

## The Brown Honeyeater

(*Gliciphila indistincta*).

### Will it become a dry-country bird ?

By Dr. SPENCER ROBERTS, R.A.O.U., Toowoomba, Qld.

Some of our small birds can be most fascinating even when only very plain coloured. Sweet song, gracefulness, beautiful nests are never ending sources of attraction and enjoyment. Such birds necessarily form the bulk of what is seen in any district. And it will eventually happen to most bird lovers who may claim to know his beat fairly well that they will be halted sooner or later by a plain-coloured stranger which possesses some or all of these attributes. Such was the case with the writer in 1932.

In the spring of that year a stop had been made in some small belah thirty miles west of here to look at the depredations of the *Cactoblastis* in a patch of prickly pear. But attention was immediately diverted from that by a note which was practically a replica of the Reed-Warbler's: yet it seemed impossible, for the country was as dry as the proverbial bone. Much more was seen of the bird responsible for it during the next day or two, and it was found to be a small, shy brown Honeyeater with a great repertoire. The most notable song was the Reed-Warbler reproduction, but he had others, including one very like that of the Jacky Winter when he sits high on the top of a dead stick to greet the morning sun. The identity was not disclosed, and no nesting was noted: evidently the bird was following the blossoms of certain plants, notably the mistletoe. He was certainly an absolute stranger to the Darling Downs.

A month later in company with Dr. Brooke Nicholls, R.A.O.U., nesting birds were found six miles east of here. A creek fringed and set in the flowers of the scarlet bottle-brush had been selected, and the nest was suspended in one of these bushes a few feet above running water. The camouflage was the drift caught in many similar branchlets, and its protection from water rats the slenderness and length of its support. The birds were watched at close quarters as they brought in various pieces of bark and flowers, wove them into the nest, and moulded its shape by pressure. All the time the song of this tiny Honeyeater dominated all the bird calls of this bit of bush, though forty-seven species were identified that morning. But we failed to identify this particular one.

A hunt of the literature and books gave the following information:—

S. A. White, writing in *The Emu*, Vol. XIX, 1920, p. 225,

of the birds of Stradbroke Island, South Queensland, says:—

"*Myzomela obscura*.—A very common bird with a very pleasing note. We met them all over the island. Mr. A. S. LeSouef handed me the following:—'These Honey-eaters were the most numerous birds on the island. In one mile north of Amity Point 32 were noted, and in eight miles (including all classes of country) 51 were heard. Their note at times might easily be mistaken for that of the Reed-Warbler. They were chiefly seen in the acacia scrub.'"

A. S. LeSouef, writing in *The Emu*, Vol. XX, 1921, p. 144, of the birds in the Geraldton district, Western Australia, says:—

"*Stigmatops ocularis* [= *Gliciphila indistincta*].—I was glad to hear this cheerful songster at Mr. McKenzie Grant's station near Geraldton. It was singing with its Reed-Warbler's note in exactly the same way as we heard it at Stradbroke Island, Queensland, last year."

Both these notes are quoted by Mathews in his *Birds of Australia* under the respective headings of *Myzomela obscura* and *Gliciphila indistincta*. Even Homer nods. Evidently Captain White had made a slip.

It was decided that the bird was *Gliciphila indistincta*, the Brown Honey-eater. I was interested as here was a delightful stranger who was breeding and presented some difficulties. The bird had evidently come from the coast, where it is common, and one could understand its presence in the bottle-brush, but not in the belah country. Two questions arose: Would they stay and had they gone further west? Both questions can fortunately be answered in the affirmative.

The accuracy of the observations of the late Mr. F. C. Morse and his delightful way of putting his facts, gives the answer to the latter, for he wrote in *The Emu*, Vol. XXII, 1922, p. 35:—

"*Stigmatops* [= *Gliciphila*] *indistincta*.—Brown Honey-eater. The identity of this bird is doubtful. In a little gully full of flowering banksia, we (that is, Dr. D'Ombraïn, myself and others) saw a pair of small brown Honeyeaters with long, curved bills. I thought they were of this species; the Dr. says not. . . . Whatever they were, they had no right there."

Surely if the bird was in the Moree district he had only recently come. I went to the 1933 Camp-Out with my ears cocked. On my way thither I stayed for the night 20 miles this side (east) of Moree, and the first note heard, and the first bird seen consciously, was this Honeyeater. It was

nesting, and, I have since been informed, has been seen in several parts of the district.

Here, then, is a bird which is apparently extending its range. That it is a great wanderer is proved by the fact that its habitat is given in the "Checklist" as:

"Aru Is., N.G., A. exc. Vic., S.A."

It is a curious fact that the bird has not ranged into Victoria or South Australia. Normally I feel that it is a coastal and range-dwelling bird, and to my mind it is a notable fact that it is invading the country of the Chats and other dry country birds. That it is somewhat diverse in colouring, marking, etc., is easily seen if one studies Mathews's plate. The four figures depicting two males and two females from four widely-separated districts are so unlike that one would doubt that they are similar species. But though the males and females in the plate seem to differ most, he states distinctly in regard to the upper and lower figures, that the opposite sex is similar. It is not surprising under the circumstances that this bird has puzzled cabinet and field naturalists considerably.

It is a pity that the name Least Honeyeater was ever abandoned in regard to the species, for I believe it accurately describes it.

Just one more point occurred to me during my interesting investigation of this bird. The "Checklist" gives the range of *Myzomela obscura*, the Dusky Honeyeater, as extending into south Queensland. I doubted this, as Mathews states it is a north Queensland bird, and there were no specimens in the Brisbane or Melbourne Museums from south of Rockhampton. But there is, in the Australian Museum, Sydney, a specimen marked as coming from the Coomera River, which is near Brisbane. Does one swallow make a summer?\*

\*Members attending the Camp-Out at Fraser Island, Queensland, in October, 1930, were definite as to *Myzomela obscura* being there. See *The Emu*, Vol. XXXI, p. 187.—Ed.

**Is the Stone Plover (*Burhinus magnirostris*) passing?—**  
In the course of a motor journey of 3,000 miles from Queensland into and around about New South Wales I heard the wail of the Stone Plover but once. We camped each night of our journey by creekside, ocean beach, plains or highlands—always in the open—and I would have wakened to any Curlew call. Until recent years the birds were plentiful amongst the islands and foreshores of Moreton Bay or along the river flats. To-day I never hear them. Foxes are supposed to be responsible for their disappearance, but Banded Plover and Spur-winged Plover are also ground-nesting birds, and we found those birds very plentiful in the country as we travelled through.—  
L. M. MAYO, R.A.O.U., Brisbane, Qld.