

Notes on the White-throated Treecreeper

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The White-throated Treecreeper (*Climacteris leucophaea*) is plentiful throughout the coastal forests of Victoria, and wherever suitable forests exist inland the bird may also be found. In open forest country its place is taken by the Brown Treecreeper (*C. picumnus*). In some places where the range of both species will occasionally overlap. The White-throated Treecreeper is very plentiful over the whole of the Dandenong Ranges near Melbourne, and even at the present time, although much of the timber has been destroyed, it may still be found within ten miles of Melbourne. It is of a bright and cheerful disposition and its highly-pitched notes are to be heard in the forest at all periods of the year. Most of its time is spent searching the bark of trees for insect life upon which it entirely subsists. Unlike the Brown Treecreeper it rarely settles on the ground though it may often be seen on logs and fallen debris, searching for food. Often when it flies on to the butt of a tree it will remain motionless for several seconds before making its ascent. After closely watching these birds, I have been unable to substantiate the statement that they use their tails as "props" in climbing trees. In fact it appears as if the tip of the tail is well clear of the tree, and in no way is it brought into use while the bird is creeping up a tree-trunk.

During last year (1932) I had some exceptional opportunities of observing the home life of a pair of White-throated Treecreepers that had selected a small stump in which to breed. The entrance to the hollow was less than five feet from the ground but the nest was placed about three feet down the hollow. The female was first seen coming out of the hollow on October 29, 1932, and there was then one egg in the nest. Late in the afternoon of that day another egg had been laid, and the third egg was noticed in the nest a few days later. Although the bird was frequently flushed from the hollow during the first day or two, yet from the time that the first egg was laid it was often absent for long periods, and I fully believe that incubation did not commence in earnest until after the third egg had been laid. Practically the whole of the brooding was performed by the female which was fed at fairly long intervals by the male. When on the nest the female was rather difficult to flush, and it was only after tapping the stump several times that she would fly off. The incubation

period for the eggs of these birds seems to be much longer than is generally suspected. It was not until November 21 that the first young one came out, and the two other eggs hatched out on November 22 and 23 respectively. The female kept sitting on the nest for nearly a week after the hatching of the young ones, but she frequently left the nest to help her partner to gather food. Towards the end of fourteen days after hatching one of the young was able to climb up the hollow and sit at the entrance, where it received the bulk of the food brought by its parents. Soon after the other two were also able to scramble up to the entrance, and from then onwards they made short excursions to nearby trees but would always return to the nesting hollow to "camp" for the night. They used the hollow for some time after they were able to fly fairly well. A month later they were still near their home accompanied by both their parents.

The White-throated Treecreeper appears to be very local in its habit. It has often been noted that the same pair of birds will continue to live in the same clump of trees for many years. These birds pair for life and in many cases will rear their broods annually in the same nesting hollow. The nest is a loose structure, built almost entirely of thin threads of soft bark and is thickly lined with fur and feathers. It is usually placed within twenty-five feet of the ground but in a few instances nests have been found at a much greater height.

In a forest gully near Lilydale (about twenty-five miles east of Melbourne), an Owlet Nightjar was known to have occupied a hollow for over two years but on visiting the locality one day I failed, upon tapping the tree, to flush the bird. On looking down the hollow, I found that a pair of White-throated Treecreepers had taken possession and had laid two eggs, which at that time appeared as if they were being gradually covered by pieces of charcoal dropping from inside the hollow. A week later the Treecreepers had disappeared, and the eggs were then practically hidden. A few days later the Owlet Nightjar was flushed from the hollow again. It is apparent that during the absence of the Owlet Nightjar from the hollow the Treecreepers had built their nest, but were shortly after driven out by the Nightjar. A similar incident is recorded from the Werribee Gorge by the late A. J. Campbell in his *Nests and Eggs*.

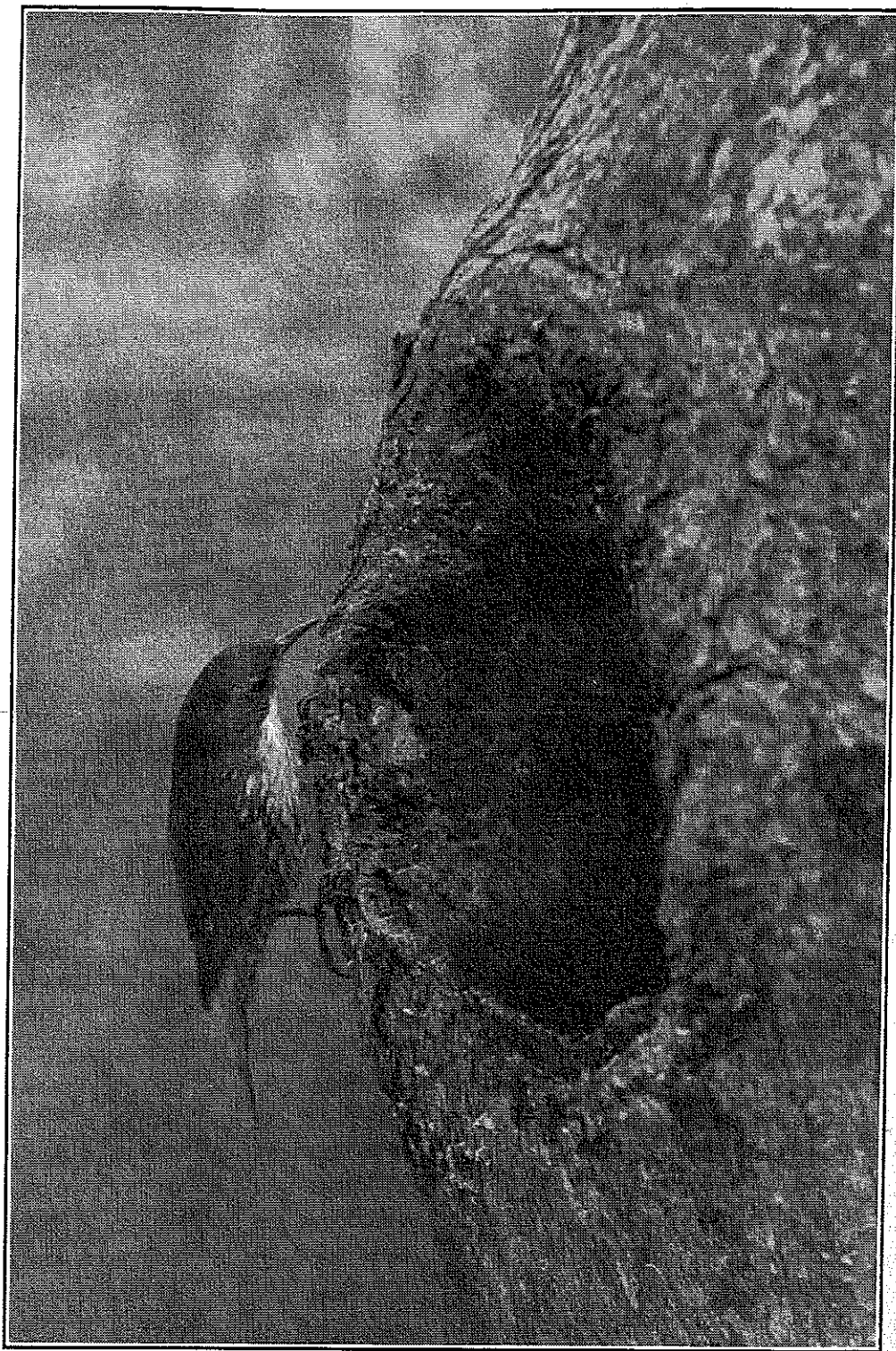
White-throated Treecreepers make fairly suitable subjects for photography but it rarely happens that their nesting hollows are found low enough to enable a photographer to take pictures without incurring considerable trouble in arranging a platform for the camera. When the first

attempt was made to take a picture of the female at the entrance of the nest firstly above referred to, the camera was placed about five feet away, but when it was found that she showed no fear of its presence, I moved it up closer to the hollow. When flushed from the nest she would return within a few minutes, but her movements were so quick that she would dart down the hollow without giving me an opportunity to photograph her. In order to compel her to pause at the entrance, I partly blocked up the hollow, and that had the desired effect. Her mode of approaching the nest was identical on every occasion. On returning from another part of the paddock she would perch in a tree about fifteen yards from the nest and then give a few sharp calls. After watching me for a few moments, she would gradually creep up the tree for a few yards and then fly direct on to the tree in which the nest was situated. She would appear very cautious for some seconds, and then make her way up the trunk but gradually working around to the far side. I would lose sight of her for an instant, and then her head would appear around the excrescence at the entrance to the nest; if not closely watched she would make a rapid dash down the hollow, whence it was not always an easy matter to dislodge her. The nesting tree was in a patch of saplings through which the light did not penetrate too freely, and for the greater part of the day the entrance to the hollow was more or less obscured from the sun. Unfortunately that drawback resulted in many of my photographic plates being underexposed. All pictures taken were of the female, the male being too timid to come within reasonable distance of the nest when the camera was there. He would, however, call the female off the nest to take the food. It was noted, however, that when there were no obstacles in his way he would take the food to the female on the nest.

During the winter months at Mooroolbark, near Lilydale, a pair of White-throated Treecreepers used to "camp" in a cavity of a chimney of an occupied house. Apparently the warmth from the fire was the attraction as they used to go elsewhere to sleep as soon as the nights became warm.

It is rather interesting to know that of recent years there have been two reports of albino Treecreepers being seen in various parts of Victoria. Whether the birds were wholly or only partly pure white it has not been recorded, but one bird was seen by numerous people on several occasions, and was in evidence for a long time.

The recent exhibition held by the Bird Observers' Club, Melbourne, was largely made possible by the loan of specimens of skins, nests and eggs, paintings and other material by the R.A.O.U., and by the assistance of members of the Union.



White-throated Treecreeper at nesting hollow.

Photo. by D. J. Dickison, R.A.O.U.