

# Castlemaine Naturalist

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#153

## ROSELLAS AND WATTLEBIRDS

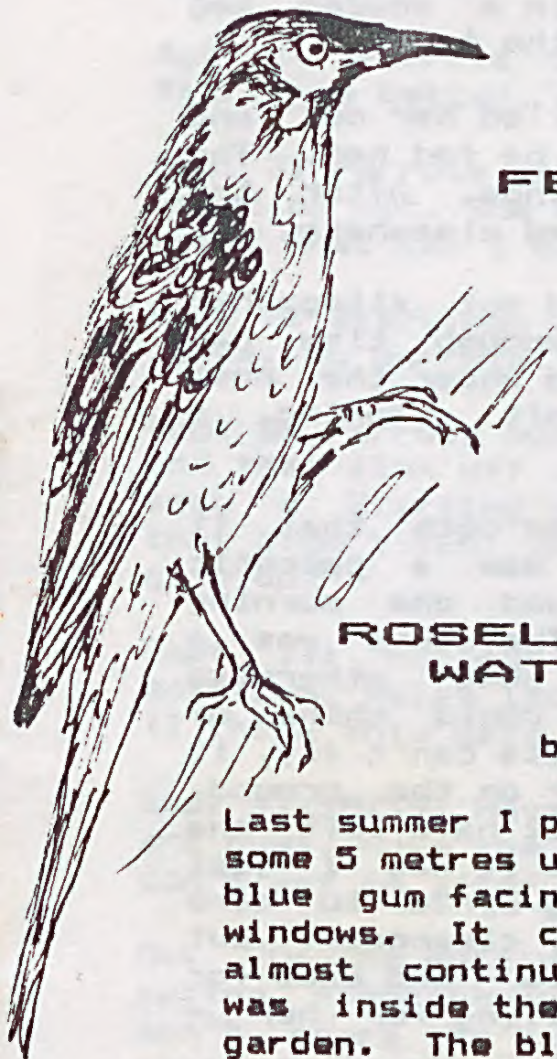
by Sheila Box

Last summer I put a nesting log some 5 metres up the trunk of a blue gum facing my living room windows. It could be watched almost continuously whether I was inside the house or in the garden. The blue gums are only about 12 metres away from the cottage.

It was November and already late for nesting, and except for several visits by a pair of Crimson Rosellas (out of curiosity I think, they spend a lot of time in next door's conifer eating the pine nuts). There appeared to be little interest until, quite close to Christmas, a pair of Eastern Rosellas accepted the accommodation.

The first exuberance of Spring was over, and other birds were already occupied with their own young, so these two had none of the hassle with Starlings, Wattlebirds, Crimson Rosellas, and their own species, prior to nesting, that I describe later.

The tops of the Blue Gums were lopped when she had been in a month, and I worried in case she would desert the nest, but she sat through a day of screeching saws and crashing branches, and didn't emerge until all was quiet again.



On hot days she leant out of the door to cool off, surveying the garden below for an hour or more before withdrawing her head and disappearing inside again. In the evening the pair of them often bathed in a wooden keg filled with water in the paddock behind the trees.

The male came morning and evening and called her out and they flew to a nearby pepper tree where he fed her. The garden beneath was white with her droppings. After the evening visit she flew back and he roosted elsewhere.

She became very scruffy. Her tail moulted out altogether and she began to look moth-eaten. When enough time had elapsed for eggs to have hatched, I stood under the nest and listened, but heard only her soft crooning, a contented and lovely sound.

I had become so deeply involved with them both that it was with dismay and disbelief that I saw a pathetic bundle of bright feathers on the ground one morning between the nest and the pepper tree. The wound was a sharp incision in the throat, the body otherwise untouched. I blamed a cat because I could think of nothing else but it didn't really fit. Cats can't fly, it wasn't a cat-like wound and she was never on the ground. Had I guessed the truth then, I would not have left the nest in the tree for the next season. As it was I just took it down to see if there were young birds to care for, found only two eggs, both infertile, cleaned it out and put it up again hoping the little male - who came for four days morning and evening vainly calling for her - would return with another mate next year.

The following June I put up three extra nests hoping I might lure more than one pair. On July 4 a pair arrived. Soon there were two pairs coming at infrequent intervals examining all the nests, going back to some several times and leaving again. Several days would pass and then they were there again. When two pairs met there was a fight and I realised they would not nest near one another.

One pair came much more often, sometimes the male alone. His wife was young, her head and breast still a mixture of red and green, and it was this pair that eventually settled after she had made exhaustive inspections, rustling about inside a nest for up to 20 minutes, leading me to think she had made her choice, only to emerge and go through it all again in another nest. Sometimes she clung to the outside, pecking the wood to cover the floor with fine dust.

Meanwhile he sat patiently on guard, fluffing out his feathers aggressively and turning all about on his perch.

From July until October 13th, when she made her mind up (and chose last year's nest) my notes tell a story of hope and despair, elation and frustration. Starlings were

the biggest nuisance. The Wattlebirds appeared later from wherever it is that they go in the winter.

#### DIARY EXTRACTS

Aug 4: Parrots here over an hour. Stood up to the Starlings better. Last week they seemed to be giving in.

Sept 3: Parrots came early. A Starling shot into the nest ahead of her. She clung to the side for a while then flew away. What can I do? Shoot the Starlings?

Sept 7: Starlings a nuisance again. In and out of all the nests. No parrots.

Sept 8: Parrots here. She went in for only a few seconds and then flew off with the male following. Earlier I had seen a Starling struggling out with a bit of greenery that didn't fit. Is their mess going to make the parrots give up?

Sept 11: Furious battle with another pair of Eastern Rosellas. Males locked together. Feathers all over patio. (I think this male might be last year's tenant).

Sept 17/18/19: Haven't seen the parrots at all. Starlings are busy. Have the parrots gone? So disappointing if they don't get in after all their early preparation.

Oct 20: The Wattlebirds that come every year are back, mating, fighting one another, and screeching. I hope they don't scare the honeyeaters away. The Eastern Rosellas settled in last week. I don't think she has laid yet as she flies away with him when he makes his last call about 6 p.m.

Oct 27: She is sitting! His last call was 6.30 and she flew out and back in again at 6.45. Young should hatch near the end of November and fly soon after Christmas Day.

Oct 29: Wattlebirds raucous and bossy letting all the world know the trees belong to them.

It was on November 2nd that the first attack took place.

In the evening I was in the summer house when I heard her male call her. As I emerged, she left her nest, and the Wattlebird dived at the same time. There was confusion - a thump as she hit the summerhouse roof, a squawking, a scuffling and she flapped to the stem of an iris and when I approached she struggled to a japonica bush and clung there, shocked and dazed. I got very close because I was on her blind side. The Wattlebirds beak had hit her in the eye which was invisible, the side of her head wet with blood. The male who had called her from a tree next door arrived belatedly and engaged the enemy. Had I not been

there I'm sure his arrival would have been too late to prevent her being finished off on the ground.

I wanted her back into her nest. I waited 10 or 15 minutes hoping she would recover and fly back (the male and the Wattlebird had disappeared), and then went to get a ladder. When I returned she was on her sighted side and she pushed deeper into the japonica and I lost her.

At first light next morning I stood under her nest and all was quiet. Then I heard the familiar clonking sound she made as she re-arranged her eggs.

I tried after that to be around before the male called her. His timing was fairly consistent. I flapped my arms and threw stones to clear the Wattlebirds off. Unlike last year's bird this male came five or six times a day, sometimes she was out for less than 2 minutes, at others half an hour would elapse before she returned. Several times she was barely back in when he called her out again, just for a minute or so. The next door cottage was in the way of my view, so I couldn't solve the riddle of these brief extra sorties.

She was nervous after the attack, putting her head out and looking all ways before taking flight, and her route changed. In the early days before the Wattlebirds were about they had mated and eaten in the blue gums. One evening he had difficulty in getting her back into her nest. He stood on the branch near it, she was high up, and called and called. Finally he lost patience and flew up to her. She came down with him and went in, and he flew home.

Later, when he was feeding her she consistently flew south-east, either to a claret ash next door, or to a eucalypt a little further away. Sometimes they mated there as well. Now she chose different ways, the old way, or north-east, or north-west, but never far away. I could usually hear them chattering. He came to the nest for her now too, instead of calling from a little way off, and he kept above her as they flew. He didn't however, see her right home. She often had to take evasive action as she returned and once was driven to colliding with the branches of a cotoneaster as she swerved to avoid an attack. Then came a few days when for various reasons I could not be around.

One morning I realised he had been calling too long without a response. He had three different calls and she didn't always come out immediately. He tried them all and his chirpiness seemed to diminish. Finally he flew to the dead branch the nest rested on. (I never saw a male bird actually look into a nest, either in a situation like this, or when they were house hunting, either this year or last. It is as though it is a place not to be intruded upon under any circumstances.)

He continued to come for three more days, often battling the same Wattlebird. There was only one pair left in the blue gums now, they having chased their own kind, away too. On the third evening he appeared to be going to roost near the nest which he had never done before. Then the Wattlebird went for him, and I didn't see him again.

There were six eggs in the nest, two of them damaged by her feet. (I used to see her entering so carefully, head down, the red patch under her rump was always my last sight of her.) Four eggs were fertile. I wept into the embryos and my black thoughts wafted away to addle the eggs of all the Wattlebirds everywhere. There is no doubt in my mind that a Wattlebird beak made that sharp lethal incision in the throat of the first parrot. I think that the first pair may have nested elsewhere earlier in the season, and the nest had been destroyed or rifled. It would explain her moulting from such a long double period of sitting, she was killed early in March, and the infertility of the small clutch of eggs.

The nests have all been taken down of course, and a little of the garden's magic has gone with them.

Earlier this afternoon (Jan 13) a pair of Eastern Rosellas came to bathe in the water keg and the Crimson Rosellas from next door fought them. As the Eastern Rosella male broke away the Wattlebird sailed in to investigate this racket in "his" trees.

## **BARKERS CREEK CHRISTMAS/ NEW YEAR OBSERVATIONS**

by Wyn Palmer

- \*A Black Duck with 11 ducklings, on a water hole near Cat Dam Track.
- \*Seven or eight young Brush-tailed Phascogales left their nest log.
- \*Another sighting of the Tawny Frogmouth family on our block.
- \*A juvenile Brown Goshawk calling from a tree, also on our block.
- \*A pair of Leaden Flycatchers, feeding young fledglings, cuddled up together on a branch and just out of the nest, near Dinny's Track.
- \*Many birds now returning returning to our water dishes, including a Speckled Warbler, A Red Capped Robin and also, unusually here, a juvenile Eastern Rosella.
- \*A dead young Crimson Rosella with a deformed or damaged beak - from starvation.
- \*A great mass of Common Brown Butterflies in a Yellow Box tree, in flower, feeding on the nectar for several weeks.
- \*The Red Wattlebirds had a second nest, only one young.
- \*Brown-headed Honeyeaters still collecting wool in the New Year.
- \*A small mob of Grey Kangaroos on the road outside our

place - the first we have seen since the pines to our south were felled nearly ten years ago.

## OCEAN GROVE CAMPOUT

To be held at "Ingamells Camp and Conference Centre,"  
Hodgson Street, Ocean Grove.

### Friday 9 March

- 4.00 pm. Early arrivals at Conference Centre
- 7.30 pm. Robert Burn "Shells and Nudibranches"

### Saturday 10th March

- 7.30 am. Breakfast
- 8.30 am. Leave for Queenscliff Pier: 9.00 am. All day trip to Mud Island
- 8.30 am. Leave for Southside Beach Car Park: 9.00 am. All day walk to Bells Beach/Ironbark Basin/Pt Addis.
- 9.00 am. Leave for Anglesea Hall carpark: 10.00 am. Morning and afternoon bush walk with "Angair"
- 8.30 am. Leave for Swan Bay Yacht Club: 9.00 am Ecology of Swan Bay Excursion: 12.00 Lunch at Princess Park: 1.00 pm. Wader Watching or assemble for snorkel excursion.
- 6.00 pm. Evening Meal at "Ingamells"
- 7.00 pm. W.V.F.N.C.A. quarterly meeting
- 8.00 pm. Dr Kerry Black "Tidal Effects on the Victorian Coastline".

### Sunday 11th March

- 7.30 am. Breakfast
- 8.30 am. Leave for Queenscliff Pier: 9.00 All day excursion to Mud Island.
- 8.30 am. Leave for Pt Addis car park: 9.30 All day Beach/Cliff Top walk to Pt Addis, Eumerella, Anglesea.
- 9.00 am. Leave for Iron Bark Basin car park: 10.00 am Morning walk (easy grade): 1.30 Meet at Anglesea Hall carpark for easy afternoon walk with "Angair"
- 8.45 am. Leave for full day excursion to Edwards Point flora and Fauna reserve, and environs.
- 6.00 pm. Evening meal at "Ingamells"
- 7.00 pm. VFNCA annual meeting
- 8.00 pm. Evening presentation by VFNCA member clubs.

### Monday 12th March

- 7.00 am. Breakfast, pack up, clean up.
- 8.30 am. Leave for Queenscliff: 9.00 Queenscliff pier for half-day bay cruise.
- 10.00 am Ocean Grove Nature Reserve walk.
- 9.45 am. Leave for Barwon Heads Estuary for morning walk.
- 8.30 am. or Free morning.
- 1.30 pm. Barbecue lunch at Ocean Grove Nature Reserve.
- 3.00 pm. Depart for Home.

## OCEAN GROVE CAMPOUT COSTS

Excursions/accommodation should be booked. Get booking sheet from the Secretary.

### Ingamells:

Frid evening meal to Monday lunch \$59.00 each, (Primary school children \$55.00 each, under 6 \$24.00.)  
Frid evening meal to Sun evening meal \$47 (\$43, \$24)  
Frid supper - Sun evening meal \$41 (\$37, \$21)  
Sat evening meal - Mon lunch \$41 (\$37, \$21)  
Sat evening meal - Sun evening meal \$27 (\$25, \$14)  
Evening meals only. Adults & children over 6 \$6.00 each, under 6 \$3.00 each  
Mud Island excursion: \$10.00 (\$5 Primary children & under)  
Half Day Bay Cruise: \$9.00 (\$4.00)  
Snorkel excursion: \$25 per person (wet suits needed)  
Hire of Wet Suit: \$15.00; snorkel & weights only \$5.

## NOTES FOR JANUARY

JAPANESE SNIPE on the Castlemaine Gold Links.  
SATIN FLYCATCHERS. A pair at Loddon Falls on 25 January.

## TULLAROOP BIRD LIST

Two members of the club identified 38 species of birds on an afternoon's trip to Tullaroop on January 6th. Only one species of honeyeater was noticed. Some were flying over, and collecting insects, from the water. When so engaged, they were being harassed by the swallows. The Reed Warblers were active in the bulrushes near the island, and spent some of their time at the edge of the water. At least three darters were noticed. They seem to be more common than a few years ago.

The full list of birds is given below.

Babbler, White-browed	Lapwing, Masked
Chough, White-winged	Magpie
Coot	Martin, Fairy
Cormorant, Large Black	Parrot, Red-rumped
Cormorant, Little Pied	Pelican
Cuckoo-shrike, Black faced	Pigeon, Crested
Darter	Pipit
Duck, Black	Plover, Black-fronted
Duck, Mountain (Shelduck)	Raven, Australian
Duck, Musk	Reed-warbler, Clamorous
Duck, Wood	Rosella, Eastern
Galah	Starling
Grebe, Great Crested	Swallow, Welcome
Grebe, Hoary Headed	Swan
Gull, Silver	Teal, Grey
Heron, White-faced	Thornbill, Yellow-tailed
Honeyeater, White plumed	Treecreeper, Brown
Kingfisher, Sacred	Wagtail, Willy
Kookaburra	Wren, Supberb Blue

# CASTLEMAINE F.N.C. PROGRAM

Fri 9 Feb. GUNBARREL HIGHWAY with Nicolette Hooper. High School at 8.00 p.m. This is the annual meeting.

Sat 10 Feb. TULLAROOP DAM. Bird watching. Take your picnic tea. Leave SEC, Mostyn St at 3.00 p.m. sharp.

Thur 22 Feb. Business Meeting. 7.30 p.m. at 38 Campbell St.

Fri 9 - Mon 12 Mar. GEELONG/OCEAN GROVE CAMPOUT. Combined Western Victoria Field Naturalists Clubs Association and Victorian Field Naturalists Clubs Association campout. See separate program on page 6 and 7.

Fri 9 Mar. BUTTERFLIES. Talk by Gary Sobey. 8.00 pm at the High School.

Sat 10 Mar. To be arranged.

Wed 14 Mar. READING THE LAND BY MAJOR MITCHELL'S PARTY. Bendigo F.N.C. meeting, Dept Agriculture at Epsom. 7.30 pm. Leave 27 Doveton at 7.00 pm sharp.

Sun 18 Mar. MOUNTAIN PEPPER on Mt Alexander. Excursion with Bendigo F.N.C. to look for Mountain Pepper. S.E.C., Mostyn St at 10.15 or Koala Park at 10.45

Sun 25 Mar. BIRDING EXCURSION TO MALDON with Bendigo F.N.C. bird group. To be confirmed.

Fri 13 April - no meeting. Good Friday.

Sat 14 April. MINERAL SPRINGS TOUR. 10.00 a.m. at 27 Doveton Street. Take lunch.

Fri 31 Aug-Sun 2 Sept. WYPERFIELD CAMPOUT. W.V.F.N.C.A. campout at Wyperfield, organised by Maryborough F.N.C.

Fri 14 Sept. WALKING IN THE WILDERNESS - SW TASMANIA with Pat Bingham.

Mon 17 Sept. DARGILE FOREST. Excursion with Bird Observers Club - weekday excursion.

Oct 26-28 GRAMPIANS. WVFNCA campout at Churches of Christ Centre, Halls Gap

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Meetings on the second Friday of each month at Castlemaine High School at 8.00 p.m.

Business meetings on the fourth Thursday of each month at 38 Campbell St. All members invited.

Visitors are invited to attend the Club's sessions.

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Castlemaine Field Naturalists Club Inc  
P.O. Box 324, Castlemaine 3450