
*McGILP—Wedgebill.**Wedgebill, Sphenostoma cristatum.*

By J. Neil McGilp.

Eggs closely resembling those of the Wedgebill have been taken close to the Victorian border. The bird was not identified at the nest. As there is no record of the Wedgebill in that country it has been suggested that the eggs belong to the Western Whipbird (*Psophodes nigrogularis*). On my last visit to Melbourne, in April, 1931, I saw those eggs. They are somewhat larger than, but otherwise identical with, eggs of the Wedgebill. Possibly country with better rainfall would produce a larger egg from the Wedgebill. The ownership of the eggs cannot be determined until the bird is identified.

With the view of assisting visitors to this mallee country to identify the bird I am writing a few notes on the Wedgebill as I know it in the interior of our State. Birds often look very

McGILP—Wedgebill.

different in the field from their appearance in cabinets, so I will endeavour to describe the bird as one sees it in its natural state. In many respects the Wedgebill resembles the White-browed Babbler (*Pomatostomus superciliosus*). It is about the same size, but the tail looks slightly longer in the Wedgebill. With the exception of the two central tail feathers the white tips to the tail feathers found in the Babbler are also conspicuous in the Wedgebill, but in the latter bird the white tips extend in size until the outermost pair of feathers are white for about half of the feather. The Wedgebill spreads the tail in flight so that these white markings are readily observed. The Wedgebill is greyer than the Babbler in colour, but has more white in the wing feathers and a well-defined crest, which is always erected, much after the style of the crest of the Cockatoo Parrot (*Leptolophus hollandicus*). Again, the Wedgebill has much the same flight as the Babbler; it flies close to the ground and does not fly a great distance, preferring to fly from one bush to another, and to escape notice in the dense foliage. The Wedgebill is shy and wary, except at breeding-time, when it can be closely approached. The call of the Wedgebill is a loud ringing "Wirry chip" repeated frequently. Its call is heard throughout the day and often at night. The bird has earned the name of "Daylight Bird," as its call is usually the first heard in the early morning. It has also been referred to as the "Wheel-barrow Bird," its call being supposed to resemble the squeaking of a wheel-barrow greatly in need of oil; this is considered a libel, as although the call becomes somewhat monotonous it is particularly sweet in tone.

The Wedgebill is insectivorous and feeds much upon the ground. It spends a good deal of its time in thick undergrowth and is seldom to be found in open country. So far as I can ascertain, the Wedgebill is purely an interior resident in this State. I have observed it over much of our interior. I have records of it as follows:—Lake Frome, Beltana, Oodnadatta, Blood's Creek, Clifton Hills, Cooper's Creek, Bookaloo, Tarcoola, Coober Pedy, Mount Willoughby, Hawker, and Kallioota—the last two localities are the most southern records. The bird is found in watercourse country, creek beds, and almost any country containing dense bushes.

The breeding season varies with the rainfall; if the season is suitable eggs are to be found more frequently between August and December. The nest is an open saucer-shape of somewhat

McGILP—Wedgebill.

frail structure. Fine twigs, rootlets, or vine stems are used to make the nest, which is then lined with fine rootlets or grass. The nest measures externally about 5 inches in diameter by about $2\frac{3}{4}$ to 3 inches in depth, according to position. The egg cavity measures $2\frac{3}{4}$ inches in diameter by $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches in depth. The nest is usually placed within reach from the ground in some dense shrub or bush. I have a record of finding two eggs in a nest in a dense mistletoe growing 15 feet up in a mulga tree. The lowest nest I have found was within three feet of the ground in a broken-down branch of an acacia over which a clematis creeper was growing. Any dense bush or clump of creeper or mistletoe is a good place to search for a nest of the Wedgebill if the birds are in the vicinity. I found a nest in quite an open situation (for a Wedgebill)—it was built in the forks of a needlebush, and was easily seen from outside the bush, which is usually not the case. The Wedgebill returns to nest to the same locality year after year. The birds are nomadic in habit, according to the season and food supply.

The Wedgebill lays two or three eggs as a sitting. The eggs are almost oval in shape, the shell is thin, closely grained so as to be very smooth with a slight lustre. They are amongst the most beautiful of Australian eggs, having greenish-blue colour as a background with dark grey or black markings. These markings vary much; sometimes they are dots or spots, at other times streaks or lines, while the comma-like markings are frequently found; some eggs contain all sorts of markings, whilst other eggs have only the one character. The markings are sparingly distributed over the shell, but sometimes are thicker on the larger end, while I have seen eggs with a distinct zone of marks in this situation. The eggs average in measurement 1 inch by .68 inch.

The bird sits closely to the nest when it contains eggs or young. Both sexes share in incubation, which lasts from 14 to 17 days. The eggs become very dark as incubation proceeds. During the nesting period the birds become very tame and do not flush out of the bushes readily, preferring to remain quietly in some thick shrub or tree near the nest. They do not often call if one is near the nest.

Both the Whip-Birds—the Eastern (*Psophodes olivaceus*) and the Western (*P. nigrogularis*)—have a black throat, whereas the Wedgebill has the throat slightly lighter in colour than the greyish brown of its body. There should not be any confusion with these birds when the “wanted” bird is found in the mallee.