

## BREAKING OF SNAIL SHELLS BY SONG THRUSHES

Writing under the title "Song Thrushes Feeding on Snails" Nye (1971) referred to the suggestion made by Morris (1954) that snail hammering by Song Thrushes (*Turdus philomelos*) may have been derived from pecking and shaking movements, or beak wiping. In January 1950 while working in my garden in Palmerston North, I saw two Song Thrushes alight on a sun-scorched part of my lawn almost devoid of grass. One, believed to be a parent, carried a soft, dark coloured, fleshy object in its bill. At that stage it would have been impossible to identify this object but, from its size and general appearance, I assumed it to be the remains of a snail minus its shell. The two birds took up a position, vis-a-vis, about a foot apart and about twenty feet from me. The parent bird took the initiative in all movements into position.

Once in position, both birds appeared to be watching one another; then the parent made a downward, sideways movement of its head and bill identical with that associated with shell breaking. This was done three or four times before the parent dropped the object on the ground and quickly walked (ran would probably be a more accurate description) backwards about ten to twelve inches. Both birds then stood and gazed for a short time at the object.

Eventually, and somewhat tentatively, the young bird hopped over and stood for a few seconds with its bill pointed at, and close-poised above, the object which it then picked up. Following another pause of some seconds duration the young bird went through a head and bill movement which could be described as only faintly resembling the shell-breaking movement of a mature thrush. Following another half-hearted attempt it dropped the object and moved away. The parent bird then picked up the object and, once more assuming the vis-a-vis position, went through the shell-breaking movement again.

This routine was repeated several times, each bird in its turn, over a period of perhaps five minutes before something startled them and they flew over the fence and out of sight. The parent bird which, at the time, had possession, carried the object in its bill.

If I am correct in my belief that what I witnessed were the first lessons in shell breaking being given by a parent to its offspring, then at least some song thrushes acquire the technique by emulating their parent.

## LITERATURE CITED

- MORRIS, D. 1954. The snail-eating behaviour of Thrushes and Blackbirds. *British Birds* XLVII (2): 33-49, text-figs 1-4, tables 1-2, pls 9-11.
- NYE, P. A. 1971. Song Thrushes feeding on mud snails. *Notornis* 18 (3): 211-214, figs 1-2.

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