

THE FANTAIL (Piwakawaka).

Common all over New Zealand, conspicuous in appearance, and fearless of man, there is probably no bird better known than the pied fantail. Similar species of the flycatcher family to which the fantail belongs are found in many parts of the world, some in Australia being closely related to the New Zealand bird. The special prey of these birds are small flying insects such as gnats, midges, and sandflies, and the long tail is primarily useful in enabling them to twist and turn quickly when in pursuit, for they almost invariably feed when on the wing. All the acrobatics of a modern human flyer and many more are second nature to a fantail; not even "looping the loop" is beyond it.

Changed conditions brought about by settlement have fortunately not disturbed this native bird very much. Always favouring open spaces at the edge of the bush and well-lighted clearings, it has taken kindly enough to shrubberies and shelter belts, finding indeed some addition to its food supply among introduced insects such as the turnip fly. Even human dwellings are not safe shelter for the housefly when fantails are about, for the bird will not only enter open doors and windows but, if unmolested, will return regularly and systematically hunt through every room in the house, chirping in friendly conversation with the owners as it does so.

Nesting begins about August, and is preceded by much demonstrative courtship in which the spreading and displaying of the tail is an important ceremony. The site selected may be near a creek or other natural clearing, and the nest itself be commenced in a medium-sized fork near the outer end of a branch, sometimes within ten feet of the ground. Both birds take part in building, until the compact, cup-shaped nest is finished, its upper rim bound down smoothly with cobwebs and its lower extremity tailed off with chips of wood and strands of web. Within three days three eggs are laid, pale cream in colour speckled lightly with greyish brown. Incubation also is a joint responsibility, and periods of from ten to fifteen minutes are spent by male and female bird in turn sitting on the eggs. These are rarely left unguarded, for the sitting bird does not leave the nest until the free partner returns. The chicks are hatched naked, but grow rapidly and are well feathered in a few days.

A new nest is built for a second brood, and this second family is on the wing as a rule not later than February.

Among fantails in the South Island, and to a lesser extent in the North Island, a fair percentage are entirely black. As these black birds often breed separately from the pied birds, and birds of intermediate colours are unknown, black fantails are regarded as belonging to a different species. That they are not entirely separate from the pied, however, is shown by the fact that a pied