

Parrot *Psephotus haematonotus*, Sacred Kingfisher *Halcyon sancta*, Dollarbird *Eurystomus orientalis*, Welcome Swallow *Hirundo neoxena*, Tree Martin *Cecropis nigricans*, Fairy Martin *C. ariel*, Willie Wagtail *Rhipidura leucophrys*, Superb Fairy-wren *Malurus cyaneus*, Yellow-rumped Thornbill *Acanthiza chrysorrhoa*, Varied Sittella *Daphoenositta chrysoptera*, White-throated Tree-creeper *Climacteris leucophaea*, Noisy Friarbird *Philemon corniculatus*, Yellow-faced Honeyeater *Lichenostomus chrysops*, Silvereye *Zosterops lateralis*, House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*, Common Starling *Sturnus vulgaris*, Australian Magpie-lark *Grallina cyanoleuca* and Australian Magpie *Gymnorhina tibicen*. Twelve of these species were recorded on tree E.

Discussion

Clearly, the living eucalypt was used more often than any of the four dead trees. This trend was constant not only when tree D was counted simultaneously with tree A, B and C. The results suggest that although dead trees may be less important than living trees, in some circumstances they are quite important to some bird species. The large number of usages recorded in this survey was boosted by the many nesting Rainbow Bee-eaters that obviously found the bare branches very convenient vantage points from which to hunt flying insects; they captured a wide range of insects including beetles, dragonflies and apparently small cicadas.

Unfortunately this short study did not record bird species that used both dead and live trees or live trees only, nor the activities of each bird species on each type of tree. This is an important area for study in any future such surveys.

Acknowledgements

This survey would not have been possible without the participation of BOC members. Thanks go to them, and to Philip Veerman (one of the participants) for his comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

Short Notes—

Hovering, Aerial Feeding and Swimming by the Eastern Reef Egret *Egretta sacra* and Other Herons

On 9 October 1984 I saw an Eastern Reef Egret *Egretta sacra* of the grey morph fishing from stationary hovering flight low over the submerged coral reef on Heron Island (80 km north-east of Gladstone, Queensland). It was holding its neck vertically upwards and its head and bill straight forward, flapping its wings at about 100-120 beats per minute. It bent its neck back into the normal flying position as it moved forward with no obvious change in rate of wing beats. As it stopped again it raised its neck as before. It continued this behaviour for 10 minutes, during which it dropped three times into the water, lunging with its bill and lowering its legs though apparently not resting on them. After the third time it rested on an exposed rock. The wind was ESE and 20-30 knots (24 knots recorded in Gladstone). The tide was high at 0800 h, the moon had been full and the observations were made at midday when the water was still too deep for egrets to wade easily among the rough coral.

In a study of Eastern Reef Egrets on the Great Barrier Reef, Recher & Recher (1972) found that the species used various foraging methods, specialising in those involving stealth and surprise in the clear waters with abundant hiding places for fish. They recorded occasional instances of birds diving from perches or swooping from flight while trailing their legs in the water, but in six weeks of observation on Heron Island and five weeks elsewhere they did not record hovering. Hence this appears to be an uncommon behaviour for Eastern Reef Egrets, perhaps only used under certain combinations of wind and tide, or when wind has made the water less clear than usual and a hovering egret less conspicuous to fish. The reef at Heron Island is low and on some tides it may be suitable for conventional feeding for as little as two hours (Recher & Recher 1972); some Eastern Reef Egrets then fly to neighbouring reefs or forage among trees on the island. The hovering behaviour would be valuable under these conditions and the individual observed was quite adept at it on this occasion.

Several heron species have been recorded diving for food from level or hovering flight in Australia (Recher et al. 1983) and worldwide (Hancock & Elliott 1978), including egrets *Egretta* spp., night herons *Nycticorax* spp., Pied Heron *Ardea picata* and Grey and Great Blue Herons *Ardea cinerea* and *A. herodias*. Other species will take food by plunging from banks or branches, including bitterns *Botaurus* spp. and Green, Striated or Mangrove Heron *Butorides striatus* (Hancock & Elliott 1978). Night herons will lunge for food while swimming, and I watched three Rufous Night Herons *Nycticorax caledonicus* doing this at dusk in the overflow to Moitaka Sewage Farm (near Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea) in June 1979. In their account of foraging by Australian herons, Recher et al. (1983) reported Plumed or Intermediate Egrets *Egretta intermedia* diving for fish close to the surface from hovering flight on several dates at one location on the Murray River. This is also recorded for Snowy Egrets *E. thula* in America, and in June 1983 I watched three Snowy Egrets behaving in this way on a freshwater pond near Tampa, Florida, where swarms of small fish were jumping close to the surface. The egrets were flying up to 10 m from the bank, hovering and returning, but they were far clumsier than the Eastern Reef Egret at Heron Island, and were airborne for much shorter periods.

In May 1983 I saw a more sustained example of aerial feeding by herons over Lake Titicaca in Peru. Two immature Striated Herons were circling separately over the lake (3 600 m above sea level) about 1 km from the shore, obviously looking for food. One continued circling for at least 15 minutes during which it dropped into the water twice, dangling its legs vertically (submerging two thirds of their length) but not resting on them and apparently taking small prey items close to the surface with its bill. It was hard to realise that these birds were of the same species that inhabits mangrove-lined coasts in Australia, typically hunting over the mud in crouched or 'low-stalk' position, though elsewhere they are one of the most versatile species.

All these aerial and aquatic methods enable herons to take prey from near the surface of water too deep for wading. They may be specially valuable for species that feed on low tidal reefs or in ephemeral swamps subject to rapid rises in water level. The method of using the neck to increase wind resistance

for hovering does not appear to have been described, at least for Eastern Reef Egrets, and was used expertly by this individual Eastern Reef Egret on Heron Island.

References

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Talon Grappling by Whistling Kites *Haliastur sphenurus*

In the Sale district, Victoria, numbers of the Whistling Kite *Haliastur sphenurus* usually build up around late summer to feed on the carp *Cyprinus carpio* stranded by dropping water levels in the many swamps. This trend was evident in early 1985.

Whilst watching a group of seven Whistling Kites flying above the La Trobe River near Sale on 5 February 1985 at around midday, I noticed two taking more interest in each other than in hunting. The two Kites flew together at about 50 m, grabbed each other by the talons and descended in a lateral spin for some 10 m or so before separating. Although I have observed this behaviour in White-bellied Sea-Eagles *Haliaeetus leucogaster* and in Wedge-tailed Eagles *Aquila audax*, and have often seen Whistling Kites swooping and diving at each other in apparent play and/or courtship, this is the only time I have seen a pair of Kites actually grab each other and fall downwards.

Morris (1976) reported male Whistling Kites to make steep dives towards the female during courtship displays; the whirling or spinning climax to such displays has apparently not been recorded specifically for the Whistling Kite although it has been for the Brahminy Kite *Haliastur indus* and other milvine kites *Milvus* spp. (Brown & Amadon 1968). Among raptors, whirling is usually confined to the sea-eagles *Haliaeetus* spp. and kites (Brown 1976).

References

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Foraging Behaviour of Herons — a Correction

In my previous note on the subject (Loyn 1985: *Aust. Bird Watcher* **11**, 133-135) there were two editorial or referee's changes which were not referred back to me as author. The title should have read 'Hovering by the Eastern Reef Egret, with notes on aerial feeding and swimming by other herons'. The published title wrongly suggested that the Eastern Reef Egret was using all these methods. Concerning hovering behaviour by an Eastern Reef Egret, the third and fourth sentences should have read 'After a few minutes it bent its neck back into the normal flying position and immediately progressed forward with no obvious change in rate of wing-beats. It then raised its neck as before; its forward progress ceased and it remained stationary over another section of reef'. The neck movement was the only visible action that could have controlled forward speed, which it appeared to do by affecting wind resistance. High-speed film would be needed to show whether any more subtle actions were involved, but I do not believe that the neck movement merely followed the change in speed. This was implied in the erroneous sentences, with no explanation of how the bird changed speed. In the third paragraph (middle of p. 134) a printing error resulted in the omission of two half-sentences. The fourth sentence should have attributed the observation of Intermediate Egrets to Klapste (1976); the reference to Recher et al. (1983) related to hovering in Pied Herons. Even in a short note such as this, it is important to allow authors to check proofs, especially when editorial changes have been made.

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Editor's note:

I apologise for the errors which crept into the original paper. At the time, copy was in short supply and there was a rush to meet printing deadlines. Also, proofs were only sent to contributors when specifically requested (a legacy of past practice). The copy situation has improved and it is now policy to refer editorial changes and proofs to all contributors. Authors can assist by replying promptly. ■