

Birds and the Health of Man

By P. A. BOURKE, Rand, N.S.W.

In his interesting paper on this topic in *The Emu*, volume 56, Prof. J. Burton Cleland refers to several species that have been known to attack human beings with sufficient determination to cause injury or even death. It is well-known, of course, that many birds become aggressive during the breeding season and make strenuous efforts to defend their nests or fledgelings. However, most of the defence is merely of an intimidatory nature, when the birds swoop fiercely with snapping beaks and, in some cases, uttering threatening calls. In my personal experience it is only rarely that birds actually strike a human intruder.

These notes record my own observations and opinions on several species, including some not mentioned in Cleland's paper.

Black-backed Magpies seem most troublesome in closely-settled areas, possibly because they have had experience of stone-throwing and nest-robbing humans (I deliberately do not write 'boys'). Some years ago a pair that nested in a park in Bathurst, N.S.W., had to be destroyed by police officers because of their persistent attacks on people passing through the park. On the other hand, a flock of magpies inhabiting the school playground at Cucumgillica, N.S.W., knew the pupils as generous providers of food, nested in playground trees for the seven years that I was in the area; and at no time made any attempt to attack either children or adults. On a number of occasions I climbed to nests, but even such intrusions were not resented—in fact I was usually completely ignored. However, that did not apply with other magpies in the area, and in the nearby town of Cowra pairs nesting in the parks frequently attacked and struck passers-by. No doubt the magpies are the birds most often reported as inflicting more-or-less minor injuries on humans, but I feel that often the aggression stems from a well-founded distrust, and when the distrust can be replaced with confidence (if such terms can be applied to birds) then magpies are as 'well-behaved' as any other birds.

Three species of Butcher-bird (Grey, Pied and Black) have, at various times and places, struck me with sufficient force to draw blood. In each case I was examining a nest containing young birds. The Willie Wagtail is often lauded for its 'bravery' in attacking prowling cats and birds of prey. One gave me quite a surprise by striking my bare head vigorously enough to make my scalp bleed (and I'm not bald—yet!). One group of Apostle-birds (*Struthidea cinerea*) treated the top of my head so badly that I eventually borrowed a hat to wear when climbing to their nest. They attacked from above, dropping straight down, dive-bomber fashion, to claw at my hair and scalp. The force of the 'bomb-

ing' was sufficient to cause fairly free bleeding and to make my head ache furiously.

Crested Pigeons and Peaceful Doves will sometimes remain on their nests and strike with wing and beak, and I have retreated before the charge of a Black Swan which certainly meant business.



Photograph of the author showing scratches inflicted by Chough.

Photo. by Iona Bourke.

Spur-winged Plovers, Goshawks and several falcons have given me uneasy moments, for they possess the weapons to inflict nasty wounds, but I have never had one do more than 'near-miss'—fortunately. On the whole, the recognized birds of prey do not seem to make very strenuous efforts to protect their possessions, but there are exceptional species and individuals. For instance, it is well known that the British ornithologist, Eric Hosking, lost an eye during an attack by a Tawny Owl (*Strix aluco*).

What was possibly my worst experience was totally unexpected. Driving along a bush road near Cowra I came across a party of White-winged Choughs (*Corcorax melanorhamphus*). One of them was a fledgeling still unable to fly. (Nestling Choughs frequently leave the nest before they are able to fly). As I wanted a photograph I stopped the car and chased the young bird, which promptly crouched and began to call loudly. I bent to pick it up, and, as I did so, one of the adults struck me on the head and face with such force that I

lost balance and went on my knees alongside the young bird—which was well away before I thought of it again. When the bleeding was stopped my wife took the accompanying photograph of the scratches, which appear to have been made by the Chough's claws. I have often wondered since whether it was really a deliberate attack or whether the Chough merely used me, rather roughly in its excitement, as a perch.

Migration of Yellow-faced Honeyeaters.—Between April 12 and 17, 1957, I travelled to Sydney via the Murray Valley, Snowy Mountains and Prince's Highways. During the course of this journey I noted migratory Yellow-faced Honeyeaters (*Meliphaga chrysops*) moving north at places well west of the previously known limits of this movement as summarized by K. A. Hindwood (*Emu*, vol. 56, p. 421).

The first birds were seen on the high ground approximately midway between Tallangatta and Granya, Victoria. Small parties were moving north through the tree-tops. The following day between Tumbarumba and Batlow, New South Wales, birds were continuously moving north, again in small parties. At the top of the steep climb near Talbingo, further parties were on the move, as they were through to Yarrangobilly. At Yarrangobilly Caves, early in the morning, Yellow-faced Honeyeaters were in continuous procession through the tree-tops at the foot of the gorge. Numbers involved were not so high as recorded by Hindwood, being in hundreds rather than thousands, nevertheless the movement was definite and distinct from any local wandering. The lower numbers might be accounted for either by the earliness of the records compared with the others, or by the fact that less birds use the routes west of the Dividing Range.

Shortly after leaving Yarrangobilly the country changes to open plateau or snow gum open forest. No Yellow-faced Honeyeaters were seen in this type of country and the species was not recorded again until my reaching Brown Mountain, between Nimmitabel and Bega. Following the coast, Yellow-faced Honeyeaters were seen moving north at many points. Significantly their numbers were small compared with those noted by Hindwood. Thus at Bega, between 9 a.m. and 10 a.m. on April 16, 280 passed over the town, resting briefly in tall trees surrounding the sports ground. It would appear that I was witnessing the very beginning of the northwards migration.

On April 23, 1956, Yellow-faced Honeyeaters were moving north in large numbers at Hall, A.C.T., near Canberra, a further record of migration west of the mountains.

Although White-naped Honeyeaters (*Melithreptus lunatus*) were seen at Granya, Yarrangobilly and other places, they appeared to be stationary and not involved in a migratory movement.—J. N. HOBBS, Finley, N.S.W., 9/7/57.