

McGILP—Observations on the Western Bower-bird.

Observations on the Western Bower-Bird (*Chlamydera guttata*).

By J. Neil McGilp.

During a tour of inspection and valuation of pastoral holdings the Pastoral Board, of which the writer is a member, met with heavy rain and were forced to camp for a couple of days at Moorilyanna Station, some 180 miles N.W. of Oodnadatta by road, but much less as the crow flies.

Moorilyanna was in recent years taken up by Mr. Stanley Ferguson, who made vigorous but unsuccessful attempts to develop this country into a sheep station. He built his homestead within a stone's throw of what has been known as the Moorilyanna Native Well, a soakage at the foot of a large outcrop of granite boulders. These outcrops are a feature of the country, and, judging from the experience of settlers in this locality, provide the only water there. Unfortunately, these soakages are not permanent, and prove useless for watering stock for any length of time. Moorilyanna is now deserted, but we were thankful to shelter in the well-built house of timber and iron.

For the first time in this State the writer came in touch with the Native Fig (*Ficus platypoda*), which grows in the outcrops of granite. These figtrees are to be found in almost every such outcrop right out westwards into the heart of the Musgrave Ranges, the limit of our journey. These trees appear actually to grow out of the solid rocks, having taken root in almost impossible positions in slight cracks in the boulders. They spread out and form huge clumps. They produce a fruit which is somewhat like a very small green fig. A reproduction of the



Bower of the Western Bower-Bird (*Chlamydera guttata*)

The white object in the entrance to the runway is a piece of cotton-wool placed there to show the opening. The light was very bad.

Photo by Theo. E. Day, Esq.



Native Fig (*Ficus platypoda*) growing out of a granite rock.
Photo by E. Colsen.

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foliage and fruit illustrates this article. Whilst examining one of these clumps of figtrees on 16th June, 1931, a small Honey-eater was noted, the call having been heard once previously from a small Honeyeater in the gums in a creek at Umbun Station, on the Peake, out east from William Creek. when the writer was unable to secure a specimen. Closer observation suggested that it might be Keartland's or the Grey-headed Honeyeater (*Meliphaga keartlandi*), and I decided to take a specimen for the S.A. Museum. Whilst trying to get a shot at this bird, which was extremely quiet and feasting upon the fruit of the figtree, a peculiar note reached my ear. It sounded like a cry and a hiss, and was followed with a chatter of one note quickly repeated. As this was quite a new note to me I did not fire at the small Honeyeater, which later on proved to be Keartland's Honeyeater, but proceeded hastily towards another large clump of figtrees quite 200 yards away, from which the peculiar notes continued to come. As I drew near a large bird was disturbed. It had a very yellowish appearance, and it was only by deduction that I decided it must be the Western Bower-Bird. The flight was rapid, though in appearance laboured, and of a swooping nature. I decided to watch the bird, and hid under the clump of figtrees from which the bird had flown. It was only a second or two when from right overhead the half-hiss, half-cry call was given, and I was able to observe closely the female. In a short space of time the bird that had flown away returned, and I had to listen to the well-nigh hideous call for quite a time. The birds were very curious and came very close to me, so that I could easily see the lilac nape patch on the male bird and the beautiful yellow and blackish plumage of both birds. The female did not show the lilac patch on the nape. Both birds made occasional flights from the tree, but until I finally disturbed them they did not fly out together. I was able to observe that, besides being fruit-eaters they also take insects; both birds took toll of the numerous moths that had evidently been hunted out by the rain, which continued to fall during the whole of the day; both birds also fed upon the green fruit of the figtree. The birds were very noisy and appeared to resent my presence, for they fluffed out the feathers and gave the hissing call repeatedly, more especially as they came near me. Whilst watching this pair, another pair came into the tree and a great chatter and hissing resulted. I had decided to leave the birds and visit a tree some 300 yards or so away, to which the birds had several times flown, in the

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hope of finding a nest or playground, but was spellbound when I heard the most realistic meowing of a cat coming from the other end of the clump. This call was again repeated, and was followed by many hissing notes. I was prepared to swear that the note was made by the Bower-Birds, until out into the open sauntered a large tortoiseshell cat, calling as he went. Had the cat not shown himself I would have been convinced that the Bower-Birds were the best mimics I had ever heard.

To reach the tree to which the birds had flown occasionally, I had to pass some Eucalypts, and in these I noted the small Weebill. It appeared to be very yellow in comparison with the southern form so I took a specimen [now in the S.A. Museum]. It appears to be intermediate between *Smicrornis brevirostris* and *Smicrornis flavescens*. It has already been described by Captain White as *Smicrornis brevirostris mathewsi*, which G. M. Mathews makes a sub-species of *Smicrornis flavescens*.

Upon inspection of the tree to which the Bower-Birds paid several visits, a playground or bower was found. It was impossible to observe if the birds used the playground from any spot other than under the tree so I hid (?) myself in the branches on the eastern side of the trunk. I had not long to wait before the birds arrived. At one time the four birds were present within 6 or 8 feet of me; they were greatly agitated and continued to hiss and ruff-up the feathers. As the birds considered my presence too undesirable for any play to be undertaken, I thought it best not to worry them further.

A photograph was out of the question on account of the rain, which continued to fall and, moreover, I had not a camera with me. I decided not to enter the playground and returned to my colleagues at the homestead, very damp in body, but not in spirit. for, notwithstanding the continuous downfall of rain, I had spent an interesting and profitable afternoon.

The rain eased off during the night and after a late breakfast our party set off for the Bower-Birds' playground, which was a new sight for all of us. Considerable chopping was necessary to clear the low-spreading branches of the silver wattle tree that completely hid the bower so that enough light could be thrown on the subject of the photograph. The day was very overcast, and the resulting picture was not very satisfactory.

The description of the playground is as follows:—It was completely hidden under the low-spreading branches of a variety

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of silver wattle growing on the side of a small hill. The birds had utilized a small clump of very strong wire-like grass, which measured 3 feet 5 inches long by 2 feet 7 inches wide and from 10 to 13 inches high. Through the longest axis of the clump of grass the birds had apparently run to and fro until a trodden-down pathway, measuring from 6 up to 8 inches in width, had been formed. The grass was trodden down and formed a carpet over the length of the runway, which was 3 feet 5 inches long. At the eastern end of the runway and almost at the trunk of the tree, but slightly north of a direct line through the grassy runway, was a large and almost circular heap of land shells. This heap contained nothing but land shells, and was built or formed on a clear space evidently cleaned up by the birds. It was estimated there were between two and three hundred shells in the heap. The heap was out of direct line with the runway, possibly because a very low limb or branch of the tree was in the way. The distance from the eastern end of the runway to the eastern edge of the shell depot was 4 feet 3 inches. At the western end of the runway a platform of rather large sticks had been built; this measured roughly 6 feet in diameter and was from 5 inches to 11 inches in depth. The birds had evidently built this to level up the floor so as to be on the same plane as the runway and the shell depot, for the surface of the ground dipped suddenly away from the runway to a huge granite boulder which made contact with the spreading branches of the tree. Upon this platform were a few black stones (they had at one time been burnt in a fire), the bleached bones of the spinal columns of marsupials, probably wallaby, and several bleached bones of the rabbit. There was not a shell on the platform, but in the interstices of the material forming the platform many shells and bones were visible, these treasures having evidently been lost during play hours. The full measurement from the outside edge of the shell heap to the outside of the platform was 13 feet 8 inches. Under the tree, but not in the actual playground, were noted several round berries (green in colour), and two or three figs.

After the photograph had been secured a diligent search was made in the vicinity, but no nest was found, though every likely situation was closely examined.