

The Lure of Wood-Swallows

By MICHAEL SHARLAND, Hobart, Tasmania

One of the disadvantages of living in Tasmania, as I do, is to find the Wood-Swallows so poorly represented, in a numerical sense, as Wood-Swallows happen to be my favourite birds, and only the Dusky Wood-Swallow is here.

Not for a moment would anyone charge the Dusky Wood-Swallow with being an undesirable member of the Artamidae, or a bird with any serious shortcomings at all. In fact, its own special character, marked by friendliness, soft, pleasing plumage tones and attractive, graceful flight that enlivens many a bushland spot, would exonerate it from any such charge.

None the less, charmer as it is, its presence doesn't compensate fully for the disinclination of other pleasing members of the clan, five of them, to visit the Tasmanian mainland and give us the enjoyment of watching them.

True, three of these other species happen to be on the Tasmanian bird-list, but to see them one must visit, or be a resident of, King Island, a Tasmanian dependency in Bass Strait.

There, according to publication No. 40 of the Queen Victoria Museum, Launceston, *The Birds of King Island*, by R. H. Green and A. M. McGarvie (9/8/71), the White-breasted, Masked and White-browed members of the family are known from time to time, the White-browed having been recorded in every month of the year, the others as casual visitors.

Some 40 miles long, King Island is nearly midway between the north-western tip of Tasmania and the Victorian coast about Cape Otway, and Max McGarvie has recorded there, in addition to these Wood-Swallows, other continental species that cross, presumably, from Victoria, but that do not come on to the Tasmanian mainland.

Yet, on Flinders Island, at the opposite entrance to Bass Strait, where one might expect to see these species as well, only the Dusky Wood-Swallow has been recorded, *vide* R. H. Green, *The Birds of Flinders Island*, Queen Victoria Museum publication, No. 34 (30/6/69).

So much for the Artamidae in Tasmania, except to add that King Island is the most southerly point where the White-breasted Wood-Swallow, normally a regular dweller of the northerly parts of Australia, has been recorded so far.

Let us look at the status of the several species elsewhere; and in doing so, if we are Tasmanians, we will surely feel envious of people who are able to enjoy the company and close acquaintance of something more than just a single species, according to whether they live within the range of the birds.

Dusky Wood-Swallow *Artamus cyanopterus*: In the extent of its distribution this one challenges the Black-faced, or Grey, Wood-Swallow, but prefers coastal areas more than the other. There is a record of it from Cape York Peninsula, and it ranges down the east coast, and a little way inland, to the southern tip of Tasmania, which is as far south as it can get. Then along the southern coast of Australia and into the south-western part of Western Australia.

Dr. D. L. Serventy, Perth, tells me it was once the only one found in the densely forested jarrah block, though, of course, preferring forest openings. He says that formerly it must have ranged northwards to the mulga-eucalypt line, or zone, which is illustrated in his and H. M. Whittell's *Birds of Western Australia*. Nowadays, however, it is restricted to the thick forest areas of the south-west, though in winter some birds move out radially and towards the northern limits of its former range.

In Tasmania it is a pretty clear-cut migrant when winter approaches, leaving for other States. Personally, I have not seen it in the Australian inland farther north than Alice Springs.

White-breasted Wood-Swallow *A. leucorhynchus*: I have photographed the species nesting at Wyong, about 65 miles north of Sydney, near the New South Wales' coastline. This appears to be the southerly limit of breeding on the eastern coast of the continent. At Darwin, in the Northern Territory, it is very common, and likewise in the Kimberley region of the north-western part of Australia. Indeed, it is distributed widely through the north, comes down towards the Centre, and in Western Australia it follows down the coastal belt to as far as Shark Bay. Barrow Island and the Montebello group also know it. It occurs also south to Werribee, Victoria, and is to be seen along the Murray River in South Australia.

Perhaps surprisingly, it favours mangroves on the west coast of Australia. I have not seen it in mangroves along the east coast, it being chiefly a woodland bird, although generally nesting close to water.

White-browed Wood-Swallow *A. superciliosus*: This one has no stable pattern of distribution. The odd fact of its turning up occasionally on King Island is no more curious than that it should present itself, now and then, and often at long intervals, in other parts of Australia where it is accepted as rather a novelty. Generally, it roams over most of Australia, apparently having no fixed route or regular destination.

It virtually drops out of the sky, in a great flock, and begins to breed just where it has landed, gets nesting over as rapidly as possible, and then leaves again almost unnoticed and unsung, and we are never sure when that particular area will see it again. Its extreme mobility extends sometimes to the act of deserting nests and eggs before breeding is over.

Masked Wood-Swallow *A. personatus*: This one, too, we could describe as a nomad. Mostly, it accompanies the White-browed Wood-Swallow on the nomadic journeys, and the two species will settle down and breed in the same bushland area. They are very chummy with each other.

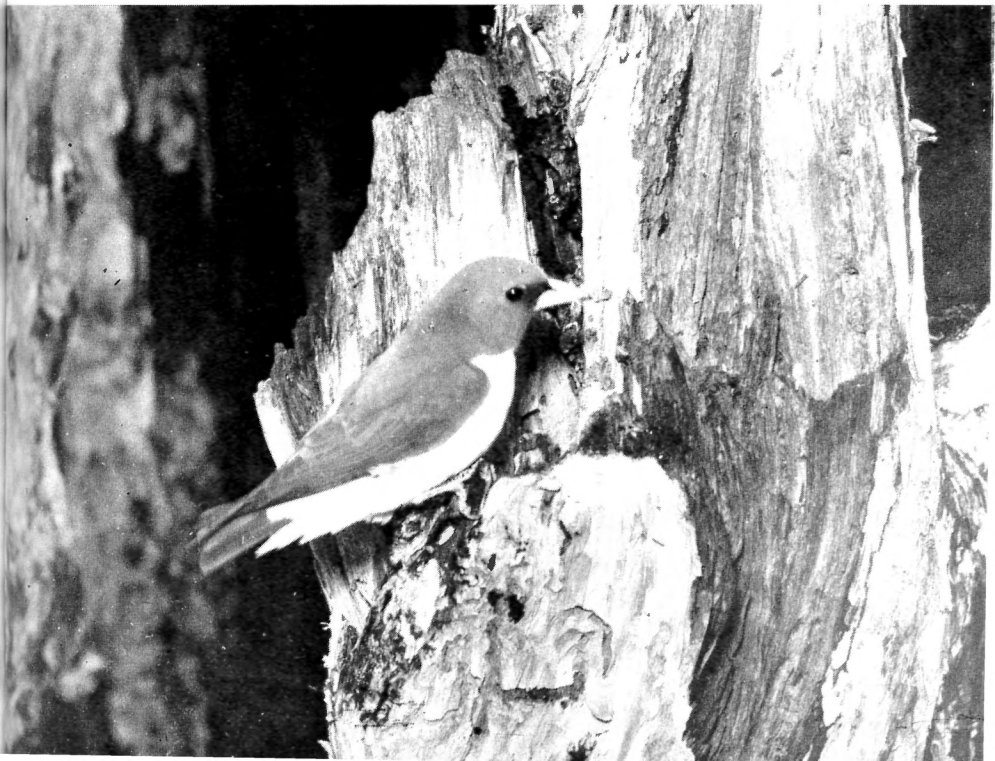
In 1944 Arnold McGill, Sydney, reported seeing a bird that he believed was a hybrid between the two species. This item came to the



Plates 34 and 35

Dusky Wood-Swallow
White-breasted Wood-Swallow

Photos by Michael Sharland



notice of H. Greensill Barnard, Rockhampton, who duly reported collecting "a very striking male hybrid" on the Dawson River, Queensland, evidently the outcome of a mating also between the same two species.

I have seen the Masked literally in hundreds of thousands feeding on nectar and insects from gum blossom in Northern Territory areas. A week or two afterwards all were gone.

Black-faced (Grey) Wood-Swallow *A. cinereus*: Occurs in all States except Tasmania, a very sedentary species, plentiful in the north of Australia, fading in numbers the farther south it goes but one of the most widely distributed of the family. In Western Australia, Serventy says, it occurs all over that State (except the heavily forested south-western corner), and on the coastal plain from Perth southwards and west of the Darling Scarp.

Down the "Track" from Darwin to Alice Springs it is one of the commonest of birds. In 1963 I often saw it flocking in large numbers along this inland road.

Little Wood-Swallow *A. minor*: This attractive small dark bird has a white-tipped tail, but no white stripe in the wing, the absence of which separates it distinctly from the Dusky Wood-Swallow when seen at a distance. Again, this species is more plentiful in the northern half of Australia than elsewhere. I have seen it in Queensland, Northern Territory, the Kimberley region of Western Australia, South Australia and New South Wales.

Dr. Serventy further informs me that its southern limit in his State is the Murchison River gorge (downstream from Galena), the Gnows Nest Range (south of Yalgoo), and Mount Kenneth (west of Youanmi).

Within easy reach of Sydney it is possible occasionally to see more than one species of wood-swallow, but not the Little, and E. S. Hoskin, recorder for the Keith Hindwood Memorial Ornithological Service, advises that he has no record of it from the County of Cumberland (Sydney district), so rich in other birds.

J. N. Hobbs, Katoomba, has found it breeding at Casino, in the north-east of New South Wales. This is an interesting record. Casino happens to be on the eastern side of the Great Dividing Range, and it is on the western side of the range where hitherto the Little Wood-Swallow has been found nesting. It was on the western side that Roy P. Cooper (*Australian Bird Watcher*, 3:77-82) reported it nesting in the Warrumbungle Range, the most southerly record for New South Wales.

As for Victoria, W. Roy Wheeler in his *A Handlist of the Birds of Victoria*, says the Little Wood-Swallow is an accidental visitor to this south-eastern State (one record, Edenhope, September, 1941).

Thus, enough has been said to show that the Artamidae is a widely distributed family through Australia.

Wood-Swallows are sociable birds and doubtless we have seen



White-browed Wood-Swallow — male
Masked Wood-Swallow — female

Photos by Michael Sharland



examples of this social trait in the peculiar clustering that takes place among some of them, mostly when going to roost, though also when preening during the day.

A. H. Chisholm gives a good account of clustering by the Dusky Wood-Swallow, in his *Birds and Green Places*, pp 59-63 (1929). The Dusky species seems to be noted for this kind of behaviour.

Elsewhere Chisholm has mentioned that clustering is known among both the White-browed and the Black-faced (Grey) Wood-Swallows. He suggests that the habit is practised by all of the species.

The birds cluster in a big swarm at times, much like the manner of honey bees. All mixed together and clinging to one another, they thus assemble on stems and branches and present a most unusual sight. But I believe the massive clustering is rare. Rather this "swarming" generally is restricted to a particular family unit and occurs on a small scale. Mostly we will find it is done at night, the party comprising adolescents, first-year's young, and their parents.

The birds' affectionate nature prompts them to snuggle up with their fellows at night, and, again, I believe the thermal benefit to be gained as the result of bodies pressed closely together during cold weather, particularly on migration, is appreciated by the birds.

The late T. P. Bellchambers, who had a fauna sanctuary at Humbug Scrub, South Australia, once lamented having known of shooters to fire into a "swarm" of roosting Wood-Swallows and kill dozens with a single shot.

While living at Darwin a few years ago I found it most entertaining watching White-breasted Wood-Swallows juggling for a roosting spot late each day.

These, instead of swarming in the way of bees or Dusky Wood-Swallows, would snuggle their bodies closely together, side by side, 15 or 20 of them, along a short, fine limb.

Latecomers, finding no room left on the limb, had either to form a new line on a neighbouring limb (where others soon joined them), or else fly up and down the existing line looking for a place to squeeze in.

And then, when one finally managed to wedge itself down between two of its fellows, after walking over their backs, all those birds on one side would need to shift an inch or two sideways. This shoving was highly unfair, for as a result of the sudden concerted shouldering imparted through each individual, the last one on the line found itself suddenly bumped off into space!

A case of "last to come, first to go".

Then there was much squealing and jostling; but after a time the dislodged one might manage to shoulder itself in at some other point in the line, and, in turn, the one now at the end would share a similar fate.

It was practically dark before all these 40 or so Wood-Swallows had packed themselves tightly together, some of them pressed hard against the stem, those on the end of the lines out in the cold.



Plate 38

Black-faced Wood-Swallow

Photo by Roy P. Cooper

Plate 39

Little Wood-Swallow

Photo by Michael Sharland

