

Vocalizations of the Red-capped Robin

Petroica goodenovii

Living as I now do in Red-capped Robin country (Capertee Valley NSW), I rashly decided a couple of years back that I should document as many different calls for these robins as I could. It seemed like a good idea at the time, but the project grew like Topsy and I ended up by writing two papers on the behaviour and breeding biology of the species (these papers have now been accepted for publication in the journal *Corella*).

For my study on the Red-capped Robins, I spent more than 500 hours in the field over a seven month period - recording, sketching, taking notes - in all weathers including extended mid-summer heatwaves where the temperature reached 45 degrees daily. Christmas Day came and went and I never even noticed. There were mozzies, sticky flies, bull-ants and meat-ants, snakes and goannas, not to mention sunburn. Was this crazy activity simply dedication to birdwatching or was it obsessional madness? Both maybe! But my devotion to duty was nothing compared to the nesting dedication showed by the robins, and they very soon became "my favourite bird species".

That particular breeding season ran from August 2000 to April 2001 and in December when nesting peaked, a total of twelve pairs of Red-capped Robins were breeding in a 12 hectare patch of acacia regrowth on my 40 hectare bush block. It was a good season, with enough rainfall to produce a good supply of bird-food - i.e. grasshoppers, katydids, crickets, small cicadas, caterpillars, spiders and other bugs.

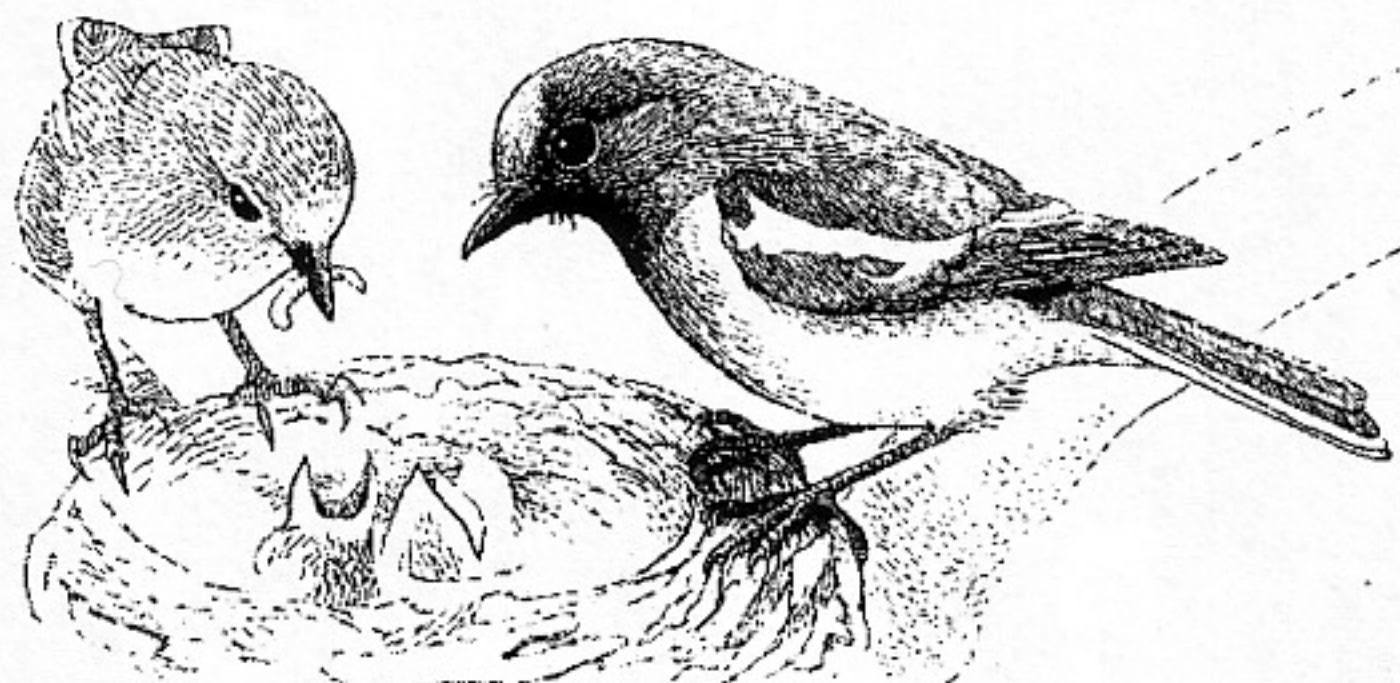
I found I was able to identify individual robins by variations in their plumage, in combination with territory and mate, e.g. some red-plumaged males had more extensive red patches on their breasts. Where brown-plumaged males were paired with similarly-plumaged females, breeding behaviour soon confirmed which was which, and by sketching the birds I learned to recognize each individual's quirks of plumage.

The robins were truly fascinating to watch and every day I checked on their nesting progress and watched their behaviour. There were an alarming number of nest failures, several nests were destroyed by stormy squalls but the main cause of nest failure was the theft of eggs and nestlings probably by larger birds. But the robins were undeterred and simply continued on with successive nesting attempts when a failure had occurred.

Females built their cup-shaped nest in a tree fork, binding the grass nest with cobweb and sometimes decorating the outside with small pieces of lichen. Nest building took only a few days to complete. When a nest failed, nest material was often recycled; the female would carry large wads of the old nest to a new site and rebuild.

My favourite pair of robins nested quite near my house and during the breeding season they built six nests. Four of those nests failed, but the robins produced five young ones from the two nests that were successful. Their final nest in January producing no less than three young, and watching those three nestlings stretch the tiny nest to bursting point was awe-

some. The parents were kept busy feeding those three mouths from dawn till dusk, and I calculated that more than three thousand insects were brought to that nest over a two week period. In hot weather the mother bird stood on the rim of the nest with her wings spread to provide shade for her young, and if it rained she again sheltered the young with her wings. Both parents were fastidious about cleanliness, and each time they brought food to the nest they also removed faecal sacs from the rear end of the nestlings and deposited



these droppings well away from the nest. Those three nestlings fledged after two weeks in the nest, and the parents continued to feed them for several more weeks until they were independent.

From my 12 pairs of Red-capped Robins I recorded at least 12 different sorts of vocalizations and you'll hear those on AudioWings CD # 10. Currently, only about seven vocalizations are described in the literature for Red-capped Robins.

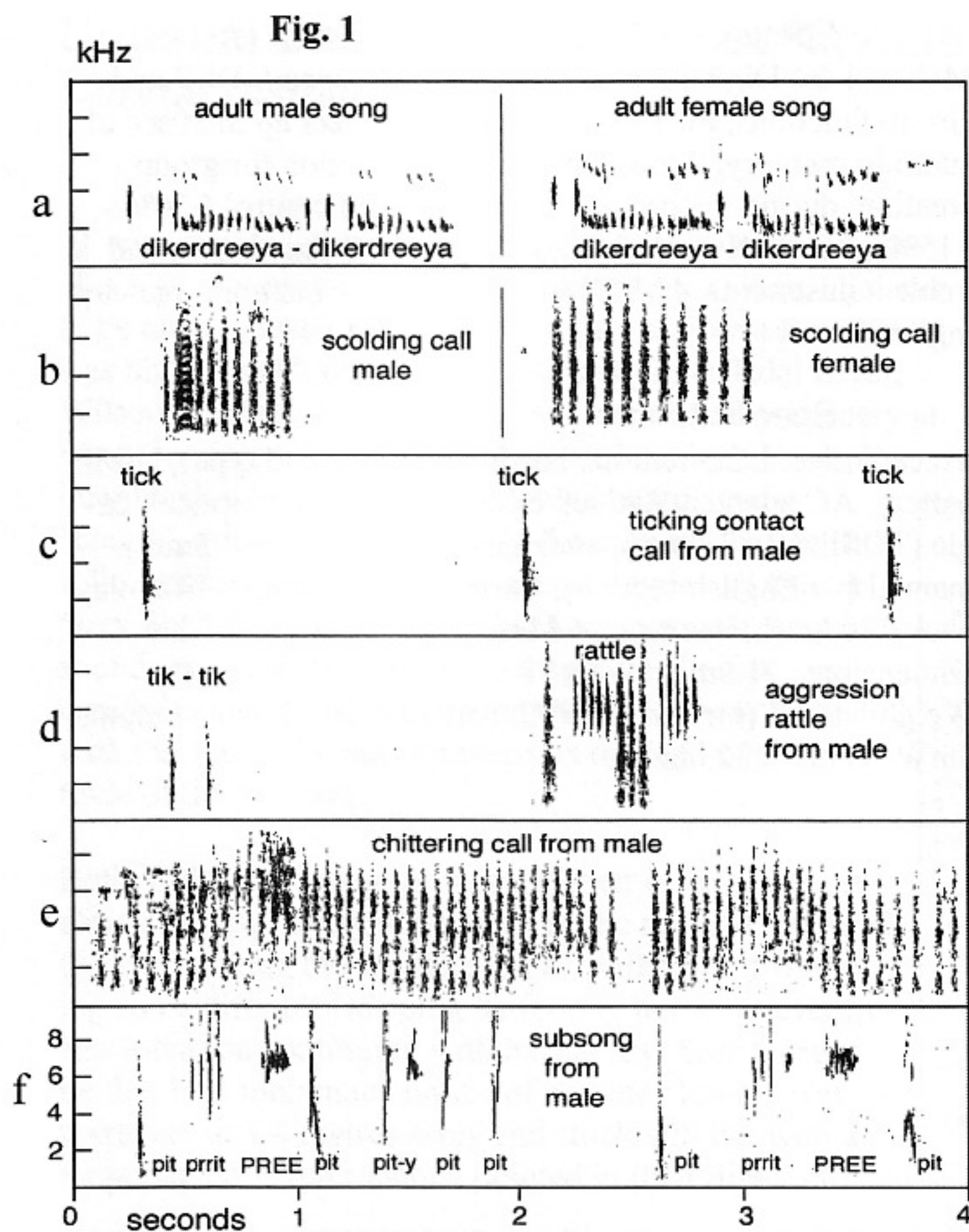
These are the vocalizations that I recorded:

Territorial Song - this song sounds a bit like water trickling from an iron roof into metal guttering - *dikerdreeya dikerdreeya*. This was given by males as territories were set up, but later in the season I also observed that the full territorial song was given by four different females who had young ones in tow. (fig. 1a)

Scolding Call - this sounded to me like the whinneying of a miniature pony - *neigh-h-h-h!* Both male and female gave this call if there was any threat to nest or territory. (fig 1b)

Ticking - this sounded like fencing duels in miniature, when two rivals were trying to out-tick one another - *tick tick tick!* Parent birds also used ticking to warn nestlings to keep quiet and lie low when a bird of prey was near. Ticking served as an agitation, contact and warning call. (fig. 1c)

Aggression Rattle - this call was given by opposing males either in fluttering flight, or in a perched encounter where the two rivals would advance and retreat along a perch and fluff up their feathers and spread their wings so's they'd look more intimidating. When they gave the squeaky rattle the beak would be wide open. This call hasn't been described before. I also occasionally heard this call given by females and



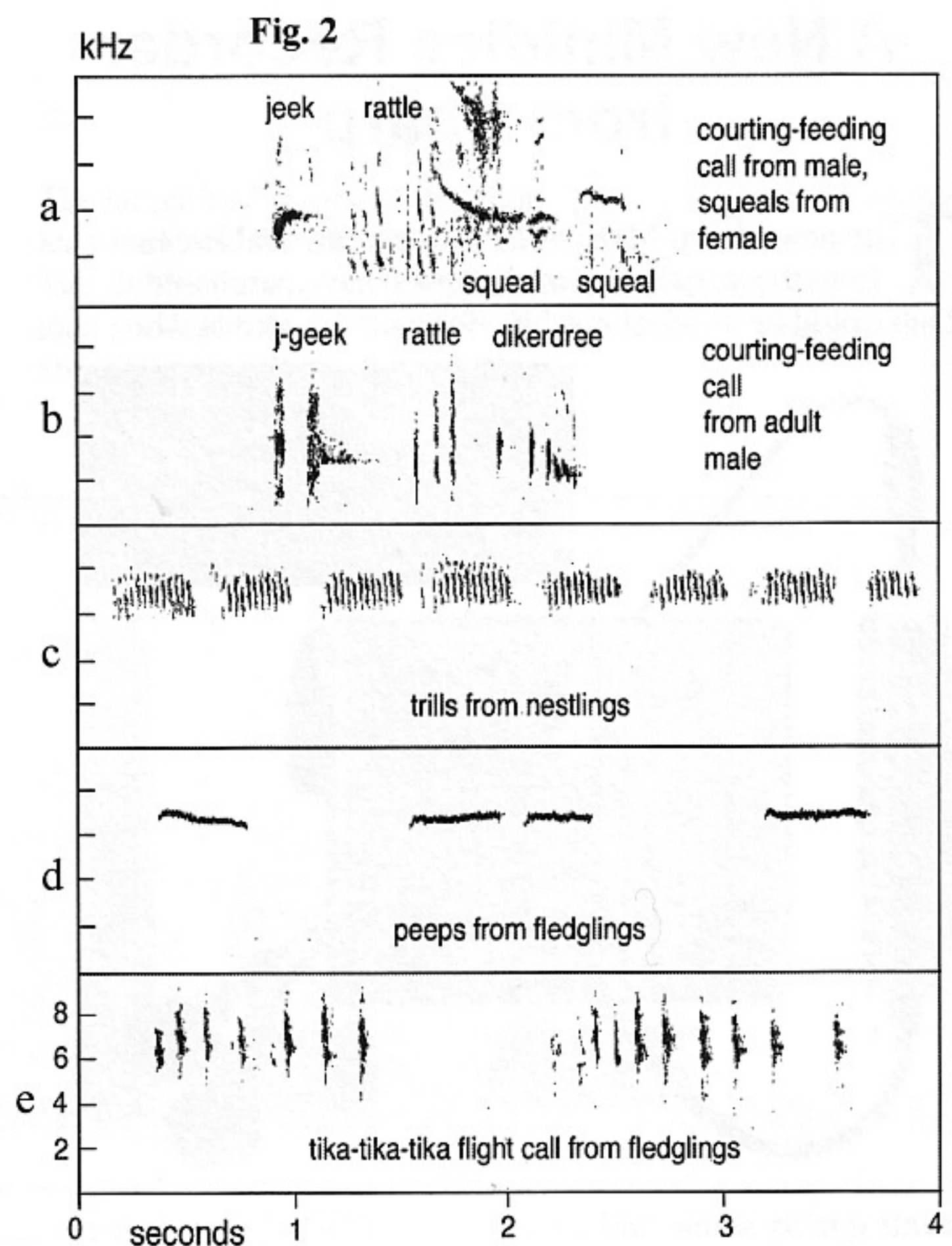
juveniles during territorial disputes. (fig. 1d)

Chattering - this call really intrigued me and it has not previously been described in the literature. I heard it on many occasions, a prolonged undulating soft chattering call, given by males when a pair were selecting a nest site. What a wonderful sight this was - the pair would investigate possible sites and the male would straddle a suitable tree fork and move his head from side to side while giving the Chattering Call for up to a minute at a time. The female would then try out the tree fork for size by sitting in it and straddling it. Several sites would be thoroughly tested and by the following day nest building had usually commenced at one of these sites. (fig. 1e)

Subsong - I heard this from adult males, an adult female, and two juveniles - an extended very soft high-pitched reeling chatter that included elements of the Aggression Rattle, Ticking and Territorial Song, sounding like *pritti-PREE-prit-PRRT-pit* repeated over and over. Again, this call hasn't previously been described in the literature. (fig. 1f)

Courting-feeding call - the male gave a short-and-squeaky courting call when he presented the female with tempting morsels such as pulverized caterpillar. When she was fed, the female gave a down slurred begging squeal, while she fluttered her wings and begged for the food just like a young bird does. Prior to egg-laying, this courting activity was often a prelude to the pair mating. (fig. 2a and fig. 2b)

Soft Rattle at nest - sometimes the male gave a very short soft rattle just prior to feeding either a nesting female or young birds in the nest. (fig. 2b)



Short Song - the male and female both often gave a shortened territorial song *dikerdree* just before feeding young birds. This alerted the young that the parent had food for them. The male sometimes also gave this call before feeding a nesting female. (fig. 2b)

Nestling Begging Call - begging nestlings gave a pulsed trilling call as they were about to be fed. (fig. 2c)

Fledgling Begging/Contact Call - after they had left the nest, the young fledglings gave a high-pitched peep call to maintain contact with their parents. (fig. 2d)

Fledgling Flight Call - the fledglings also gave a *tika-tika-tika* call each time they made a short flight, this call has not previously been described in the literature. Its function is probably as a contact call. (fig. 2e)

I didn't hear any mimicry from my robins, although it has been reported from Victoria that they may mimic Scarlet Robins where the two species occur together.

Vicki Powys

More detail on my Red-capped Robin research can be found in the following references:

Powys, V. (2004). Breeding biology of the Red-capped Robin *Petroica goodenovii* in Capertee Valley, New South Wales. Corella (in press, due March 2004).

Powys, V. (2004). Breeding behaviour, vocalizations and plumage of the Red-capped Robin *Petroica goodenovii* in Capertee Valley, New South Wales. Corella (in press, due March 2004).