

"Pretty Dick" calls run together into a continuous song, without any spacings.

(6) Occasionally four syllable calls, as if the bird were stuttering the "Pretty Dick" call, were heard. These could be written as "Pretty D'Dick". This was sometimes a single call, sometimes a pure series, and sometimes interspersed in a series of "Pretty Dick" calls.

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## Notes on the White-winged Triller

By HAROLD E. TARR, Nunawading, Victoria

The White-winged Triller, (*Lalage sueurii*), inhabits the open forest-lands of Australia and it has been recorded also in Tasmania, south-east New Guinea and Timor. It occurs as a migrant in southern Australia but in the northern part of the Continent appears to be a stationary species. It is an irregular migrant to Victoria, sometimes not paying a visit for a period of up to three years. They also appear during some years in vast numbers, but in other years appear to be very scarce with no set pattern that one can follow.

The sexes are totally different in colouration, although they are the same size, being 6 to 7 inches in total length. The male in breeding plumage is a resplendant figure in shining black and white. The head, mantle, flight feathers and tail are glossy black; the lower back is greyish; a wide patch on the shoulder, the edge of the secondary feathers and the under surface are white.

In the north of Australia many male birds with brown heads and backs are noticeable during the winter months, and this appears to be a form of eclipse plumage similar to the change made by the Wrens (*Malurus*) and the Grebes (*Podiceps*). The female Trillers appear in normal plumage during this period. The female is a brownish coloured bird with the wing feathers having paler edges which form a distinct pattern, plus a pale brown eyebrow. Juveniles, on leaving the nest, are coloured similar to the females. Both sexes have a black bill, dark eyes and dark slate coloured legs. The juveniles are the last to leave Victoria on migration, departing about a fortnight after the adults, which is generally about the end of February.

In the northern parts of Australia a closely allied species, the Varied Triller (*Lalage leucomela*), will be found. This species can be distinguished from the White-winged Triller by the biscuit coloured breast and the white eyebrow on the male, and the large white eyebrow on the female.

When the White-winged Triller arrives in Victoria during September its loud melodious call immediately draws attention to its presence. The call-notes may be uttered while the bird is in flight and also by the male while he is sitting on the nest.

The male birds are very restless on arrival and they have the habit of sitting on the tops of the trees, from which they fly or glide to the ground, swinging around in flight similar to that of the Wood-Swallows, or even hovering over some object on the ground.

The food, consisting of insects and their larvae is procured from the trees and also on the ground. No special trees appear to be selected for nesting, as I have found nests in banksias, pines, eucalypts, melaleucas and casuarinas. Although conspicuous in his black and white plumage the male does his share of nest building and incubation. One nest that I had under observation from the very start of its construction took two days to complete. I first noticed the bird appearing to clean her beak in a horizontal fork and I could just discern the trace of spider web. After the initial foundation of web the female acted as the tradesman from within the nest and the male carried on as her labourer. Most of the material was gathered close by, the male never going more than 100 yards away for building material. At one stage I timed him to do two trips to the minute but this was not an average series of trips. These birds only worked during the early and late parts of both days. The nearest Triller that I could find at mid-day on either day was at least a quarter of a mile from this nesting site.

The nest is always placed upon a horizontal fork at heights varying from 4 to 40 feet from the ground, and is a very shallow bowl-shaped structure. It is very small in comparison to the size of the bird, and is composed of grasses, with small pieces of bark or lichen on the outside and covered with spider web.

In ten nests that I measured the nesting cavity varied from  $2\frac{1}{4}$  to  $2\frac{1}{2}$  inches in diameter, and from one-half to seven-eighths inches in depth. From my personal observations egg laying commences in Victoria in October and carries on until December. Each bird will feed the other at the nest while it is incubating.

Two days after the nest, that I had watched being constructed, had been completed the first egg was laid, followed by another egg two days later which completed this clutch. These eggs took 14 days from the laying of the second egg to hatch, and both of the young birds left the nest 14 days later. Egg clutches vary in sizes from 1 to 3 eggs, but the majority of the clutches observed by me have been of 2 eggs. The eggs have a base colour of green which is heavily streaked and blotched, mainly at the larger end, with brown. The smallest egg that I have measured was 18 x 14.45 mm., and the largest egg 23.25 x 16.5 mm., and the average measurement of 30 eggs was 20.75 x 15.7 mm.

At one nest, where I was taking photographs, the male became very tame and appeared to be jealous of the female. Each time she came to the nest while I was present he would drive her away. If she happened to be on the nest he would alight beside the nest with his beak open and, uttering a scolding note, chase her away for distances up to 100 yards. Sometimes she managed to beat him back to the nest only to be driven away again. While in flight the the female's pale edged wing-feathers appear as a light patch.





The Female White-winged Triller incubating eggs on its nest.

Plate 6



The Male White-winged Triller, showing the difference in colour pattern to the female.

Plate 7

Photos by Harold E. Tarr

This particular male bird became so tame that he would pick at my hat if I got too near to him when I was adjusting the lens of my camera. I have noted on various occasions that whereas the male bird appears to cover the nest fully while incubating the female appears to force her breast forward into the nesting bowl. It is really amazing how tight the bird sits while gale force winds are blowing, but with such a shallow nest, the eggs would be blown out if the bird did not keep them in the nest by sitting very closely.

**Nesting of the White-winged Triller.** The seasonal conditions during the spring and summer months of 1961-62, on the western Darling Downs and adjacent northern highlands in Queensland, were ideal for the local birds of the area, and particularly attractive to the migratory nomadic species.

Many of the latter species appeared in unusually large numbers and bred freely. Amongst these was the White-winged Triller (*Lalage sueurii*).

I first noticed the appearance of the Trillers in late September. By October 30 their number had built up to an unusually large influx. At this time they were nesting freely, and almost every suitable tree or group of trees contained a nest or nests.

Up to three nests were found in one tree, and up to five nests, with eggs or young, in a group of trees. A survey of the district from my home, 14 miles east to Jandowae, 10 miles south towards Warra, and 28 miles west to Chinchilla, revealed a similar population for the whole of that area. How far beyond this area, where suitable habitats occur, the Trillers extended I do not know. A visit to the Cadarga district, 72 miles north, revealed the same influx.

On October 13, 1961, during the period when the birds were arriving, I saw a male Triller fly from the north towards a small group of brigalow trees close to our house. It approached the trees uncertainly and, after half circling the group, landed on a high dead branch. At first it glanced about in all directions and then, as though it was satisfied that all was clear, it began flying from limb to limb. About three hours later it started to call and by the late afternoon it was trilling almost continually, and I observed that a female was now in the vicinity.

The pair remained in and around the same group of trees, and I never saw them venture further than 40 yards from it.

Early in the morning of October 19 I noticed that the male Triller was carefully studying small horizontal branches. Later that day I saw him working on a newly started nest, situated on a small forked horizontal limb. He flew to some nearby stacked fence posts on the ground, and after gathering cobweb he artfully unwound it off his bill onto the limb. Up to this stage I had not seen the female take any interest in the project, however, afterwards I saw her assisting energetically. The nest was not yet visible from the ground though it was only 15 feet up.