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Tawny Frogmouths Displacing Common Mynas from a Nesting Hollow, and Related Observations

This note describes the displacement of the Common Myna *Acridotheres tristis* from a tree-hollow, where it was nesting, by a Tawny Frogmouth *Podargus strigoides*, and subsequent observations. The observations occurred in Martin Street, Belgrave, in the Dandenong Ranges to Melbourne’s outer east (37°54’S, 145°21’E), from October to November 2000.

A single Frogmouth was first observed on 4 October perched on one of the lower branches (approximately 15 m above the ground) of a large old Mountain Grey Gum *Eucalyptus cypellocarpa*. The following day two Frogmouths were observed perched together in a fork about 25–30 m above the ground. This position was approximately 3 m from a hollow which had been used by Common Mynas to successfully raise young for the previous 2–3 years. The hollow was located at the end of a dead branch protruding horizontally, approximately 1 m from a larger branch. This hollow appeared to have two entrances: a vertical entrance at the end of the branch which the Mynas had been using for entry, as well as a flat topless hollow entrance.

The presence and position of the two Frogmouths varied for 3 weeks during daylight hours since that initial observation: sometimes they perched together in the same fork; at other times together on other limbs; sometimes singly and occasionally not in the tree at all.
Each night, at approximately 1845 h, the Frogmouths flew from their perch to the end of the dead branch containing the hollow occupied by the Mynas. Both Frogmouths partook in almost inaudible calling (of the ‘trisyllabic’ did-did-do as referred to in Higgins 1999) with heads raised and throats pulsating. During this ritual they constantly shifted from one leg to the other, all the time being within a few centimetres of each other.

Mating of the Frogmouths was observed only once, on 13 October. After approximately 5 minutes of the activities described above, the female flew to a low branch (approximately 4 m above the ground) of a nearby Blackwood Acacia melanoxylon, followed soon after by the male, and they mated. Copulation lasted for about 20 seconds, the male flying from the Blackwood branch next to the female and perching on her back, with occasional flapping of wings to maintain balance. Surprisingly, for such a relatively common and often sighted nightbird, this species’ copulatory behaviour has not been described (Higgins 1999). Smith (1997) mentioned a pair of Frogmouths ‘apparently copulating’ followed by the smaller and more brown-marked bird seemingly ‘dismounting’. However, a comparison of his description and photographs (also in Smith 1999) with information and plates in Higgins (1999) shows that Smith mis-sexed the Frogmouths, and hence his account of sex roles is suspect.

During the day of 22 October, one of the pair (presumably the male, see Higgins 1999) was first noticed to be lying flat on the topless entrance to the Mynas’ hollow. The Mynas, of which there appeared to be three tending the nest at the time, hopped around on nearby branches for the first day of occupation. Often aggressive defenders of their nest space against other potential hollow-using (Pell & Tidemann 1997a,b) or predatory species such as the Laughing Kookaburra Dacelo novaeguineae (pers. obs.), the Mynas were surprisingly not very vocal during the displacement. It is possible that they had become used to the presence of the Frogmouths at close range in the previous weeks.

It is unclear whether the Mynas’ nesting material from previous years, which included strips of plastic, remained in the hollow or was used by the Frogmouths for their nest building. A few dead English Ivy Hedera helix tendrils and yellowing leaves were evident protruding from the top of the hollow.

The presence of a feral Honeybee Apis mellifera nest in a very small hollow only 2 m away appeared to have little influence on the nesting Frogmouths until early November. However, at approximately 1400 h on 2 November, a large swarm of bees was observed to gather in the canopy. The male Frogmouth was harassed by a smaller breakaway swarm for about 30 minutes and was eventually forced from the nest before returning approximately 15 minutes later. That night was the first occasion that the male was observed leaving the nest at night (for approximately 3 minutes) since the start of nesting. Whether the bees affected in any way the breeding success of the Frogmouths was unclear.

Paton’s (1996) assessment of the impacts of feral Honeybees in Australia dealt only with their potential to outcompete native nectar-feeding birds and bees for pollen/nectar resources, and birds and mammals for tree-hollows. No mention was made of their potential impact on other species with which they do not potentially compete directly for resources, in this instance by driving a Tawny Frogmouth from its nest.

The Frogmouths disappeared around mid November and appeared not to have reared young successfully. It is unclear whether any eggs were laid. The
Mynas eventually nested in a hollow on the side of the tree approximately 5 m away from the Frogmouths, and have not returned to their original hollow since the departure of the Frogmouths.

Tawny Frogmouths have been recorded using nests of other species (Higgins 1999), but this appears to be the first published record of this species actively displacing another species from a nesting hollow. This also appears to be the first published record of Tawny Frogmouths nesting in the same tree as Common Mynas (Higgins 1999). Importantly, it has been proven that Mynas outcompete some native birds for nesting hollows (Pell & Tidemann 1997b), so it is encouraging to see the converse in this instance. What was not so encouraging was that another ‘feral’—the Honeybee—caused the Frogmouth to leave its nest, and possibly affected the breeding success of that particular pair.

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References


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