

## New Guinea's two Black-and-White Butcherbirds

By H. L. BELL, Canberra, A.C.T.

In the *Emu* (62:87) Watson, Wheeler and Whitbourn quote the Black-headed Butcherbird, *Cracticus cassicus*, as being the common butcherbird seen during the visit of the Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union to New Guinea in 1960, including the period that was spent by the party at Port Moresby. Conversely, the Black-backed Butcherbird, *C. mentalis*, was recorded only a few times during the same visit to Port Moresby. It is considered that most of the *cassicus* seen by members of the party at Moresby were, in fact, *mentalis*, for the following reasons.

The only illustration of *mentalis* available to the party was that of Cayley (*What Bird is That?*). This depicts a rather darker version of the Grey Butcherbird, *torquatus*. In fact, *mentalis* is a boldly-marked black-and-white bird, which leads the newcomer to New Guinea to assume that, by a process of elimination, it is *cassicus*, as depicted in Iredale, 1956, and which is also a boldly marked black-and-white bird.

The common butcherbird around Moresby is the Black-backed, which occurs in savanna, as it also does in the Cape York Peninsula. *C. cassicus* is a frequenter of rain-forest and it may be seen only on the margins of rain-forest out from Moresby and in the strips of gallery forest along the few perennial streams. In the savanna it has been recorded in the larger patches of monsoon-forest, a dry thorny degenerate rain-forest occurring in favoured spots.

Restricted to southern New Guinea and Cape York the Black-backed Butcherbird is obviously a relative of the Grey Butcherbird; its bold plumage according to the pattern of the latter species. However, it distinctly favours the more open park-like savannas, and appears to reach its optimum numbers in parks and garden areas. Shorter grass under the tree-layers seems a necessity, and it accordingly frequents savanna with *Themeda australis* or *Imperata* (blady-grass). This may explain why it has not colonized the man-induced savannas of eastern Papua as have other species; these higher-rainfall area savannas are largely grassed with tall canegrasses or kunai.

Its call is quite distinctive. The gurgle of *torquatus* can be discerned, but it is a slow languid note; not the rapid cry of the Grey species. Other notes are explosive loud calls and a low "muttering" gurgle. Its call is well worthy of study by someone with the gift of distinguishing bird song. It is certainly an accomplished mimic.

The Black-backed species holds territory and nests have been recorded by me from August to April; from the height of the "dry" to the height of the "wet". The nest is a normal butcherbird nest, built in typical sites. Both two and three young have been recorded, but I have not yet seen the eggs. After breeding, although territorial fidelity remains, the species has a habit of flocking with

four to six birds; flying up to about 200 feet, wheeling at each other and calling constantly for about five minutes. Then, suddenly, they glide separately down to the trees below. This display is seen from May to August.

Small birds seem not to display the same fear of the species as they do of others of the genus. However, on October 5, 1965, a Black-backed Butcherbird was seen to kill a Sacred Kingfisher, *Halycon sanctus*, but not to eat it, and I have seen them try to take fledgling Willie Wagtails. I have not yet recorded the shrike habit of impaling prey on thorns. Insects and lizards seem the normal diet. On one occasion one was seen to chase a Goshawk, *Accipiter* sp. up to 300 feet.

As the Black-backed Butcherbird is representative of the Grey Butcherbird of Australia, so the Black-headed Butcherbird is of the Pied, *C. nigrogularis*.

The Black-headed Butcherbird is found throughout New Guinea lowlands, extending to 5000 feet in the Wau area. At first this seems a species of rain-forest margins and clearings, but apparently its habitat requirement is the tops of tall trees overlooking the canopy. This explains its presence at overgrown clearings and the second-growth margins of rain-forest edges, where, from vantage points, it can dive down to secure prey in the foliage below. However, in untouched forest, where a large tree does protrude above the canopy, the bird can usually be found. This habitat requirement needs confirmation by further study.

The song is melodious and long but confusion with the Black Butcherbird, *C. quoyi*, has made our recognition of the calls rather doubtful. It is usually in pairs and seems to hold territory. Like *mentalis* it does not appear to unduly worry other birds.

Insects seem the diet, although Rand and Gilliard (*Handbook of New Guinea Birds* :454) also record fruit. The nest is typical of the genus but seems to be built very high in jungle trees. The literature records two or three eggs. L. W. C. Filewood (*pers. comm.*) has recorded up to three occupied nests in the one large tree.

One of the D'Entrecasteaux and Trobriand Islands occur the only other race, *hercules*, which is well on the way to full speciation. It is much larger; is almost wholly white on the back in life, and is, in all, a magnificent looking bird. On Goodenough Island it has colonized man-induced savanna, possibly through lack of a competitor.

New Guinea's other two species of *Cracticus* are the Louisiade Butcherbird, *C. louisiadensis*, a largely black distant relative of *cassicus*, confined to Tagula Island, and the Black Butcherbird, *C. quoyi*, a furtive but common denizen of the jungle under story and second-growth. The brown phase does not seem to occur in New Guinea, and it does not appear to be a mangrove-frequenter in the Port Moresby area.