

Field Notes on the Black Bell-Magpie *Strepera fuliginosa*

By Miss J. A. FLETCHER, R.A.O.U., Woodbridge, South
Tasmania.

My sister and I were able to spend a couple of weeks in early January of this year with our friends, Mr. and Mrs. Wilson and family, who live at The Steppes.

The altitude of this place is a few feet short of 3000 feet. It is on the road to The Great Lake, being about 12 miles from Miena, the settlement on the southern end of that vast sheet of water.

A mile from the Steppes is the Lagoon of Islands, for a wonder most aptly named. This lagoon is 8 miles round, and towards its eastern shores there are numerous small tea-tree and rush-covered islands.

Until the autumn of last year this was a great resort of many water birds. Then, however, a fire swept through, and running round the edges, burnt out the favourite feeding area. Owing to drought conditions then prevailing all the shallower flats were quite dry.

The birds did not return for the breeding season, evidently finding the reedy expanses of the Lake of the Woods, a few miles over the hills, a good hunting ground. I was disappointed to find this the case, and as an injured foot forbade the rough scrambling necessary to reach the lake, I therefore resigned myself to watching the Black Mags. and the birds of the immediate forest.

Though so elevated and subject to heavy falls of snow in the winter time, this tract of country is one of the worst for snakes I have explored in Tasmania, and in other parts I have had many and vivid experiences with these brutes. Here, they simply did not make any attempt to move out of the way. Pondering over this I came to the conclusion that they were so used to the presence of sheep that human footsteps did not alarm them.

This characteristic of theirs was a decided drawback to exploring, for in a boulder and stick-strewn ground it was easy to tread on one of these lazy wretches when one's eyes were roaming the tops of trees for possible nests.

The breeding season was over at the time of my visit. The bush, however, was noisy with the cries of young birds of many species. I found a great variety of nests for so elevated a district. Had the waterways been accessible to me, I should have added many more species.

In this paper I shall confine myself to a few facts about the Black Bell-Magpie (*Strepera fuliginosa*). Readers of *The Emu*,



Young being fed by a Black Mag.—the Black Bell-Magpie
(*Strepera fuliginosa*).

Photo. by Miss J. A. Fletcher, R.A.O.U.

October, 1921, may remember a few notes of mine, dealing with winter conditions of these birds which frequent The Steppes.

A flock of nearly eighty *Streperas* stay round the homestead from April until about early September, separating in the latter month to take up the control of their breeding areas. Unlike the White-backed Magpie (*Gymnorhina hypoleuca*), these areas are closer together, in fact, overlap. Evidently, sterner conditions of livelihood make the birds more tolerant of one another. Another aspect may be that the near neighbourhood of one breeding pair with a second tends for better protection against the many species of Hawk frequenting these uplands.

From the observations of my friends, I know that the same pair remain faithful to each other, year after year.

The site for the nest, as a rule, varies each season, but always in their chosen haunts. Some of the nests must be well constructed, for I was shown those of several years previous, in which young had been reared, and which still might be taken for this just finished season's nest.

Each bird assists in the construction of the nest, which is commenced about the beginning of October, sometimes in September, much depending on the duration of winter conditions.

Occasionally an old nest is trimmed up and made to do duty a second time. The old pair of Black Mags. that have for 7 or 8 years frequented the house, had their young hatched by the beginning of November, bringing them to house surroundings by the first week of December. Here the little ones stayed midst the shelter of the trees whilst their parents fossicked about for their food, which included pieces of meat, cake or bread crumbs, the latter preferred with jam or sugar upon it.

When the young Mags. grew bigger they flew to meet their parents as soon as they heard the long flute-like whistle. Each parent seemed to feed one particular child, and it was interesting to watch which fledgling would become excited after an old bird's signal.

The Black Mags. are so destructive on chickens that these must be kept in the barn until their feathers grow, after which they are generally left alone. My friends have given up trying to keep turkeys or ducks, it being impossible to rear any ducklings owing to the fondness of these birds for a duckling diet.

One morning during my visit, the hens escaped from the barn. In less than fifteen minutes the old Mags. had caught three chickens, one of the chicks being well feathered. They would have probably taken the lot if not noticed.

An hour later, my sister and I were down in one of the paddocks when I noticed the two young Mags. sitting in a tree, with the mother and father flying from different directions and feeding them.

I watched the latter and saw him go to a log, look about, then run its length, hop off the end, and stepping backwards, tug, tug. Next, he flew back to his child, carrying something which

resembled a chicken's leg. So I went along to inspect his larder. There I found part of the biggest (feathered) chicken most ingeniously fixed by the outstretched wings tucked in and under the splintered ends of the log. The body of the chicken was being slowly pulled to pieces in such a position that it gave the bird extra power in his tugging. I set my camera and waited a long time, hoping to photo. the old fellow tugging, but though he perched on the log, he would not come in the range of the lens. As it was getting late I had to leave, but took a shot of the fixed chicken. This, however, was not sharp enough to reproduce.

I called in at the female's reserve and found the remains of some of the entrails suspended on a spur on a log.

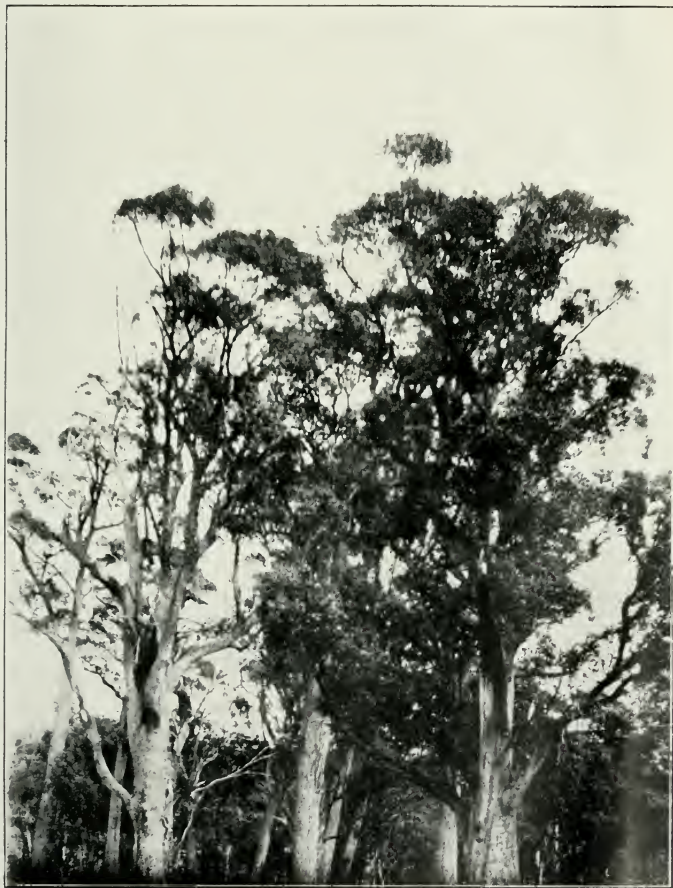
The young *Strepera's* clothing was in a state of a mixture of long dusky down and rapidly growing feathers. In the fortnight of my visit all the breast and under feathers replaced the down. The tails were well grown. One bird I took for the daughter was slightly smaller, less bold and she had less white on her tail than her companion. They were only beginning to learn to pick up for themselves. After the first week of my stay the mother ceased feeding the little hen-bird, and so the father took on both of the children. As I left he, too, was beginning to train his charges to feed themselves. He would bring a piece of meat, for instance, drop it in front of one of them. If the youngster squawked he made no attempt to feed it. At last, losing patience, he would fly off, his son following with loud cries. If hungry, the latter returned and had a try to feed himself, and by degrees found he could do it quite well. Occasionally the parents were absent for a long while. Then the little ones sat in a special corner of a large willow growing near the door. It was quaint to hear them trying to imitate their parents' various calls. This queer little gurgle, low as if afraid of others hearing it coming out of the heart of the tree, sounded eerie.

The adult female *Strepera's* coat was distinctly rusty, but her mate possessed a very fine black one.

Once the male bird took a buttered crust from my hand. Another morning he hopped into the doorway, and seeing the table set for breakfast, perched on the corner of the table, sat with his head on one side watching while I cut him a piece of bread, buttered, and as a great treat sprinkled some sugar over it. He wouldn't take it from me, evidently a little nervous of the house enclosure, but as soon as I placed it on the table he hopped along, picked it up and flew off.

The situations of the nests, I found, varied. Some were fairly low, quite an easy climb, while others, as in the photo enclosed, were very high—up as high as 70 feet.

Many of the lower nests were too awkwardly placed to photograph, and others too difficult to focus upon.



Swamp Gum Trees (*Eucalyptus stuartiana*) in which Black Bell-Magpies (*Strepera fuliginosa*) nest. The nest is in the fork under the clump of twigs second from top.

We went on to The Great Lake, and in many places I spotted nests of Black Magpies or Hill Bell Magpies—Jays (*Strepera arguta*) built in the fine cider gums (*Eucalyptus gunnii*, Hooker).

On the way to Bothwell there is a nest on a limb spanning the main road.

Before concluding I might mention that the one Jay (*Strepera arguta*) which frequents The Steppes homestead brought a mate this season, and when I was there I saw them with their family.

New Sub-species of Tit-Warblers (*Acanthizae*)

By A. G. CAMPBELL, J.P., R.A.O.U., Croydon, Victoria.

While examining a long series of *Acanthizæ* to determine the limits of certain species, I discovered that important geographical regions are unrepresented although distinct sub-species occur therein. The following* offer good grounds for separation:—

Acanthiza pusilla leeuwinensis. Sub. sp. nov.

Upper surface dark brownish olive, tinged on rump with medal bronze (dark orange citrine); frontal patch less marked than in *A. p. pusilla*, but tawny to the base of feathers; forehead crescents ochraceous tawny with dark spots beneath and dusky fringes, like those of *A. p. macularia*; upper tail coverts and base of tail cinnamon brown; throat white with black striations heavier than in *A. p. pusilla*; flanks tawny olive; under tail coverts cinnamon buff; tail with black subterminal bar .3 inch wide, tips edged white on inner web; central feathers with an obscure dark spot (rudimentary bar) near tip; bill and legs brown; basal half of lower mandible light; eyes red. Length, 3.8 in.; bill, .35 in.; wing, 1.9 in.; tail, 1.7 in.; tarsus, .8 in.

Type male (103) from the collection of the late A. W. Milligan, and now in the Royal Australasian Ornithologists' Union's Collection, Melbourne. Taken 26/4/1911 at Wilson's Inlet, South West Australia, by F. Lawson Whitlock, R.A.O.U., collector.

Co-type female (253) in "H. L. White Collection,," National Museum, Melbourne. Similar to male, but tail tips more broadly marked with white on four outer feathers; under tail coverts darker ochraceous tawny; axillaries warm buff. Taken at Augusta, S.W. Australia, 6/4/1919, by T. Carter, R.A.O.U., collector.

I have seen similar skins from Irwin's Inlet, S.W. Australia. This is an interesting link between the *Acanthiza* of eastern and western Australia, and cannot be confused with *Acanthiza apicalis*.

* As *Acanthiza (Motacilla) pusilla* does not appear to have a definite type locality assigned to it, I hereby declare Port Jackson, New South Wales, to be the type locality (see White, "Journal of Voyage to New South Wales," p. 257, 1790).

The same thing applies to *Acanthiza nana*, and I also declare Port Jackson, New South Wales, the type locality (see Vigors and Horsfield, "Trans. Linnæan Society, London," vol. xv., p. 226, 1827).

In another article I propose to deal with the natural causes which apparently affect the distribution of the *Acanthizæ*.—A.G.C.