

An observation of agonistic behaviour by a Dollarbird

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Around 7.15 pm on the evening of 15 October 2021, I observed an agonistic display by a Dollarbird *Eurystomus orientalis* towards a Masked Lapwing *Vanellus miles* in the grounds of Shoal Bay primary school (32° 43' 43"S, 152° 10' 24"E). The Dollarbird was executing a number of diving swoops towards a single Masked Lapwing, foraging in the school grounds. The Dollarbird was launching its attacks from a lower branch of a tall Smooth-barked Apple *Angophora costata*. The branch was about five metres above the ground. The attacks were around 10 seconds apart and continued for about two minutes. As it swooped, the Dollarbird uttered a single drawn-out scolding 'kek' call. This call is described by Marchant *et al.* (1999) as an alarm call. On ceasing its attacks, the Dollarbird alighted on a branch in the top of the tree. The Masked Lapwing called repeatedly during the attacks while facing off its attacker, but made no effort to leave. After the attacks ceased, the lapwing flew off unhurriedly to another part of the school grounds, calling as it departed. The Dollarbird subsequently flew from the tree and I did not see it again around the school grounds that evening.

The reasons for the Dollarbird's behaviour could include breeding territory defence, nestling protection, feeding resource defence or a combination of these. The species defends its breeding territory vigorously, excluding other Dollarbirds, and they are commonly seen escorting other avian intruders out of their territory (Marchant *et al.* 1999). They have been observed excluding many larger species including Pied Currawong *Strepera graculina* and Laughing Kookaburra *Dacelo novaeguineae* (Marchant *et al.* 1999). The size of Dollarbird territories has not been reported.

I have walked past the school several times a week for the past 15 years, usually around dusk. The Masked Lapwing is part of a 'resident' family that is usually observed in the grounds or on nearby lawns and footpaths. They breed each year in the school grounds. The Dollarbird is the first I have encountered at this location. The school grounds are

surrounded by tall Smooth-barked Apple and Blackbutt *Eucalyptus pilularis* both of which would provide excellent vantage points for perching, or from which to conduct foraging forays. They could also potentially provide nesting sites.

Dollarbirds nest in natural tree hollows, usually at height. They arrive late-September to early-October, breed from October to January and chicks fledge from December to February (Marchant *et al.* 1999). Adult birds depart the Hunter Region in late February and most juvenile birds depart in early March (Newman 2013). An inspection of the tree, which was around 20-25 m tall, did not identify any potential nesting hollows. I have not observed this species previously in the school grounds and have not seen it there subsequently. There are no indications that the birds nested elsewhere in the school grounds or established a territory there. Dollarbirds are known to use the same nest-tree or a nearby site each year and some territories have been known to be occupied annually for at least 10 years (Marchant *et al.* 1999). My observation was made in mid-October, which is at the start of the breeding season, so it is possible the bird was undertaking an exploratory investigation of a possible new nest location in the school grounds. However, I did not see a second Dollarbird in the area.

Dollarbirds feed almost exclusively on flying insects. They search for food from a conspicuous perch and capture it by 'hawking', before returning to the same perch. Their food consists of large flying insects such as cicadas, beetles and moths. They are most active in late afternoon and early evening when crepuscular insects become active (Marchant *et al.* 1999). My observation was within this foraging window and the bird may have been feeding from the tree prior to the Masked Lapwing's arrival. However, the Masked Lapwing, which forages for invertebrates on the ground, should not have been a competitor for the Dollarbird's foraging resource.

Agonistic encounters between a Dollarbird and two separate Brown Goshawk *Accipiter fasciatus* at Wingen were described by Newling (2013), on two mornings in January 2013. Dollarbirds were resident in that area at that time, although there were no reports of their having a nest or feeding dependent young. The reason for the attack appeared to be entirely territorial. The goshawks were reported to have possibly been nesting nearby.

This agonistic behaviour in the Shoal Bay school grounds did not appear to be driven by breeding territory defence, nestling protection or feeding resource defence. This suggests that, in some instances, Dollarbird's agonistic behaviour toward other avian species may be instinctive, regardless of territorial bounds or other drivers.

REFERENCES

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