

Unrecorded behaviour of Jacky Winter

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The following observations were made while conducting a bird survey in an area of grassland with a few shrubs in Curracabundi National Park (31°40'54"S, 151°44'31"E) northwest of Gloucester in NSW on 23 May 2010. Three Jacky Winters *Microeca fascinans* were foraging nearby, occasionally perching on the tops of tussocks. When I started making "pishing" sounds to attract wrens, two of the Jacky Winters immediately responded by flying side by side directly at me with their wings outstretched and held horizontal to the ground making a pointed-tip wing profile. Both birds approached me at eye level, peeling off at the last minute. This was repeated at least twice, in each case in response to "pishing" noises. A second observer, Terry Hardwick, was approximately 25m away when the first attack occurred, but had come quite close when the two birds flew at me the final time. They did not attack Terry. Before the final attack all three Jacky Winters congregated and perched in one of the shrubs.

There is no mention of this behavior in the Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds (Higgins & Peter 2002: 582), although this source states "both members of a pair swooped at observer handling nestlings". The observation in this note was not made at a nest and was outside the normal breeding season (August to January) of the Jacky Winter (Higgins & Peter 2002). In May the third bird would not be expected to be a dependent juvenile, which are fed for only 10 to 15 days after fledging (Keast 1994). On this occasion the aggressive response to a human intruder does not appear to be related to the protection of a nest or fledglings and its purpose is unclear.

On 15 June 2010 there were 18 Jacky Winters foraging as four groups in open pasture on the *Yaraandoo* property at Duns Creek (32°38'04"S, 151°39'25"E). I "pished" all four of these groups and each one responded with some, up to three at one time, of the birds flying at me. There was considerable variation in the ferocity of the attack and it did not involve the synchronized approach by a pair of birds flying parallel to the ground at eye height as experienced at Curracabundi National Park. In several instances birds swooped down at me. Differences in the flight trajectory were probably associated with the elevation of the birds when disturbed, some from fence posts, others from trees. Again the birds making the most violent approach flew at my eyes peeling off at the last minute. Clearly I triggered a normal response of the Jacky Winter to disturbance, but probably seldom experienced by bird watchers because it is unusual to "pish" in open country. The interesting question is why "pishing" provokes this response? Is there a natural equivalent such as the begging calls of a young cuckoo which precipitates mobbing behaviour?

REFERENCES

- Higgins, P.J. and Peter, J.M. (Eds). (2002). 'Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds, Volume 6: Pardalotes to shrike-thrushes'. (Oxford University Press: Melbourne, pp. 577-590.)
- Keast, A. (1994). The annual cycle in a vocalization context: a comparison of the Eastern Yellow Robin *Eopsaltria australis* and Jacky Winter *Microeca leucophaea*. *Emu* **94**: 230-238.