

Tree and Bird Day Competition.

SCHOOL PRIZE ESSAY.

The following essay was awarded the first prize in connection with the Schools Competition for the Cup presented by the South Australian Ornithological Association:—

THE MINAH.

The Minah is an interesting bird to study because of its habits and ridiculous acts. Often when I am watching.

the Minahs, they will show off by jumping from limb to limb and then running up a limb fly off and turn a somersault in the air, fall down about half a chain and fly up into the air again. In the morning when I awake you will hear a Minah sing out and after a while a mob of about four comes up, then they start hopping about in the trees, flying at each other and in a little while end up in a fight because one has pecked another too hard.

The Minah lives near our swamps, where there are plenty of trees, such as redgums and mallee saplings. They like warmth and plenty of food for themselves and their young ones.

They choose a tree that is very bushy, that nobody may see their nest. They build them on the thin limbs in case anyone is tempted to climb the tree to get their eggs or young ones. The swamps also supplies them with dry grass which the floods bring along. They take it to their nesting-place and mix it with some horsehair to make it firm, and after they have made it like a cup they line it with wool, and then three cream-coloured eggs are laid, with tawny spots all over them, especially on the larger end. The female sits on them for about two weeks, when she hears the eggs crack and three fluffy little chicks are chirping for food. The parents are kept busy feeding their babies for about three weeks, then their father teaches them how to fly and get their food.

Then father has to teach them to sing too. He makes the little ones sit on a limb, then he hops up in front of them and the lesson begins.

They are noisy creatures. Early in the morning you will hear a Minah sing out "Toowhit! Toowhit! Toowhit!" Presently you will see some more coming to the tree, and while they are hopping around one sings "Rat! Rat! Rat!" and away they fly to another tree, and here they begin to sing something that sounds like "Toowhitoooo! Toowhitoooo!" If anything strange is about you will hear their warning cry of "Rat! Tat! Rat! Rat!" In this way they get any bird friend out of danger. One morning father went down to shoot a duck, and when the Minahs saw him they sang out their warning cry and away the ducks flew.

I notice, too, that birds, dogs, hares, rabbits, and foxes, and even cows and horses will look to see if anything is coming when the Minah gives this call.

The Minah is a cheeky-looking bird. Its back is a dark grey continuing down to the end of the tail, underneath is greyish white, and under the eye is a yellowish-white skin. The end of its tail is tipped white. The wing measures seven inches from back to tip of wing feathers, and about the middle

of the wing are four or five feathers that are tipped with green. From the tip of the beak to the end of tail measures 11 inches. The bill is yellow with a slight curve at the end, and it is very sharp in order to pull off the bark to find its food. Its tongue has a brush at the end, and this enables it to gather all the honey from the flowers, and while it is getting the honey, pollen sticks on this brush and so it fertilizes the next flower it visits. Their legs are yellow with strong sharp claws.

The Minah has a smooth flight, but it shifts its wings quickly and makes it look jerky. It will also soar from tree to tree without any movements of the wing, only lying over the way it wants to turn. When it is darting at a fox it will soar down at a rapid rate, and when it is within an inch of its head snap its beak viciously.

I once watched the Minah feeding. It flew down to the butt of a tree and looked all round it, then it spotted a case moth, it ran up to it, grabbed it and flew off to its nest, and then gave it to one of its babies. Back she came again and found a cocoon on the same tree; she pulled it off, broke it open, and took the grub to her babies as well.

She came back again to get something else, but she saw me and flew up into the tree. I went back about a chain and watched it again. I saw it pull off a bit of loose bark, drop it to the ground, fly down, peck off the insect that was on it and take that to its babies. She never came back again, but flew to a tree near by, filled its beak with water and returned home. Another time when walking along the swamp I found a number of Minahs hanging upside-down taking the honey out of the gum-tree flowers. The Minahs are greedy birds. They drive the plucky little Fantail from a mob of insects that it is eating and eat them themselves.

The Minahs never go away from their native haunts. All winter and summer the Minah plays about the trees eating honey from the flowers and devouring the insects that destroy the trees.

One day a Minah fell into the swamps from a tree; a Murray Magpie flew down and went to his help. He looked very sorrowful, but when his feathers had dried he flew up to the Murray Magpie and called out as if he was thanking him.

The birds around me hopped and played;

Their thoughts I cannot measure;

But the least motion which they made,

It seemed a thrill of pleasure.

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