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A DISPLAY OF THE SPANGLED DRONGO *Dicrurus hottentottus*

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Behaviour of lesser known Australian birds is often better documented than that of more common species. In Brisbane, Queensland, the Spangled Drongo *Dicrurus hottentottus* is considered a local resident and also a common species. Its movements are generally regarded as well known. Reader's Digest (1986) indicate that the species is "nomadic and part-migratory in the east", saying that the birds display close to the nest, and described a pre-copulatory display performed by both sexes near the nest.

In September 1988 a pair, accompanied occasionally by a third bird, constructed a standard suspended nest in an Ironbark *Eucalyptus* cf. *paniculata* at Toowong, a western suburb of Brisbane. The nest site was at the end of a branch some 15 m above ground level. The birds had previously nested in the immediate vicinity for at least two years. Actual nest construction was not observed, but a nest watched by one of us (NWL) while under construction at Mount Nebo was being built by two adults. We did not

ascertain whether eggs were laid in the Toowong nest although one adult was seen sitting on the nest on a few occasions. We also noted the close attendance of some nest predators, the Pied Butcherbird *Craicicus nigrogularis* and Pied Currawong *Strepera graculina*.

We maintained observations over the ensuing two months when it could be anticipated that, if breeding had been successful, young birds would be visible either being fed by their parents or near the nest. On no occasion during the period were young observed. This apparently unsuccessful nesting attempt was due in all probability to human interference. Immediately prior to nest construction, limbs and leaves were lopped cutting a swathe through the local trees, presumably to enhance the view of a number of adjoining apartment units. This opened the nest site to potential predation.

On 28 October 1988, at 1745 hrs, a single bird was heard giving a distinctive song, consisting of five or six single notes uttered in series. After a

brief interlude, the songster appeared, flying over the roof of a neighbouring cottage. It moved above roof level (10–14 m) in a westerly direction. Both wings were raised about 45 degrees above the body, which was held almost vertically. The flight ceased its forward momentum, the wings were continued to be held in an outstretched position above the body, which was now dropping forward. With the tail arched well over the body and its head pointed earthwards, the bird commenced to drop vertically and with some rapidity. The calling ceased when the bird was within 3 m of the ground. The bird then flew off with its normal pattern of flight. After alighting in a nearby tree for less than a minute, it flew away. The display appeared to last only a few seconds and it was within 100 m of its nesting tree.

Banfield (1908) briefly described a similar display flight by a bird on Dunk Island, Queensland. His description has not been referred to, nor have similar displays been reported by other observers. The Toowong bird continued displaying frequently until mid-December 1988, after which we were both absent for two weeks. On our return in late December the display flights had ceased. Each display was similar to the display described above. We did not confirm the number of individuals participating in the display.

There was no fixed time for the display flights, which were recorded at any time from 0430 hrs until 1700 hrs, each lasting for only a few seconds. Pre-flight displays were not observed. Flights were recorded as frequently as 10 minutes apart or at intervals of several hours although these can not be considered as exact intervals as other flights may have been undertaken without being observed. Several of the flights occurred when the bird travelled in a westerly or south-westerly direction; fewer were seen being made in southerly or south-westerly directions.

Display flights for other species are often well documented. Several Australian passerines, such as some honeyeaters (Boles and Longmore 1985), illustrate this behaviour. These honeyeater displays or territorial flights are regularly rising and often associated with song. After peaking, the bird drops back into cover. Similarly documented is the distinct rise and fall, without calls, of some pigeons, e.g., Spotted Turtle-Dove *Streptopelia chinensis* and Bar-shouldered Dove *Geopelia humeralis* (McGill 1968; Frith 1982).

The long tail of the drongo has probably developed primarily for manoeuvrability but is used for display. The aerobatics of the bird while capturing food in flight and the switching of the tail while at rest are most noticeable to the casual observer. Asian subspecies of the Spangled Drongo are often recorded as riding on the backs of cattle, using them as sallying points when pursuing insects. This activity has as yet not been recorded for Australian birds. In the display described here, the tail is used to effect along with the wings and accompanying vocalizations.

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DATA EXCHANGE

UNUSUAL IRIS COLOUR IN WHITE-CHEEKED HONEYEATER

The iris colour of the White-checked Honeyeater *Phylidonyris nigra* is described as being dark brown or blackish-brown at all ages.

On 16 August 1989, while banding at Moonee, near Coffs Harbour, New South Wales, with G. P. Clancy, 15 of these birds were caught, including a juvenile and several immature (first year) birds. The iris colour of one adult was noted as follows: inner iris — mid brown (much paler than the usual colour); outer iris — light brown to light fawn at the outer edge.

I have banded some 1 200 of these birds in over 30 years, and this is the first occasion such a variation has been noted.

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