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## **Wood-Swallows in Mid-Northern Victoria**

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### **SUMMARY**

The seemingly contradictory movements of some species of Wood-Swallows and their unpredictable selection of seasonal breeding grounds is discussed. It is shown that their annual migratory arrival and departure dates for Victoria can be predicted to within a few days. Evidence is given of large scale nectar-feeding, and *Artamus cinereus* is shown to be breeding in Victoria.

### **GENERAL**

Dr. Allen Keast summarised the movements of the Wood-Swallows (*Emu*, 58:217-18), and showed that *A. superciliosus* and *A. personatus* winter north of the Tropic of Capricorn. *A. leucorhynchus* is strongly migratory from southern areas, and *A. cyanopterus* leaves Tasmania entirely, and Victoria and most of New South Wales almost entirely. *A. cinereus* is the only sedentary Wood-Swallow in Australia, and *A. minor* is sedentary in parts of its range and nomadic in others.

We have not observed *A. minor* in Victoria, although there has been one record in this State.

#### *White-browed Wood-Swallow, Artamus superciliosus*

In the *Australian Bird Watcher*, 4:42, A. H. Chisholm gently chides one author for calling Wood-Swallows entirely insectivorous, and another for failing to mention a few earlier references to these birds as feeders on nectar.

With experiences of Wood-Swallows literally gorging on nectar from citrus blossoms the lack of knowledge on the subject quite astonished us, but we were in a favourable situation and later found that what we had considered as probably commonplace was not generally known.

In October 1941, one of us witnessed a huge flock of Wood-Swallows feeding on an orchard of blossoming orange trees, on a neighbour's property, at Mystic Park. Several years later, on our own citrus orchard in full blossom in October, there descended a flock of countless thousands of Wood-Swallows about mid-morning. The birds literally festooned the trees in a swarming chattering horde, and they covered five acres of orchard. They were so thickly clustered as to drag down the branches of some trees to almost a weeping effect. So intent were they on the matter in hand and such was the racket they made, that they were almost oblivious of our presence

amongst them. They stayed some two hours and then disappeared completely; although later we had a greater number of residual nesters than in normal years.

On this occasion the mixed flock comprised some nine White-browed to one Masked species. A few years later, however, in a similar mass invasion, the numbers were reversed and the Masked species predominated. This phenomenon has been noticed by earlier observers but is still unexplained. In this area the White-brows are seasonally fairly common, while the Masked is rather rare, and it is difficult to understand the occasional invasion in numbers of a rare species accompanied by a few individuals only of a normally much more common species.

Also puzzling is the spacing of these invasions. It could be that these massive flocks of migrating birds descend on citrus orchards every spring at some point along the Murray Valley, where citrus orchards are spread along hundreds of miles. But why gather in such huge flocks?

The nectar in the citrus blossom is very plentiful, and it is not unusual, when plucking marketable fruit from the trees, that nectar from blossoms spatters the face of the picker. Chisholm mentions White-brows in May being late birds in Victoria. This is confirmed by our card index records, which show several to the end of May but only one in June. The earliest record we have for spring returns is one of a flock of White-brows flying south on August 30, 1960, while most early return records are spread through September, three weeks later than the White-breasted.

However, in 1972, after these notes had been written, we had three reports in the month of July. On July 14 several White-brows were over the house, and the following day 20 birds were seen. On the 16th a sizable noisy flock was circling high over the marsh forest with only an odd bird being low enough to be sighted. On the same day we saw two Black-faced and four Dusky Wood-Swallows in the same area.

Are these birds spring migrants or autumn departures?

On May 30, 1959, Tom Lowe saw Wood-Swallows feeding on the open ripe fruits of a Weeping Pittosporum, *Pittosporum phylliraeoides*. Eight White-brows, with a greater number of Dusky Wood-Swallows were counted, and from an examination of the fruits we concluded that the attraction was almost certainly the gummy pulp surrounding the seeds. The tree was small, no more than 2½m high, and carried only a few fruits. Obviously, some 20 birds would not have stayed very long had they been feeding on insects only.

The following data from our records relating to spring arrivals and autumn departures are of interest. All observations were made around the Mystic Park district.

May 20, 1954, six birds overhead calling.

October 14, 1955, first returns.

September 5, 1957, a few overhead with a few Masked species.

August 25, 1958, one bird heard calling; the early date indicates that it may have been a White-breasted. April 7, 1959, large flock, apparently migrating.

May 30, 1959, 8-10 birds feeding on berries of *Pittosporum*.

August 30, 1960, small flocks flying south, calling.

September 14, 1961, six flying overhead. May 8, 1962, number heard flying high to the north.

September 4, 1962, flock came in low on a north-west wind.

September 7, 1964, recorded.

September 20, 1965, recorded. April 11, 1966, flock overhead, heard calling.

September 28, 1966, first spring returns. April 27, 1967, flying high overhead.

September 25, 1967, came in numbers in gale force wind, flying south. September 10, 1968, bunch flying overhead, calling, high.

September 8, 1970, first returns, flying low with gusty north-east winds, stormy, some Masked species. April 28, 1971, number flying high to the north.

October 10, 1971, first return for the season.

July 14, 1972, several; 15th, 20; 16th, a sizable flock. See report.

The birds are often heard while flying high and out of sight. This applies both to southward moving spring birds and northward autumn birds moving out. There is no mistaking the loud sparrow-like "*chip chip*" of the White-browed Wood-Swallow. We agree with Claude Austin (*pers. comm.*) that it is highly probable that many flocks pass over out of hearing.

In our experience, and this is confirmed by David Dent and Claude Austin, it is most unusual for any of the birds, in the first few flocks of spring arrivals from the north of White-brows and Masked, to alight on trees or on the ground, even briefly. In the long years of our watching each of us can name but one such incident, and with three of us that single occasion happened this season.

Two or three weeks after the earliest flocks have passed over southward the story is very different. Wood-Swallows are around daily, moving in all directions at once and, as always, garrulous. Perhaps the early birds that never settle are those which annually make their objective the Victorian southern boundary. This is a feasible suggestion, as our Murray Valley area is at least 200 miles from the coast, and it is possible that the birds with the longest journey ahead are always in the van of the southern moving hordes in spring. A peculiar behaviour of the earliest spring arrivals from the north is that the first group of birds seen are often moving from south to north and, indeed, this intriguing action also applies to the latest autumn departures; generally they are flying in the "wrong" direction.

#### Masked Wood-Swallow, *Artamus personatus*

Our written records of the Masked Wood-Swallow are more discontinuous than those of the White-browed and White-breasted species. This is due to the irregularity of its visits and it is very often

in small numbers, mixed with much greater numbers of White-browed Wood-Swallows. This latter species often fly overhead at a great height and can be identified positively by their voices, but the Masked species, which are often with them, can escape notice.

There have been seasons, however, in which the Masked Wood-Swallow has not appeared, and this indicates the more sporadic nature of its movements in this area. Even following the mass invasion on the orange blossom only two pairs remained to nest in the orchard and surrounds. The Masked species is not a common bird here.

The following notes show our records of the first arrivals and departures in each season of the Masked Wood-Swallow in this area. September 7, 1957, several.

February 26, 1959, one bird.

October/November, 1960, huge flock, later two nests.

September 5, 1962, small flock; 24th, number in flock of White-browed; October 20, more than usual around.

September 11, 1968, one or more in flock of White-browed; October, more Masked than usual this spring.

September 8, 1970, small flock mixed with White-browed; November 5, several birds.

#### White-breasted Wood-Swallow, *Artamus leucorhynchus*

The White-breasted Wood-Swallow is, of all our local migrants, the most regular in its arrival and departure dates; appearing across the Murray River before the end of August, after having been away from Victoria for 13 weeks only. A beautiful and cheerful bird to have around it shares with the Black-faced species a homely tameness of disposition. It has a distinct liking for localities with ample water, and nests along the shores of lakes and rivers, so much so that it is a rare bird, indeed, in any extensive dry area.

The appropriation of an old nest, and in particular that of the Magpie-Lark, *Grallina cyanoleuca*, is well known; other favourite sites are dead trees, in or near the water's edge, where the nest is placed on top of a broken off upright limb, or in the end of a more horizontal limb-stump, in which case the nest is near the end and never completely hidden within a hollow at depth. It may, as with other Wood-Swallows, be placed close to an upright tree-trunk where some protuberance affords a safe siting.

Very rarely, in our experience, does it build in the outer branches of trees where the nest may move dangerously in a gale. One only such nest have we seen and it was built entirely by the birds in the outer twigs of a Pepper Tree, *Schinus molle*, at a height of 4m, which is quite a common height in any situation. In relation to the size of the bird this nest was very substantial, and was built mainly of thin twigs and dry grass-stems. The ample cup was firmly attached to branches and was visible to an observer from outside the tree. The tree was about 20m from the edge of the lake and there was little or no leaf cover above the nest.

First recorded arrival and departure dates each year:



White-browed Wood-Swallow — male

Photo by Tom Lowe

1958, Aug. 25, May 7; 1959, Aug. 26; 1960, Aug. 23, May 15; 1961, Sep. 7, May 10; 1962, Aug. 31, May 9; 1963, Aug. 21, May 27; 1964, Aug. 24; 1965, Aug. 26; 1966, Aug. 28, May 30; 1968, Aug. 18; 1969, Aug. 18, May 13; 1970, Sep. 3; 1971, Aug. 20.

#### Dusky Wood-Swallow, *Artamus cyanopterus*

We have made fewer recordings of dates on the Dusky Wood-Swallow, as we were inclined to believe that it was not really a migrant, yet we have only one bird recorded remaining as late as June 21. Since these notes were written the observation of four birds on July 16, 1972, has been made.

Our limited number of records show plainly that the Dusky is not a common, evenly distributed bird in our area, although the locality is well timbered and well watered, and should be, according to Keast, suitable for a greater number of birds.

We have found it nesting in Red Gum, *Eucalyptus camaldulensis*, and in various species of Mallee, also in the introduced Boxthorn. It is not unusual for it to be found nesting with Masked and White-browed in one group in the mallee.

Our recorded arrival and departure dates are set out below.  
September 19, 1954, first returns.

August 3, 1958, two birds in the mallee; May 29, 1959, number circling and calling at a low level.

September 9, 1959, some seen in the marsh; May 30, 1960, a group in the marsh feeding on seeds of *Pittosporum*; June 21, 1960, one bird in the marsh — a wintering bird.

May 13, 1961, flock overhead flying north.

September 15, 1963, a pair nest-building in a Red Gum.

July 16, 1972, four birds.

Black-faced Wood-Swallow, *Artamus cinereus*

The Black-faced Wood-Swallow has been scarcely reported as a Victorian bird, and the records below comprise our entire experiences with them during 30 years residence in the district. The additional remarks and observers reveal the status of a species which must be regarded as rare in Victoria. All of these records were made in an area 12 miles by 6 miles in the Lake Charm/Mystic Park localities. It would appear that in this area there is a small resident breeding population, some ten miles from the Murray River, within Victoria. September is the only month in which they have not been recorded, and, although this is the area in which we live, and which gets an intensive scanning by comparison with country further afield, we have seen no Black-faced species in any other Victorian localities. These birds can be seen in numbers immediately north of the Murray River, in the Riverina.

## Victorian records outside Mystic Park

John Hobbs (*pers. comm.*) advised me that he had one sight record for Victoria; that of a single bird near the 160 mile post on the Calder Highway. This would be approximately the latitude of Mystic Park.

A nesting record is given in the Fourth Report of the Mid Murray Field Naturalists' Trust, April 1971. A nest was located in the Piambie area which carried three almost fully fledged young birds, on January 3, 1971. This was their first nest record on the Victorian side of the river. Piambie is a few miles south of Boundary Bend.

Claude Austin (*pers. comm.*) states "not seen Black-faced south of the Sunset mallee".

In January 1972, P. A. Disher and J. and E. Thomas saw a bird at Dumosa, near the 200 mile post on the Calder Highway.

## Observations in the Mystic Park area

October 19, 1958, two birds Lake Charm (T.G.L.) our first record.

May 6, 1962, five birds Kangaroo Lake, (D. G. Dent).

December 9, 1962, one bird Lake Charm, (P. A. Disher).

July 7, 1963, one bird Kangaroo Lake, (D. G. Dent).

January 30, 1965, two birds The Marsh, (J. Watson, V.T.L.).

February 7, 1965, six birds in a group, Mystic Park, one a recent nestling, (T.G.L.).

August 6, 1966, several, Lake Charm, (T.G.L.).

April 22, 1967, three, Mystic Park, (B.O.C.).

March 9, 1968, five, Mystic Park, (T.G.L.).

January 8, 1969, several, Lake Charm, (V.T.L.).

May 31, 1969, one, Mystic Park, (T.G.L.).

August 9, 1969, one, Mystic Park, (T.G.L.).

November 1, 1969, pair nest building, Mystic Park, (T.G.L.).

June 12, 1970, eight birds, Mystic Park, "Hawking low over thistles, feeding", (V.T.L.).

July 19, 1970, several, Lake Charm, (T.G.L.).

August 29, 1970, one, Mystic Park, (T.G.L.).

July 16, 1972, two birds in The Marsh.