

SOME OBSERVATIONS OF THE WESTERN WHIPBIRD

By K. J. MACK.

During a two-week vacation on southern Yorke Peninsula during August and September, 1966, one day was reserved for observing the Western Whipbird (*Psophodes nigrogularis*), for apart from all other reasons I was anxious to see and hear the bird to enable me to identify it more easily elsewhere. Accordingly, on September 1, I proceeded with my family to West Cape, near Pondalowie Bay, armed with camera, binoculars, tape-recorder and H. T. Condon's paper "The Western Whipbird" (*South Aust. Ornith.* vol. 24, 1966, pp. 79-92).

I was unnecessarily pessimistic about hearing and observing the birds, for we had no sooner arrived, than we heard, in low, stunted Coastal Mallee (*Eucalyptus diversifolia*) and heath adjacent to a sand dune, loud chiming calls, which were quite new to us. Then other calls were heard in the distance.

I tape-recorded one at a distance of about 50 yards and replayed the tape promptly in order to hear its quality, when to my surprise and delight, the bird came closer, calling all the time, so I taped this call too. On playing the calls to my family, we were greeted with some most extraordinary actions and calls. No less than eight birds came close, calling singly or in pairs and I was able to tape their calls from as close as 15 feet. Binoculars were not required, such was the perfect view we had at short range. Eight is a minimum number, comprising five birds taped calling loudly, three of whom were accompanied by their mates.

We remained at West Cape from 1100 to 1500 hrs., during which time the calls were mainly continuous, and after the recorder was stopped the birds still remained in close proximity to us.

Replaying a tape on the spot is a natural event in recording, but obviously I had unintentionally interfered with the males' mating territories, such were the birds' inquisitiveness and generally bold actions. Almost no fear was shown as the birds approached us, hopping along the ground and through the low bushes. A person ignorant of bird habits could easily assume that the

birds were tame, enjoyed human company or were otherwise curious, but I am positive that there was more to the matter than that.

THE CALL

The cart-wheel call was the only one taped and this is a perfect description. There is a strong resemblance in some notes to the Reed Warbler and Rufous Songlark, but we immediately thought of the Wedgebill for a comparison, having encountered this species in the North-East several times. The similarity of the call, its clarity, tone, strength, the answering call of the mate — all were there like the Wedgebill, and above all, the almost continuous song that seems to go on and on — these are the factors which to us link these two species of the same family.

A close resemblance with the White-browed Babbler was also noticed, for the alarm calls of this species and the Whipbird appear identical. On my tape each bird has a different call. It may well be that each bird in an area has a call different from that of its neighbours.

LESS CALLING WHEN BREEDING?

On September 4 we encountered one Whipbird two miles east of Royston Head, away from the sand dunes, on the edge of a tea-tree and she-oak flat. To this site on October 8, 1966, we took Mr. R. G. Ohlmeyer, but neither heard nor saw any Whipbirds. A scan around the Browns Beach and Royston Head sand dunes likewise proved fruitless, so we went to West Cape, where the population appears denser. Here we found about four birds close to the track, but only once did they call and it was a rather feeble effort compared with those of five weeks before. It appeared that the birds were breeding, as one was noticed vigorously searching amongst the Templetonias and Olearias, emerging with a grub and heading towards a low clump of Coastal Mallee.

Interest in the taped calls of the previous month, and in calling itself, appeared to have vanished. The time was 1300 to 1500 hours, the earlier searching at Brown's Beach and Royston Head being between 1000 and 1200,

so that the time of day was much the same as before. We assumed the changed characteristics to be due to the breeding season and wonder whether other observers more familiar with the species agree. This apparent seasonal variation in calls rather intrigues me when compared with the Wedgebill, whose lovely chiming call in September reverts to a more subdued one in autumn. The White-eared Honeyeater also appears to develop a strong, bolder call during spring, with the mate chiming in.

Our two visits to Pondalowie Bay convince me that while tape-recording calls is harmless, the replaying of the tape at or near the site during mating may be harmful and could constitute a breach of the Fauna Conservation Act, 1964, relating to Rare Species. I think I am justified, following my experience, in advising bird observers of this aspect and encourage them not to interfere, no matter how unintentionally.

Detailed scientific study is warranted on this very fine species.