

Avian Casualties

By ROY P. COOPER, Melbourne

Although large numbers of birds die from natural causes every day, in addition to those that are killed by predators, it is seldom that a dead bird is found in the bush.

Many carcasses of birds may be seen on the highways, where they have been killed by motor cars. However, these birds have not died in natural circumstances and are, therefore, excluded from the normal pattern. In any case it is seldom that the carcass of a bird will remain on the road for more than a few days. It will be eaten by other birds, particularly Crows and Ravens, or it will be dried by the hot sun or the hot bitumen on the road and quickly disintegrate.

When a bird is taken by a predator the carcass is torn apart and disappears rapidly. Sometimes the bones will be swallowed by the predator, depending on the size of the bird, but at other times the bones will be plucked clean and then discarded.

Not all the birds that die every day are killed, there are many that die from natural causes. Some will even escape the attack of a predator, but will die later from wounds received. When these birds drop to the ground their bodies are eaten by small animals or larger birds, and often by ants.

It is amazing the cumulative effect of destruction that can be caused by thousands of ants. They will invariably remove the last vestige of the soft parts that remain.

The body of a bird the size of a thrush could be eaten completely by meat ants within 24 hours. A snake, four feet long, that I placed on a mound of these ants was stripped clean, flesh, skin and scales, when I returned on the following week. Only the skeleton remained. The feathers are quickly dispersed by the elements or taken by other birds to use in their nests.

Recently I saw the carcasses of two birds that had died in their natural environment, although certainly not from natural causes.

During October, 1964, near Yungaburra, north Queensland, a Barn Owl (*Tyto alba*) was found caught by its foot in the jagged edge of a dead tree. The trunk of the tree, which was about 12 inches in diameter, had broken off at a height of approximately 25 feet from the ground. The dead wood had gradually decayed forming a hollow down the centre, and the edges of the break were saw-toothed. The Owl had been caught by its foot in one of the narrow forks around the top of the trunk, and remained suspended.

Evidently it either had been nesting or roosting in the hollow, and when it had started to fly from the tree, with its usual downward sweeping pattern, a leg became jammed between the rough edges. The weight of the bird's body and the force of its momentum had wedged the leg tightly, and the bird could not escape.

Dr. Alan Lendon has informed me of a similar case that he had observed at Cunderdin, Western Australia. A Barn Owl had been caught by its leg in a crack in the jagged edge of a hollow, and had been dead for some time. Inside the hollow were two more Barn Owls with five young birds.

The second instance was during the same month, October, 1964, when I observed the body of a Raven (*Corvus coronoides*) hanging in a tree near Port Wakefield, South Australia.

The bird had become impaled on a thin broken-off stick that was protruding from the trunk of the tree. It would have been end on to the bird in its flight to the tree, and, consequently, very difficult to see. The jagged end had pierced the neck of the Raven and, by the condition of the carcass and the position of the head, wings and legs, death must have been almost instantaneous from a broken neck.

Observations on the Oriental Cuckoo at Gin Gin, Queensland

By E. E. ZILLMAN, Gin Gin.

The Oriental Cuckoo (*Cuculus saturatus*) is a bird of the northern hemisphere, where it breeds during the northern spring and then migrates southward at the approach of the cold weather. Being a true cuckoo it does not raise its own young, but lays its egg in the nest of another bird and leaves that bird to carry out the duties of rearing the parasite.

The Revisers of Cayley's *What Bird is That?*, 3rd Edit., 1963, state that "Very little is known of this Cuckoo", also that it is "sparsely dispersed throughout northern and eastern Australia".

In the Gin Gin area, which is 31 miles west of Bundaberg in south-east Queensland, I have found them in singles or in pairs, and on several occasions in parties of three.

During February and March, 1964, 14 different Oriental Cuckoos were seen, and over six years, from 1958 to 1964, 35 Cuckoos were recorded under circumstances that indicated that they were different birds. The total number of separate observations made was almost 200, which, of course, included repeat observations on the same bird.

There are several places near Gin Gin where I have seen these Cuckoos. During March, 1964, I found three Cuckoos adjacent to the main road near the town, and on the same day another three birds several miles away, and a pair a few miles further on. All the birds were in small scrub near creeks and it is obvious that I did not see all the Oriental Cuckoos that were in the district.

It would appear that the months between February and May are the best ones in which to find the Cuckoo in this area. My



The Raven impaled on a sharp stick near Port Wakefield, South Australia.

Plate 33.



The Barn Owl hanging from the top of a tall tree near Yungaburra, north Queensland.

Plate 34.

Photos by Roy P. Cooper