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NOTES ON THE NESTING-SITE OF *GERYGONE*

PERSONATA, Gould.

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(Plate lvii.)

Among the animal kingdom, birds, owing usually to their non-combative habits, and lack of powers of retaliation, appear to be highly endowed with instinct enabling them to resort to many stratagems and devices to secure protection, either from an enemy when threatened by danger, or during the usually anxious period of the breeding season. Birds that deposit their eggs on the grassy sward, or nearly bare earth, would appear to stand more in need of a protector than any others, but strange as it may seem, the bare and exposed situation in which the eggs are laid, affords them the very best protection. Take, for instance, the eggs of the Southern Stone Plover (*Burhinus grallarius*) and the Spur-winged Plover (*Lobivanellus lobatus*), how closely in colour do they resemble their surroundings; or the eggs of the Black-faced Dotterel (*Egialitis melanops*), the surrounding pebbles on the margin, or in the dried up bed of a creek or river. The eggs too of the Pratincole (*Stiltia isabella*), so frequently deposited on a sun-baked plain, and as the wheel marks show sometimes right in the centre of the track, how hard they are to distinguish even in their apparently unprotected state. Again the eggs of the Red-capped Dotterel (*Egialitis ruficapilla*) deposited on sandy dunes and sea-beaches, with only a few small pieces of gravel to keep them from rolling away, how closely do they assimilate to their surroundings, and how very difficult they are to discover by the untrained eye. The actions of the birds alone are frequently the only means of discovering them, by their feigning a broken wing or leg. This is where instinct is at fault, for to anyone but a novice it is the most fatal mistake the birds could make, and is a sure indication that either eggs or young are near at hand. Some birds, however, to me appear to be endowed with a certain amount of reasoning powers, for why will the Red-kneed Dotterel (*Erythrogonys cinctus*) when

laying her eggs near the margins of a swamp often slightly smear them with mud; the Australian Dotterel (*Peltohyas australis*) when leaving her eggs cover them with a layer of thin sticks, two or three inches in length; and the Black-backed Magpie (*Gymnorhina tibicen*) when leaving the nest cover her eggs with a layer of wool and rabbit fur!¹ Many species, too, when a Cuckoo deposits an egg in their nest, if it contains no eggs of their own, covers up the Cuckoo's egg with a layer of lining material, sufficiently thick to prevent incubation.

Of the many stratagems used by birds to secure immunity from harm, probably no more ingenious device is utilized than that of the Masked Bush Warbler (*Gerygone personata*), who nearly always builds its hooded dome-shaped nest close to a wasp's nest, of which fuller details may be found in "Nests and Eggs of Australian Birds."² The White-throated Bush Warbler, too, or Native Canary (*Gerygone albigularis*), a migratory species visiting South-eastern Australia during the spring and summer months, and at present common in the vicinity of Sydney, often builds its nest in trees affected with scale, and thickly infested with ants, while yet another species, the Large-billed Bush Warbler (*Gerygone magnirostris*), inhabiting Northern and North-eastern Australia, more frequently builds a long pendant nest on a vine or branch overhanging water, and closely resembling a mass of debris, left by the receding water after the creeks or rivers have been in flood. Hence the name of "Flood-bird" locally applied to this species in the neighbourhood of Cooktown and the Bloomfield River District, North-eastern Queensland.

My colleague, Mr. Allan R. McCulloch, who was collecting in 1907 at Somerset, Cape York, and on some of the adjacent islets, returned with a number of birds in different stages of plumage, in some instances from the young in down to the adult, also some nests, and eggs and photographs of eggs, sea-birds and young, *in situ*, of which the latter will form figures for future Parts of the "Nest and Egg Catalogue" now being prepared for the press. Among the photographs is a very interesting one of a deserted nest of *Gerygone personata* built in close proximity to a wasp's nest, which is reproduced (Plate lvii.). Mr. McCulloch has also kindly supplied me with the following notes relating to the taking of it.

¹ North.—Austr. Mus. Sp. Cat., I. Nests and Eggs of Austr. Birds, i., 1900, p. 6.

² North.—Austr. Mus. Sp. Cat., I. Nests and Eggs of Austr. Birds, i., 1903, p. 202.

“On the 10th October, 1907, Mr. Bertie Jardine and myself were walking through the dense scrub near Somerset, Cape York, on the lookout for birds' nests, I having my camera ready for use. In a particularly quiet and shady part, Mr. Jardine pointed out a nest of *Gerygone personata* hanging on some low bushes about three feet from the ground, and placed only eight or nine feet off the track. As is usual with this bird it was hung close by a wasp's nest, and surrounded by a tangle of vines, some of them very prickly. Both the birds' and wasps' nests were deserted, though there were a few of the insects flying around, and we had little difficulty therefore in securing a photograph.”

Gerygone personata, in building its nest close to an occupied wasp's nest, may be regarded as living with comparative safety from human enemies, unless one chooses to disregard what we are taught in our early school primers—“Do not irritate wasps.”

EXPLANATION OF PLATE LVII.

Nest of Masked Bush-warbler (*Gerygone personata*, Gould) built in close proximity to a wasp's nest.



A. R. McCULLOCH, photo.
Austr. Mus.