

Blackwood Notes.

By Edwin Ashby.

Family Matters of a Pair of Willie Wagtails (*Rhipidura leucophrys*). 12/9/1932.

Early in September a pair of Wagtails commenced building a charming cup-shaped nest in the twigs of a drooping bough of a gumtree only a few feet above the water. The nest was beautifully made and firmly attached, and on the 18th September I noticed one of the pair giving the finishing touches to the nest by spreading a filmy coating of cobweb on the outside. Five days later the hen was sitting on the nest, and continued sitting closely till 5th October, when I noticed some egg-shell near the water's edge, and concluded that one or more of the eggs had hatched. On 22nd October, or 17 days later, the two young seemed nearly as large as their parents, from whom they were chiefly distinguished by their short tails. The larger fledgling sometimes stood on the edge of the nest, but more often stood upon its brother, or sister; the under bird made vain efforts to stretch its limbs, but every time it tried to open its wings the bigger one trod it under and sat down comfortably on the head or back of its fellow. It was quite evident that this state of things could not continue, for the weaker bird was

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in great danger of being smothered. I was glad to be able to report the next day that both had left the nest and were being fed by the parents in the boughs of the same tree. Four days later, 27th October, both the young were able to fly and hunt for food (though I admit they preferred to be fed like babies) almost as well as their parents, whom they closely resembled both in size and plumage, except for the shortness of their tails. The astonishing rapidity of the whole proceeding almost takes one's breath away. Think, only a brief 30 days from the date of one of the parents giving the finishing touches to the nest and these birds had gone through the business of egg laying, incubation, the rearing of the young, teaching them to fly, and, it might almost be said, the launching of them out to fend for themselves in the wide world. It was only two days over a fortnight later when I discovered that a parent bird was again sitting on the nest, and the cares of incubation and the promise of a second family were in full swing, and, on 30th November, a very hot day, I saw a half-clothed chick in the nest. It was stretching its slim neck as high as it could in its endeavour to get some passing breath of air; although the neck seemed bare, the head was bonneted with black feathers, and the white line over the eye was clearly seen. Owing to the situation of the nest, being well out over the water, it has been impossible to look into the cup of the nest, and my visits to the nesting site have been infrequent, but, until to-day, 12th December, I have not noticed either a chick in the nest nor has a parent bird been sitting, but this afternoon a parent bird was in the nest. The explanation is not quite evident—the only one that suggests itself to me is that some fatality has occurred and the parent is endeavouring to remedy the disaster and is busy laying a third set of eggs.

Addenda.—The following day, 13th December, I saw the male bird feeding the single chick, so no fatality had taken place as regards the single chick of the second brood. The hen evidently considered that the father was quite competent to take complete charge, and, turning her attention to more important matters, has at once laid a third clutch of eggs and commenced incubating them without a day's delay.

Feathered Pottery Makers—Work of Magpie-Larks (*Grallina cyanoleuca*). 19/12/1932.

In the same tree that was selected by the Willie Wagtails for their nesting site, I noticed on 18th September, 1932, that a

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pair of Magpie-Larks had placed their nest on a drooping bough on the far side, hanging well out over the water. The nest, when first discovered, had been completed on the outside. It consisted of a symmetrically-made piece of pottery, in size and shape resembling a largish pudding basin. I greatly regretted not having seen the earlier stages of this work. As I stood and watched both birds come to the nest to put some finishing touches, I could see one of the birds from where I stood working on the inside, but could not see her head, because it was hidden by the rim of the nest. I concluded that she was smoothing off the plaster of the inside, but, whatever the action was, it caused the whole body to quiver and the job took several minutes. The next day I had hoped to have seen more work done on the structure and brought my field-glasses in order to discover more accurately how, with a beak as a tool, such work was done; unfortunately, the birds apparently did not visit the nest for several days. The clay, of which the nest was composed, was of a very dark colour; undoubtedly it was quite too damp for use. During the next day or so it changed colour until it became a pale yellowish brown, and on 23rd September the hen was on the nest at 8.30 a.m., either laying an egg or commencing incubation. From that date until 5th October one or other of the parent birds was always on the nest when I was able to inspect, and on the 7th she was still sitting, I think, possibly, on freshly-hatched chicks. A fortnight later the edges of the nest were splashed with the white excreta of the fledglings, and on 27th October the nestlings were a fair size and the parents were continually feeding them. Two days later they were too big to get into the nest, the two young both standing on the edge. In size and plumage they much resembled their parents. On 5th November they had left the nest, but both kept in the same tree for several days, the parents being kept very busy supplying their wants. On 12th November both birds carefully inspected the nest, evidently discussing the question of repairs with a view to a second brood; the results of this inspection were evidently unsatisfactory for they transferred their interests to another tree on the other side of our reservoir, and there made a new pottery nest, placing it on a lofty bough in a tall gumtree in a position too difficult to watch.

Unusual Bird Visitors.

During August, 1932, a White Egret (*Egretta alba*) paid us a brief visit; as far I am aware this is the first occurrence of the species in our district. The White-faced Herons, incorrectly

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called Cranes (*Notophox novae-hollandiae*) are often here, but up to the present have not nested, although suitable blue-gumtrees are standing in the water. On 4th September two pairs of Australian White-eyed Ducks (*Nyroca australis*) spent the day on the reservoir, and this also was a first record, for although Black Duck (*Anas superciliosa*) and Grey Teal (*Querquedula gibberifrons*) are not infrequent visitors we have not previously noted the White-eyed Duck. The two ducks each kept close to their respective drakes; the latter were handsome fellows in full breeding plumage; the rich chestnut colouring seemingly extended along the full length of the birds; the white speculum of the wing was reduced to a white spot when the birds were swimming. These Ducks had gone the next morning, but a rather interesting incident occurred in connection with their visit. I happened to have my field-glasses with me when I noticed a male Little Grebe (*Podiceps ruficollis*) swim rapidly towards the Ducks and stop a few yards away from them. He hesitated for a few moments. When his mate started to join him, "his impudence" made at once at one of the pairs of Ducks, who tried to get away by swimming, but the speed of the Little Grebe was too good. He separated the drake from the duck, and the big drake flew for some distance in his endeavour to escape, still pursued by his small but pugnacious adversary. When one remembers that the feet of the Grebe are not webbed from toe to toe like the Ducks, but each toe is separately webbed like a paddle, one cannot help wondering whether for speed the foot of the Grebe is not the more efficient tool. On 10th September nine Grey Teal spent the day on the reservoir, but were much disturbed. On the 19th January, 1933, early in the afternoon when thunderstorms were seemingly forming in every direction, for constant rumbling could be heard from only a few miles away, two White Ibis (*Threskiornis molucca*) appeared flying quite low down over our garden, coming from the direction of our reservoir, and flying in a north-easterly direction; their long curved beaks held horizontally in front were most conspicuous. Those two birds had hardly got out of sight when a Straw-necked Ibis (*T. spinicollis*) put in an appearance; its plumage, white underneath and dark, seemingly black, upper part, was clearly seen. It was flying high and also coming from the south-west, but it continued to mount higher and higher in a spiral flight, and then made off due east and was seen no more. I can only explain their visible presence as probably due to the attraction of the water

MORGAN—A Trip to Mannahill, S.A.

of the reservoir on migrating birds that otherwise would have passed overhead at such an altitude that they would not be visible. We must presume that, having lowered their flight and thus inspected the water, they decided that it was not sufficiently attractive to stop. We have reason to believe that rare birds not infrequently fly over the city at too great a height for human observation. On 5th February an unusual and very dainty visitor spent the day on our reservoir, viz., a Pink-eared Duck (*Malacorhynchus membranaceus*). This charming though small Duck, has a bright pink spot near its ear, and thence its name. Its breast and lower neck are covered with zebra-like bands, but its most distinctive feature at a distance is the exceptionally large shovel-like bill, which is held horizontally as it swims on the water. Although not one of the "Whistling Ducks," its whistling notes when heard in the darkness of night form a most attractive night sound. This is the first record we have of this species visiting our reservoir.
