

THE SUNBIRD

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OBSERVATIONS OF THE CLUSTERING OF
LITTLE WOOD-SWALLOWS (ARTAMUS MINOR)

by V.J. Wood

A habit of clustering at night and occasionally during the day by members of the genus Artamus and in particular the Dusky Wood-Swallow Artamus cyanopterus is fairly well known. Sporadic accounts have appeared in literature from the earliest days of ornithological documentation in Australia. Hindwood, in the Emu, 1956, gave an interesting series of accounts of Wood-Swallows clustering. One such notation was the data relating to a specimen in the Australian Museum, Sydney; a Dusky Wood-Swallow was one of 27 shot while hanging in a cluster of more than 100 in a dead tree at dusk, in southern New South Wales during March 1901. Chisholm (1929) also described the habit of Wood-Swallows clustering, in his book Birds and Green Places. Having recorded the clustering habit of both the Dusky Wood-Swallow and the White-browed Wood-Swallow Artamus superciliosus, Chisholm concluded that all members of the genus Artamus would cluster at times. My observations on the Dusky Wood-Swallow and the Little Wood-Swallow Artamus minor add more evidence to this statement. Two accounts of the Little Wood-Swallow clustering were recorded by me during an ornithological expedition by the South Australian Museum to the Northern

Territory and Queensland during April and May 1962.

During the mid afternoon of April 29, 1962, the expedition encamped about 40 miles north of Newcastle Waters, Northern Territory, and subsequently surveyed the region. I observed a small party of Little Wood-Swallows which clustered into a tight bunch in an upright position on the earth attached to the root system of a dead eucalypt that had been bulldozed over during maintenance operations to the overhead telegraph line. The birds flushed at my approach, allowing me to inspect the roost. The tree itself was situated in an open area with the root facing to the north, allowing the position to be exposed to the direct rays of the sun for most of the day. It also appeared from examination that the roost had been used for several weeks; much of the earth that had adhered to the roots of the tree had been displaced, revealing an extensive lattice-work of fine rootlets which permitted the birds to perch without difficulty, and a deep mound of excreta had built up, together with the displaced earth on the ground below. The actual area of the cluster site measured about 50 cm in diameter at a height of about 140 cm from ground level.

After examination of the site, I positioned a mist net across the face of the tree root and within minutes captured three specimens; these in turn were banded with C.S.I.R.O. bands (020-37301, -37302, -37303). These birds represented the first of the species to be banded under the scheme (C.S.I.R.O. Div. Wildlife Res. Tech. Pr. No. 5 p.19). After dismantling the net, I continued to observe the cluster position from a distance of about 40 yards. Within 15 minutes, 17 birds clustered back to the site.

On May 27, 1962, at approximately 1600 hours, the expedition encamped on the Neive River, near Cunnamulla, Queensland. On this occasion a large number of Little Wood-Swallows were observed clustering in a burnt out trunk of a dead tree. Situated at a height of about 160 cm the group numbered about 60 birds. When approached the birds showed a reluctance to disband and take flight. On examination of this roost, no less than six dead birds were found to be positioned upright on the walls of the arboreal shelter, whilst two more dead specimens lay on the ground below. Three of the specimens found dead appeared to be in good plumage and condition, one specimen in particular revealing a heavy layer of subcutaneous fat. The remaining specimens were somewhat dilapidated

and I considered them beyond preparation as study skins. All the dead birds showed signs of heavy scouring with pale yellowish excreta adhering to the ventral region and extending onto the tail feathers. Unfortunately, the locality and our facilities did not lend to a thorough investigation into the causes of this obviously fatal ailment. Several local residents in the area disclosed the fact that experiments with agricultural insecticides were being conducted in the district at the time and the possibilities of residual poisoning of the birds could not be overlooked. Because of the time involved before the expedition would return to South Australia, it was impossible to keep a body perfect enough for clinical analysis and accordingly the actual causes of the deaths were not positively determined.

It appeared that this larger group of birds had not used the cluster site for any length of time. It was interesting to note that when several of the dead birds were replaced in their original positions and I had retreated a short distance, many of the birds returned immediately to the cluster position, completely surrounding the dead specimens, yet not one was dislodged by its living kin. By 1730 hours it had begun raining heavily and further observations were abandoned. A visit to the cluster site early the following morning revealed

that a small party of birds was still tightly bunched around the dead birds.

The peculiarity of clustering by Wood-Swallows has never been explained adequately. It can be suggested that the habit is motivated by seasonal conditions. Chisholm (1922) in his book Mateship with Birds, stated that the Dusky Wood-Swallow is chiefly notable for the communistic tendencies it develops in the autumn. Edith Coleman in her paper on the swarming of Wood-Swallows, Victorian Naturalist, 1944, observed the clustering habit at Blackburn, Victoria, in February of that year, the weather on this occasion being warm and sultry. Accordingly, seasonal conditions may not be the principal factor, although it does appear that the habit is primarily adopted during the winter months, even on comparatively warm days in northern Australia. The habit of clustering may serve a dual purpose - the retention of body heat during the cooler weather and a social form of camouflage.

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Acknowledgements

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RUFIOUS-CROWNED EMU-WREN, STIPITURUS RUFICEPS,
A NEW QUEENSLAND SPECIES

by Brigadier H.R. Officer

In June 1969 Mr. Ellis Tucker of Brit Brit, near Coleraine, Victoria, identified an Emu-Wren, Stipiturus, in an area of porcupine grass Triodia and mallee type eucalypts near Opalton, some 60 miles south of Winton. Mr. Tucker was well acquainted with the genus in Victoria. The sighting was reported in The Bird Observer, November 1969, where it was pointed out that this was the first Emu-Wren record for Queensland. Mr. Tucker intimated that if any other observers were travelling near the area of sighting, he would appreciate confirmation.

In June 1970, Mrs. H.B. Gill and myself had routed ourselves through Winton and a decision was made to visit Opalton and find the species in question. Aided by a very clear "mud map" provided by Mr. Tucker,

we were able not only to find the actual area without any difficulty, but also to locate the birds equally easily. In fact, it did not take us half an hour to do so. They were good examples of Rufous-crowned Emu-Wrens Stipiturus ruficeps.

After covering the area of porcupine grass thoroughly, we satisfied ourselves that there were at least two family groups present. During this investigation we flushed another species from the porcupine grass which still remains as an unidentified flying object.

In contrast to the Emu-Wrens, which were very confiding, this bird was quite shy and we didn't succeed in getting a chance to study it at rest. Only once did I observe it running instead of flying. No sooner was it forced out of one clump of porcupine grass than it quickly flew to another and pitched. This manouvre was repeated many times.

To me the Behaviour was typical of a Spinifex-bird Eremiornis carteri which I know well. It also appeared to answer to colour and tail shape and size of this species. Mrs. Gill was of the opinion that it was a Grass-Wren Amytornis sp., but I could not accept this as the plumage appeared too uniformly brown, lacking any grey.

or dark colour. As well the tail did not appear long enough for a Grass-Wren. Finally, as has been pointed out, it flew and did not run, being typical behaviour of Eremiornis carteri.

The fact that a Grass-Wren has been recently identified in an area not very far south of Opalton is a point in Mrs. Gill's favour. Her ears too, are much more acute than mine. Observers are encouraged to follow this U.F.O. sighting up - preferably with a mist net.

SOUTHERN BLACK-BACKED GULL
LARUS DOMINICANUS IN CAIRNS

by Mrs. H.B. Gill[♂]

On June 24, 1969, I saw a large juvenile gull on the Cairns waterfront. Definite identification was not possible, but I believed it could not be a Pacific Gull Larus pacificus because the bill appeared to be too small.

Mr. W. Hawkins of California told me that he had seen a mature gull with a black back near Green Island on April 19, 1970. While in Cairns on April 23, 1970,

with Mr. & Mrs. Hawkins, we were fortunate to have close views of an adult gull, both sitting on the mud and flying.

There was no doubt at all that the bird was a Southern Black-backed Gull Larus dominicanus. There was no black sub-terminal band on the white tail, and the yellow bill was comparatively small with a red tip.

The bird was seen again on May 4 and 13 and June 8, 1970.

NOTES FOR JUNIOR MEMBERS

by Miss Nancy Hopkins

This month I want to talk about a group of birds known as fantails. Each one of the four different kinds in Australia is easily recognisable by similarities in plumage and habits. The largest is the one you probably know best of all - Willie Wagtail. In trim black, brown and white, Willie Wagtail is one of the best known birds in the country, and is commonly found in all kinds of open country as well as parks and gardens in the city and suburbs.

During autumn and winter, Willie Wagtails are very commonly seen in the towns and cities along the coast. When spring arrives, many then disappear into the bush to

nest and rear their young. After the young have left the nest the families scatter again. Then, one day in autumn you once again here "sweet pretty little creature" and find that Willie has returned for another visit. It is quite likely that it is the same bird that stayed with you through last winter - at least you probably like to think it is the one.

If you happen to notice a pair of Wagtails staying in your area in summer keep a look out for their nest, but don't interfere with it or go too close. The nest is not very noticeable most times, but often Willie gives the game away by making a fuss when you come too near. The nest is built flat on a bough and is so smooth that many people think it is made of mud. A close look at an old used nest will show that Willie has constructed it from grass and soft bark bound up smoothly with cobwebs.

Sometimes Willie Wagtails experiment with strange nesting places. One pair were known to build a nest and raise their family on a rotary clothes hoist. Perhaps you know of an odd or interesting nesting place used by Willie Wagtail? If you would like to tell me about it write to me at my address on the inside front cover.

You may know the Grey Fantail too. If not, watch for it at shady picnic spots, or you may see it during

autumn and winter in parks and gardens. Normally the Grey Fantail likes the edges of shady rain forest, or along tree-lined creek banks - not the open paddocks where you find Willie Wagtails. The Grey Fantail is somewhat smaller than Willie Wagtail with sooty grey and near white plumage instead of bold black and white. Like the Willie Wagtail, it flitters and flutters in the air after insects, often flying out from an open perch such as a dead branch. It is much more active than the Willie Wagtail, and this, together with the habit of continually fanning its tail, has earned it the name "Cranky Fan". The Grey Fantail's song is lively and very squeaky. Sometimes it sounds almost like a rather out of tune violin or rusty gate pushed backwards and forwards.

The Rufous Fantail is not nearly as common as the previous two, being very much more at home in the shady rain forest or very thick vegetation along creeks. Sometimes, you may be fortunate enough to have one visit your garden during the autumn or spring while on migration. It is a very beautiful bird with a rich chestnut back and tail which is constantly spread out.

Next time you visit a rain forest National Park keep an eye out for a Rufous Fantail along the track in front of you, flitting up off the ground after insects.

Pictures showing the Rufous Fantail near the nest appear in many books and magazines, even on writing pads. Have you only seen a picture or the bird itself? Write and tell me.

If you happen to live in far north Queensland you might have seen the last member of the fantail quartet - the Northern Fantail. It has rather the same appearance as the Grey Fantail but is much quieter and more subdued with a habit of perching for long periods.

Any questions you may have about birds or bird watching I will try and answer for you if you care to write to me. Next time I wish to tell you about School Bird Clubs - perhaps you already have one at your School, If so, let me know about it.

AN ABERRANT MANGROVE HONEYEATER
MELIPHAGA FASCIOGULARIS

by J.S. Robertson^ϕ

Amongst a recent batch of dead birds gathered in this area and delivered to the Queensland Museum in July 1970, for possible salvage into study skins, one was quite a curio.

It seemed to be an aberrant specimen of the Mangrove Honeyeater Meliphaga fasciogularis, which species is very common in this area. Mangrove Honeyeaters observed here have a prominent and wide black bar on each side of the head from the upper mandible to and through the eye, and extending on to the side neck.

This black bar makes a sharp colour change from the mainly yellow areas immediately below it. The aberrant specimen entirely lacks the black bar; instead the lower yellow area extends upward to include the normal site of the black bar. Additionally, the dark markings on its underside seem more pronounced than on normal Mangrove Honeyeaters. It will be seen from the Table below that the dimensions of this specimen fit within the size range of local Mangrove Honeyeaters as tabulated from my Banding Field Books.

	<u>Aberrant specimen</u>	<u>Local range</u>
Length mm.	197	186/221
Wingspan	270	251/300
Wing	86	82/97
Tarsus	24	23/30
Culmen	16	15/19
Tail	81	-
Weight gms.	24	22/35

A similar bird was observed here at length and at short range on June 10, 1967. It was recorded in detail. In this case also the black line was missing, but the yellow extended up to mid eye level only. Possibly the 1967 and 1970 birds are the same individual. The time of year is the same for both these records, so a plumage phase due to moult or season may be indicated.

DO PHEASANT COUCALS MATE FOR LIFE?

by Miss Ella Pratt^ø

On May 2, 1970, when driving towards Murwillumbah a Coucal Centropus phasianinus was observed well ahead looking at something lying on the road. Seeing the car approaching, the Coucal ran a few feet away but returned to the object and lowered its head down to it. Meanwhile the car was slowing down to give the Coucal a chance to get clear, but it repeated the whole manoeuvre of departure, return, and bending down, before flying off when the car was only a few feet away. The cause of its concern proved to be a dead Coucal, also in adult plumage, which had apparently been struck and killed by a previously passing car.

The behaviour suggests that possibly the birds were a mated pair. In view of the date, May 2, which is outside their usual breeding season, it raises the question of whether with Coucals the pair bond extends for their lifetime and not just during the breeding season.

THE WHISTLING EAGLE HALIASTUR SPHENURUS
AS A HUNTER

by Miss Nancy Hopkins

Recently, while visiting the farm lagoon at Deepwater Bend, Brisbane, I noticed several Whistling Eagles Haliaastur sphenurus incessantly circling over the water. In conversation with the owner I was informed that he thought they were hunting Swamphens Porphyrio porphyrio which occur there commonly. Their movements certainly suggested that they may have been concentrating on the birds in the swamp but no conclusive actions took place during the period I was there.

Though a well known scavenger, the Whistling Eagle is also known to feed on "small mammals, lizards, birds and the larvae of insects" (Cayley 1969). Reference to my notes reveals several instances of possible active hunting by this species.

Once in the Northern Territory, I came upon a Whistling Eagle on the ground among trees eating from the carcass of a flying fox. It had evidently been freshly killed, and as no shooting had taken place in the area, it appeared likely that the eagle had attacked it as it hung in the trees asleep.

Other incidents of note occurred over several years, during periodic visits to the Townsville Town Common. On one trip two Whistling Eagles were disturbed from a freshly killed duck carcass. Nest refuse on the Common revealed many bird skeletons as well as tortoise shells, fish heads and other garbage. The bird skeletons were chiefly those of ducks, but at one nest skeletons of what I took to be White Cockatoos were found. Some of the skeletons were complete, indicating that whole birds had been carried to the nest site.

The remains observed were always those of birds which would have seemed too large to carry far, although F.T.H. Smith (Australian Bird Watcher Vol.3 No.5) has reported a Whistling Eagle carrying a White-faced Heron Ardea novae-hollandiae for 200 yards at an altitude of 30 feet before dropping it. As well, it seems unlikely that all skeletons represented carrion found nearby, and all were birds that could have been taken on the ground.

Only once did I see anything really indicative of hunting of small birds; some Indian Mynas Acridotheres tristis which are largely ground feeders, gave warning calls and took cover when a Whistling Eagle appeared overhead. I thought this unusual but nearby found a Myna with an abdomen injury sheltering in the end of a hollow log.

A further puzzling incident concerned the apparent pursuit of a Straw-necked Ibis Threskiornis spinicollis by a Whistling Eagle. The ibis spiralled slowly upward followed by the eagle. Then two other ibis appeared and circled near the eagle as though to distract it from the first. Shortly after, the eagle retired and the ibis drifted away.

One wonders whether or not this not-so-dashing hunter requires a stationary target?

SOME SOUTH-EAST QUEENSLAND SIGHTINGS
OF THE BLUE-WINGED KOOKABURRA DACELO LEACHI

by J.S. Robertson[♂]

In the "Courier-Mail" of August 3, 1970, David Fleay of West Burleigh Fauna Sanctuary gives some details of a Blue-winged Kookaburra Dacelo leachi which was brought to

him following its collision with a car somewhere between Toowoomba and the Gold Coast. He then raises the question of the status of this bird in south-east Queensland.

During the period 1948 to 1958 my duties involved spending perhaps a third of my time in routine country inspections by road. In the evening it was usual to make a written record of any birds of special interest seen during that day's travel. Reviewing these notes recently has disclosed the following sightings of the Blue-winged Kookaburra. It is clear that although these are large and distinctive birds, seeing one of them was an unusual event.

13.9.48 ... near Milbong.

18.8.49 ... on Purga Creek, near Loamside; also at Churchbank.

31.8.49 ... near Radford, one male and two females.

2.6.50 ... about 5 miles south of Rosewood.

27.9.50 ... near Toogoolawah.

20.8.53 ... near Mutdapilly; also in Wivenhoe Pocket near Coominya.

12.11.58... near Kagaru; also at Teviot Creek near Undulla.

These inspections involved covering the whole area from the east Darling Downs to the Coast and south to the N.S.W. border, at all times of the year; opportunities to notice birds were no better or worse in one area or another. Thus the time of year and location of the sighting is

considered as fairly representing the pattern of the birds' occurrence. Though some development has occurred, conditions in these areas are probably much the same now as then.

It will be noted that all sightings were between June and November, and along the flatter country near the waterways, within an area from 50 miles north to 20 miles south of Ipswich, and never near the Coast or west of the Dividing Range.

To the above records can be added a sighting by Mr. Russell White of Ormond, Victoria, who recorded a male bird at Purga, 7 miles south of Ipswich on August 21, 1970.

Two other records of interest from the Editor and Mrs. Kathleen McArthur concern a pair during the months July-September 1965 at the Coolum Swamp, and a single bird near Gatton on June 6, 1965. It is worth noting that the Coolum Swamp birds would have been no more than 5 miles from the coast as the Blue-winged Kookaburra flies.

Editor.

MIGRATION MOVEMENTS AT WELLINGTON POINT

by J.S. Robertson

<u>1970</u>	<u>Arrivals</u>
February 25	White Ibis
March 1	Straw-necked Ibis
March 24	Satin Flycatcher, male, on passage
March 25	Rufous Fantail, on passage
March 26	Golden Whistler, mostly immature males
March 27	Spangled Drongo
April 24	Scarlet Honeyeater, suddenly, and in large numbers
April 24	Noisy Friar-bird
April 25	Rose Robin
April 26	Little and Noisy Friar-birds in clear migration, with flocks of 20 to 60 at close intervals, all passing from south to north
May 4	Yellow-faced Honeyeater, and Eastern Spinebill
May 5	Yellow-faced Honeyeaters passing in heavy north migration
May 8	Dusky Wood-Swallow
May 15	Fan-tailed Cuckoo
May 15-19	Little and Noisy Friar-birds, Yellow-faced Honeyeaters passing north in large flocks
May 30	Further considerable north migration of previous three species
June 1	Mixed flocks of 10 to 100 of previous three species to mid afternoon

Departures

March 8	Koel
March 30	Dollar-bird
April 5	Leaden Flycatcher
April 5	Eastern Curlew

MIGRATION MOVEMENTS AT
RESERVE CREEK, MURWILLUMBAH

by Miss Ella Pratt

Arrivals

1970

February 22	Rufous Fantail
March 5	Golden Whistler
March 26	Grey Fantail
March 26	Scarlet Honeyeaters
April 22	Yellow-faced Honeyeaters
April 25	Noisy Friar-birds
April 19	Rose Robin
April 27	Noisy Friar-birds started going north with flock sizes from 5 to 70, and from 10 to 120 during May to May 30
May 4	Yellow-faced Honeyeaters started going north in regular flocks from a few to 30 birds between 9 a.m. and 3 p.m.
May 5-8	Yellow-faced Honeyeater movement continued, and included a few Scarlet Honeyeaters
June 10	Red-backed Kingfisher - an unusual visitor

Departures

January 19	Channel-billed Cuckoo
Late February	Sacred Kingfisher
February 26	Brush Cuckoo
April 4	Koel
April 4	Leaden Flycatcher
April 9	Spine-tailed Swift
April 19	Cicada-bird
May 2	Spangled Drongo

NOTES ON THE FLOCK PIGEON
HISTRIPHAPS HISTRIONICA

By Keith Williams

My first sighting of this beautiful bird was during a trip to the Northern Territory in 1958. On subsequent trips to western Queensland I had opportunities for further observations and the following notes are taken from my diaries.

On July 3, 1958, we made a late camp 20 miles west of Camooweal and on the morning of the 4th found the area to be open grassland with a few scattered and stunted trees. Flocks of Flock Pigeons were first noted soon after dawn, flying from north to south over the grassy plain. Flocks were estimated at roughly a hundred birds and hundreds of such flocks passed overhead. About two hours after the last had gone south, flocks were seen coming back and this time the direction paralleled the road - roughly east/west.

We broke camp about 9.30 a.m. and continued into the west where we found an aggregation of pigeons only a few miles from the campsite. Our vehicle disturbed them and they rose into the air in thousands, continuing to do so during the next mile of road. No further sightings of Flock Pigeons were made on that trip which lasted a month.

On June 28, 1966, while travelling from Winton to Hughenden, I pulled up at a windmill and tank just beyond Stamford. While I was there a couple of Flock Pigeons came in to drink and they were soon followed by others which circled for a while before landing, drinking very quickly and flying off again.

Further on, while travelling over the grassy downs, more were seen and I stopped to have a closer look at them. Here, a single bird was noticed performing a flight display. It flew very slowly about 80-100 ft above the ground and forward progress was so slow it appeared to be almost hovering. During flight the wings were beaten very rapidly for a few seconds and a humming sound could be heard - from wings or bird itself could not be ascertained - until the flapping stopped, after which the bird would glide for several seconds with the wings held in a vee position. This was repeated continually until we moved on.

In later conversation with a local grazier, I was informed that this was part of a display over the nest performed by the male. He had observed the same procedure before, and after seeing the male suddenly swoop to the ground, had searched and found a female on eggs. Nesting in the area occurs normally in June. He also

informed me of their spasmodic appearances in the area; some years none are seen, while in other years hundreds of nests can be found.

On September 2, 1967, while travelling from Birdsville to Bedourie, we crossed an area locally known as the Lignum Channels. Great flocks of pigeons were seen here coming in to drink during the late afternoon. The flocks came in rapidly and circled a couple of times before landing on the bank of the billabong some distance from the water. Then the whole flock would run down to the edge where portion of the flock would drink before all took flight. Meanwhile, other flocks waited to come in and drink. This procedure was repeated again and again during the hour we watched. Similar methods of drinking have been observed with flocks of Budgerygahs, with the entire group repeating the pattern until all individuals had watered.

On September 3, 1968, while travelling west towards Birdsville from Windorah, we found large numbers of Flock Pigeons feeding along the roadside just a few miles west of the town. As we travelled on many more smaller flocks were seen flying away over the open plain.

On October 5, 1968, we came to the Birdsville-

Bedourie road a few miles south of Bedourie beyond Cluny Station. Here, we observed large groups of Flock Pigeons moving across the open countryside. Great numbers were flushed from the roadside herbage all the way to Boulia. That evening we camped at Marion Downs and next morning (4th) broke camp at about 7.45 a.m. Flock Pigeons were again seen in large numbers feeding beside the road and flying back and forth across the saltbush plains.

The nomadism of this species is well known and my observations over ten years has reinforced this, as flocks have never been seen in the same area more than once during the trips mentioned, nor have they been seen in any other western district in the same year.
