
McGILP—History of a Wagtail's Home.

An Unfinished History of a Willie Wagtail's Home.

By J. Neil McGilp.

At about 5 p.m. on Wednesday, 18th October, 1933, I noticed a pair of Wagtails (*Rhipidura leucophrys*) hanging around an apricot tree in our back garden at King's Park, S.A. They appeared from their furtive actions to be nesting, so I watched patiently until I saw one of the birds return from the back of the yard with something in its bill. The bird settled on a plum tree, then flew to a fork in a horizontal branch of the apricot tree and fussed about for some time. After the bird had left I inspected the fork and noticed just a film of cobweb spread on each prong of the fork. I have stated that the bird, before going to its nest, alighted on a plum tree, that is worthy of mention, for the bird rarely went to the nest without first landing on this identical branch of the plum tree. By 5 o'clock, on the following day quite a lot of work had been done on the nest, and the base appeared ready for the erection of the circular walls. While I watched for over half an hour both birds carried material, but one only did the building—this bird, evidently the female, as she alone sat on the nest almost invariably, had an irregular black spot below the true alignment of the black throat, and by this mark I was able to readily distinguish the birds. Cobwebs were secured principally from

McGILP—History of a Wagtail's Home.

a wire-netting trellis, and small pieces of grass or flower stems were also gathered at no great distance from the nest. The birds continued their labours while I watched from under a peach tree not more than 15 feet from the nest. On the Friday both birds were hard at work when I returned from the office, the circular walls were fully half built, and it was interesting to see the female enter the partly finished nest and twist and turn about as if to make the structure circular. Its mate assisted by carrying material, which the female took and worked into the nest. The next day, Saturday, 21st, found the nest going on towards completion, the walls appeared almost finished, but not rounded off; a start on lining the nest had commenced, grasses and hair forming the lining. I noticed the nest had taken on a very dark colour, and I was not surprised when I noticed the birds flying to and from an old tank, once used as an incinerator, after cobwebs. The next day was very hot, with strong hot northerly winds, and when I visited the nest at 9 o'clock it had been to all intents and purposes completed, much cobweb had been added in the early morning. On Monday, 23rd October, I went to the nest, but as the birds were not about, and as a thread of cobweb stood up above the rim in an unnatural position, I was afraid that the birds had been interfered with. It was not until after my return home at 5.30 p.m. that the birds were noticed, and then right away from the nest. This was unusual, for the birds throughout nest-building operations were continually near the nest, even when not actually at work. I went up to the nest and decided the birds had deserted, as some of the hair and grass had been pulled up into the egg cavity, and there were several loose cobwebs about the rim of the nest. This fact is interesting, and I have since come to the conclusion that the birds had deliberately made the nest untidy so as to appear deserted.

Early on Tuesday morning, 24th October, I heard and saw the male bird near the nest, so went along, and the female flushed from the tree. I was surprised to see a beautifully marked egg. This egg was laid between 6 p.m. on Monday and 6.35 a.m. on Tuesday. I visited the nest again at 5 p.m. and 6.15 p.m., but it still contained the single egg. The female left the nest at the 6.15 p.m. call, but was nowhere about at 5 p.m. At 7.3 a.m. on Wednesday there were two eggs in the nest. I visited the nest at 5.25 p.m., 6.40 p.m., and 7.15 p.m. (almost dark), but there were no more than two eggs. Three eggs were seen when the bird flew from the nest at my approach

McGILP—History of a Wagtail's Home.

—by the way, I did not mention that the nest was roughly six feet from the ground, and a slight pull on the branch allowed inspection of the nest and contents. This visit was at 6.45 a.m. Other visits in the evening were at 5.45 p.m. and 6.25 p.m., but only three eggs were in the nest. On Friday, 27th October, I was delighted when at 7 a.m. I noticed a fine four-egg clutch in the nest, and the female appeared less inclined to flush. I got up much closer to the nest before she left. The female soon returned to the nest, and I was surprised to note the male, who had evidently not seen my approach, fly to the sitting bird with some cobweb. This the sitting bird appeared to place well down outside the fall of the nest, and to pull it upward to the rim. Incidentally this feature was noticed on four different occasions during the time the female sat on the nest. On the Sunday I spent quite a time in the garden in sight of the nest. I noted that the male fed the sitting bird on the nest twice, but also that the sitting bird flew from the nest to capture a passing moth, and then returned to her duties. The sitting bird frequently sang from its nest, and here it might be mentioned that many times during the nights, especially towards early morning, both birds could be heard calling, the male roosted in a walnut tree on the opposite side of the garden.

From then on the female became very tame, and I could get within a few feet of the nest without her leaving. On Wednesday, 1st November, I was surprised to see the female in the garden, so visited the nest and found Mr. Wagtail sitting. He was not as trusting as his better half, and cleared out long before I had reached the tree. In the evening, when it was about dark, I went to the nest, a bird flushed from the nest sooner than I expected, perhaps on account of my unusual call. It was interesting to note that both birds settled on the ground fairly close to the apricot tree, and made little attempt to draw me away, as was usual during the daytime. I disturbed both birds from the ground, but they flew to the other side of the tree, and again alighted on the ground. It was almost too dark to see the birds, but they made no attempt to fly into the trees, as is their custom in the daytime. On 3rd November the female sat so closely that I could easily have stroked her—here it is worth recording that the bird, whether it be the male or female, sits in exactly the same position on the nest, that is to say, sits with its tail pointing always in the same direction. On Saturday, 4th, I purposely disturbed the female to inspect the eggs. They had certainly become much darker in colour, and incubation was proceeding rapidly. I did not go near the

nest again until Monday, 6th November, at 4.45 p.m., and I was rather surprised not to see the male bird greet me as I entered the back gate, his point of vantage being a chimney over the wash-house, which he used very frequently, and from which his call of "Sweet pretty creature, very pleased to greet you," was given to all and sundry at all times throughout the day. This absence of the male at this and several later occasions may have something to do with its nesting habits. It appeared to be intentional, for unless I forced the female from the nest he did not show up. Yet, when I had returned to the back verandah I noticed him fly to the female with food. It looks as if the male did not wish to unduly advertise the fact that his mate was approaching the motherhood stage or something like that. On the evening of the 7th November the nest was visited at 5 p.m., and the female was on the nest, and though I stood within touching distance she made no attempt to leave the nest. I again saw no sign of her mate.

Early next morning, at about 6 a.m., my wife asked if I had heard the Wagtails making a lot of noise during the night. I went along to the nest to find that a tragedy had taken place. I first noted both birds in the plum tree, and then on going to the nest I found it pulled right over and the eggs had gone. There was no trace of them beneath the nest. The nest had been pulled over towards the centre of the tree. I placed the crime on a cat or a Boobook Owl (*Ninox boobook*) that often is to be seen and heard in our vicinity. I left the nest as it was, but two days later it, too, had disappeared. On Friday, 17th, I saw the male bird with cobwebs in his bill fly over our fence into a neighbour's garden, so I hope they will have better luck in their new home.
