

RED-TAILED BLACK COCKATOO IN SOUTH-EAST OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA

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The Red-tailed Black Cockatoo (*Calyptrorhynchus banksii*) inhabits most of the scrub country along the South Australian-Victorian border, from Bangham to near the Glenelg River, and flocks of 50 to 100 have been seen on several occasions, but generally they are found in small groups of ten to twenty birds. For many years fairly reliable reports of these cockatoos breeding in the Bangham scrub and similar type country have been received from various sources, but definite proof has been hard to collect. They breed in certain areas just over the Victorian border, where suitable nesting trees are still standing. There are six recent records from the Edenhope district; three during October/November and three for February/March period.

My only positive record this side of the border was on November 16, 1949, when a pair was found nesting in an old dry gum in open forest country, some few miles north of Naracoorte. The nesting hollow was 42 feet from the ground, and the entrance was just large enough for the birds to enter comfortably. The interior of the hollow opened out considerably, and a single young, with bright yellow down, and not more than two days old, was resting on a raised bed of chips and splinters of wood bitten off the inside of the nesting chamber by the parent birds. This platform of chips was slightly saucer shaped, and measured 7 inches across and 2 inches high, and was 3 feet below the entrance.

Whilst the young one was being examined, both male and female settled in a nearby tree, where they remained for some minutes continually sounding their peculiar call and at the same time elevating the feathers on the top of the head. These feathers can be raised and thrown right forward over the beak, but not do appear as a crest in the normal resting position. The yellow spotting about the head, neck and breast of the females seems to be more prominent than in the northern race.

The Red-tailed Black Cockatoos in this area keep mostly to the stringybark scrubs. Their chief food is the unripened seeds of stringybarks, obtained by biting off the small twigs carrying the seed capsules and opening

them while held in the claws. The birds also feed on the seeds of banksias, hakeas, small casuarinas and other native shrubs, particularly after a bush fire has passed over a patch of this type of country. Very rarely, they have been observed on the ground feeding on prickly burrs, and they also bite into dead timber in search of the larva of wood-boring beetles.

During March, 1949, a flock of 300 Black Cockatoos was reported feeding on a freshly burnt piece of country near Naracoorte, and on investigation was found to be comprised of both the Red- and Yellow-tailed (*C. funereus*) species. Owing to the nature of the country an accurate count was not possible, but at least one-third of the birds seen were of the Red-tailed species.

There are still a few tracts of mixed stringybark and gum scrub left where the Red-tailed Black Cockatoo can be seen for most of the year. In the spring of 1959 nearly 100 of these birds were feeding in one particular spot, and just on sun-down used to fly into some tall eucalypts, where they camped at night, and their weird cries when flying in to roost could be heard more than a half-mile away.

Several reports of them breeding in very low hollows in stringybarks have been received, and one grazier told me of a tree where it was possible to stand on the seat of his spring-cart and look into the nesting hollow. On January 25, 1960, a female Red-tailed Black Cockatoo was flushed from a hollow in the top of an old dry stump about 25 feet high, in stringybark timber just over the Victorian border. No attempt was made at this time to examine the hollow. A return visit was made on March 30, 1960, and both birds flew into the tree just on dusk when the female immediately entered the hollow and fed the young bird. This site was again visited on April 24, 1960, and by this time the young one was well grown and nearly fully fledged, but would probably remain in the nest for another three to four weeks. As on previous occasions there was no appearance of the old birds until nearly dark, when they both arrived together. The period of incubation appears to be four weeks, and the

single young one remains in the nest for three months. Even after this lengthy period the parents continue to feed the young for some considerable time after leaving the nest.

With the continued clearing of scrub lands

and consequent destruction of food plants, the Red-tailed Black Cockatoo must eventually be driven from its south-eastern habitat unless it can learn to open pine cones like its Yellow-tailed relative.