

## NOTES ON SOME CENTRAL AUSTRALIAN BIRDS

By GORDON CLARKE.

The following observations were made during a visit to Ayer's Rock and Alice Springs between August 13 and 20, 1964.

### NANKEEN KESTREL (*Falco cenchroides*)

At Ayer's Rock a male was noted screaming down the face of the Rock in a twisting tumbling flight, to settle on the back of a female which was sitting in a hole in the rock face.

The birds copulated, and the male, with wings extended and held high over the back, called a constant high pitched 'Ki-ek'. Copulation over, the male flew off, whilst the female, shaking her plumage, called too and soon afterwards flew off.

### PLUMED PIGEON (*Lophophaps plumifera*)

At least ten birds were noted within the Pitchi Richi Sanctuary, Alice Springs, where they are fed. They were extremely tame, and Zebra Finch were allowed to feed right under the pigeons' tails without hindrance.

When feeding they were seen to pick at the surface, but sometimes also scattering the top cover of sand and chaff to get at the buried food. This was accomplished with a left and right motion of the bill, using it as a scoop.

Threat display was seen in which the bird assumed a position similar to that when feeding, but with the crest depressed and laid

back along the neck. The lower back and rump feathers were raised, and the wings were dropped and directed forward to expose the violet patches.

Courtship display was also seen, and its similarity to that of the Crested Pigeon was most striking, as both species were in sight displaying at the same time.

In this display the bird bows forward deeply, dropping the head almost to the ground, at the same time raising the spread tail vertically and flicking it slightly. From the rear the spread and raised undertail coverts stand out strikingly against the tail. The wings are held off the body and dropped to show the violet patch, and they are directed forward to make this even more prominent. No response was noted to this display by the apparent mate, which continued feeding unconcernedly.

Further behaviour noted which was not clearly understood was as follows.

A home-made kiln constructed of 15-in. concrete blocks was surrounded by earth, banked up around three sides and on the top to a total height of approximately 4 ft. 6 ins., and the two birds taking part—one larger and with a longer crest than the other—were found to be running back and forth, in and out of a hole in the rear of the mound. The hole was half circular in shape, six inches across the floor and four inches

high at its highest point in the centre, and extended inwards a few inches.

Usually one would run in as the other ran out, but sometimes both would be away, or present, together. The length of time spent inside was very short, the bird merely running in and straight out again; and, as the level of the hole was a foot or so above the surrounding garden, the bird ran down the mound, out a few feet, turned around and repeated the process. Before actually entering the hole the bird would stop, gape, and then move in. Sometimes the actual move in after the gape did not take place.

A third bird was present for a short time, and was once chased off by the smaller bird in threat display, running swiftly after the intruder for some 15—20 yards, before terminating the chase and returning quickly to the kiln.

Similar behaviour was witnessed at the Ross River Tourist Camp, where 11 or 12 birds were found frequenting an area used for trimming timber used in the construction of the chalets. Here the birds were running in and out of the cavities under the logs lying on the ground.

One possible explanation of this behaviour was that the birds were choosing a breeding site, though I cannot comment further.

Mutual preening was noted between the apparent pairs, one nibbling briefly at the side of the neck of the other.

#### CRESTED PIGEON (*Ocyphaps lophotes*)

At Alice Springs 8 to 10 fed alongside Plumed Pigeons.

The display of these birds was extremely close to that of the Plumed Pigeon. In this the head was bobbed down to the ground and the tail was raised over the back and fanned, being spread to its maximum as the bird bowed. The wings were held off the body and spread to show the iridescent patches.

From the general appearance and displays of both this and the previous bird, it would appear that they are very closely related and of recent common stock.

#### RED-BREASTED BABBLER (*Pomatostomus temporalis*)

In small parties from Simpson's Gap

through Alice Springs to Trepchina Gorge, generally frequenting riverside vegetation. Also noted working through citrus trees in the Pitchi Richi Sanctuary. The "Tu-whit tu-who" call of this species appeared to be identical to that of the White-browed Babbler (*Pomatostomus superciliosus*) in the Para Wirra National Park, Adelaide; and was at first thought to be that species.

#### PIED HONEYEATER (*Certhionyx variegatus*)

Recorded at Ayer's Rock (two males and a female) and Mt. Olga (one male).

#### WESTERN BOWER-BIRD (*Chlamydera guttata*)

Alice Springs. First noted feeding from a bowl of nectar put out for honeyeaters at the Pitchi Richi Sanctuary, the bird quickly disappearing on my approach.

At midday a pair of birds were located, and found to be displaying at what I have termed a bower. The bower consisted of a clump of mistletoe some two feet in diameter, which was parasitic upon an acacia and was affixed to a lower branch close to the trunk, from which it hung and touched the ground. The acacia was about 15 ft. in height, with a spread of some 12 ft.

The display lasted approximately ten minutes and the bird, judged to be the male, jumped around the bower assuming a vertical stance and at the same time flapping the wings, stopping only when close up to the second bird. In this display the tail was spread and the nuchal plumes were raised also.

The call used during the display was not unlike the loud hiss of a cat, though this was not always heard.

The second bird was much more passive, not jumping at all and assuming a crouched attitude; occasionally moving around the bower when it would be followed by the other. The crest was raised only partially.

Occasionally the displaying bird would stop and go off one or two yards, apparently to feed on an orange, taking a few pecks only, then returning to continue the display. As I was some 40 to 45 yards away I could not be sure whether it actually fed or not.