

## SPOTTED BOWER-BIRD IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA

By E. F. BOEHM.

It seems probable that the Spotted Bower-Bird (*Chlamydera maculata*) was formerly distributed along the Murray River Valley and the immediate adjacent scrubs to at least as far south as Swan Reach. They do not appear to have been very rare in the early days of settlement, but later occurred only in a few remaining suitable localities, and in small numbers. A generally brownish bird, mottled with rufous and golden buff, and with a small erectile, lilac-pink nuchal crest, the Spotted Bower-Bird attracted attention because of its remarkable powers of mimicry, and its habits of building a bower and maintaining a display-ground during the breeding season. The bower was a simple avenue of twigs and grass-stems and was generally built beneath a tree whose branches were sufficiently low to provide concealment. The display-ground in front of the bower was characterised by a collection of conspicuous objects such as pebbles, bones, shells, and flowers and pods of plants. Yellow objects seem to have been very seldom used as decorations.

Marshall (1954) writes: "The female Spotted Bower-Bird builds her nest in a tree or bush within a few hundred yards of the bower." He gives a vast amount of information concerning the display and breeding-biology of the species in Eastern Australia.

Spotted Bower-Birds are largely fruit and berry-eating birds, and their fondness for cultivated fruit made them a nuisance in orchards and kitchen gardens. As a consequence, they were generally shot by the settlers. It was stated by A. H. C. Zietz (in North, 1902) that the birds were known to some settlers near Morgan as "cabbage-birds" from their destructive habit of eating the leaves of those plants in the kitchen garden. Favaloro (1940) has stated that Spotted Bower-Birds have been shot or driven out from many of their old haunts along the Murray River in North-Western Victoria because of their depredations to fruit.

At one time it was believed that only the adult male possessed the attractive lilac pink neck-plumes. However, Jackson (1912) subsequently secured a female with a similar adornment, and it is generally accepted now

that adults of both sexes have the lilac-pink plumes. Young birds lack the neck-crest altogether, and are more heavily marked on the throat and chest than the adults, according to Marshall.

F. W. Andrews, in 1883, obtained six specimens of the species at Overland Corner, according to North (1902). In the Australian Museum, Sydney, there is one specimen, a male, from "interior of South Australia," and it was formerly in the Dobroyde Collection.

Mr. H. T. Condon has kindly supplied me with the following information on specimens in the S.A. Museum collection:

"South Australian skins: only two skins so labelled, both males (B. 7673 and 7674), collected by J. T. Cockerell, no date; the locality is given as 'River Murray Scrub, S.A.'"

"There are also five skins (one mounted) without data in the William White Collection which were probably taken in South Australia, as well as another, also without data, which came from the Gawler Institute."

"Eggs: no eggs taken in South Australia in the Museum collection."

Referring to the type specimen of *C. maculata clelandi*, Mathews 1912, from South Australia, Hartert (1929) stated that the specimen was an unsexed, old, and dirty skin obtained from some "Dr. Clelland" [sic]. He placed it in the synonymy of *C. maculata maculata*. Condon (1951) has recently also regarded the South Australian birds as belonging to the typical form.

Mr. Samuel Sanders, Jr., has informed me that he knew of only two districts on the Murray River in this State where small colonies of Spotted Bower-Birds were formerly found. He writes: "One was the North-West Bend, from where I received a report of the species from the late Mr. S. McIntosh. The other was Barber's Flat, near Kingston, where I discovered the birds in November, 1914, and found a bower. Later, I discovered that there were altogether three bowers among the lignum, but only one seemed to be in use at any particular period. It was then deserted for a while. The decorations at the bower were pieces of stone, mussel shells,

and a blue flower or two." He did not actually see the birds at the bower, and usually observed them in a clump of Murray Willows (*Acacia stenophylla*).

Mr. Sanders continues: "The climax occurred in March, 1915, when the Bower-Birds raided the fig trees of a farmer, Mr. S. Pope, who then shot all the birds he could find. Mr. Pope's daughter, Nellie, delivered two of the birds to me with the remark: 'Father says you can have the Bower Birds'; and added: 'He shot them because they were eating our figs.'"

Mr. Sanders' father, the late Samuel Sanders, Snr., skinned the two birds and mounted the skins. He was very grieved about the whole affair. It is not known what subsequently happened to these mounted skins. Captain S. A. White (in Mathews, 1926) wrote: "Where this bird was once very plentiful on the Murray River in S.A. years ago there is not one to be seen now."

Tindale (1930) reported having seen a single Spotted Bower-Bird near the left (eastern) bank of the Murray, 3 miles north of Swan Reach, in 1929, but the record may be regarded as doubtful. McGilp (1934) states that one bird was known in the early 1930's at Cowilla, above Renmark.

Some taxonomists consider the Western Bower-Bird (*C. guttata*) to be a race of the Spotted species. The Western form still inhabits areas where the Native Fig (*Ficus platypoda*) occurs in the ranges in the extreme north-west of the State. Its remoteness from close human settlement will perhaps ensure its survival for a long time to come.

The Spotted Bower-Bird is now possibly extinct in this State, and one must deplore the general apathy which ornithologists and

protectionists of earlier generations appear to have displayed in regard to the study and conservation of this extremely interesting species in South Australia.

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