

Wood-Swallows in Western Victoria

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Flocks of White-browed, *Artamus superciliosus*, and Masked, *A. personatus*, Wood-Swallows in company may often be seen migrating *north* in south-west Victoria but I have never seen them going *south*.

On any warm sultry north-wind day in late October or November, it is almost certain that these birds will be seen and heard in small to large loose flocks, cheeping their meandering way across the sky, but always achieving finally a northerly direction, almost straight into the wind. This happens whenever the weather conditions are of this nature, which might be for only a few days in the season.

November 3, 1971, was a typical "Wood-Swallow Day", in fact. I think the only such day of the season, as the spring weather of 1971 was most abnormal. It was humid, warm and dull, with thunder threatening all day, and the wind from the north strongish in the morning but dying to a light breeze in the afternoon. About 1430 hours the clouds cleared for a short time, but soon reverted to 10/10ths cover. During the time of less cloud the birds appeared to be flying higher.

I had been in the house for most of the morning and continuously from 1100 hours till 1415 hours, so I probably missed seeing many of the flocks that passed over; but the following records are those that I did see.

0930 hours. About 20 *Artamus* passed over, flying just above tree-height, but I was too late to identify any more than the final two birds — both White-browed Wood-Swallows.

0950 hours. About 40 birds, including ten identified White-browed and two Masked species.

1045 hours. About 40 immediately overhead at tree-height. Identified 20 White-browed and three Masked. Field-glasses not necessary.

1420 hours. About 30 birds, one hundred or more yards east, not identified.

1500 hours. About 50, flying higher at about 300 feet. A very loose flock with much wandering round the sky. Changing direction continually but achieving a true northerly result. The angle of the light made identification impossible.

1525 hours. About 20, at an even higher level than the last flock but flying due north. No identification possible as light too glary even with field-glasses.

1610 hours. A very loose flock of over 100 birds. Flying low, even below the tree-tops, and about 30 White-browed and three Masked birds were positively identified.

1615 hours. Another flock heard only, as they were out of sight beyond the trees.

1625 hours. A small flock, not well seen through the tree-tops. One White-browed.

1700 hours. 50 to 60 birds observed in bad light, one hundred yards or more to the west.

1720 hours. About 30 just above the trees. Five White-browed and one Masked birds were identified.

1750 hours. Light rain and thunderstorms followed by a cool south-westerly change and an inch of rain during the night.

This is my only census of a "Wood-Swallow Day", but my general notes indicate that similar days have been occurring regularly over the past 25 years.

Only once have I seen these birds settle here. November 11, 1954, had been one of these special days, but a cold showery south-west change arrived in the afternoon and 12 White-browed Wood-Swallows were, apparently, forced down to shelter in the trees. They were gone in the early morning following.

How do these birds move to the south of here without being observed as they return in the autumn flying north? V. T. Lowe of Mystic Park, Victoria, has suggested to me that they might fly southward at too high an altitude to be seen or heard by man. This seems to be the best answer to this question that I have asked of many people.

Both of these species nested near Portland in December, 1950 and 1952, in hundreds, in approximately the ratio of ten White-browed to one Masked, and near Casterton in December 1962, in similar numbers. On all three occasions they used only a small area of bushland, and several nests would be found in the one tree. In each of these three years I have notes of them flying north over this property in October and November. They must have then turned round and flown, unobserved, southward to nest.

In mid November 1969, they nested in enormous numbers all over the Little Desert area in western Victoria. At that time I found them to be nesting widely in small trees, but they seemed to avoid the taller Yellow Gums. Again they were roughly in the proportion of ten White-browed to one Masked. I have never seen these two species of birds in south-western Victoria, except on these group-nesting occasions, or on their northward flights in spring.

Of the other members of the genus the Dusky Wood-Swallow, *A. cyanopterus*, is of nomadic occurrence in the area. It arrives in spring to nest in patches of woodland, either singly or in small colonies, but may be seen at any time of the year in woodlands in small numbers.

This bird has a little known ability to sing. On October 1, 1954, near Balmoral, in the early light of day I watched and listened to one bird singing a prolonged melodious series of what could only be described as Canary-like songs, over a period of ten or more minutes. There were two birds sitting on the same dead tree, but only one, presumably the male, did the singing. It ceased when both birds flew away and started their morning feeding.

The Black-faced Wood-Swallow, *A. cinereus*, probably does not come into the wetter parts of south-western Victoria, as it is a

resident of the drier inland, but, with a party of other observers, one bird was seen near Rockhole Bore, in the Sunset Country. It may, therefore, penetrate as far south as the Little Desert.

I have no records of the White-breasted Wood-Swallow, *A. leucorhynchus*, south of the Murray River, near Mildura. However, it must have crossed the south-western parts of Victoria on one occasion, as on June 15, 1961, A. M. McGarvie saw four birds on King Island, in Bass Strait. Being such an unlikely vagrant, particularly at that time of the year, he collected one specimen, which is now in the National Museum of Victoria, Melbourne.

It might have been better if I had had a gun, and collected a specimen, on March 8, 1969, when I saw about 15 Little Wood-Swallows, *A. minor*, approximately half-a-mile west of the village of Dunkeld, at the south end of the Grampians, in south-western Victoria. I had stopped the car to fill my pipe and was attracted by their peculiar feeding actions, otherwise I might easily have passed them off as Dusky Wood-Swallows. They were using power lines, as a resting spot, which crossed a large open area surrounded by tall Red Gums. From this vantage point they would fly vertically upward with a heavy struggling flight, and catch an insect just as they stopped flying. They would then fall a few feet before resuming flight, and either ate the insect in the air or returned to the lines to eat it.

These actions were repeated time after time during the ten minutes that I watched them. They were so busy feeding that I was able to get underneath them and see every detail of plumage perfectly with 8X binoculars. I am very familiar with this bird in other parts of Australia and, although this is an unusual record, as there is only one report of this species being seen south of the Warrumbungle Ranges in northern New South Wales (Roy P. Cooper, *Australian Bird Watcher*, 3 : 77-82), I had no hesitation in identifying them as Little Wood-Swallows.

Daylight Clustering of Wood-Swallows. April 14, 1972, was a fine sunny day at Ivanhoe, western New South Wales. Wood-Swallows had been passing over all morning so high they were revealed only by their calls and could not be specifically identified.

At about 1 p.m. the temperature was 70°F. but a gusty southerly wind was blowing bringing with it the first bite of winter's cold. In very open-timbered country I came across a small party of Wood-Swallows at low level. Thirteen were Black-faced, *Artamus cinereus*, which are non-migratory in the district but which form into nomadic groups. Sixty four were White-browed, *A. superciliosus*, and three were Masked, *A. personatus*. Most of them were perched in the rather tangled branches of a Belar, *Casuarina cristata*, which, overlooking a wide grassy plain, was being buffeted by the cold wind. The tree had a sharp lean to the west with its branches rising vertically from its trunk. The diameter of the trunk was about a foot.