

SHORT NOTE

Stitchbirds copulate front to front

Reports of Stitchbird (*Notiomystis cincta*) breeding behaviour are sparse; what little is in the literature is mainly about nest site selection and defence by males and single males attempting to copulate with paired females (G. Rasch, pers. comm.).

The following account of Stitchbird mating behaviour is derived from my observations of seven different breeding pairs of Stitchbirds (six different males) during five breeding seasons at the National Wildlife Centre. The mating ritual begins with the male flying closely behind the female in rapid circuits of the aviary. Several circuits are completed high in the aviary, and then the birds descend through the vegetation, maintaining their speed. After one bird (which one remains unknown due to difficulties in observation through the vegetation) emits a single low call, both birds come to a stop on the ground. I often saw a "gannet-like" throat and bill rubbing display, both before attempts by the male to roll the female over on to her back and after unsuccessful attempts. The male mounts the female front to front while she lies prone on her back with her wings outstretched, and mating occurs in conjunction with a distinctive series of loud repeated calls. The male dismounts and flies off to an adjacent low branch to preen, as does the female after righting herself. I have not seen Stitchbirds copulating in the "standard" position of birds, although a frenzied attempt was observed on one occasion when a new female was introduced to a male who was in peak breeding condition (having recently lost his nesting mate).

Stitchbirds mating in the front to front position were also observed by L. Cooke at the National Wildlife Centre; he reported that an unfamiliar call attracted his attention, and that "the male was clasping the female's beak with his" during copulation (National Wildlife Centre internal files).

I am not aware of any other avian species which copulates in a front to front position. The act of mating on the ground, the accompanying loud mating calls, and the apparent oblivion of the birds on occasion to surrounding activity could make them vulnerable to predation when mating, not only by introduced mammals but also by Wekas (*Gallirallus australis*).

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