

WHY MALLEE BIRD LAYS HER EGGS IN THE SAND (From 'Legends of the Birds')

WAYAMBEH, a descendant of the original Wayambeh, who was turned into a tortoise, married Kookaburra. It was a strange mating, with an even stranger consequence.

Tortoises lay their eggs in the sand close to streams and billabongs, leaving them to hatch out for themselves, whereas kookaburras are like all sensible birds: they build nests and keep the eggs warm with their own bodies.

Kookaburra, argued with his tortoise wife.

"It's not right," he protested. "Whoever heard of anyone burying eggs in the sand, just as if they were rubbish to be disposed of? Don't be so silly, Wayambeh. Do the sensible thing. I'll help you build a nest and then you can do your duty as a mother in the proper way."

Tortoise darted her head from side to side in exasperation.

"I don't know why I ever married you, you silly bird. A fine figure I would make climbing a tree!"

"If my mother could lay her eggs in a nest, surely it's good enough for you?"

Wayambeh danced with rage, her shell jumping up and down on her back.

"Can't you get it into your thick head that I can't fly, I can't climb trees, I can't build nests, and if I sat on my eggs I would break them?"

She waddled down to the stream. Kookaburra flew overhead keeping a sharp eye on her; but once she settled down she remained motionless for so long that he grew tired of watching and flew off to get some food.

Presently Ouyouboolooy the Black Snake came by. He was an old friend of Wayambeh. She was glad to confide in him. Ouyouboolooy was a sympathetic listener. And it was at this moment that Kookaburra returned.

He gave a cry of rage, swooped down, caught Black Snake by the neck, flew to the top of a tree with him, and dropped him on the ground. Ouyouboolooy's back was broken. While he lay writhing in his death struggles, Kookaburra opened his beak and gave a great laugh: Goor-gour-gah-gah! and from that exultant, chattering laugh he gained his true name, Goorgourgahgah.

Although his wife was innocent of any liaison with Ouyouboolooy, she was terrified of her husband's anger. She scuttled off swiftly on her short legs, but her time of egg-laying had come and could not be delayed. The instincts of a long line of ancestors were not to be denied, no matter what her husband might think. So she scooped a hole in the mud with her hind legs and laid six white eggs in it, covered them over, and smoothed the mud with her lower shell.

She had an interested spectator - Woggoon, the Mallet Fowl.

"Why do you lay your eggs there?" she asked. "It seems a silly thing to do."

"Nothing of the sort," retorted Wayambeh. "It's much more sensible than laying them in a nest high up in a tree, or even in the grass, and sitting on them to keep them warm."

If we didn't keep them warm the chicks would die of cold."

"Ah, that is true. They must be kept warm. You see, that is why I lay mine in the mud. They are close to the surface where they are kept warm by the sun. We don't have to hatch them out, so you can see how much trouble we are saved."

"I see," said Woggoon thoughtfully.

She flew away and spoke seriously to her husband.

"I'm not going to lay my eggs in the nest this year," she told him.

He laughed.

"Then where do you propose to lay them, my dear? Perhaps you thought of burying them somewhere!"

"That's just what I am going to do," she retorted.

The argument between husband and wife raged all night long, but by morning the male bird was worn out and gave in. He even took part in the experiment, helping her to make a mound of leaves, sticks, and sand, and scraping a hole in which to bury her eggs.

Once the eggs were laid they were covered over. The two birds were not completely satisfied that Wayambeh's method would be successful. Day after day they visited the nest but saw no signs of the fledglings emerging. At last the female could stand the suspense no longer.

"My chicks are dead!" she wailed. "They should have hatched out long ago."

She scratched the soil from the mound. To her dismay she found only a few broken shells where her lovely eggs had been. But at that moment she looked up and saw the gladdest sight of her life. Coming towards her were several adorable little Mallee Fowl chickens whom she recognised at once as her own. The great experiment had proved successful. Ever since then Woggoon has followed Wayambeh's example and has laid her eggs in leaf-mould so they will hatch in the warm earth.