

“Freezing” by the Speckled Warbler

By A. H. CHISHOLM, Sydney

The small ground-frequenting bird which is sometimes termed “Speckled Jack”, and figures rather more formally as *Chthonicola sagittata*, carries distinction on several counts.

One of Australia’s avian “fragments”, ranking a genus of its own and defying precise classification, it is among the few birds that have been given secondary names based on their eggs—in this case “Blood Tit”, in recognition of the fact that, although the domed nest (built in a scooped-out hollow on the ground) is well-screened and well-lined, the eggs are coloured warm chocolate or deep red.

The nestlings, too, are distinctive in that they are apt when disturbed to utter hissing sounds, noises so suggestive of a snake as to be quite startling (See *Emu*, 32, p. 317, for a woman’s story of an occasion when, as her fingers touched a nest, the hissing from within caused her to tumble backwards in fright.) Similar offensive—or defensive?—sounds are sometimes made by adult Quail-Thrushes (*Cinclosoma*) when tending young, and also by certain small birds, mainly species which breed in hollows, in Britain and America.

Yet another feature of *Chthonicola* behaviour is the bird’s remarkable “freezing” ability. In this it rivals a somewhat larger earth-feeding (but tree-nesting) species, *Oreocincla lunulata*, the Ground-Thrush, which also has cryptic markings on much of its plumage. I have seen several times a food-carrying Ground-Thrush perch on a branch, or on the rim of its nest, absolutely immobile, for a lengthy period, and I have twice seen a Speckled Warbler act likewise in a tree.

The first of these experiences is recounted in my book dealing with the Sydney district, *Nature Fantasy in Australia* (1932, p. 57). There, in some little detail, the story is told of a Speckled Warbler which, with food in bill, sat in a tree for about fifteen minutes, and even when we (two observers) moved some fifty yards from the spot and, partly screening ourselves, watched through field-glasses, she still remained on the branch, rigidly still, perfectly silent, so that after nearly an hour’s vigil we conceded defeat and departed.

In the same area—Doonside, west of Parramatta—much more recently (February 25, 1967) that experience was repeated. A member of our wandering party, Mrs. Elaine Hutcheson, called me up to advise that two Speckled Warblers had risen from the ground to a tree and while one had flown away the other, with a grub in the bill, had remained motionless on a branch. Expecting that bird to go to a nest, we retired behind some bushes and watched, in turns, through binoculars. But, again, the vigil failed. Our resolute subject simply “stayed put”, motionless and silent—and was still in the “freezing” attitude when, half an hour later, we reluctantly retired.

Of course, little Speckled Jack can be reasonably active, both in movements and vocally, whenever the need arises. It is customary for a pair or a small party to traverse the ground smartly, meanwhile often uttering a rasping chatter; and often, too, one ascends a tree and there produces a sweet song that occasionally includes mimicry. A Victorian observer once told me he heard a Speckled Warbler imitate, clearly but not loudly, the notes of six other species, and a writer living in northern New South Wales has related in a recent issue of the *Emu* (66, p. 298) that a *Chthonicola* captured in a mist-net produced, while held in a hand, admirable imitations of the call-notes of various local birds, including the Rufous Whistler and the Mistletoe-bird.

It is regrettable to have to record that this versatile little bird has latterly been, owing to the destruction of habitat, considerably reduced in numbers in the forests west of Sydney. Nevertheless, we still see nests occasionally; several have been observed as late as March and one was found to have eggs on April 9 a few years ago.

Possibly collectors' activities have been a factor in limiting the ranks of the species. This, almost certainly, has been the case with its "guest", the Black-eared Cuckoo (whose eggs, like those of the host, are blood-red), which is now rarely reported anywhere near Sydney.

Distribution of the Speckled Warbler is considerably more extensive than used to be supposed; it extends in the south-west from near the Victorian-South Australian border up through open forest areas to the lower north of Queensland, inland from Mackay.

The Large Sand-Dotterel on French Island

By DESMOND J. QUINN, Chadstone, Victoria

On February 6, 1966, I made a trip to Tortoise Head, at the south-western tip of French Island, Western Port, Victoria, which lies 35 miles south-east of Melbourne. After walking through an almost dried-out samphire swamp, that was separated from the sea by mangrove flats, I arrived at a sandy beach. The receding tide was leaving dozens of little pools on the exposed muddy flat, which was about 30 yards wide. As I focussed my binoculars on the few waders (mainly Curlew-Sandpipers and Red-necked Stints) that were present, I saw a dotterel close-by, which I recognised as a Large Sand-Dotterel (*Charadrius leschenaultii*) by its stout, long bill and long legs. Also conspicuous were its white eyebrow and frons, large dark eyes and upright stance. The upper parts were light greyish-brown, which extended from the side of the neck to the side of the breast as a broad bar, where it was sharply cut-off from its white surroundings. The