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Crested Bellbird

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The Crested Bellbird (*Oreoica gutturalis*), which is widely distributed throughout the drier inland areas of Australia, has a melodious bell-like call and the remarkable habit of placing hairy caterpillars around the inner edge of its nest.

Although its calls are often heard in the bush the bird is not easily seen, due chiefly to the ventriloquial quality of its notes. It is uncanny to watch one of these birds uttering its call, yet the sound of the notes appears to be coming from a different direction. On one occasion a bird was calling from a tree only 20 yards from where I was standing but the sound came from a slightly different angle and from a much greater distance. I asked my companion, a well-known birdman who, however, had had little experience with Crested Bellbirds, to indicate the spot where the bird could be located. He pointed to a tall tree over 100 yards away and commenced to walk in that direction.

However, at my suggestion we did not move, and gradually the call appeared to be coming closer and closer, yet no sign of a moving bird could be seen. Finally the call sounded from the nearby tree and, after several minutes, my companion located the bird on the limb where it had been sitting throughout the whole of the performance.

The call consists of five notes, the first two being uttered slowly and then followed by three quick notes. They all have the bell-like quality but the final note, uttered in a lower key, gives the full effect to the entire call. It has been interpreted in many ways but I prefer the words "Dick, Dick, the devil" as being the best onomatopoeic name for this wonderful songster.

Although the Bellbird feeds largely on the ground the call is generally rendered from a perch in a tree. Calls uttered while the bird is searching among the grasses and fallen leaves are a chattering "chuck-chuck" without any resemblance to the bell-like quality of its main song.

The Crested Bellbird must not be confused with the Bell-Miner, which is often called erroneously the "Bellbird". This is the species which utters the single bell-like note, but as these birds occur in colonies, and a number of birds will be calling at the same time, the effect is of one bird calling continuously. The Crested Bellbird belongs to the family of Crested Shrikes whereas the Bell-Miner is grouped with the Honeyeaters.

The nest, which is similar to that of the Grey Thrush, is a deep cup-shaped structure composed of strips of bark, twigs, leaves and rootlets. It is usually placed in a thick, vertical fork of a tree or in a depression in the top of a stump, particularly where regrowth gives overhead protection from predators.

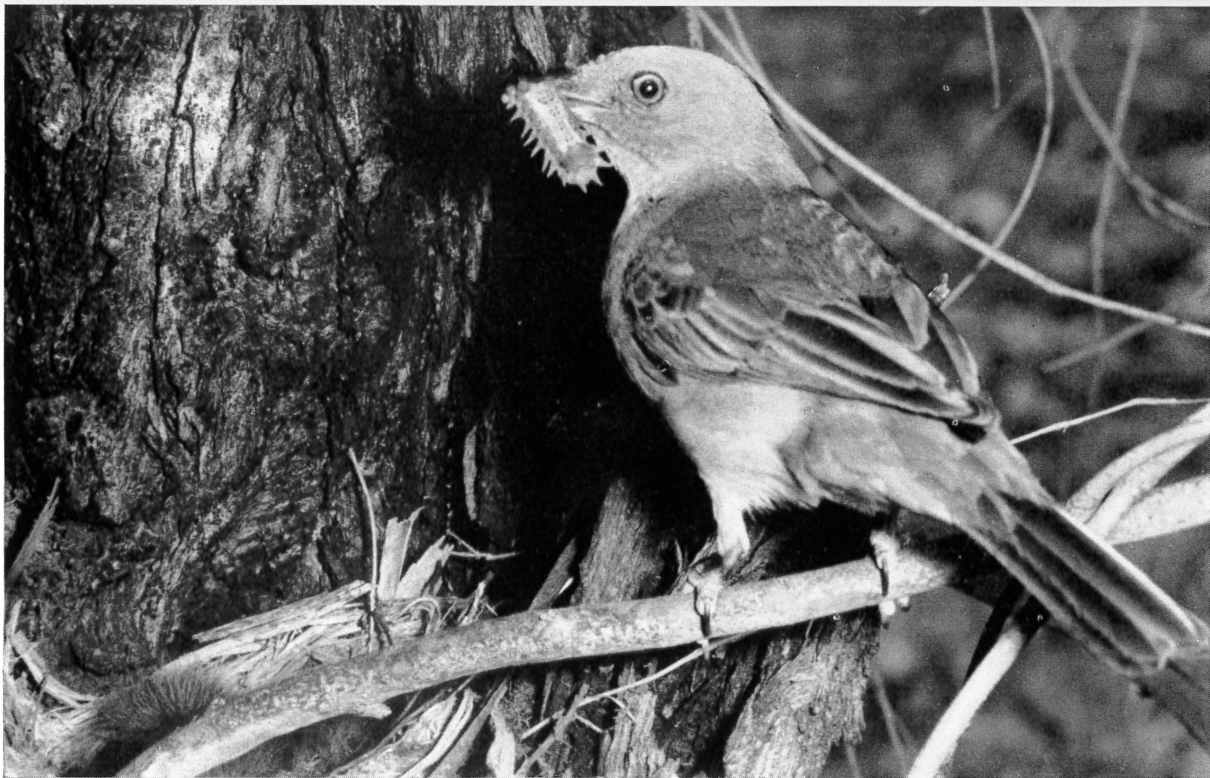
The hairy caterpillars are placed around the inner edge of the nest. The bird has no means of paralysing the caterpillars by injecting them with any potent liquid, but achieves the same effect by squeezing them with its bill along their backs. This is a rough and ready method and many of the caterpillars are killed and, in the warm climate, quickly dry up and are useless for food.

The insects are collected and placed around the nest before the young birds hatch, and it appears that the purpose is to ensure that there will be an adequate supply of food available to rear the nestlings, irrespective of the weather conditions prevailing at the time of their hatching.

However, the Bellbirds do not feed solely on these hairy grass-caterpillars as is shown by the larvae that is in the bird's bill in the accompanying photograph. Why, then, do they build up "stocks" when other insectivorous species, frequenting the same habitat, successfully rear their nestlings on the available insect-diet? The habit may not be unique but it is certainly unusual.

The Crested Bellbird is a stationary species, frequenting the dry scrub lands of the interior. It will usually be found singly or in pairs and during the winter months, when insects are not so plentiful, it covers a wide area in search of food. At this time it does not call as frequently as during the nesting season, and as it moves silently over the ground looking for insects or sits quietly on a perch in a tree, it is often overlooked by an observer.

I have always found it to be very shy, particularly when approaching the nest. On one occasion, in an area where a large number of trees had been cut up for firewood and the unwanted branches and leaves piled into heaps, I watched a male Bellbird for two hours before it would return to its nest. Prior to this period I had searched the area thoroughly, looking into every stump and tree-fork that appeared suitable, without succeeding in finding the nest. Finally, after the bird had remained perched in a thin, tall sapling for over half-an-hour, it flew into one of the piles of heaped up branches, which was situated over 300 yards away from where I was hidden. Throughout this period the bird had held a caterpillar in its bill and did not utter any call. Within minutes of its entering the pile of debris it emerged without the food. I suspected that the fledglings had already left their nest and were hidden among the dead leaves. However, a search revealed a nest built on a horizontally lying branch in the midst of a mass of dead leaves. It contained three young birds almost ready for departure. A more unlikely nesting site for a Crested Bellbird would be difficult to find.



The female Crested Bellbird with food for the nestlings.

To observe these birds closely or to photograph them it is usually necessary to erect a "hide". One photographer broke off a number of large branches and laid them, thick end upward, against a tree to provide himself with sufficient cover to deceive the bird. Sitting on the ground, in the midst of leaves and branches, was not conducive to comfort, especially as the Bellbird had been near the nest for some time and he had been unable to move his cramped limbs for fear of frightening the bird. Glancing away from the bird for a moment, he was horrified to see a large deadly brown snake making rapidly for the shelter of the leaves that encompassed him. The speed of his eruption from the "hide" was second only to the rapidity with which the Bellbird left its perch.

Notes on the White-winged Chough. The White-winged Chough (*Corcorax melanorhamphus*) is a common bird in the Mallee areas of the Swan Hill district in north-western Victoria. They can become a nuisance in some wheat growing areas as they have the bad habit of taking the green shooting wheat-blade shortly after it has emerged from the ground. When they pull the blade they also pull up the growing grain, which at this stage is full of milky substance and relished by the birds. It takes a lot of grains of wheat to satisfy a party of Choughs and they could thin a crop considerably.

At times their nests are robbed by humans or predatory birds and on one occasion I remember a bird that laid successive clutches of 5, 5, 5, 6 and 4 eggs, a total of 25 eggs, in the one season. During one drought-season I found a nest that was made almost completely of cow manure. It must have rained towards the completion of the nest as the rim was built of mud.

I have known Choughs, on two occasions, to build in Ravens' nests. Willie Wagtails will often construct their nest near that of a Chough; another instance of the association of black and white birds. They seem to be on most friendly relations whereas a pair of Ravens nesting nearby was repeatedly attacked by the Wagtails.

A small colony of Choughs will build a nest with a community effort and also feed the young with the same community spirit but in my experience only one female lays in a nest. The eggs in each nest that I have examined have a similar colour pattern.

On one occasion I frightened a sitting bird off a nest and so violent was its departure that the nest toppled to the ground, being dislodged by the alarmed bird. This Chough later returned to where the nest had been constructed and actually laid an egg on the bough.

The Nankeen Kestrel and the Common Bronzewing will use old nests of the Chough for nesting sites.

—S. Daniell, Swan Hill, Vic., 27/5/1961.