

## Various Bird Notes

By A. H. CHISHOLM, Sydney

As one who has had considerable experience in the production of periodicals and books of natural history, I should like to say that, in my view, the *Australian Bird Watcher* is a very useful and generally admirable journal; and on the same basis I wish to amplify certain items appearing in the issue of December last (Vol. 2, No. 6).

**Parrots and Wattle Blossom.** The note by A. D'Andria regarding Superb Parrots feeding on wattle blossom takes me back about 50 years to a day when I saw, in Central Victoria, two Eastern Rosellas so engaged. I was not able to discover what, precisely, the birds were eating, and the matter passed from my mind until, in the same district in August 1965, I saw numbers of Swift Parrots doing the same thing.

It was a novelty to see birds of the tree-tops frequenting plants only a few feet in height, and, never having previously viewed a Swift Parrot from above while it was in flight, I did not at once recognise the owners of the green backs. In each instance the blossoms had been crushed, but again I failed to determine what, exactly, the birds were eating.

The wattle concerned in both my cases was *Acacia pycnantha*, and possibly this was also the species in D'Andria's case. It does not appear to contain any saccharine material appropriate to the tastes of Swift Parrots.

**Bower-bird Puzzles.** Contrasts in distribution and fluctuations in numbers in the cases of the Satin and Regent Bower-birds are very curious.

H. L. Bell states that when visiting the Bunya Range of Queensland in 1957 he found the Regent to be the commoner species, and yet in 1919, when a camp of the Royal Australian Ornithologists Union was held there, the opposite was the case. As I recorded in *The Emu* in January 1920, no fewer than 53 Satins, including nine full-plumaged males, were seen in an open space at one time.

That aside, the odd thing is that whereas the Regent occurs in various scrubs northward from the Bunyas, up to as far as the Mackay area, the Satin appears to present a lengthy gap in distribution. Common in south-eastern Queensland, to a short distance north of Brisbane, it then virtually vanishes until it reappears on the Atherton Tableland, about 1000 miles farther north. Kendal Broadbent, it is true, stated in 1888 (*Proc. Ryl. Soc. Qld*, Vol. 5, Pt. 1) that he saw the species in scrubby gullies of the Berserker Range, near Rockhampton, but that appears to be the only record from the central or lower northern part of Queensland.

The absence of the Satinbird from the rich rain-forests of the Eungella Range (where I sought it unsuccessfully in 1964) is

especially strange; and so, too, is the problem touching the Rawnsley Bower-bird, or "Blue Regent", the oddity which Diggles described in 1867 as *Ptilonorhynchus rawnsleyi*, and which may be a hybrid between the Satin and Regent Bower-birds. It, in a relatively recent period, was reported to have been seen at Eungella, and more recently again it was claimed to have been seen in north-eastern New South Wales.

**Mimicry by the Shrike-tit.** In my booklet on vocal mimicry among Australian birds, *Nature's Linguists* (Melbourne, 1946), I cited a number of examples of imitations by the Eastern Shrike-tit. They included impressive notes by Ellis McNamara and K. A. Hindwood from New South Wales and a report from a country-dweller in Victoria of a Shrike-tit having been heard to imitate ten species, ranging from pardalotes to eagles. It was these reports that caused a reference to such mimicry to be made in the 1958 edition of *What Bird Is That?*

Now G. R. Beruldsen of Adelaide has added to the evidence with another long list of imitations. In so doing he has strengthened our belief that the Shrike-tit, although one of the lesser-known mimics, is distinctly accomplished in the art, and this fact is the more interesting in that the species is essentially arboreal, whereas almost all other outstanding mimics are birds of the ground.

As to Berulsen's suggestion that the Shrike-tit removes twigs above its nest in order to prevent distortion of the structure, I discussed this matter in a detailed article in *The Emu* in 1915 (Vol. 15, p. 81), and am still of the opinion stated there, that the bird's object in nipping off leaves and small twigs is to lessen the swaying of the tree-tip branchlets.

**Nesting of the Grey Swiftlet.** An interesting note in D. H. C. Seton's article on the Grey Swiftlet colony of Finch-Hatton is that when he visited the cave on November 21, 1964, the number of nests appeared to be "upward of 300". That estimate exceeds one I made there about three weeks earlier.

Describing the cave and its inhabitants in a medium of wide circulation, the Sydney journal *People*, on March 24, 1965, I stated the number of nests as "perhaps about 200", this being the product of a somewhat hurried count made on November 3, 1965. Yet the earlier describers of the colony, J. S. Robertson and F. M. Hamilton, who made their visit in 1959 (October 7), were not able to record more than "about 25" nests.

That contrast, it would seem, is not wholly explained by the fact that Robertson and Hamilton were limited to matches, whereas I used a torch; rather, it indicates that the colony had greatly increased within five years. Anyway, it is no easy matter to make a precise count in such a spot, not merely because of the crowded nature of the nests (as shown in Seton's photograph), but because the cave is almost completely dark, the roof is embarrassingly low, and the air is so stuffy as to be almost unendurable.

Incidentally, it is somewhat striking that the number of Swiftlets' nests counted on Dunk Island in 1921, by E. J. Banfield and myself, was approximately 220, and the number counted on neighbouring Bedarra Island, in both 1955 and 1965, was approximately the same. (The Bedarra colony was described in the *North Queensland Naturalist*, by John Busst, in September 1956 and in equal detail, with nine photographs, by John Orrell in *People* of May 19, 1965.)

It will be interesting to have further details regarding the status of the species when, as is very probable, other colonies are found in caves of obscure, rocky gorges or hillsides on various parts of the mainland.

**Our Cuckoo from Asia.** As remarked by J. A. Bravery, it is odd that during about 120 years, since the period of the pioneering John Gilbert, few records have been made relative to the presence of the Oriental Cuckoo in Australia. Yet, in contrast, the species has been seen of late on quite a number of occasions in various parts of the east coast, extending from North Queensland to Sydney.

Does this imply that the Cuckoo has become more abundant, or should the development be ascribed to greater diligence (plus, perhaps, a spice of luck) on the part of observers?

Most reports concerning the species have come from Queensland. They have included several sightings by Eric Zillman of Gin Gin, and also, as a distinct novelty, the presence of two of the birds in the grounds of Government House, Brisbane, during January-February 1965. These uninvited but welcome guests were watched closely by the Governor, Sir Henry Abel Smith, who has told me in a letter that he was much impressed by their sparrowhawk-like flight and the varied nature of the plumage.

In some lights, Sir Henry says, the back appeared to be chestnut and in others blue-grey; the legs, claws, and skin around the eye were bright yellow, and the wavy horizontal bars on the breast were clearly defined.

Most observations on the food of the species suggest that the chief items are stick insects and caterpillars. While feeding, the birds do not, it appears, call at all frequently, but Zillman tells me he has heard them utter a mournful trilling and a soft and queer type of "laugh".

Although some of the recordings have been made in the cool months, there can scarcely be any doubt that this species of Cuckoo is essentially a migrant from South-East Asia (where it is known as the Himalayan Cuckoo) in its post-breeding season, and therefore its egg is not likely ever to be found in the nest of any Australian bird.

Still, it is unwise to be dogmatic in such delicate matters, and I for one would not be very surprised if, ultimately, it becomes revealed that this bird does sometimes breed in Australia.



Accepting that migration is a constant practice with the species, one wonders what has caused international tourism to develop in such a case. And, accepting also that there is sound reason for the practice, why is it not followed by the Oriental Cuckoo's close relative, *Cuculus canorus telephonus*, the Asiatic race of the European Cuckoo?

The famous European bird, as is well known, moves off from Britain to Africa in autumn, but its Eastern representative does not, apparently, get any farther south than the islands of Malaysia. Unlike its "cousin", it has never discovered either New Guinea or Australia.

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## The Dispersal of the Satin Bower-bird

By RETA E. VELLENGA, Leura, New South Wales

In an effort to trace the movements, and to watch the plumage changes, of the Satin Bower-bird (*Ptilonorhynchus violaceus*) my husband and I began a banding project on this most interesting bird on June 16, 1965.

Up to the end of April, 1966, we have captured and colour banded 233 Satin Bower-birds in our garden. The coloured bands are conspicuous and we are able to identify every bird that returns or is sighted elsewhere. Last winter 80% of the birds that had been banded returned to our area and 25% were recaptured.

There is a great concentration of these birds throughout the entire area of the Blue Mountains during the months of May to September in each year. At the end of September or early in October nearly all of these Bower-birds have departed elsewhere. A few of the mature, blue-coloured male birds remain to attend their bowers, and some of the female birds select nesting sites and breed in the district. They visit us fairly regularly for food until the young birds leave the nest during February or March.

During the recent summer months we spent much time in an unsuccessful search for the missing birds. We inspected areas that were considered to be likely habitats, from the slopes and wooded streams of the lower Blue Mountains to the valleys, gorges and streams of the upper areas of the same range. Visits were also made to areas of volcanic pockets of rain-forest, such as Mount Wilson, Mount Irvine, Bilpin and Kurrajong. In every area we were told that the dispersal of the birds took place at the end of September.

Where did they go?

If observers would report to us the locations and the type of country where Satin Bower-birds are seen during the months of October, November and December, especially if they are feeding or displaying in parties, it would greatly assist in plotting the movements of these birds.

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