

# MIMICRY BY THORNBILLS AND WOOD-SWALLOWS

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## 1. THORNBILLS.

Although thornbills are as vocal as any other group of small birds their calls are not usually conspicuous, more often merging into the general volume of bird song than commanding the attention as do the calls of many other birds.

Therefore, it has surprised me to note that on almost every occasion when Chestnut-tailed Thornbills (*Acanthiza uropygialis*) and Buff-tailed Thornbills (*A. reguloides*) are approached while suspended in a mist net or while being handled preparatory to banding, these birds clearly and (in relation to their small size) loudly imitate a great variety of calls of other birds. To a lesser extent, this imitation habit while under stress in the presence of humans has also been noted from Striated Thornbills (*A. lineata*) and Brown Thornbills (*A. pusilla*).

On September 18, 1965, about 9 miles south-west of Waikerie, in company with Mr. Doug. Barnes, a group of Chestnut-tailed Thornbills was approached while suspended in a mist net and the mimicry of other birds commenced. The calls of one bird selected at random were noted and the following calls were clearly identified:—A flock of Mulga Parrots, one Grey Thrush, a group of Babblers, one Yellow-tailed Thornbill, one Grey Butcherbird, one Mallee Ringneck, and in addition two calls not definitely identified, but probably that of a Blue Bonnet and a Yellow-plumed Honey-eater.

This diversity of calls is typical and nearly all the imitated calls are notable for the clarity and trueness of their rendition. They are so faithfully reproduced that one at times looks up from the bird being handled to make sure that the call is not actually coming from the rightful owner of the call.

I have also noticed that the mimicry of other birds was not commenced by the Chestnut-tailed Thornbills when on one occasion a Grey Butcherbird darted over a mist net containing the Thornbills. Other birds in the vicinity raised an alarm at that moment but the Thornbills remained silent.

One of the most intriguing renditions I have heard came from a Chestnut-tailed Thornbill netted in my home garden on January 19, 1966, when it vigorously imitated the bedlam of a flock of Galahs in flight and occasionally a single Galah in flight.

## 2. WOOD-SWALLOWS.

I was surprised to note that from a small group of White-browed Wood-Swallows (*Artamus superciliosus*) perched on a dead Mallee tree near Waikerie on September 25, 1965, calls of a group of Babblers and of a flock of Mulga Parrots were detectable. The calls were reasonably well reproduced and were easily identified. The tree with the Wood-Swallows was observed for some minutes and then approached until the Wood-Swallows flew. There were no birds of any other species observed in or near the tree or its vicinity.