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Notes on the Tawny Frogmouth (*Podargus strigoides*)

By DONALD F. F. THOMSON, R.A.O.U., Canterbury (Vic.)

Perhaps one of the best examples of protective coloration and mimicry by Australian birds is afforded by the Tawny Frogmouth (*Podargus strigoides*). Though its characteristic pose and its simulation of a broken limb are well known to all bird-lovers, probably many people have never noticed the bird at all, except for a glance, as it faded like a ghost through the shadows of the night, passing it by with the slightest suggestion of a shiver, as an "owl." The owl has always been regarded as ghostlike and sinister—as a bird of ill-omen, but the *Podargus* is not an owl.

No doubt, however, the strikingly protective coloration and pose of this bird have had much to do with its survival in the struggle for existence, and with the fact that of all our nocturnal birds the various species of the *Podargidae* are the most numerous and widely distributed.

One cannot but notice the wonderful provision of nature in the adaption of this bird in a country where insect life is extraordinarily abundant in species and numbers. Probably there is no other bird so entirely useful, from the point of view of man, as the *Podargus*, nor one which does so much to preserve the "balance of nature" of which we hear so often. Not only is the *Podargus* thus one of the most economically valuable of all our birds, but it is perfectly adapted for its "work"—the capture of its insect prey—as well as for its own survival.

A truly nocturnal bird, it is active just at the close of day, when myriads of insects come forth to disport themselves in the evening air. Though quite large—about 24 inches over all—the *Podargus* (*Podargus strigoides*) is very light in weight, and has the same facility for silent flight which characterises Owls at night. The beak, from which the bird derives its name of "Frogmouth," is large, very broad and gaping when open, and serves the double purpose of providing a big surface for the capture of flying insects on the wing and also of increasing the resemblance of the bird to a broken and jagged limb when the creature is at rest. As if the bird were conscious of this, when in repose it will often select the broken part of a limb, and sitting upon it, thrust its head up at an acute angle. In any case it is one of the most difficult birds to detect, and very often is found only by tapping the tree, thus causing it to fly. The bird which was photographed, though not so well concealed as is often the case, was only discovered by chance, being on a box tree at no great height from the ground.

The greyish mottled plumage matched the dark, drab grey of the box bark admirably, and the bird took no notice of my presence until, after exposing the plate, I knocked the tree, when it immediately took to flight. Though often very reluctant to fly, the Podargus does not appear to be nearly so stupid in the day time as most other nocturnal birds, possibly owing to its being accustomed to sleeping in exposed positions, often in sunlight, instead of in the dim hollows so much frequented by other night birds.

Though usually found singly or in pairs, last season I was much interested to observe four Frogmouths—all apparently adult—sitting together on a limb. Probably, however, it was a family group—two adults, two grown young.

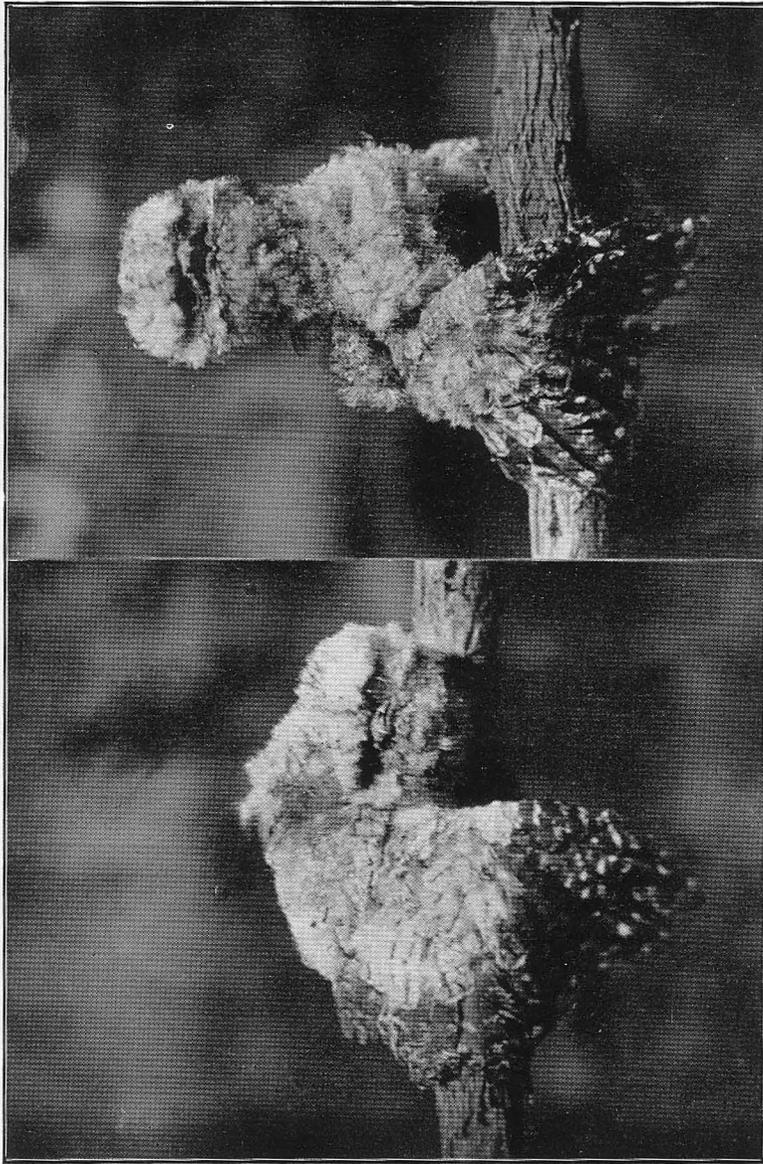
The nest, which is scarcely more substantial than that of a pigeon, is composed of more or less fine twigs placed on a broken limb or in the fork of a horizontal bough, or some similar position, often at no great height from the ground. Here, with no other lining, two, or rarely three, large white eggs are laid. When brooding, the bird will often sit motionless, with its body almost flat along a horizontal limb; and, as the nest is also very inconspicuous, the bird is hard to see. Though the female sits fairly closely, a knock on the limb of the tree usually causes her to fly; sometimes, however, the bird will not leave until actually pushed off the nest.

It was on the evening of December 30th, 1921, while roaming in the bush on the foothills of the Dandenong Ranges—one of my happy hunting grounds—that the dog nosed something near the ground, and passed on. Investigation revealed a young Podargus apparently patiently waiting "for something to turn up." It was a rather curious fact that the dog—a big deerhound—though a fierce hunter, learnt, quite of his own accord, never to harm a bird, and, in fact, often accompanied me when photographing.

Placing a box, which happened to be handy, over the young bird, I left him for the night.

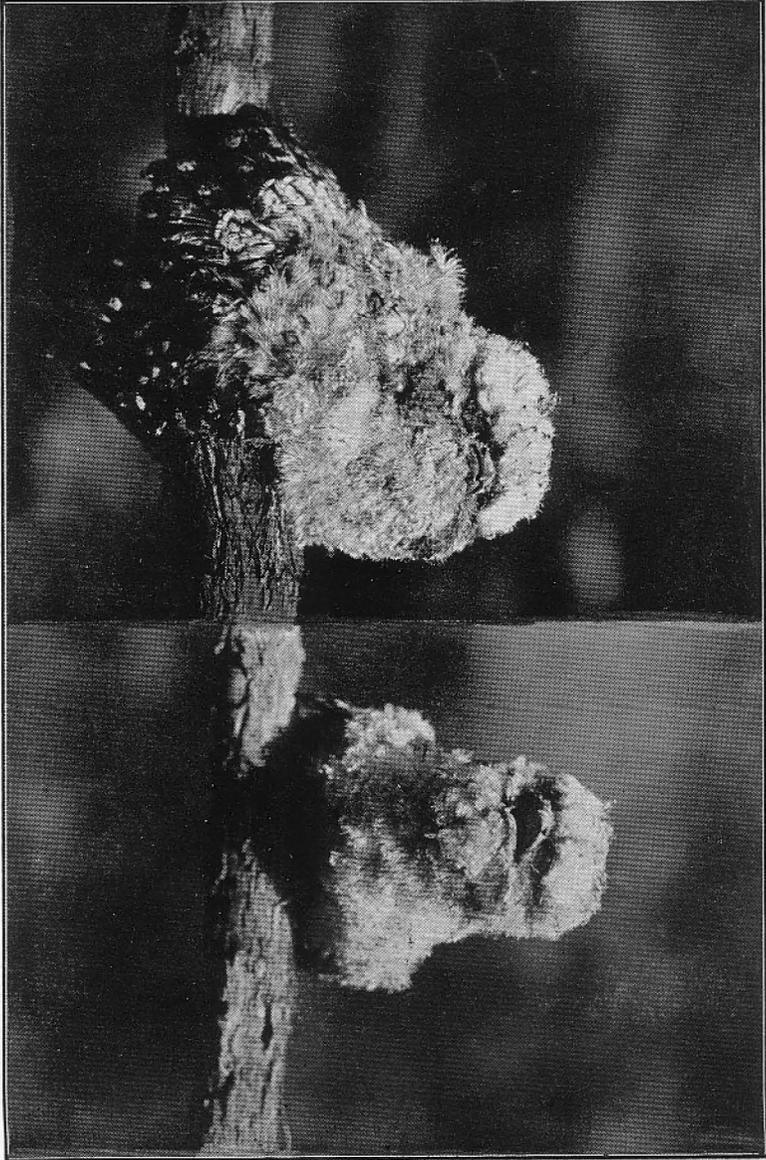
Next morning, December 31st, I returned, and spent about two hours exposing the accompanying four plates on this youngster. The morning was bright and warm, and he was very, very sleepy. Sitting sideways on the limb, wings drooping on either side of the perch, he matched the dull bark of the Eucalyptus beautifully.

In color he was of a dull grey on head and body, mottled with darker grey and fading to black on the wings. His beak was very short and broad, and his mouth large. Though he was actually very small in body, he was covered with a great amount of feathers, being peculiarly light, and little more than a fluffy ball. When he slept he would hold his head up and gradually his eyes and beak would fade away amongst the feathers until



Terrifying Attitude adopted by young Frogmouth (*Podargus strigoides*)

Photos. by Donald F. Thomson, R.A.O.U.



Terrifying attitude adopted by young Frogmouth (*Podargus strigoides*)
Photos. by Donald F. F. Thomson, R.A.O.U.

they practically disappeared in the long, downy fluff. I was not able to get a photograph of him really asleep, for he would wake up just as I endeavoured to get to the camera to expose a plate. The first picture shows him just dozing, and as nearly asleep as he could be induced to go while I remained near.

Immediately on being approached he would wake up, open his mouth wide, and stretch his neck to its full extent, ruffling his feathers and going through the most alarming contortions imaginable—well calculated to inspire an enemy with fear. The series of four pictures illustrates stages in his weird antics. Finally he would crouch low on his perch, his whole body lowered, wings drooping, as if about to spring, his great eyes ablaze with a blue light, and almost starting out of his head.

No doubt these fearsome antics are the means of protecting the harmless young *Podargus* from many enemies. Though he opened his beak widely, it was probably either as a demand for food, or more probably for intimidation. Certainly he could not have done much damage with it.

He apparently disliked being picked up, and expressed his resentment with a squeaking, wailing cry—the only note he uttered.

After studying the protective attitudes of the adult, it was very interesting to note the development in the young bird. Though harmonising with his surroundings in the bush, and depending for protection principally upon this, the young bird, being unable to take to flight if discovered, evidently depended on "bluffing" his enemies by the most amazing evolutions and contortions that I have ever seen performed by a bird. It was one of the most charming features in my experience of wild nature, and the faith of the tiny creature in the success of his antics accompanied by that blue glint of his eye, which I suspected was more of fear than of defiance, was not untouched with pathos.
