

## Notes on the White-winged Chough

By MARCUS D. GOTTSCH, Melbourne.

During the month of October, 1957, I camped, with three companions, in the mallee near Lake Hattah. We had chosen a spot on the pipe-line that runs between the lake and the township, as at this site there was a water-tap that had previously been used by men of the Country Roads Board. The district at the time of our visit was suffering drought conditions, so we left the tap dripping and the pool of water that formed attracted many birds.

One of the first species to take advantage of the water was the White-winged Chough (*Corcorax melanorhamphus*). A flock of about 18 of these birds began making regular visits each day, and we noticed that the presence of water had provided them with ideal conditions for making mud. This in turn had stimulated the nest-building activities that followed.

The Choughs would arrive making their usual whistling calls, alight some fifty yards from the water, and then cautiously approach on foot. One or two birds acted as leaders, the rest followed in a party a short distance behind. On arrival at the pool, the birds would busy themselves with quenching their thirst and making mud. These activities were carried out in silence, with one or more birds acting as sentries. The mud was made by several birds scratching earth into the water, and then paddling until the mud had reached the right consistency.

At intervals, during this activity, a short display was carried out by two or sometimes three birds. The tail was lowered to the ground and the wings were arched downwards with the primaries spread and also touching the ground. The head and neck were held in a horizontal position. In this attitude the white "window" in the wing became very noticeable. The birds stood facing each other, never more than a few feet apart. The whole flock was attracted by the display and uttered a continuous volley of whistling calls during its duration, this being not more than a few seconds.

On one occasion two of the birds displayed on the road for at least 40 seconds. The tail was lowered, the wings arched downward, and the head and neck held horizontally. In this case the birds were approximately 12 feet apart, and they advanced towards each other with a slow strutting motion. The remainder of the flock formed a rough circle around the displaying birds and were in constant motion, their tails being raised and lowered in an agitated fashion. On this occasion, not as many birds called as at previous displays. It was not determined whether the displaying birds or those from the remainder of the flock were making the calls. The display was terminated by an approaching car, when the birds were four feet apart.



White-winged Chough at nest showing the manner in which the young birds hang their heads over the edge of the nest.

When feeding the young, one or more birds accompany the food-bearer. The approach to the nest is made along the ground, in much the same manner as when the flock approaches water, previously described. When at a distance of one or two trees from the nesting tree, the birds left the ground and proceeded in short flights and hops, by way of the branches, to the nest. A Chough on the ground is worth two in the trees, for it is an ungainly bird, and frequently loses a foothold and overbalances.

Some weeks previous to our visit rain had fallen, and a nest had been started, but, owing to the dry conditions that followed, the source of mud-supply had failed before the nest was finished. However, this enterprising party of Choughs continued their building with fresh cow-manure.

While photographing a nest that contained fledgling Choughs, we were constantly amused with the sleeping habits of the occupants. The young birds positioned themselves radially in the nest, heads to the perimeter, tails to the centre. The head and neck hung over the side of the nest and the birds slept. This position may have a cooling effect as it would ensure the maximum airflow around the bodies spaced in this fashion. The hanging head stretches the skin of the neck, making the feathers stand out instead of lying flat, as in a normal position, allowing air to pass over the skin instead of the feathers. The maximum temperature at the time of these observations was over 90°F.

After feeding the young, the parent waited to receive the excrement, but no attempt was made to carry this away, as with most other birds. The adult bird, after holding the dropping in its beak for a second or two, would let it fall to the ground. The only useful purpose this could serve, it would seem, was to keep the nest clean. Certainly no effort was being made to conceal the presence of the nest, as the ground beneath it was littered with droppings.

When not engaged in searching for food, the Chough spends much of the day in dust-bathing. This appeared to be always carried out at a favourite spot, judging by the well-used shallow hollows. What appeared to be preening during the dust-baths may have been a type of "anting" with fine, talcum-like dust. Beakfuls of fine dust are shuffled amongst the feathers. This habit has been witnessed by other observers, but, at the time, we were not aware of this "dust-anting" habit, so, unfortunately, no particular effort was made to study it.

In two instances new nests were built on top of old ones, giving each nest an unusually large appearance.

In *Nests and Eggs of Australian Birds* (1900) A. J. Campbell wrote: "There is much of interest surrounding the *Corcorax*. Not only is the bird a unique or anomalous kind, but as a common forest species throughout the greater part of Australia, little is understood of its natural habits." Today, more than a half-century later, this is still more or less true.