

## Butcher Bird Songs Fools Me at Nambour

On July 15, we drove north from Brushwood to Brisbane, passing through sugar cane, banana, and pineapple plantations. Nambour was our second night stop. I heard crickets there and had to open up the trailer all the way to get at my collecting and recording gear. We worked late into the night. The motel was a fine one that served us dinner as well as breakfast in the room. The food was passed to us via slots in the wall with shelves that extended from the inside of the wall of the room to the outside of the wall.

Near dawn that night I was awakened by the loud whistling of a catchy tune just outside our window. As much as I liked the song, I was nevertheless irritated that the individual bringing breakfast around to the rooms should be whistling so loudly, and so very close to the meal-serving slot of our motel. Weeks later, however, far out in the bush with no humans visible in any direction, I was astonished to hear the same song being whistled. This time I got up and moved carefully toward the sound until I could see the singer, a male butcher bird. His mate was nearby, and I discovered that, as with many Australian birds, they were singing in duet. Their combined song was more like a human whistling than any bird song I had ever heard. Also unusual, its melody was slow enough for the human ear to hear it all.



Campfire, New South Wales

As we worked across the continent, I tape-recorded many variations of male butcher birds' extraordinarily jazzy tunes, and their mate's replies (or admonitions!). This required me to keep my tape recorder and parabola close beside my cot when I slept in the morning just before daylight. The birds began to sing only shortly after Dan and I had finished work, when we were dead tired, and ensconced in our cots. On one particular morning I felt I had to exit my cot to get a good recording, so I crawled out and stood with the tape recorder and parabola, taping the birds, just as some kind of large vehicle came rumbling around a curve, which had appeared to us as a deserted track in the middle of a wilderness. I was more than a little surprised because we had seen no evidence of any persons for a long time since we had started to work in the area. Even more surprisingly, the "large vehicle" turned out to be a yellow school bus full of children! When I realized this, it was too late for me to do anything but continue to tape-record butcher birds while standing in nothing but my jockey shorts and unlaced field boots. I carefully kept the parabola in front of me! But I still wonder what those little faces pressed to the windows had to say to their schoolmates and their teachers when they arrived at school.

Once, in Western Australia, I was able to watch a female butcher bird duetting with a male. The male would sing what seemed to be the whole tune. The tuneful portion consisted of perhaps 9-12 notes, perhaps repeated twice. As I recall, the ending was, at least in some of the species, in the form of four ending notes,

the first one lower-pitched and short, and the last three on the same pitch, the first two of the three, brief, and rather staccato. The last note was always a long-drawn-out one that seemed to fade away gently. I discovered by keeping my eye on the female that some part of those last notes were her contribution to the whole performance. I could tell because, when her turn came, she lifted her head and then brought it “demurely” down again as she called, amusingly like an over-precise choir singer. At a Max Planck Institute in Germany, some time later, an ethologist who studied this kind of duetting in birds offered an interpretation. What he suggested caused me to paraphrase his explanation such that a male butcher bird might be saying something like this, “Well, here I am, take a look at me. I’m a very fine male, as I’m sure you can see. I’m strong and free, with a fine territory.” The German ethologist suggested that the female’s contribution, three or four monotonic syllables given at the end but so as to seem inseparable from the male’s song, probably meant something like, “Annnnd he’s maaarrrieeeeeeed!”

For anyone who might wish to listen to or use my butcher bird tapes, they are stored in the University of Michigan Museum of Zoology. I am sure that, across the 42 years since I met the first butcher bird, I have more or less inadvertently altered the butcher bird songs to make my verses about them more interesting. In any case, butcher birds are indeed fascinating.

Well, here I am, take a look at me.

I’m a very fine male, as I’m sure you can see. *Annnnd he’s maaarrrieeeeeeed!*

I am strong and free, with a fine territory.

I’ll be good with you, and the babies too. *Annnnd he’s maaarrrieeeeeeed!*

You can trust me sure, that’s a guarantee.

Why not come now and play with me. *Buuuut he’s maaarrrieeeeeeed!*

### The Butcher Bird and His Wife

The musical notation consists of two staves in 4/4 time. The first staff contains the melody for the male bird's song, with lyrics: "Well, here I am: take a look at me! I'm a ve-ry fine ma-". The second staff contains the melody for the female bird's response, with lyrics: "le As I'm sure you can see. A-n-nd he's mar-ried!". The female's melody is shorter and ends with a long, drawn-out note.

### The Variable Road from Rockhampton to Townsville

The road from Rockhampton north to Townsville was, to say the least, highly variable. Some sections are rather ordinary smooth blacktop (in Australia pronounced “BITCH-umen”). Others were ancient concrete on which most sections were tipped at a slightly different angle than the ones next to them. A hundred miles or so was single-lane pavement, with decaying sides and chuck-holed borders. When we traversed it, fifty miles or so was not paved at all, but a pitted clay thoroughfare. Driving a Land Rover at 45-50 mph over such a road is a little like standing continuously against a vibrating exercise belt. In Australia, driving a Land Rover slower than approximately 55 mph on corrugated dirt roads gives one the impression that the entire vehicle will soon fall apart. The problem is that driving at the necessary speed on unpaved or traffic-damaged roads sometimes makes staying comfortably and true on one’s own side of the road extremely difficult.