

NOTES ON THE BLACK-CAPPED SITTELLA

By J. NEIL MCGILP

The Black-capped Sittella (*Neositta pileata*) is the only member of the genus found in South Australia. The late Dr. Angove, of Teatree Gully, in one of his notebooks made an entry to the effect that he had found the Orange-winged Sittella (*N. chrysoptera*) nesting, and described the nest and eggs. However, no other ornithologists have observed the species in South Australia and it is generally regarded that Dr. Angove's observation was made in error, or applied to specimens seen in Victoria or New South Wales.

The Black-capped Sittella is the largest species of the genus, with long, deep yellow, slightly upturned bill with a black tip. The feet are large for the size of the bird. In the field the birds may be recognised by the black cap of the male, or black head of the female, the orange-colored bars on the wings and the white underparts of both sexes. It resembles two other species—the Orange-winged (*chrysoptera*) and the White-winged (*leucoptera*), but the former has a brown cap or head and the underparts more or less streaked, while the white wing-bar at once distinguishes the lastnamed.

The Black-capped Sittella has been reported from most parts of South Australia, except Kangaroo Island and the extreme north-eastern and north-western portions of the State. As little ornithological work has been done in the two last-named areas, it is anticipated that sittellas may be found in districts where suitable conditions exist.

It is really surprising what little information regarding the habits of these birds has been published. It is true that many references such as "a small flock seen" or some such observation can be found, but seldom has anything appeared giving notes on habits and nidification, or else the statements of different writers are conflicting. For instance, some say the *Neositta* does not run up a tree when searching for its food, whereas others claim that when so engaged the birds generally work spirally down the limbs and trunks of trees with the head pointed downwards. One writer goes so far as to say that they run both up and down with head pointed downward.

The writer has had a fair experience with

these birds and has collected much information from ornithological friends.

The Black-capped Sittella appears to subsist entirely on insectivorous food, examination of a number of stomachs by Lee and Gray, Dr. Cleland and others show that in the main its diet consists of such things as spiders, beetles, grubs, leafhoppers, click beetles, ants, bees, froghoppers, craneflies and bugs of many kinds. The bird is seldom seen on the ground. Its food is generally collected from the bark and it can be seen busily engaged searching in crevices and holes in trees. Occasionally it may be seen leaving a tree to dart after an insect trying to escape. We have no evidence to show that nuts or fruits are eaten.

The species is frequently seen, sometimes in small flocks of some 10 to 20 birds, but more often in smaller companies of 5 to 8 birds. They wander about quite a lot within a somewhat limited range, though at times after the young are reared they seek out other suitable areas. Generally, however, they return to the previous nesting locality for breeding purposes, which takes place from August to November. They are extremely active birds, continually on the move, chattering as they go, whether they be hunting for food or in flight. The call is rather a weak piping or chipping chatter; once heard it can be recognised even though the bird is not observed. The flight is erratic, undulating and seldom of any great distance before alighting. Short flights as the birds progress from tree to tree seem to be preferred. When flying into a fresh tree, the company of birds usually alights on the outer branches near the top of the tree. They work generally towards the base of the tree, occasionally some of them work upwards for a few feet and out on to lower branches. The general trend, however, is spirally downwards with the head pointing in this direction. In large trees, particularly, if of any great height, the birds work along the limbs and seldom come far down the trunk. In scrub-like trees and saplings, particularly if they are rough-barked or in a dry or rotting state, the birds spend much time and often work almost to the ground.

The most interesting feature of the Black-capped Sittella is its nesting and breeding habits. The nest is a beautiful, well-camouflaged structure. It is open, upright and placed in an upright fork, usually in a dry branch, though at times rough-barked live forks are used. Usually the nesting fork is fairly well up from the ground and near the top of the tree. Nests have been as high up as 60 ft. and as low as 10 ft. from the ground. Sometimes the nest is built in an exposed conspicuous situation in a fork of a very old, dry, rotting tree, but generally if the birds are not about the nest is difficult to detect. A good deal of cobweb and spiders' cocoons are used in building the wall of the nest. Outwardly the nest is decorated and protected with scale-like pieces of bark with pieces of lichen which are attached to the cobweb-like wall. The pieces of bark or lichen overlap from the top in much the same manner as tiles in a roof; this may probably be done to deflect rain falling during the period of incubation and also to make the nest as similar as possible to the surrounding fork. Apparently these decorations are stuck on the wall by saliva from the bird's mouth, but this seems unnecessary, as the inside of the bark is usually flaky and the edges roughly serrated, and this is sufficient to hold them to the cobweb. Generally the rim of the nest has a castellated appearance, the interior or egg chamber is lined with soft threads of bark and sometimes a little dry grass, matted together with cobweb. External measurements of the nest appear to be determined by the size and depth of the fork in which it is built; an average nest measures externally $2\frac{1}{2}$ inches in diameter at the rim and $2\frac{3}{4}$ to 3 inches in depth. The egg cavity is fairly regular in size, being $1\frac{3}{4}$ inches in diameter and $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches deep. In building, the female starts off by plastering or smearing quite a lot of cobweb at the base and well up the inner sides of the fork. As the work progresses, she frequently hops into the nest, turns and twists about to shape it to her satisfaction and to pull up some cobweb to fasten the exterior decorations which are added as the work proceeds.

When completed the nest can be easily taken for a short broken arm of the fork or a knot growth.

As before stated, the group or company of birds invariably return to its former terri-

tory for nesting operations, and in many instances actually build the new nest in the identical fork used the previous year. Mr. Reg Attiwell, of Naracoorte, a keen and reliable observer, writes that he has records of one group using the same fork for three consecutive years.

Usually 3, sometimes only 2, and rarely 4 eggs are laid as a clutch. In Campbell's "Nests & Eggs" (vol. 1, p. 341.), there is a note in which J. G. Macdougall, writing to Campbell, mentioned that on Yorke Peninsula on November 13 (1895?), he had taken 7 eggs from a nest. The nest was of the usual size, but two birds sat side by side on it covering the eggs, some of which lay on top of the others. Before he had descended the tree the birds were sitting together again on the empty nest.

The eggs are rather dumpy ovals and the shell is of fine texture and fairly glossy. The ground color is light bluish grey, the surface being marked, more particularly towards the larger end, with dots and splashes of olive, dark grey or slate color. There is little variation in size or color of the eggs.

The nesting extends from August to November; nesting commences earlier in our northern areas. Incubation lasts for 12 to 14 days and the young are born naked within a few hours of each other.

The female undertakes most of the incubating, though the male has been seen to take a turn on the nest. The sitting bird is fed by its mate and often by other members of the group. She commences twittering as the food is being carried to her. For a species that does such a lot of work to camouflage the nest, it is curious that the sitting bird makes such a noise whilst being fed, for the twittering notes and the presence of other birds "give the show away." Many a nest which otherwise would escape notice has been observed through this strange habit.

The writer has no record of the Sittella acting as a foster-parent in South Australia. Eggs of the Narrowbilled Bronze, the Pallid, the Fantailed and the Squaretailed Cuckoos have been found in nests of sittellas in other States, and there seems little doubt that in all probability the Black-capped Sittella is at times victimised by one of the Cuckoos.

It is generally recognised that the Black-capped Sittella adopts some sort of a community effort in the construction of the nest.

The writer has several times observed more than the pair of birds assisting in the building operations. The female has been observed to do practically all the actual construction; the other birds of the group assist by carrying material to her. Now and again one of them will land on the fork just above the nest and place a piece of bark, lichen or cobweb in or on the nest instead of waiting for the female to take the material.

Mr. Attiwell in a letter states, "On one occasion I saw three separate birds of a group of 8 adding bits to a nearly completed nest. One bird off and the next on in the space of a few seconds. Generally all the birds of a flock fly together to the nesting tree, but only the female does the building. Quite often the group appears to lose interest as the work nears completion and only the pair are left to finish the job. A group of 9 or 10 birds that had two nests under construction simultaneously appeared to divide the work fairly equally, by the time both nests had eggs the main group had disappeared and both pairs each hatched and attended to the young themselves."

The writer has noticed that birds of a group, whether building or feeding the sitting bird, usually fly in company to the nesting tree. Having delivered what has been carried, the birds leave almost together but usually in a different direction. A nest can be found if the observer is aware of this peculiar habit. As the company acts together it is most difficult to determine to what extent individuals act as carriers or how many of them are spectators only. It is apparent that the nesting pair do most of the work, but others, possibly under an urge to start nesting, assist by carrying material until they themselves are ready to set up house-building on their own.

From my own experience and from information obtained from correspondents, I find it difficult to set down the constitution of a group of birds in the vicinity of a nest. It has been suggested that the group comprises the previous year's offspring and the parent birds, and that only the parents carry nesting material and the rest of the group simply accompany the parents to and from the nest. In many cases the group is too large for a family group. The writer considers that the group consists of breeding birds, most

of which later separate and commence building.

Rarely have other than the parents been observed feeding the young. They nearly always alight on the inside of the fork just above the nest and work down to a position where they can reach downward to feed the young. When this has been done, they drop downward for some feet below the nest when flying away.

When disturbed the sitting bird often feigns injury to lure the disturber away from the nest. Here again Attiwell writes, "Have never seen a nest anywhere except in an upright dry fork, sometimes in a green tree, mostly near the middle. On two occasions when climbing to a nest—*once when eggs* were nearly hatching and *once when it contained newly hatched young*, the females have put up quite a display when I was at the nest; they would drop their wings and fluff up all the body feathers and hop all around me, hanging upside down and cutting all sorts of capers to keep me away, at the same time making a little chipping scolding note." The writer has had similar experiences.

The Black-capped Sittella is fastidious about its nesting fork and has often been seen to remove a partly built nest to a nearby fork or to one in a tree not far away. For a time the writer was under the impression that the bird has resented close observation of its building efforts, but later it seemed more likely that the removal was due to the site not proving suitable for the bird. Sometimes there is a delay of up to 10 days between the apparent completion of the nest and the laying of eggs. It is recalled that near Happy Valley an almost completed nest was located by the writer. A week later it was examined though there was no sign of the parents or the group which had been present and working in the first instance. There were no eggs in the nest and the lining seemed unkempt and it was thought the birds had deserted. A fortnight later when passing the nest (it was visible from the roadway), the male bird was seen. The nest was examined and it contained 3 eggs, which had been incubated for something like 5 or 6 days. The female was flushed, but in this case, although dropping down almost to the ground, she made no attempt to distract attention from the nest.