

COURTSHIP DISPLAY OF THE MISTLETOE BIRD

By J. NEIL McGILP.

On November 2, 1946, in company with Messrs. S. E. Terrill and H. Jarman, the writer paid a visit to a well-known hunting (ornithological) ground near Tea Tree Gully, and it was our good fortune to see the mating display of the dainty little Mistletoe Bird (*Dicaeum hirundinaceum*). As none of the party had previously witnessed such an occurrence it was decided that an attempt be made to describe it.

We were standing under a stunted Eucalypt (Hill Gum) closely watching a male White-winged Triller when a male Mistletoe Bird flew on to a small dry twig about 2 feet from the ground and 6 feet from where we were standing. With his arrival we heard some plaintive squeaks, which appeared to come from a small shrub some 3 feet from the male bird. At first it was thought that he was endeavoring to distract our attention from a young bird hidden in the shrub, but almost immediately he commenced to sing very sweetly and softly and to begin a very attractive display.

He bowed his head from side to side, the tail feathers being spread out fan-wise and held slightly above the level of the body. Each time he bowed he flicked his tail up first to one side and then to the other. By

such movements the scarlet under-tail coverts and the glossy blue-black feathers of the back and tail made a charming contrast. The shapely outlines of the bird's body added beauty to the picture. As the display proceeded it was noted that the bird increased the tempo of his actions and the cadence of his song, until it gave us the impression that he was a fast-moving machine. Each bow and each flick of the tail were so well synchronised that the dainty body appeared not unlike a robot driven by some unseen motor power. The whole display was most attractive and, indeed, fascinating and, having regard to the amount of energy that was being expended by such a tiny creature, it lasted quite a while.

Suddenly, without any warning of his intentions, the male bird dashed upward from his perch on to a leafy bough of the Hill Gum, where we, for the first time, noticed the female. She was perched in a crouched position and the body feathers were ruffled out. They copulated and forthwith darted away into the scrub, the female being followed by her mate. The squeaks ceased and there is not the slightest doubt that they were produced by the hen bird and not as we first imagined by a young bird in the small bush. As the female was, evidently through-

out the male's display, perched quite 6 feet from the shrub from which the squeaks seemed to come continuously, it was thought highly probable that on occasions such as this she may have some ventriloquial power, by the use of which she is enabled, in some measure, to draw attention away from herself and her mate.

Whilst watching the display we were almost spellbound to note that such a tiny

bird was capable of such energetic action, and that the song and movements became more vigorous and more spectacular as the display continued.

We had previously heard most of the notes used by the male bird; they have been used as disjointed calls but, so far as our experience goes, never as a sustained serenade such as we had the pleasure of hearing on this occasion.
