

BASIC PROCEDURE IN OBSERVING AND RECORDING IN BIRD STUDY

by RICHARD SCHODDE

Tomes have been written on the way to study and record birds, yet why in some current Australian ornithological publications can one still comb haystacks of description and words for a needle or two of useful ornithological information?

The reason for all this seems to be that few aspiring bird watchers realise that the procedure of comparing or relating is the focal point of the way we study Nature. Why is this animal different from that one? What does this animal do that is different from that one? Why does this animal live in this habitat and not that one? Hence the procedure of comparing asks these fundamental questions which, in their turn, have given rise to such sciences as taxonomy (classification), ethology (behaviour) and ecology (the relation between the organism and its environment). Even genetics began through Mendel's *comparing* the inheritance of different colours in the sweet pea. As for birds, we get to know one species and its habits largely through comparing it, whether consciously or not, with others.

Most bird watchers however, have heard at one time or another that *all* pieces of information gleaned about birds are of value. As a result they tend to compile lengthy and haphazard notes that are often to little point. For example, an observer publishes his observations of a particular species as follows:—

"Common at times and rather nomadic in my district. Has a high-pitched "pip-pip-pip" call. On one occasion I found a nest constructed in a crab apple tree; it was made of strips of bark and rootlets. The parent birds were in constant attendance, bringing a piece of material every few minutes or so, and uttering soft cheepings all the time."

This delightful yet vague piece of description tells us little about this bird or any other that we didn't know before. For instance, all birds are nomadic at one time or another, to a greater or lesser degree. The important points to record in nomadism are:—

(1) when does it occur, (2) how far do the birds move, (3) how does nomadism in one species compare with that of its re-

latives. Likewise, the fact that a bird has a high pitched "pip-pip-pip" call has little significance until it is related to its own behaviour—it might be a flock or a territory call—or compared with that of its nearest relatives. And finally, the constant attendance of the birds at the nest tells naught but the obvious—how else would the nest be built? Information on nesting has little value unless it is compared with the general nesting methods—encompassing nest shape, position and construction, clutch size, egg texture and colour, and plumage phases of young and fledgelings—of that species or its relatives.

So the golden rule in bird watching is not to observe but to observe and compare. In practice, it works out something like this. When commencing bird watching or more serious aspects of bird study, the observer consistently compares in his mind every feature and every action of his bird with what he already knows of that particular species and of other (related) forms. If he does this, he will soon find that he is "getting to know his birds" far quicker than before and that his observations, whether written or not, have a logic, preciseness, and significance that was not previously possible.

Take the Thornbills (*Acanthiza*) for example. To the average observer, these are a jumble of very similar species which are almost impossible to identify with any certainty. Yet consistent comparison in the field will soon reveal the small, but many and constant differences between them. I have drawn up the following conspectus of those South Australian species with which I am familiar to illustrate simply how this can be done.

1—Rump plain; no whitish eyebrow; breast plain yellowish; eye red-brown. Singly, in pairs, or small groups; occurs in outer foliage of clumps of shrubby trees (mostly *Acacia* or *Melaleuca*) in woodland areas; call a distinctive two note "tzit-zit," uttered frequently . . . Little Thornbill (*A. nana*).

2—Rump plain; distinct whitish eyebrow; breast striated; eye cream. Forehead markings narrow whitish streaks. Mostly in small

flocks (5—20 birds); occurs in outer foliage of sclerophyll vegetation, usually well above ground; call a soft "tiz-tiz-tiz-tiz," etc., uttered almost continuously . . . Striated Thornbill (*A. lineata*).

3—Rump plain (chestnut in mallee form) no whitish eyebrow; breast striated; eye red-brown; Forehead with crescent shaped or "scalped" pale edges to feathers.

Singly or in pairs; occurs in low shrubbery of sclerophyll vegetation (mallee forms excepted), but not on ground; calls are mostly a short series of rich Reed Warbler-like notes, and a long harsh "tizzing," like that of the White-browed Scrub Wren . . . Brown Thornbill (*A. pusilla*).

4—Rump chestnut, contrasting with back; no whitish eyebrow; breast plain; eye grey-white.

Mostly in small flocks (5—20 birds); occurs through outer foliage of mallee, sometimes on the ground; usual call is a soft whistling note, uttered frequently . . . Chestnut-tailed Thornbill (*A. uropygialis*).

5—Rump dull buff to pale chestnut, slightly contrasting with back; no whitish eyebrow; breast plain; eye brown.

Mostly in small flocks (5—20 birds); occurs in low samphire, chenopod shrub steppe and sclerophyllous heath vegetation; call a soft quickly repeated "chipping" like that of Eastern Whiteface, uttered frequently . . . Dark Thornbill (*A. iredalei*).

6—Rump buff, contrasting with back; no whitish eyebrow; breast plain; eye brown. Mostly in small flocks (5—20 birds); occurs in open undergrowth and on ground in woodland and sclerophyll forest; call a loud quickly repeated "chipping" like that of Eastern Whiteface, uttered frequently . . . Buff-tailed Thornbill (*A. reguloides*).

7—Rump bright yellow, strongly contrasting with back; whitish eyebrow; breast plain; eye brown. Mostly in small flocks (5—10 birds); occurs in open undergrowth and on ground in forest, woodland, and mallee margins; calls a soft "chip-chip-chip," etc., uttered frequently, and short series of trilling notes . . . Yellow-tailed Thornbill (*A. chrysorrhoa*).

Because the proof of the pudding is always in the eating, I suggest that readers carry

this conspectus with them in the field to test on every thornbill they see. The observer is bound to find a few contradictions occasionally—Nature is like that—but in general, when he *groups* the field characters of each thornbill he sees, he will quickly, I hope, be able to pick the right species.

The conspectus itself shows how concisely informative observations can be (and can be recorded) if the procedure of comparison is used in our approach to bird study. In fact, every aspirant's success as a bird watcher largely comes down to how well he applies this technique.