

Early Breeding of the Top-knot Pigeon (*Lopholaimus antarcticus*)

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Not for many years has there been such abundance of wild fruit and berries in the brushes around Wallis Lake as there has been during the present year. All the fruit-eating birds and Pigeons have gathered to the feast, and Top-knot Pigeons are present in thousands. Their numbers prompt one to enquire where they come from, and how the species is maintained, in view of the fact that they lay one egg only, and are rarely found breeding.

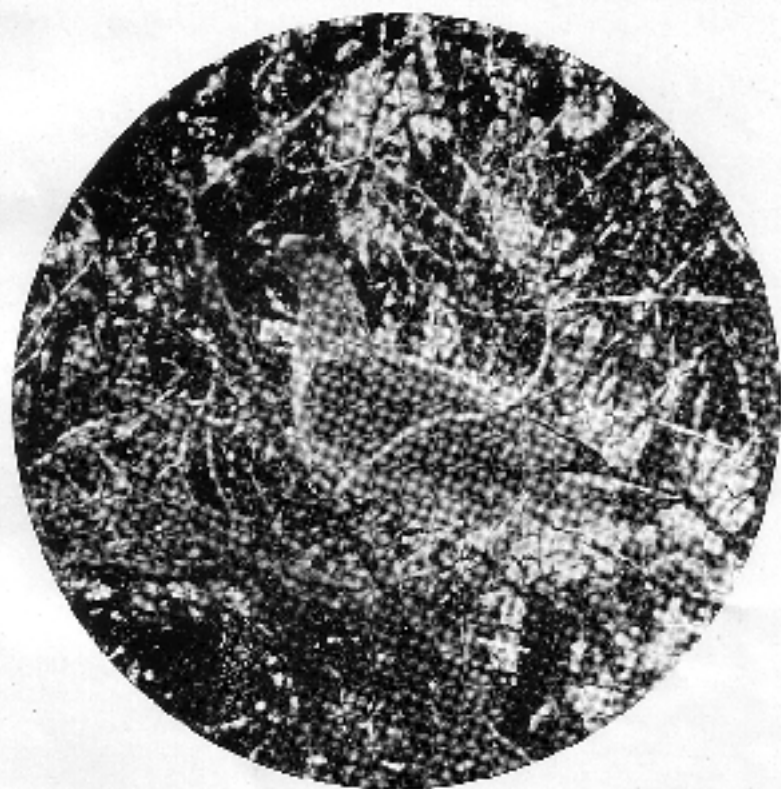
A tree crowded thickly with feeding Pigeons is a wonderful and beautiful sight. The large slate-coloured birds clamber on top of one another until suddenly they take fright and flash away with a sound like a gale of wind. Unfortunately a great deal of slaughter of these Pigeons goes on in spite of close seasons and the proclamation of sanctuaries.

The Top-knots had been around "Ellerslie" about a month when I was surprised to find that they were breeding. This was in June, although I had not previously known them to breed before October. The first nest, found on June 10th, was built in a paper-bark tree, thirty feet from the ground, and over a track. We flushed the bird, and found beneath the tree the shell of an egg from which a young bird had hatched. The nest was found to contain a young bird about one week old. His quills were just bursting, and his head was bald.

We had not a camera with us, so decided to return the following day, and commence a series of photographs showing the various stages of the nestling's growth. Circumstances were against us, however, as for nearly three weeks rain fell almost unceasingly. At the end of the third week I found the young bird still in the nest, but well grown. On the first fine day we undertook to photograph the chick, but he had grown so strong that we were afraid he would fly if an attempt were made from the nesting tree. After experimenting from another tree about twenty feet away, however, we were forced to take the risk, and my son ascended carefully with the camera and placed it six feet from the nest. While the camera was being focussed the young bird moved away to the edge of the nest. He did not move further and a picture was obtained.

The nestling was fully feathered, and his top-knot was just appearing. His legs and bill were lead-coloured, and the irides brown. He was about a month old, and left the nest a few days after the photograph was taken. But for the weather it would have been possible to picture the growth of this and several other young birds in the vicinity.

A nest containing an egg was found later at a height of 83 feet in a brush box tree. This was a very bulky structure, and



Young Tropicbird Pigeon (*Lopholaimus antarcticus*) near the nest.
Photo. by Fred. Gossesky

the egg was smaller than is usually the case. On inspection the nest was found to be too much shadowed to make a satisfactory picture.

Another nest was found 40 feet from the ground in a lilli-pilli tree. Egg-shell was found beneath the tree, and the nest was consequently expected to contain a young bird. We were surprised, therefore, to find that the nest contained an egg. Apparently the birds had laid a second egg after the first young bird had been reared or possibly some other pair of birds had taken possession of the nest. This nest was also a bulky structure, and its appearance may be judged by reference to the photograph (see Plate 49).

A little later I noticed an egg-shell beneath a large forest oak. Investigation revealed the tail of a Wonga Pigeon (*Leucosarcia melanoleuca*) projecting from a bunch of oak leaves and twigs. We concluded that the nest contained a young Wonga, and that the shell on the ground was the remains of the egg from which it had hatched. However, my son climbed up with the aid of a rope, and found that the nest contained two eggs of the Wonga Pigeon. I then examined the egg-shell on the ground more closely, and found that it had been part of a Top-knot's egg. The Wonga's eggs were much incubated, and it was apparent that the bird had taken possession of a Top-knot's nest after the young Top-knot had left.

The Wonga sat very closely, and had to be driven away before the eggs could be seen. The nest was in such a position that it was impossible to obtain a picture. I have no previous record of the Wonga Pigeon breeding in June; the usual breeding season extending from October to January.

Another nest of the Top-knot was discovered low down in a parasitic fig tree. This nest contained an egg almost double the size of that in the brush box nest. Probably the small egg was laid by a young bird.

Most observers have recorded the Top-knot as building a frail platform of twigs in an extremely high tree. My experience has been different. In many cases, I have been able to see into the nests by standing in the saddle when on horse-back. Over ninety per cent. of the nests observed during the last three months have been built between eight and forty feet from the ground. Almost all the nests I have seen have been bulky, a fact which is demonstrated by the photographs obtained.

The Pigeons are fairly trustful while nesting, and are difficult to flush. By the exercise of a little patience we would have been able to photograph the adult birds at the nest had it not been that the weather made this impossible. The birds feed from sunrise until about 11 a.m., and from about 2 p.m. till an hour before sunset.

The Top-knot Pigeon makes a peculiar note, or rather noise, between a snort and a sniff. While in the nest the young utter a whining reedy call.