

Agonistic behaviour of the Red Wattlebird *Anthochaera carunculata* towards an elapid snake

Matthew Mo^{1*}, Scott Beno² and Bel Manria²

¹Hurstville NSW 2220, Australia

²Cowra NSW 2794, Australia

*Corresponding author. Email: matthew.sk.mo@gmail.com

Abstract. This note describes a Red Wattlebird *Anthochaera carunculata* directing a series of swoops at an Eastern Brown Snake *Pseudonaja textilis*. The mobbing interaction occurred while the snake was on the ground. Previous literature suggests that the Eastern Brown Snake could constitute a potential nest predator.

The Red Wattlebird *Anthochaera carunculata*, part of a wide diversity of honeyeaters found in Australia (Ford 2001; Hay *et al.* 2022), is endemic to large areas of the eastern and southern parts of the continent's mainland (Higgins *et al.* 2001). It occurs in woodlands, forests, heathlands and shrublands (Saunders 1993; Kerr & Gully 2023) but is also well adapted to anthropogenic habitats such as urban and agricultural landscapes (Smith & Smith 2021; Kendall 2023). Like other honeyeaters, Red Wattlebirds are well documented to be antagonistic towards conspecifics and other birds (Davis & Recher 1993; Ford & Debus 1994; Mo *et al.* 2016). There have also been published reports of Red Wattlebirds attacking mammals such as dogs (Buchanan 1987), cats (Whittell 1933) and possums (Higgins *et al.*

2001), and at least one report of one attacking a snake (Tokue & Ford 2006).

On 26 November 2025, at 1625 h, SB and BM observed a mobbing interaction between a Red Wattlebird and an Eastern Brown Snake *Pseudonaja textilis* on a rural property in Cowra in the Central West region of New South Wales (Figure 1). The snake was an adult, estimated by sight to be just over 1 m in length, and was moving across a mown lawn. The bird performed a series of at least five swoops over the snake's head region, accelerating speed during each approach when within ~70 cm of the snake and descending as low as ~20 cm above the snake. The snake was moving across the ground throughout the interaction



Figure 1. A Red Wattlebird flying towards an Eastern Brown Snake. Photo: Scott Beno

and responded to each swoop by accelerating movement. The entire interaction lasted c.1 minute, concluding after the snake gained cover in a native-plant garden. This was the second mobbing interaction between these two species observed by SB and BM, with the previous interaction observed earlier in November 2025.

Mobbing is an anti-predator defensive strategy commonly observed across several fauna taxa (Abolins-Abols & Ketterson 2017; Carlson & Griesser 2022), generally understood to drive predators away or distract them from detecting the mobbing species' offspring (Dutour *et al.* 2016; Pawlak *et al.* 2019). Breeding seasonality in Red Wattlebirds is quite protracted, with eggs present any time from May to January (Ford 1980, 1999; Tokue & Ford 2007) and mostly between September and November (Morris *et al.* 1981; Higgins *et al.* 2001), when the mobbing interactions described here were observed. Snakes are documented nest predators of wattlebirds and other honeyeaters (Campbell 1900; Higgins *et al.* 2001). Although the Eastern Brown Snake is generally known to be terrestrial, there have been published reports of this species engaging in arboreal behaviour to take prey, including nestling birds (Warham 1958; Shea *et al.* 1993). Thus, although the snakes in our observations were on the ground and were swooped with little to no provocation, the mobbing behaviour is likely because of the perception of threat from a predator and aimed at deterring the snakes before they approach the nest (Altmann 1956). The previous publication that briefly mentioned an observation of a Red Wattlebird mobbing a snake also concerned an adult Eastern Brown Snake (Tokue & Ford 2006). This combined with our observations may indicate that these interactions are more common than currently documented.

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