

Large birds as unusual prey items for butcherbirds

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This note describes Pied Butcherbird *Cracticus nigrogularis* predation on bird species of unusual size and compares that with the behaviour of the Grey Butcherbird *Cracticus torquatus*.

OBSERVATIONS

On 28 September 2021 Mr Les Sharpe of Martinsville, on the eastern edge of the Watagans, reported to me a persistent Pied Butcherbird attack on a Peaceful Dove *Geopelia placida* (LS pers. comm.). The attack was interrupted and there was no opportunity for the butcherbird to subsequently feed on the dove which died shortly after being taken into care.

The following day, Les reported that a Pied Butcherbird persistently attacked and killed a Bar-shouldered Dove *G. humeralis*, later returning to apparently feed briefly on the intestines of the bird (LS pers. comm.). This was possibly the same bird observed the previous day as the observation was at the same location, but there can be no positive proof.

Feeding took place on the ground and there was no attempt to move the prey. A second butcherbird joined the first some minutes later. It did not feed, but it turned the dead bird over.

BACKGROUND

Pied Butcherbird

Higgins *et al.* (2006, "HANZAB"), described food for the species as invertebrates (mainly insects) and small vertebrates (frogs, lizards, snakes, small rodents and birds) and occasionally fruit, seeds and nectar. There are records of the species occasionally feeding on road-killed carcasses and the species is also recorded, as are other species such as ibis, as a "friend of the farmer" for sometimes eating pests such as grasshoppers and rodents.

In relation to specific bird predation, nestlings and fledglings of several species were noted as being taken, but in terms of adult bird predation, only smaller passerine species such as House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*, Silvereye *Zosterops lateralis* and Double-barred Finch *Taeniopygia bichenovii* were described, with the largest species mentioned being an adult Willie Wagtail *Rhipidura leucophrys*. The latter apparently was not taken for food - it had been harassing the butcherbird that had just taken three recently-fledged chicks, and it was killed during its defence of the nest and young.

There are also HANZAB reports of Pied Butcherbirds hunting in association with an Australian Hobby *Falco longipennis* and attempting to catch Common Starlings *Sturnus vulgaris* and smaller honeyeaters when flushed; but success with that technique is not recorded.

David Stuart from west of Dungog reported that Pied Butcherbirds frequently were taking Crested Pigeon *Ocyphaps lophotes* young from the nest just prior to fledging (DS pers. comm.). Though a substantial prey item, the butcherbird did not appear to eat much of the carcasses, just picking holes in their backs.

In HANZAB there are no records of a Pied Butcherbird taking larger adult birds of the size of a Bar-shouldered Dove.

Agonistic behaviour for the species is described in terms of aggressive pursuit and mobbing of actual or perceived predators and aggressive territorial and nest defence, but there is no record of this behaviour resulting in bird fatalities.

Grey Butcherbird

For this closely-related species, the record is quite specific about the many prey species taken which were of quite considerable size. A similar diet range is recorded as for *C. nigrogularis*, and David

Stuart has recorded them taking a just-fledged Willie Wagtail chick which was 2-3 days out of the nest (DS pers. comm.).

As well as a similar nest-robbing diet and a range of small adult passerines, Grey Butcherbird are recorded as also taking Brown Quail *Coturnix ypsilophora*, Laughing Dove *Spilopelia senegalensis*, Mulga Parrot *Psephotellus varius*, Bassian Thrush *Zoothera lunulata* and Common Starling.

David Clark from Box Hill in Victoria has reported Grey Butcherbirds taking Spotted Dove *S. chinensis* and Common Blackbird *Turdus merula* (DC pers. comm.). He noted that given the size of those prey species it was a drawn-out affair until the prey was dispatched. In his observations, the prey was generally positioned on its back with the butcherbird feeding on the breast. He also reported a recent Victoria Birders account of a Grey Butcherbird persistently attacking and killing an adult Dusky Woodswallow *Artamus cyanopterus* on the ground before carrying it away.

DISCUSSION

For prey species such as Bar-shouldered and Spotted Dove there seems no doubt that they were targeted for food by the two butcherbird species.

It seems most unlikely that they would initiate nest or territory defensive behaviours or be mistaken for predators, and in these observations, feeding activity followed the attack. The effort required would be considerable given the broadly equivalent sizes and body weights of predator and prey and success required repeated and persistent attack as recorded.

It seems that both species may have similar behaviours and at times target large prey, but that fewer records are available for *C. nigrogularis*.

An additional observation from the reports is how little of these larger prey items appears to have been consumed, an interesting behaviour given the extreme effort required to make the kill.

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REFERENCES

Higgins, P.J., Peter, J.M. and Cowling, S.J. (2006). 'Handbook of Australian, New Zealand & Antarctic Birds Volume 7 Boatbill to Starlings'. (Oxford University Press: Melbourne.)