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WONDERFUL WOODSWALLOWS

John Blyth

Black-faced Woodswallow at nest. Photo: Babs and Bert Wells/CALM

BIRDS do not have to be rare or difficult to see to be interesting! The six Australian species of woodswallows all occur in Western Australia, with two, the Black-faced (*Artamus cinereus*) and Dusky (*A. cyanopterus*), common and conspicuous in south-western agricultural areas. These two are slightly larger and heavier looking than the very common Welcome Swallow, have similar levels of aerial skills and have a charm all their own.

Woodswallows are not related to true swallows, nor, despite having brush-tipped tongues, do they appear to be closely related to honeyeaters. There is increasing evidence that their closest relatives are butcherbirds, currawongs and the Australian Magpie, and current classifications puts them all together in the family Artamidae.

Remarkably, they differ from their closest relatives, and from all other passerines ('songbirds' or 'perching birds'), in lacking a preen gland, a modified sebaceous gland at the base of the tail, that produces a 'feather restorer', an oily, water resistant secretion with many qualities helping to maintain the feathers in healthy condition. The maintenance of strong and healthy feathers is vitally important in all flighted birds, especially such aerial specialists as the woodswallows, and a large proportion of each day is spent preening the feathers. In woodswallows feather maintenance is assisted by powder-down, rather like talcum powder, instead of oil from the preen gland. The powder-down is produced by the breakdown of the tips of special feathers on the breast and back, and is spread around all feathers during preening. This contributes to the soft, non-glossy appearance of their plumage, a characteristic shared with the common and widespread Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike (*Coracina novaehollandiae*) and some of its relatives. These songbirds also produce powder-down, but unlike the woodswallows, have retained the preen gland as well.

The brush-tipped tongue indicates that the ancestral woodswallow is likely to have fed heavily on pollen and nectar, but this does not appear to be an important food source for the two species common in the southwest. Like all Woodswallows, the Black-faced and Dusky are superb aerialists and they feed mainly on flying insects, taken while on the wing, sometimes hundreds of metres above the ground. Woodswallows soar and glide to an extent unknown in most other songbirds.

There is little difference between the sexes in either the Black-faced or Dusky Woodswallow. The two species may occur together around the edges of woodlands and open forests and can be difficult to identify, especially when flying, or perched, silhouetted, against the sky. They are about the same size and perch and fly in a similar manner. Both species also have the habit of swinging their tail vigorously from side to side, fanning it out while they do so, thereby highlighting the large white corners at the end of the tail. However, reasonable views allow the dark, dusky brown underparts of the Dusky to be separated from the much paler fawny-grey of the Black-faced. The small but well-marked face mask of the Black-faced is obvious with better views, as is the long white leading edge of the wing on the Dusky Woodswallow.

Birds in juvenile plumage (the first full set of feathers replacing the down of chicks) of both species are very different in appearance from the adults, being mottled and streaked in off-white on a largely brown background (no doubt providing camouflage during the very vulnerable period before and immediately after fledging). However, even at this stage the Dusky can be identified from the Black-faced by the white leading edge to the wing and a darker throat.

The Black-faced Woodswallow is common and conspicuous

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throughout the wheatbelt, where it sits on power lines, fences and dead trees, from which perches it soars and swoops in search of it's flying prey. It is absent only from the wetter parts of the southern, eastern and northern coasts, but is most characteristic of arid and semi-arid Australia. In general it favours dryer and more open vegetation than the Dusky Woodswallow, which is largely a bird of open forest and woodland, including well grown mallee.

Like the Australian Magpie discussed by Ian Rowley in the April 2001 Western Wildlife, Black-faced Woodswallows have coped well with the changes wrought by agriculture and have expanded their range to the south and west around the wheatbelt. Open farmland with scattered trees is similar in structure to the savannah grasslands in which they occur throughout inland Australia, and, because of the artificial enrichment of agricultural land, there is usually no shortage of their main prey, flying insects.

By contrast, the Dusky Woodswallow has declined markedly in the southwest, as much of its main habitat, the open forest, woodlands and tall mallee of better soils, have been cleared for agriculture. From my experience this species appears to need substantial areas, tens perhaps hundreds of hectares, of the right habitat to maintain a population.

Southwestern populations of both Black-faced and Dusky Woodswallows have been thought until recently to be entirely sedentary, moving little from their breeding area. This seems to be true for the Black-faced Woodswallow which even in the arid zone is essentially sedentary, although outside the breeding season flocks form and may become locally nomadic. However, recent detailed analysis by Ron Johnstone of the WA Museum has shown that the southwestern population of Dusky

Dusky Woodswallow. Photo: Babs and Bert Wells/CALM

Black-faced Woodswallow. Photo: Babs and Bert Wells/CALM

Woodswallows is at least partly migratory. Birds leave the colder and wetter parts of the south-west in autumn/winter and fly northwards, sometimes in flocks of several hundred, as far as the Murchison and Gascoyne Rivers. They return to the southern parts of their range, where breeding occurs, in spring.

In the southwest both Black-faced and Dusky Woodswallows live in small family parties, and breeding occurs mainly in the period from August to December. In the arid zone the Black-faced Woodswallow will breed in almost any month depending on rainfall.

All woodswallows are very gregarious birds, and have an expanded family system probably similar to that described by Ian Rowley for magpies but much less well studied. They also roost together in family or larger groups, and this results in two related habits that I find very endearing. The first of these, apparently exhibited by all Woodswallows, is their clustering in tight masses to roost. This behaviour is most developed in the Dusky Woodswallow, and up to 100 birds have been seen, on the trunks or larger branches of trees, clinging to each other and to the

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tree, looking more like bats than birds. This behaviour may occur during the day if the sky clouds over or the temperature drops, and it is thought to be a mechanism for limiting heat loss.

The second habit, also seen very clearly in Dusky Woodswallows, is for a group of up to ten or so birds to perch on a bare horizontal branch, all huddled together in a line. If one bird near the centre finds the pressure too much and flies out, the space is immediately filled by all the rest of the birds moving closer. In many cases, the deserter soon appears to regret its decision, and attempts to squeeze back into the line. Birds on each end of the row also appear to think that their position is less desirable and continually flutter up and attempt to infiltrate the middle of the row, presumably so that they can have both sides kept warm at the same time!

The two southwestern species of woodswallows build a broad, rather flimsy, bowl-shaped nest of fairly light twigs, usually rather rough on the outside, and both members of the pair take part in nest-building. The nest of the Dusky Woodswallow is often placed in a quite solid fork in branches or trunks of trees or behind stiff but projecting pieces of bark, up to 10 metres from the ground. Black-faced Woodswallows are more likely to place their nest in thicker bushes closer to the ground, and both species have been known to nest in broken stumps or even on top of fence posts.

Both species lay three to four eggs, which are incubated, by both parents, for about 15 days before the chicks hatch. Fledging usually takes between 16 to 20 days, during which time both parents, and often some young birds from the previous brood, feed the young. Like many Australian songbirds, woodswallows will frequently nest and lay again if the first clutch or brood is lost reasonably early in the breeding season. Occasionally two broods may be reared successfully in one breeding season. Those breeding pairs assisted by adult young fledged in the previous year are more likely than unassisted pairs to be able to raise two broods in the one year.

If you are lucky enough to have one or both species of the local woodswallows on your property, not only will they act as natural controllers of outbreaks of some insects, but they are a delight to watch. They are both quite tolerant of human presence and both species have commonly been recorded breeding around homesteads where the habitat is suitable.

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BUSH DETECTIVE

Spot the bird!

Some animals have wonderful camouflage, can you spot the bird in this jam tree? Turn to p 19 for a close-up.