

NOTORNIS

VOLUME SEVEN NUMBER FOUR: APRIL NINETEEN FIFTY-SEVEN

NESTING OF THE YELLOW-BREASTED TIT

(*Petroica m. macrocephala*)

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On 6/10/55, early in the morning, I saw a female Yellow-breasted Tit flying to and fro in the verandah of my home near Wakefield and trying to begin a nest on a ledge under the corner of the verandah ceiling. Every time she flew away from the ledge the wind caused by her wings blew down to the floor some of her building materials, moss and fine straws bound together with cobwebs. She persisted with very little success, so after an hour or so I tacked up a small stick and a piece of cardboard to give her something to hold her materials. From then on building went on apace and in two days the nest was almost finished; she completed it on the third morning. Probably two days would have been enough if she had not had so much time wasted that first morning.

The male did not carry building material, but came occasionally and examined the nest with a critical eye, apparently deciding what was needed next, and would go away by himself, but returning after a while to lead the hen off in some new direction whence she would return with material and work from there for a while. The colour of the breast of the male approached the yellow of pale factory-made butter. The female had a few yellow feathers too, giving her breast a slight tinge of cream. Some of the fine straw and dry grass she used was pulled with much fluttering from the bottom of an abandoned blackbird's nest (this year's) in a wistaria just outside the verandah. The cobwebs were collected from about the verandah and eaves of the house, the moss from a distance away under the trees.

Egg laying must have begun on the day the nest was completed. We contrived a way to see into the nest by standing on a step below and holding a mirror over the nest. Five pale eggs (slightly pink, I think) with brown specks were laid within as many days and the brooding began immediately. The male bird fed the female by collecting caterpillars or insects in its beak and then flying into the trees close to the house, where it would whistle a thin little song. The female would immediately leave the nest and fly to the tree. Only once did I actually see her meet her mate. I heard the snap of her beak as she took the food, but several times I saw him with something in his beak — once some wriggling green caterpillars — and heard him give his little whistle.

After she had been sitting nearly two weeks something must have alarmed the hen — dogs barking at a cow which came round the house, I think — and she was away from the nest for more than six hours, but I saw her on the nest in the evening, by the light shining through the pantry window. We thought that would be the end of her hopes, but by the end of the third week she hatched out four of the eggs. During the last week she seemed to leave the nest for longer periods and we thought she was giving up hope of hatching them, but perhaps she was not needed so constantly, or she may have been feeding herself for the next stage.

After the nestlings were hatched we could not count them very well as they looked in the mirror like a few slugs with a little pinkness showing here and

there. At first the male bird seemed to do most of the hunting. When he flew to the nest the hen would fly off. He would dip his head twice into the nest before flying away, she would return after a few minutes, dip her head down once and settle down over the chicks until her mate would come again. During the second week she was helping more with the feeding and would warm the chicks up after being off the nest for about ten minutes. He would feed them twice before she returned. The food during this time seemed to be small and looked fluffy, perhaps sandflies or other small insects; but this week was the third, and the youngsters filled the nest so that the mother was not needed for warmth and the food had progressed to the ordinary earthworm size or a slater. At this stage most of the hunting seems to be on the ground. I frequently see the parents pulling worms out of the lawn just as the thrushes do. When I throw a worm on the path the male bird sees it from his perch on the telephone wires and flying straight down will jerk it up and down until he breaks it in two pieces — then away he will fly to the nest with one piece and return for the rest. The female too when she has had a worm on the lawn will work away at it — probably breaking it in pieces.

On 16/11/55 I had a look at the nest after dark to find that the mother was not on the nest — there would not be room for her as the chicks fill the nest. They are growing their feathers now and are obviously two males with their black heads and light breast feathers and two females with brown heads. Last week I observed that before flying away from the nest the parents would stay a minute watching the little ones and often, but not every time, would pick up something white in the beak and fly quickly away. At first I thought it might be broken shells they were clearing away, but soon realized it was the droppings of the young birds, and yesterday I saw that the young ones were now attempting to attend to their sanitary arrangements themselves. A nestling appeared to heave itself on to the backs of the others and then on to the edge of the nest till it contrived to push its tail over the edge and so get rid of its own droppings. The parents are still clearing up occasionally, but there are a lot of white splotches on the step below.

Every time one of the parents arrives with food we know all about it with the chorus of squeaking from the young. They are fluttering a little now and trying their wings. I am very afraid of what will happen when they begin to fly, as we have two cats! One cat was sitting eyeing the nest this morning so that I had to smack him and take him away every time I noticed him. At last he gave up in disgust.

17/11/55. When alarmed near the nest, the parents fly low and perch low apparently to draw attention away from their young.

It does not seem possible that such small eggs should take three weeks to hatch, but I am almost certain of this. Building started on a Thursday and laying on a Saturday and I would not be surprised if they do not fly by the end of the third week. They are practising this morning on the edge of the nest.

18/11/55. A boy who had been staying with us overnight was trying to see into the nest. I handed him the mirror we had been using and told him to use it quietly. Instead, he shot his arm up quickly and the four young birds 'exploded' from the nest; two flying into his face; then, turning, flew to a tree just outside the verandah; and the other two flew the length of the verandah, about 18 feet, before going outside and flying back to the same tree. In the excitement I did not notice what happened to them, but imagine that the parents piloted them away to safety. We did not see them near the house again. They did not nest in the same place this year, 1956, but late in August I saw the female collecting cobwebs along the wall of the house and flying out towards some trees.

Summary: October 6th. Nest begun. 8th. Nest finished. ? First egg. 12th. Five eggs. Incubation begun. 29th. Four eggs hatched. Incubation period, therefore, about seventeen days. November 18th. Four young flew. Fledging period of twenty days.