

Nesting of Grey Butcherbirds

H. J. de S. DISNEY

In September 1965 my neighbours were feeding regularly with meat a pair of Grey Butcherbirds *Cracticus torquatus*, which were nesting in their garden. A trap was baited with meat and the first adult captured was banded and dyed with picric acid for identification. The other adult was found to be one I had netted and banded in my own garden in 1963. The young were subsequently banded in the nest. The notes reported here are on the nesting of this pair in 1965 and 1966.

1965 Season

25 July—Nest building commenced about 3.5 metres from ground in banksia bush under tall trees on edge of a gully.

21 August—Building of the nest proceeded slowly and steadily up to this date when the nest was still unlined.

22-27 August—Building proceeded more rapidly. Courtship behaviour of one bird, as indicated by fluttering of wings, observed.

28, 29 August—Three eggs found in nest at 15:00 28 August, and a fourth at 15:00 on 29 August.

19 September—First egg hatched between 08:30 and 11:15; warm day.

20 September—Second egg hatched between 02:30 and 12:00, third between 12:00 and 14:00; warm day.

21-24 September—Fourth egg did not hatch and disappeared; cool weather.

24-30 September—Chicks changed in colour from pink to grey, and were fed largish pieces of food including a small lizard.

1-9 October—Feathers emerged, and adults commenced to sit on branch next to nest.

10-12 October—Chicks and adults banded.

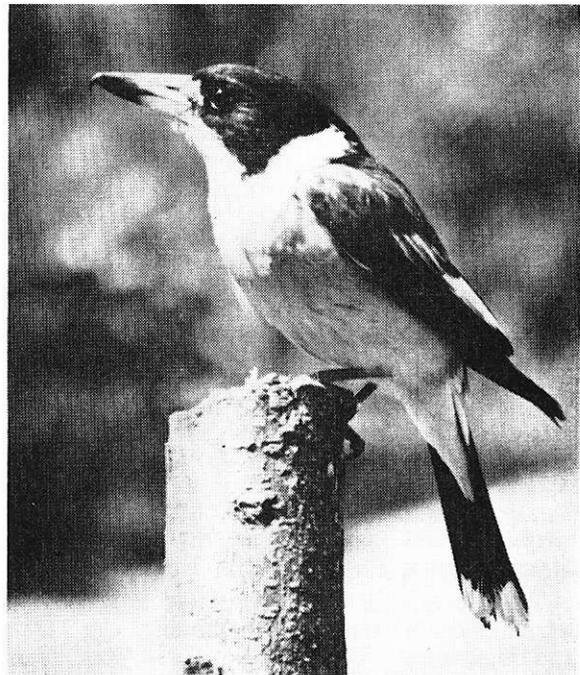
13-15 October—Chicks sat on edge of nest.

16 October—One chick left nest and perched on nearby twig.

18 October—Chick uttered food begging calls and normal appearing excreta found directly under nest for first time; heavy rain.

19 October—Chicks left nest by 10:30; rain stopped.

22 October—Chicks and parents seen in trees 45 metres from nest. The size of the bodies of chicks appeared to be half to three-quarters that of adults, the tails were short and beaks wide.



• Grey Butcherbird—the adult banded in 1963 (see text); the band is barely visible on the right leg.

Photo: M. Fitzpatrick

1966 Season

7-10 July—Nest building commenced and proceeded slowly until first week of August.

1-18 August—Nest building.

19 August—When on nest and in trees one adult uttered a different call which was similar to that of a young bird. First egg was laid between 10:00 and 16:00.

21 August—Second egg laid before 09:00. Adult again uttered "new" call at 09:30.

22 August—Third egg laid between 10:30 and 15:45. "Female" sat on nest and uttered call like that of young bird and "male" flew to her and placed food in beak.

27 August—Fourth egg present.

14 September—One egg hatched by 11:00.

15 September—Two more eggs hatched by 13:00.

16 September—Fourth egg hatched.

13 October—One chick left nest to sit on nearby branch at 07:00, three chicks left nest with parents at 08:00.

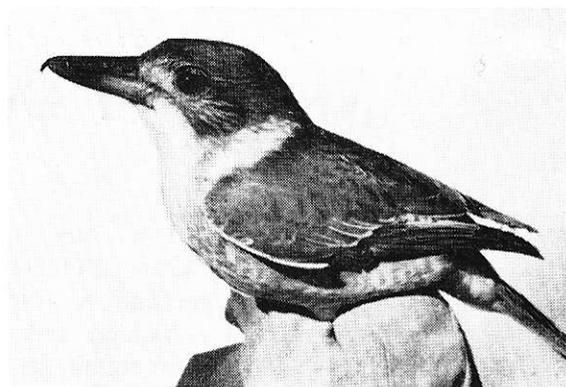
Summary

In both years this pair of Butcherbirds commenced nest building in the same tree in July. Building proceeded slowly and steadily for a month, and progressed rapidly the week before egg laying in mid to late August. The incubation period was 24-26 days and only the "female" was seen to incubate eggs. Both parents fed the chicks which left the nest after about 19 days.

Comments on Behaviour

Three days before nest building began in 1965 a fierce fight involving four Butcherbirds took place at the future nest site. The next day the resident pair chased away a Kookaburra *Dacelo gigas*, and no birds other than Magpie-Larks *Grallina cyanoleuca* and Noisy Miners *Myzantha melanocephala*, remained in the vicinity. The Miners regularly attacked the Butcherbirds.

The changes in the calls of the Butcherbirds were noticeable during nest building, egg laying and incubation. The melodious call was heard during nest building, one bird commencing and the other answering. When nest building became rapid during the week before egg laying one bird, thought to be the female, fluttered wings and feathers in a "courtship" behaviour, and



• Grey Butcherbird (immature).

Photo: S. G. Lane

commenced to make calls similar to those of a young bird. This bird, which was longer, slither in build with darker grey breast feathers, and had a longer bill, was the only bird seen to sit on the nest. When it made these juvenile-type calls on the nest, it was fed by the other bird. These calls ceased when the eggs hatched, as did the "melodious duet". The early morning call continued. Another call was heard during the first week after hatching when the "female" put her head low into the nest and made a soft, sweet-sounding call. During chick rearing "warning-off" calls were heard rather than songs.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Mr and Mrs Fitzpatrick for permission to report their notes which demonstrate that much may be learnt from watching banded birds in a garden and recording the observations made. I also wish to thank Mr M. D. Murray for his assistance in the preparation of these notes.

H. J. de S. Disney,
12 Yallambee Road,
Berowra, N.S.W.

Bird in the Hand Booklet

Copies of this booklet are available for \$4.00 including postage.

Remittances should be addressed to the Secretary, The Bird Banders' Association of Australia, P.O. Box A313, Sydney South, 2000.