

Notes on the Large-tailed Nightjar

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When writing of the Australian race of *Caprimulgus macrurus*, Gregory M. Mathews (*The Birds of Australia*, Vol. VII, p. 237) said: "Confined to the far north, there is practically no life-history known of this member of the typical Caprimulgine forms." One might disagree with the Australian range of the species as given in current literature, but one cannot but heartily endorse Mr. Mathews's remarks concerning the extreme scarcity of field data.

A bird to which about half a dozen names are given, and being known to the northerner only by its singular call-notes, the Large-tailed Nightjar—a "strictly nocturnal bird"—presents a difficult problem for any ornithologist who would essay to glean something of the life-history of this tropic form.

During a visit to the far north in March-April, 1932, I saw nothing of *Caprimulgus macrurus*. I frequently caught glimpses of Nightjars flitting about at dusk and on moonlight nights, but on no occasion was I able to identify positively any particular species. However, during a later trip, in the months of November, December and January, I had scarcely reached the Tropic of Capricorn before becoming aware of a strange and insistent nocturnal bird-call. It was a most peculiar bird-voice—a succession of dull "chopping" notes which might be likened to the sound of an axe-head being struck against a hollow log.

The first person whom I interrogated as to its origin expressed the opinion that the unusual noise was made by a Bandicoot. The second said that it was the note of the "Carpenter-bird"; the third that the "Joiner-bird" was responsible for the weird drumming; and the fourth and several others considered the notes to be emitted by the "Hammer-bird" or "Axe-bird"! It will at once be noticed that all these north Australian vernaculars are related to the vocal attainments of the species—the calls always carry the impression of some object being struck by an implement.

Wherever I journeyed, people who learned of my interest in bird-life often asked me the identity of the night-caller, the calls of which they all knew so well. J. P. Rogers was one of the first Australian bird-men to discover that the author of the dull, muffled notes was *Caprimulgus macrurus*. Mr. Rogers was collecting for Mathews on Melville Island when he heard the unusual calls, and actually shot the particular bird which uttered the notes. Published by Mathews, J. P. Rogers' notes tell us that

about January, on Melville Island, the birds stopped calling, although in February several were heard.

In many localities I was assured by residents that the "Hammer-bird" was a decided migrant, apparently leaving after the "wet season" and returning to breed in the following spring and summer. But is the bird a migrant, or even a nomadic form? The sub-species, of which Mathews recognizes ten, seem to discount that theory. There is a possibility that *Caprimulgus*, like some other species, remains comparatively silent during the "off" season, and is therefore not noted by the casual observer. The "chopping" notes may be mating calls, and other notes uttered by the bird may not be sufficiently distinctive for the casual bushman to associate with any particular species.

Caprimulgus macrurus has a wide distribution, being found throughout the Malay Archipelago, Malay Peninsula, Cochin-China, Siam, New Guinea, Northern Territory, and North Queensland. Campbell and Barnard* record the

* *The Emu*, Vol. XVII, pp. 17-18.

species calling and breeding in the Rockingham Bay region (Cardwell) during October, and that seems to be the hitherto most southern record.

In early November, 1932, I was at Marmor (about 30 miles south of Rockhampton). At night several species of birds called; the Pallid Cuckoo "chanted" occasionally, and the "trill" of the Fan-tailed species was very often heard. The Stone-Curlew (*Burhinus maguirostris*) wailed at irregular intervals, dingoes howled in the hills, and there were sundry unrecognisable other calls. A particularly striking series of notes was repeatedly heard coming from the thick scrubby hillside—generally two or three, or occasionally one or four dull, vibrant notes. The local people were not certain as to the identity of the bird responsible for the notes. Some considered that it was "like a man hitting a pipe under water," and that it was the "Carpenter-bird" or "Joiner-bird." I considered then that it was probably the Large-tailed Nightjar, a belief that was later confirmed.

Marmor is about five hundred miles south of Cardwell, so the extension of range is considerable. The calls were again heard echoing across the mangrove swamps near Mackay, but were missed at Townsville, and not heard again until I reached Cardwell. Here the species was common, and at dusk, on several occasions, I was able to get quite close to the bird without startling it. At Marmor the bird gave only up to four notes in succession, but at Rockingham Bay I usually heard six or seven notes, and once or twice heard series of over fifty notes; a slight pause occurred between every fifteen or sixteen calls. A

bushman I met at Cardwell asserted that the bird possessed shriller cries as well as the "concussion" notes, but this I was never able to prove to my own satisfaction. The birds seem most active in the early hours of the night, but continue to call spasmodically right through until just before daybreak. Several times in the early hours of the morning I heard them calling on the scrub-mantled slopes of the Barron Gorge, near the famous falls.

Like most night-fliers, the Large-tailed Nightjar flies silently. It twists and turns in mid-air with great facility, and if disturbed whilst perching it utters a series of deep croaking notes greatly resembling those of a frog—in fact, it would not surprise me to learn that a vernacular name in some parts is "frog-bird," so greatly do these alarm notes resemble the cry of a certain type of amphibian.

The Large-tailed Nightjar appears to have a decided liking for mangrove swamps, possibly because of the abundance of insects which congregate in the vicinity of these fascinating areas. Several times I was fortunate enough to flush adult examples of *Caprimulgus* from the ground at the edge of mangrove swamps; they seem to perch on the earth in the shade of tree-trunks throughout the long hot tropic days. Although the species is often reported from localities where mangroves are unknown, yet wherever mangroves occur in the far north, there *C. macrurus* will be found. Rogers tells of finding them breeding beside a mangrove swamp, whereupon the old bird "flapped and struggled on the ground," as if injured. The late Dr. W. D. K. MacGillivray also found the species associated with the mangroves in North Queensland. The remains of beetles were found in the stomach of a Large-tailed Nightjar by William MacLennan whilst he was collecting, on the King River, for H. L. White.

No nest is constructed; the female simply selects a suitable spot and deposits her pair of pinkish-stone eggs on the bare earth.

The above details seem to cover our knowledge of the natural economy of the local races of *Caprimulgus macrurus*. A pleasing factor is that, although the bird is a ground-breeder, it still seems to persist in numbers quite close to the largest towns and cities of the North. Its singular calls are well known to citizens of such places as Rockhampton, Mackay, Cairns, and probably Townsville. It is to be hoped that some enthusiastic ornithologist will fully investigate the life history of this tropic Nightjar.