

## We were chuffed to see the Choughs

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We were over the border recently at the Naracoorte Caves, and were walking through a patch of bush near the main tourist centre when we heard a series of mournful whistles and harsh grating noises.

A little careful stalking showed us a group of large black birds on the ground among the bushes. At first sight they looked like ravens, but they had thin curved beaks and red eyes. Then one flew up onto a low branch and we saw the white patches on its wings. It was a White-winged Chough.

There must have been about ten birds in the group: it was hard to count them because they were all moving about, fanning out their wings and tails and calling to each other. Two of the birds were smaller and browner and fluffier than the rest, and had pale stripes over their eyes: obviously chicks.

White-winged Choughs (pronounced “chuffs”) are particularly interesting birds because – like people – they live in social groups and put a lot of effort into bringing up their young. A group consists of the parents (one male and one or two females) plus their sons and daughters from several previous years who all help care for the chicks.

They build their nest on a horizontal branch, carefully constructing it out of mud – or maybe cattle or emu dung if it’s a dry year. All the group helps in building the nest and feeding the chicks. When the chicks are about four weeks old they flutter to the ground, but they can’t fly properly so the family still has to guard them as well as feed them. They eat insects, scratching for them in the ground rather as domestic chooks do. They also dig up and eat the tubers of orchids and native lilies. Because they spend so much time on the ground, they are very vulnerable to foxes and cats.

The help from the older brothers and sisters is essential for the chicks. Groups of less than four adults are unable to raise chicks, and only groups of seven or more are regularly successful. In fact, groups have been known to “kidnap” young birds from rival groups to help with child-rearing.

Choughs live in open eucalypt woodlands, and the size of the family groups means that they need large areas to forage in. Their survival and breeding is threatened not only when forest is cleared completely, but also when it is broken up into small remnants. It would be interesting to know whether they can live in blue-gum plantations.

Several people report seeing choughs in the Hamilton region in recent years. They are well worth watching out for.

