

SOME HABITS OF THE COMMON BRONZEWING

By E. F. BOEHM

Of the native Pigeons occurring in South Australia, the Common Bronzewing (*Phaps chalcoptera*) has the widest geographic distribution, and is also the largest species in size. There is probably not an ornithologist who has not met with the species in the field and seen its nest and eggs. It has frequently been kept, and, occasionally, has been bred in captivity. Nevertheless, ornithological periodical literature and popular bird books contain fewer intimate details of its habits and economy, not to mention its breeding biology, than is the case with some of the rarer birds. Are we guilty of straining much in pursuit of rare and illusive birds, while almost ignoring some of the more common species who would have presented more abundant opportunities for critical observation?

The Common Bronzewing inhabits open forest and scrub country and does practically all its feeding while on the ground. When disturbed, it flies up with a "whirr," followed by loud flapping of the wings, and, frequently, alights on the horizontal

bough of a tree. However, where the scrub is thick and low, the bird usually settles on the ground again. Its food consists of the seeds of various plants, including shrubs such as *Acacia*, *Cassia*, *Geijera linearifolia*, and *Heterodendron oleifolium*. It also eats many kinds of fruits and berries, among them being those of the Ruby Saltbush (*Enchylaena tomentosa*) and several kinds of *Rhagodia*.

Where agricultural land adjoins its haunts, it frequently searches the edges of stubble paddocks for spilled wheat grains and the seeds of several kinds of weeds. Common Bronzewings sometimes gather in flocks of up to a dozen or more birds at the site where wheat has been winnowed, and during periods of severe drought on the margin of the wheat belt flocks of 40 to 50 or more of these Pigeons may occasionally be seen at spots in scrub where sheep have been fed with haychaff. A great variety of common weed seeds are often present in haychaff, and most of the tiny sorts are not picked up by sheep. The

Pigeons undoubtedly feed on these small seeds.

I have known up to sixty of these birds flush from a crop of Wild Oats (*Avena fatua*):

Unfortunately, some illicit shooting of Common Bronzewing apparently still takes place in remote Murray Mallee districts, and dams and stock-troughs are the places where shooters lie in wait at about sunset. Three or four birds are thus secured from a flock with a single shot.

Breeding takes place chiefly in late winter and the spring months, but some nests with either eggs or young may be found in summer and autumn. The cooing of the males is a deep, penetrating call which can be heard up to half a mile away in calm weather. Nests are built of thin sticks and are really only platforms with scarcely enough depression in the centre to hold the two white eggs. Indeed, many eggs are knocked off the nests by the birds when leaving hurriedly upon being disturbed. Often a sitting bird will allow an observer to approach within a few feet before it flies away. The nests are frequently built within 6 to 10 feet of the ground in a tall shrub or small tree. Occasionally, a nest may be seen at a greater height from the ground. Old nests of Babblers (*Pomatostomus*) and Magpies (*Gymnorhina*) are sometimes used as foundations for nests by the Pigeons. Not infrequently an old mud nest of the White-winged Chough (*Corcorax melanorhamphus*) is utilised and it undoubtedly makes a snug brooding place for the Bronzewing.

Sometimes, a brooding bird that has been disturbed will fly low over the ground with the clumsy flight of a young one just able to fly, or will even flutter to the ground and feign injury.

At times the Pigeons nest in exceptional situations, such as in the stub of a hollow tree trunk, a foot or more down from the entrance; or upon sticks lying across a stump, where scrub has been cut down, and within only a foot of the ground.

Two white eggs are the normal clutch, but occasionally only one partly-incubated egg or one young is found in the nest. In the latter cases, it seems that one of a pair of eggs had been accidentally broken.

Common Bronzewing sometimes gather in numbers to roost on branches sheltered by thick foliage in a limited portion of a patch of scrub. Excreta accumulated in heaps indicate that some roosts have been used for a relatively long period.

In its haunts among the trees and scrub litter this Pigeon is wonderfully protected by its coloration, but seen in bright sunlight in an open patch the male in particular appears very attractive indeed. The iridescent bronze patch on the wings then simply glows with color; the chest takes on a brilliant pinkish tint; while the head of the male, with its large cream cap contrasting with the rich brown nape, adds to the striking appearance of the bird.

Although European occupation of the country has resulted in considerable reduction of the forest and scrub lands, the Common Bronzewing is still to be seen in suitable patches of growing timber, even near Adelaide.

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