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INHERITANCE OF TERRITORY IN RUFOUS WHISTLERS AND NOTES ON BEGGING IN COURTSHIP BY BOTH SEXES

By Mrs. RICA ERICKSON, "Fairlea," Bolgart.

This is the subsequent history of the unmated, adult male Rufous Whistler (*Pachycephala rufiventris*) which entered "Fairlea" timbers on March 8, 1949. Notes on the arrival of this bird and the early history of the two young birds, male and female, with which he associated, were published in the *Western Australian Naturalist*, vol. 2, 1949, p. 10. Apart from the story of this bird winning and losing two mates, other points of interest arise: firstly, what becomes of young whistlers in sparsely populated areas?; and secondly, that both male and female whistlers may use begging and baby calls in their courtship.

TERRITORY

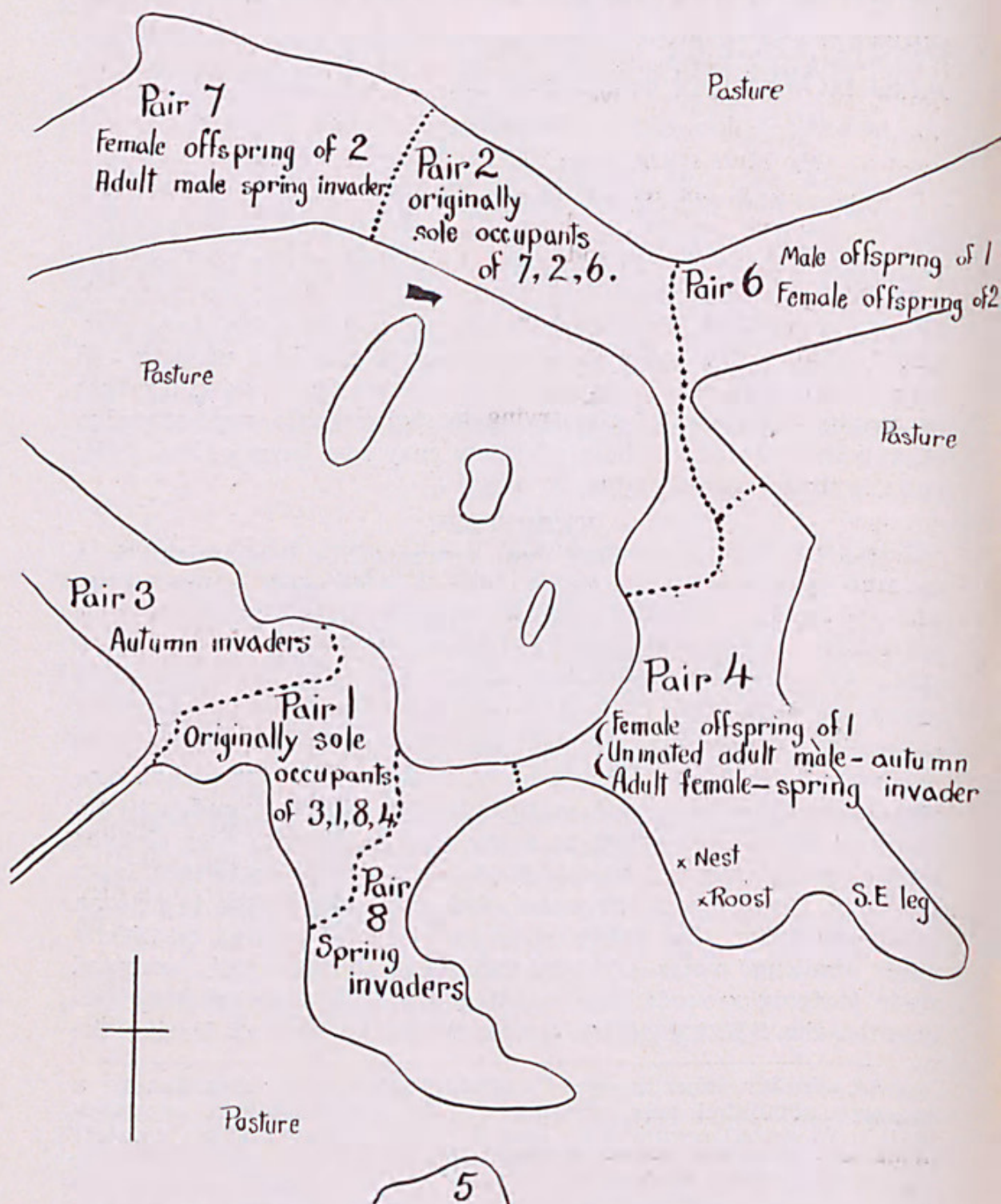
The part of the timbers most concerned in this account is a roughly H-shaped section about 80 acres, occupied early in 1949 by only one pair of adult whistlers (Pair 1) with their two young. As already related, although the parent birds foraged freely over these 80 acres before the young were efficient on the wing, when the young birds grew older they were taken daily to forage in one particular portion, east of the nest. The young birds were thus accustomed to living in that part of their parents' territory which they were later to defend as their own.* When paired autumn invaders forced the parents to define their boundaries they claimed only 8 acres (approximately) in the heart of their former large territory. By this time the young birds were old enough to lead an independent life. The young male had already learned to whistle adult challenge notes and the two young birds readily accepted their foraging grounds as a roosting site. The unmated male frequented the S.E. leg of the timber where he roosted. During the

*A similar inheritance of territory by young whistlers in a sparsely populated area occurred in the creek timbers (approximately 80 acres) occupied by Pair 2. Their offspring (two females) were taught to forage at the west end of the creek. One of these young females paired with the young male (6) when he claimed the east end later in the season. The other young female remained in her territory and attracted an adult male. I had no time to study her later history and do not know if she continued to stay there with the male throughout the breeding season. I have no record of these two young females defending their territory but the adult Male 7 was aided a little by the one which remained.

day all three birds joined company to forage in both their areas, shown on the map jointly as 4. Soon it was noticed that though the two males were most often found together the young female preferred to forage alone in the S.E. corner.

YOUNG MALE DOMINANT

The young male appeared to be dominant in this trio. He led the party when they defended their territory against a pair of adult



Map of "Fairlea" timbers showing the disposition of the Rufous Whistlers during early spring 1949. At the beginning of 1949 the whole of the H-shaped portion was occupied by Pair 1, and the whole of the "brook timbers" (those extending E-W across the top of the map) were occupied by Pair 2.

invaders in mid-May and appeared to initiate and win most of the disputes which occasionally arose between them. For although they foraged amicably together as a rule it was soon evident that the young male resented the adult's desire to win the young female for his own company.

RIVALRY OVER FEMALE

The two young birds roosted together in the best shelter of the territory—in a loose cluster of jam trees and wandoo saplings. During April and May, at sunrise, the adult male would leave his roost in the S.E. corner to join the young birds and during the day would call a single plaintive note, "sweet," that seemed to attract the female to his side. If she did respond thus the young male recalled her by whistling "sweet" also. On the other hand, occasionally when the young female called "sweet," both the males came to her. The female, though loyal to her brother, was not averse to the adult's attentions and in time responded by flying closely past him and perching nearby as though to attract his attention.

The first dispute observed between the adult and the young male was at sunrise, April 25. There was a heavy mist and whistlers in adjacent territories were very vocal. The young male, followed by the female, seemed to be trying to whistle the adult male out of their territory.

On the second occasion, May 3, the weather was dull with a dry east wind. The adult seemed to be the aggressor and the dispute seemed to be over the young female. The two males fluttered at each other with challenging whistles. The young female, who was watching nearby, during a pause in the conflict flew close to the adult male attracting him to follow her and the action broke off.

A third encounter was witnessed at midday, May 9, a warm sunny day. There was a din of whistling in some isolated wandoos on the boundary. Four birds were actively engaged in whistling, bowing and chasing, for the male parent had joined the conflict. It lasted for many minutes and ended in the unmated male remaining alone on the boundary, apparently the loser, without mate or territory. The young male gradually retired to his roosting centre calling the female to follow, a summons which she was slower to obey than usual. Yet next day the three were again foraging together as though nothing had happened. From this day until the pairing issue was settled, the two males (although they were not whistling much, calling a single "sweet" only about once an hour) continued to be keen rivals for the female's company. While the pairing was in the balance each of the two males made furtive excursions into the brook timbers, territory defended strongly by Pair 2, both virile birds.

YOUNG MALE'S LOSS OF AUTHORITY

The two young birds continued to roost together till mid-May. By May 22 the adult bird finally won the young female to roosting

near him in the exposed timber of the S.E. corner. The young male was alone at his better-sheltered site and on that morning foraged apart also. He adopted the company of a Red-capped Robin (*Petroica goodenovii*) and fed low in shrubs instead of in the tree tops as usual. During afternoons the males fed together while the female fed apart as usual. Finally the young female drove her brother away. She had come swiftly in answer to a call from one of the males who were together. She instantly approached the adult male, fluttered her wings and begged with baby cheepings. Then she suddenly flew scolding at the young male to drive him away before she continued.

It was a day of double defeat for the young male. He left the couple and was feeding quietly when hearing a call of "sue" he casually answered, "swt, swt, swt." The result was startling. Male 2 from the brook timbers came like a flash, invading the young bird's territory. He fluffed out his feathers, appeared huge and called aggressively "sweet sue." At the first momentary vision the young male fled precipitately to the shelter of his roost tree and there he remained silent. He remained very subdued for several days. The outcome was unexpected. When missed from his customary roost one morning, he was found battling spiritedly against Pair 2 from whom he wrested a good territory in the brook timbers during a conflict which continued for many months.

THE ADULT MALE 4 IN AUTHORITY

The adult male now assumed the duties of whistling the territory challenges. Hitherto he had been comparatively silent and Territory 4 had been the quietest on "Fairlea." The newly-paired birds moved in to occupy the young male's former roost. There on awakening in the morning they responded eagerly to each other's early morning calls, the male following the female persistently until she crouched beside him with fluttering wings making strange churring calls. The pairing of these birds seemed to be finally settled, yet at the end of July the young female left him. Presumably she joined a group of wandering whistlers which for a week had roosted unchallenged in the group of trees that Pair 4 favoured. The new party comprised a young bird (with whom the young female was friendly), an old female and an adult male with unusual plumage (almost white underneath with a dark grey neckband). After the party passed on it was seen that the old female remained with Male 4. Her plumage was so different from the young female's that there was no mistaking their identities.

COURTSHIP OF OLD FEMALE

This new mate was very aloof and came to the male's side only at sundown to roost with him. The male's reaction was seen one cold sunny morning, August 23. He was heard whistling strangely and continuously. As I approached the scene two birds flew away furtively. They were guessed to be the old female and a Golden Bronze Cuckoo (one of the birds called this cuckoo's notes soon after leaving the spot). At this time of the year these cuckoos are

often close companions of female whistlers). The male whistler, however, continued his performance without noticing me. For half an hour or more he repeated a certain round of movements. First he perched on a low jam tree and whistled "swt joey." Then he flew to a lattice of fallen boughs where he hopped from one particular twig to another, fluffing his feathers, bowing deeply, and "cheep-cheeping" like a baby bird softly all the while. There were regular interspersions of a loudly whistled "swt" or "swt, swt," or "swt-jcey." Then he flew to a jam tree and then back to his first perch again before performing once more on the lattice of fallen timber. I could not stay to see the end, but at midday found the male still cheeping like a begging baby.* This time he was high in a wandoo and faint cheeping answers to his persistent notes were heard twice. Suddenly the female who was hidden in the foliage turned on the male, scolding harshly and trying to drive him away. Seeing me, she fled, and he followed, still begging and calling the cheeping notes.

The next day this pair of whistlers began a month-long conflict with a pair of spring invaders (8) which finally established themselves between Pair 1 and Pair 4.

NESTING FAILURE

Early in October, Male 4 was seen snuggling among the top-most twigs of a tree testing out a nest site. On October 11 his song was more emotional than usual. He was found guarding his mate as she tugged at long fibres among the grasses for her nest. The site chosen was most unsuitable, about 30-40 feet up in a tall wandoo. She succeeded in hatching at least one chick which the male was seen to feed on the day before a gale emptied the nest.

The parents showed little concern over the loss of the young, nor did the female build another nest though she may have done so had she stayed. After a fortnight or more of close companionship she left the male who once more roosted alone (November 22). From then till the end of December he whistled a ceaseless repetition of short phrases—the "lonely" song of a deserted male. The female could not have gone far, possibly to a patch of timber (5) which had formerly been occupied by a female and where a female once more was found battling against Pair 8 who foraged there also. Wherever the female retired to, she returned to Male 4 on December 3 to assist him in a territory dispute with Pair 8, and again on December 25 to court him. Yet she was not again seen in Territory 4 and Male 4 always roosted alone. His "lonely" song quietened during January and he seemed unperturbed by his mateless condition until autumn 1950 when a young female was present on the outskirts of his territory. Despite his frequent calling of "swt" she did not stay. During the spring of 1950 a young female was seen inside his territory but there were no pairing activities. Later in

*This action by a male whistler of begging and cheeping like a baby bird while following a desired mate was observed also when Male 6 wooed his mate.

the season an adult female spent several days with him and appeared to respond favourably to his ardent courtship, but even she did not remain. His failure on each occasion was not due to lack of virility in proclaiming territory, for throughout 1950 he was as assiduous as the other resident whistlers in territorial song. That he is the only unmated male in "Fairlea" timbers may be due to the lack of a good sheltered nesting site in his territory. While now, in December, the annual courtship by his whistler neighbours of their faithful partners has culminated in nesting and rearing of young, Male 4 is still whistling the monotonous "lonely" song.

A VISIT TO THE MONTE BELLO ISLANDS

By KEITH SHEARD, Nedlands.

During a survey carried out in north-west waters in August 1950 by the C.S.I.R.O., Division of Fisheries, using the crayfish processing vessel *Villaret*, the islands of the Monte Bello group were visited for a short period. The demands of the survey allowed only a limited time to be spent on the islands but the following brief notes are presented for those who are interested in the natural history of the north-west.

The group of islands covers an area of about 75 square miles, and are about 40 miles north-west of the mouth of the Fortescue River, the nearest point on the coast, and about 85 miles north-north-east of Onslow. They lie within an area of low and irregular rainfall (about 8 in.) with long periods of drought. Most of the rain falls in heavy showers during the summer "willi willis" when evaporation is very high. The vegetation is very similar to that of the adjacent mainland and is chiefly a spinifex complex with *Myoporum*, *Cassia*, *Olearia* and *Chenopodium*. Trailing *Ipomea* is common and forms a tangle of stems underfoot. Buffel grass, which is spreading rapidly on the mainland and even crowding out the Spinifex (*Triodia*) in favourable localities, is also well established at all the islands of the group.

The chief islands are Hermite, about 6 miles long and two miles wide, fairly rocky with limestones and a coarse sandstone, and heavily indented with shallow lagoon-like bays which dry out at low tides; and Trimouille Island composed chiefly of sand dunes and limestone ridges. This island is about 3 miles long and barely a mile wide. In addition, small islands, each of a few acres in extent, are very numerous.

Water supplies are a problem. There is a small cement catchment at the side of a small hill inside the entrance of the southernmost lagoon of Hermite Island. This would be serviceable after rain. Two wells have been dug to about 15 feet through sandstone several hundred yards south-westerly of these. They were partly filled with blown sand by the time we visited them. Fairly good water is reported to be present at high tide in these wells. Good water is also reported at a depth of 10 to 20 feet at the base of the largest sandhill at the northerly end of Trimouille Island.



Erickson, Rica. 1950. "Inheritance of Territory in Rufous Whistlers and Notes on Begging in Courtship by Both Sexes." *The Western Australian Naturalist* 2(7), 145–150.

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