

Discovery and Early History and Notes on the Lyre-Bird (*Menura superba*).

BY H. V. EDWARDS, R.A.O.U., BEGA, N.S.W.

ACCORDING to Collins ("Account of the English Colony of New South Wales"), the Lyre-Bird (*Menura superba*) was accidentally discovered in January, 1798, by "a party of Irishmen" allowed by Governor King to go out in search of land suited for a separate settlement for themselves. These amateur explorers, who were unsuccessful in their quest, penetrated to the Blue Mountains, where they obtained and brought back to the settlement on Port Jackson specimens of a "new variety of the Bird-of-Paradise," which was subsequently named the "Lyre-tail"—*Menura superba*. Collins gives an accurate figure of this avian treasure trove from the "pencil of a capital artist." Then apparently arose the difficulty of classification. Temminck began by placing the bird among the Thrushes, between the forms *Cinclus* and *Pitta*—an arrangement followed pretty closely by Cuvier. Vieillot, however, differed, placing the Lyre-tail near the group *Columba*; while Illiger, in his "Prodromus," placed it among the Rasores, as also did Vigors, who included the bird in his family of *Coraciidæ*. The new bird was also referred to occasionally as "Lyre-Pheasant," or "Pheasant of the Woods," and classed with the Hornbills. Swainson, however, in his "Classification of Birds," made the *Menura* the first genus of his group *Megapodiinæ*, or "Great-foots."

As regards the habits of the Lyre-Bird, early observers arrived at some strange conclusions. Collins says:—"They (the Lyre-Birds) sing for two hours in the morning, beginning from the time when they quit the valley for the hills"; while Chief Justice Field, of Gibraltar, who was long resident in New Holland, asserted that the *Menura* was in "all its habits a Gallinaceous bird, living on the ground in small societies, and being very fond of rolling in the dust." At a much later time, Bennett, in his "Wanderings in New South Wales," &c., 1832-34, records that tails from the male Lyre-Birds were sold in Sydney as curios—first at low prices, and then, as the birds grew scarce through constant destruction, at from 20s. to 50s. the pair. He then makes a most remarkable statement. "The nest of the Lyre-Bird," he says, "is formed merely of dried grass or dried leaves scraped together; the female lays from twelve to sixteen eggs, of a white colour, with a few scattered blue spots." The single egg of the Lyre-Bird is, of course, blotched with chocolate-brown on a ground of bluish-grey, while the huge nest is cleverly constructed from sticks, twigs, mosses, bark, &c., and shaped like that of a Blue Wren or Superb Warbler. From an accidental resemblance, too, between the European Wren and its nest and the Lyre-Bird and nest, the latter has been classed by some superficial writers as a "Giant Wren." The breeding-time of the Lyre-Bird, according to Bennett, is December, "when all the wild animals in the colony (New South Wales) are produced."

Even in these early days (about 1834) Bennett had cause to lament the rapid disappearance from settled parts of "the kangaroo, Emu, and Lyre-Pheasant," while the writer (in the "Penny Cyclopædia," 1839) to whom I am indebted for much of the above information "hopes that some spirited individual will not suffer the Lyre-tail to become extinct, but will bestir himself to import these magnificent birds into our country (England), where they would form a striking addition to our aviaries." This beneficent hope was, unfortunately, doomed never to be fulfilled—for obvious reasons.

Although the Lyre-Bird (*Menura superba*) is tending to some extent to place its huge nest in elevated situations—such as tall stumps, tree-ferns, &c., it still breeds in many instances on or close to the ground. The two nests, recently photographed, were built—one in the heart of dense ferns and the other in perfectly open forest recently devastated by a bush-fire. One nest was well concealed and the other totally destitute of cover. In both instances, however, the egg and the loud-voiced chick were quite at the mercy of prowling foxes. In another instance the nest was built at the butt of a tree-fern, again quite destitute of cover, and, from its great size, a most conspicuous object. Many other birds, at times, exhibit the same want of caution in the selection of a nesting-site. Thus, the common Magpie (Crow-Shrike) has been known to build its conspicuous nest on a heap of road-metal.

Some Bird Notes from Bega.

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THE White-browed Wood-Swallows arrived here about the middle of this month (October), as they do pretty regularly. Not very long after their advent the big brown chafer beetles began to emerge from the ground. These beetles now annually defoliate the finest gum-trees in many districts. In early years on Monaro, N.S.W., I only remember them as appearing sparsely on gum suckers and small gums—chiefly cabbage gum, white gum, and box. Is the reduction in the number of insectivorous birds responsible for the increase in this pest?

Quail have also put in an appearance. I found one (of the Stubble variety, *Coturnix pectoralis*) impaled by the neck on the top (barb) wire of a fence. It had flown directly into a barb, and was just beginning to decompose when found.

The Cormorants are arriving from their breeding-grounds contemporaneously with the stirring of mullet fry in the ponds and rivers and the awakening of aquatic life generally.

The Oriole (*Oriolus viridis*) arrived in August. These birds were rather troublesome in orchards last summer. I also saw them feeding on the purple-black berries of a species of laurel. The



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