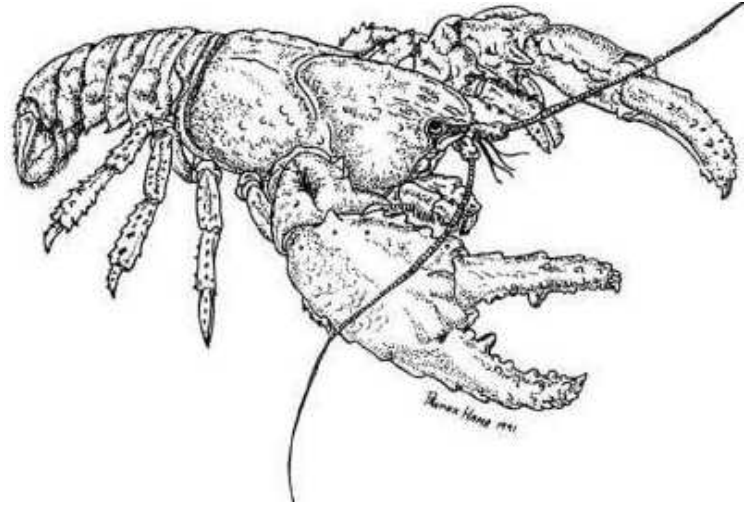


Disjunct Naturalists

WEBSITE OF THE CENTRAL NORTH FIELD NATURALISTS



Lucy Bird

by **Yvonne Maher**



Tree Martin

A week before Christmas I noticed what I presumed to be a dead baby bird on the footpath near my home in Adelaide. As I stooped to pick it up, two bright eyes looked up at me, and I realized that it was a 'swallow' nestling.

I brought the tiny, terrified bird home, and made a home for it in a shoe box, covered by a tea towel.

The next 24 hours were filled with acute frustration and concern, as I tried to prise open the baby beak to force in some nourishment in the form of squashed worm and egg yolk!

On day two, as I again hopefully held the squirming meal worm in front of the baby, the tiny beak shot open! I was elated, at last we were on our way, and I knew that my baby would live! I named her Lucy.

The next six days were among the most rewarding days of my life, as the tiny tyrant led her willing slave down a path of constant attention to her growing needs.

She slept in her box in front of my bed, and woke me as dawn broke, with a gentle reminder that it was breakfast time. I willingly complied, cleaning the soiled tissues out of her box, and providing her with a small branch on which to perch.

Her box sat on the table by my window, allowing her to look out at the garden and the birds that came for their early morning ablutions in the bird bath in front of the window. Soon she was responding to their calls, and after a day or two of learning to perch on her stick, she began to preen and stretch a wing and leg sideways, ballerina style, while becoming ever-more steady on the perched leg.

She was eating ravenously. Meal worms, crickets and slaters, initially thought to be too large for her little beak, were grabbed avidly and swallowed with some difficulty and great satisfaction! She became the star of the neighbourhood, and sweetly tolerated all expressions of 'Ooh and Aah', before returning her gaze to the birds in the garden.

We wandered daily to where her siblings could be heard calling from their nest in the cross bars of power poles. (Tiny holes in metal posts, in a succession of days that rose above 40 degrees!) Lucy, in her covered box would respond desperately to their calls, hopping up and down in the hope of a response. (Was there communication that my human ears could not detect?)

A week to the day after Lucy entered my life, while on my way to catch a bus, I noticed that Lucy's siblings were emerging from the tiny holes in the power pole cross bars. The small babies came out uncertainly, settled on the power lines for a short spell, then suddenly launched into the air, and with amazing agility headed higher, ever higher. I knew that I had half an hour to decide whether to allow Lucy to fledge with her siblings, or to keep her until she had lost the remaining clumps of down and emerged an adult bird.

Sadly for me I knew what she would want, and taking her box to the base of the poles, I lifted the tea towel and bade her farewell. She jumped on to the side of the box, looked around a couple of times, and headed for the sky with her siblings, leaving me with a sudden hole in my life.

My association with Lucy stimulated a new interest in the 'swallows' in our inner city area, and I realized that while there were some welcome swallows, the majority of the birds were in fact tree martins, of which my little companion was one (hence the tiny hole in the pole for a nest).

I have not been able to find much in the literature about the habits of tree martins, but as a parent keenly scanning the skies for my fledged offspring, it appears that tree martin babies, once fledged, no longer depend on the parent bird to feed them. I did not once see the begging behaviour of other birds, instead the birds formed a flock and circled high, landing on the wire only to preen or rest. I would appreciate it if anyone who knows more about the behaviour of these wonderful little birds could respond to this theory.

I now develop a rather interesting gait every day when I walk past the power lines, My gaze turns skyward, and often I can be heard calling 'are you there Lucy?'

I shamelessly anthropomorphize that the one little bird that frequently detaches from the group to sit alone and call is Lucy. (Or could it be Lucius?)

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