

## The Jarnadup bristlebird eggs - who dunnit? Allan Burbidge

In the H.L. White collection in the Museum of Victoria, there is a collection of two bristlebird eggs from Jarnadup, near Manjimup, Western Australia, collected by James Stephens in 1919. It was thought, with some controversy, that the eggs were from a Western Bristlebird.

More recently, measurements of many bristlebird eggs and consideration of the description of the nest (see *South Coast Threatened Birds Newsletter* No 9, page 2, 2005) showed that the eggs were definitely Rufous Bristlebird eggs. This led to the conclusion that this clutch represented the only known collection of eggs of the now extinct western subspecies of the Rufous Bristlebird.

However, re-examination of the eggs by Nick Kolichis, who has extensive and detailed knowledge of the eggs of Australian birds, and further consideration of the case, has revealed that this conclusion may have been premature.

In colour, pattern and shape the eggs are very similar to collec-

tions from Victorian Rufous Bristlebirds, and almost identical to a 1921 collection by H.A. Purcell from near Anglesea. Interestingly, the eggs in the Anglesea clutch are also small for Rufous Bristlebirds, and almost identical to the Jarnadup eggs.

The Jarnadup clutch apparently was collected by James Stephens, but only one other known collection of eggs has been attributed to him. He was, therefore, probably inexperienced at collecting and preparing eggs for museum collections. An inexperienced collector would use two holes to blow the egg – one at each end.

However, the Jarnadup eggs were blown using only a single hole in each egg, indicating this was done by an experienced and competent collector. In addition, the set marks and holes match closely those of the Purcell collection from Anglesea. Taken together, these facts suggest that the Jarnadup eggs may have been collected by an experienced collector in the An-

glesea area of Victoria, and it is even possible that they were laid by the same female as laid Purcell's 1921 collection.

Recent re-examination of the collecting slips by Rory O'Brien at the Museum of Victoria has also shown that there is some minor confusion in the labels of the bristlebird eggs.

It is therefore possible that (i) there was a mistake made during the original documentation of the collection, (ii) a mistake was made during transcription of data, (iii) an unknown party intentionally falsified the collection data in order to attract a greater reward for a rare collection or (iv) the original collection was actually from Jarnadup in Western Australia but someone exchanged the eggs for the more commonly collected Victorian Rufous Bristlebird eggs. Given the confusion on the data labels, it is likely that an honest mistake has been made.

Nevertheless, given the extreme rarity of collections of clutches of the Western Bristlebird, and the intense and competitive interest in egg collecting a century ago, it is also possible that dishonesty may have come to play. It seems likely that the Jarnadup clutch is an example of a mistake, honest or otherwise.

We will probably never know the full story in relation to the Jarnadup eggs, but the story highlights the importance of careful observation, recording and communication of data, particularly in relation to threatened species, where the opportunity to collect data is often limited.



The Jarnadup bristlebird eggs. Photo courtesy Museum of Victoria.