Pied Currawong Banding Observations*

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Summary

Pied Currawongs *Strepera graculina* banded at Leura, New South Wales, showed a marked difference in weight compared with those banded by J. S. Robertson at Pt. Wellington, Queensland *(Australian Bird Bander,* Vol. 7, No. 1, 1969). A table of weights is given which shows peak weight periods during the year. Age characteristics of first year birds are noted including the change of colour of the gape. Summer and winter populations are mentioned, together with some notes of habits and movements on the Blue Mountains.

Introduction

346 Pied Currawongs were banded from June 15, 1965 to June 30, 1968 in our garden. Banding was not continuous, but was only in the form of "blitzes" when the birds became too troublesome and interfered with our Satin Bowerbird project. The number captured therefore in no way indicates the local population which is very great during the winter months. Nevertheless our records, when analysed, do show the trend of population and movement. The age characteristics of first-year birds and the variation of weights are interesting.

Currawongs are very vicious and difficult to handle, and the low percentage of retraps and the absence of long distance recoveries made the banding of this bird unprofitable to us. They entered the traps with the Bowerbirds, sometimes up to nine at a time. They attacked any bird left briefly unattended in a trap. They were also a problem at our food trays and we were unable to find any food that they would not eat. They consumed gallons of honey-syrup provided for Bowerbirds, sucking it from bottle tubes as expertly as any honeyeater.

We quickly noticed that very few banded birds returned to the garden and those that did could hardly be induced to enter the trap. However, there were always plenty of new birds. As we could not spare the time to handle so many vicious birds, we often just left them in the trap for up to fifteen minutes before releasing them unbanded. We hoped this would be just as effective, and it certainly did clear the garden of Currawongs for an hour or so.

Method

We trapped the Currawongs in a 180 x 60 mm trap made for Bowerbirds and consisting of wire-netting with a trip door. It has a catching box with a top sleeve at one end for removing the birds. My husband wearing stout gloves removed the birds from the trap and held them while I placed a CSIRO metal numbered band on the leg and recorded details. As the birds call loudly most of the time I had an excellent view of the inside of the mouth while banding. We weighed them in a calico bag suspended from a spring balance, deducting the weight of the bag. We had our balance checked for accuracy. They were not colour banded so returning birds had to be retrapped before identification was possible.

*These notes were written during June 1972, but not previously published.

Seasonal populations

Leura is situated on a narrow tabletop of the Blue Mountains, elevation 1000m with 300m cliff edges on both sides; Jamieson Valley north and the Grose Valley south. Mostly the Currawongs went down the cliff edges in the evening to roost on sheltered ledges below, and on a winter evening it was a beautiful sight to watch them plunge straight over the edge.

During the summer months, November to March, some Pied Currawongs remained in the area, and almost every day six or more birds were observed together at our food trays. Six nests were located round the cliff edges in December 1967.

A great increase in numbers occurred during April and early May, and this time coincides with the migration of the Yellow-faced and White-naped Honeyeaters through the Blue Mountains. Many thousands of these little birds in their flight north ascend the cliff tops from the valleys and often arrive in an exhausted condition. The Currawongs wait for them at places where they pause to recover and then they seize the exhausted birds. We have also observed Currawongs lining the flight routes, flying two or three on either side of groups of the Honeyeaters.

It is after this migration is finished that the Currawongs occupy the tabletop scavenging for food. During May, June and July we could have trapped fifty birds per day in our garden if we had the time or strength. From the end of July until the following March numbers decreased. In spring we often saw concentrations of these birds near the nesting sites of small birds where no doubt eggs and nestlings were consumed. Starlings', Sparrows' and Blackbirds' nests in our area were always robbed by them.

Table I shows the numbers banded each month, roughly indicating the fluctuation of summer and winter populations:

Table I

	J	F	M	A	M	J	J	A	S	O	N	D	Total
1965	—	—	—	—	—	4	16	—	—	—	—	—	20
1966	1	—	30	6	22	45	16	6	19	4	2	1	152
1967	1	—	—	4	13	40	40	7	—	1	5	6	117
1968	—	—	—	—	16	38	—	—	—	—	—	—	54
Totals	2	—	30	10	51	127	72	13	19	5	7	7	343

Recoveries

Only seven birds were recovered dead. Twenty-three were recaptured at the banding station and released alive, making a total of thirty recoveries. Of the dead birds six were found within 25 km of the banding station. The exception, 090-77496, was banded on April 30, 1967 and was found dead at Buxton on the Southern Tablelands, elevation 400 m, on July 28, 1967, 62 km direct flight over wooded country. We have no indication of the age to which the birds live as our oldest recovery was an adult found dead four years and one month after banding. During 1970 I only saw one banded Currawong in our garden and none to the end of April 1971, nor did I see a banded Currawong elsewhere in the district.

Weights

It is noticeable that the Pied Currawongs banded by us at Leura were much heavier than those weighed by Robertson at Pt. Wellington, Queensland. Sixteen birds were banded by Robertson between the months

of April and early July. His average weight was 275 gm. Minimum was 222 gm and maximum 317 gm.

Table II shows the average weights and the fluctuations of weights throughout the year of our birds, and the total birds weighed each month for three years, including retraps. Weights did not fluctuate noticeably from year to year in any given month.

Table II

Birds weighed	J	F	M	A	M	J	J	A	S	O	N	D	Total
1965/68	11	—	30	10	56	107	57	14	19	5	7	7	323
Av. wt. in gm	310	—	306	310	408	345	360	294	292	242	294	301	319

Minimum weight was 230 gm — two birds
Maximum weight was 470 gm — one bird
Between 300 and 400 gm were 223 birds

Adults were in every weight group, two weighing only 240 gm each. However, only six first-year birds weighed between 410 and 470 gm. On the 323 total, 97 were adults and 226 were first-year birds.

Colour of Gape and other Age Characteristics in First Year Birds

We have established by observation of all birds handled that in newly-fledged Pied Currawongs, still being fed by the parent, the colour of the entire gape, the inside of the mouth including the tongue and as far back in the throat as can be seen, is a bright yellow and has a swollen appearance. The two birds banded in January were fledglings still showing signs of feather growth from down but able to fly well, and the gape was as above. The eyes of these birds were clouded brown and no coloured ring showed around the iris. They also had a brown streaked front collar. The yellow flange was approximately 25 mm long. The new plumage was a "good" black with the usual adult white marking. We have only handled one bird with an all-pink gape and two birds with pink, blotched black, in the gape.

When the birds were a little older, predominantly in March, the colour of the gape had faded to a pale yellow and was not swollen. At this time the female parent had ceased to feed the chick. The iris was then circled with a greenish-yellow ring. Only a few birds were then recorded with a brown-flecked front collar. When this collar does occur it often persists and sometimes appears quite rufous. We have handled adult birds with this feature prominent.

The change of the gape to black takes almost a year. The black is first noticed at the base of the tongue and the back of the throat. This black gradually advances to the front of the palate, and the tongue becomes all black at first, whilst the palate is blotched with black. Just before the first annual moult in September and October when the bird is shabby and feathers are worn, the gape is all black but not so dense or shiny as the gape of an adult bird.

Birds retrapped after the first annual moult showed the full adult characteristics of shiny dense black gape and sharp yellow eyes. As the black inside the mouth advances so the yellow flange shortens. It also has disappeared just before the first annual moult.

Field Observations

At first acquaintance Pied Currawongs are the most unlovable birds to have in one's garden. They harass every other bird and take possession of every food container. They are most inquisitive and watch for hours parrots feeding or bowerbirds displaying. I believe this is just to be sure that there is no food that they can snatch. They will skulk for days near the nests of other birds, waiting for the moment to seize an unguarded chick. They fight each other for possession of such a choice morsel and often tear the victim apart in mid-air.

They also appear abject cowards and retreat crying in distress if even small birds corner them and attack. It is a wonderful sight to see Red Wattlebirds chasing them in and out among the tall trees, several birds skimming at great speed through the branches without once touching a leaf. The Currawongs look thoroughly frightened. They are surprisingly "loyal" to each other and always when these alarm calls are uttered the whole clan gathers around. It is strange, however, that they do not attack the pursuing birds but seem to join in the flight away from them. Blackbirds and Starlings also attack Currawongs skulking near their nests.

They are crafty rascals. We tried every device we could think of to provide food for other birds that the Currawongs could not obtain. They even ate the parrots' sunflower seeds. I have seen them open acorn shells and eat the nuts after watching Australian King Parrots feeding on them. However they do not lift the nut to the beak with the foot as do the parrots, but hold the nut with one foot against a branch or the ground and break the shell open with the beak.

A small dish, such as a half-coconut shell suspended on a long rigid rod was the only container that the Currawongs were unable to manage. The Bowerbirds would fly down to the edge of the shell and were able to feed from the dish. The Currawongs could not do this.

Dishes suspended on rope or twine were soon mastered. A Currawong would perch above and pull the string up with the beak about 75 mm at a time. It then grabbed the string with a foot and held it against the perch while it pulled up another length with the beak. When the dish was within reach of the bill the bird held the string with the foot until it had fed. If the string slipped, nothing daunted, the bird would start all over again. They very quickly learned to suck honey-syrup through a tube and would not leave it until the bottle was empty. They became greatly excited when we were filling the syrup bottles. I once made a noose of string suspended at the sucking end of the tube to try and snare a bird when it put its head through to suck. The bird simply pushed the loop aside.

However, living among the Currawongs also has its compensations, and one has much joy and amusement just watching their antics and play. If they see a Bowerbird pick a flower, they also will pick a flower, but then don't know what to do with it. They often pull each others' tails. The female parent is most strict, and if her offspring "annoys" her too much she will toss it over on its back with a quick swipe and stand over the youngster thus for five minutes or so while it squawks in distress.

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