

A Note on the Black Honeyeater

By C. E. BRYANT, Melbourne, Victoria

The genus *Myzomela* is represented in Victoria by two species—*M. sanguineolenta* and *M. nigra*. Whereas the former reaches that State by way of the east and the southern coast, the Black Honeyeater, a bird of the interior areas, comes in from the inland regions. Both are spasmodic in their appearances, although, I am advised, *M. nigra* is to be found, represented by a few pairs, practically every year in the extreme north-west of the State. Its progress farther south, to about the neighbourhood of Bendigo, which is presumably its southern limit, is less regular. Many birds visited Bendigo, I am told, in 1928-29, and this year (1937) numbers of pairs again nested there.

In 1928-29 Mr. Marc Cohn, of Bendigo, secured some photographs which were, however, not published. He tells me that since then he has watched diligently for the return of the birds to his district. This year (1937) the Black Honeyeaters came again and he secured additional pictures. He was desirous of publishing them in *The Emu* before photographs appeared elsewhere, but, unfortunately in that he was forestalled by the publication in a newspaper of photographs taken at one of the nests discovered by him. Mr. Cohn was to have written for *The Emu* some account of his experiences with the birds, but has been unable to do so and has asked me to record my impressions to accompany his photographs. Incidentally, the Black Honeyeater has been chosen as the subject of the colour plate for the next (April) *Emu*, when an account from an observer with greater experience than mine of the bird will appear.

To try for photographs I visited Bendigo three times. In low scrub (*Olearia Toppii*) about two miles from the city, a pair of birds had a nest with the full complement of two eggs. On the Saturday afternoon a few hours without rain were utilized in an attempt to photograph the birds—for the rest of the week-end it rained continuously.

The hen flushed from the nest and feigned injury on our near approach. Although returning to the nest immediately the camera and tripod were removed and whilst a number of persons were close nearby, the hen could not be induced to "face the camera." Cohn had already made attempts on two previous occasions to photograph the bird, when it had been just as suspicious of the camera and tripod.

The male bird kept well away. We found that it had particular vantage points which it visited again and again, and on which it sat calling repeatedly. These points—two or three in number—consisted of bushes a little more elevated than the surroundings. The call chiefly given was



Male Black Honeyeater at nest.

Photo. by Marc Cohn.

a plaintive trill, portion of which was slightly suggestive of the note of the Grass-bird (*Megalurus gramineus*).

The hen bird came around the nest but rarely closer than about ten feet therefrom. I have never noted a bird that so regularly chose the exactly-identical points on which to alight in its comings and goings to and from the vicinity of the eggs. Upon its alighting on a particular twig one could accurately anticipate its next point, perhaps a couple of bushes away, by the experience of its prior "journeys." The flight is rapid and jerky and when extending over any distance is marked by short rising and falling motions similar to those of a Chat (*Epthianura*) in flight.

In a patch of *Hakea* bushes several miles beyond Huntly, towards the "Whipstick" scrub, another pair of nesting Black Honeyeaters was found. The nest was built at an elevation of about three feet and contained two eggs. It was constructed in the only dead bush amongst perhaps a hundred living *Hakea* shrubs. The nesting material corresponded exactly in colour with that of the twigs and seed capsules of the *Hakea* bush. The female returned readily to the nest—in this case, also, by a very defined route. Rain made attempts at photography impossible.

Two weeks later (October 31) this nest was revisited. One young bird was in the nest, with nothing to indicate what had happened to the other or to the second egg. The young bird was grey with darker stripes. The eyes were unopened.

When the camera was set up the hen displayed the same fear of it as the other bird had done and would not return to the nest. As it was found that large ants were taking advantage of the absence of the parent from the nest to attack the nestling, photography was abandoned.

On November 17 I saw Mr. Cohn again, in Bendigo, and he told me of another nest, with two young birds, near the site of the first nest. He had accustomed the birds to the proximity of a camera and tripod by putting in a few hours photographing on the previous mornings. With this bird I had better luck than with the other pairs and was able to photograph both male and female.

The nest contained two young birds a little smaller than the one already mentioned. The adults were assiduous in their foraging and returned to the nest—one or the other, but principally the male—on an average of about once every ten minutes. Although in the case of the other two nests the male had kept well away, in this case the male came much more readily. With the same zig-zag flight, making one think of Fly-catchers rather than Honeyeaters, the male came winging into the vicinity of the nest, flitted from one to the other of its points of approach, hesitated for a few seconds about a foot from the nest, and then fed the young birds. No more was the plaintive whistle heard, but a harsh

note, not very loud, which apparently apprised the young that food was on the way, took its place.

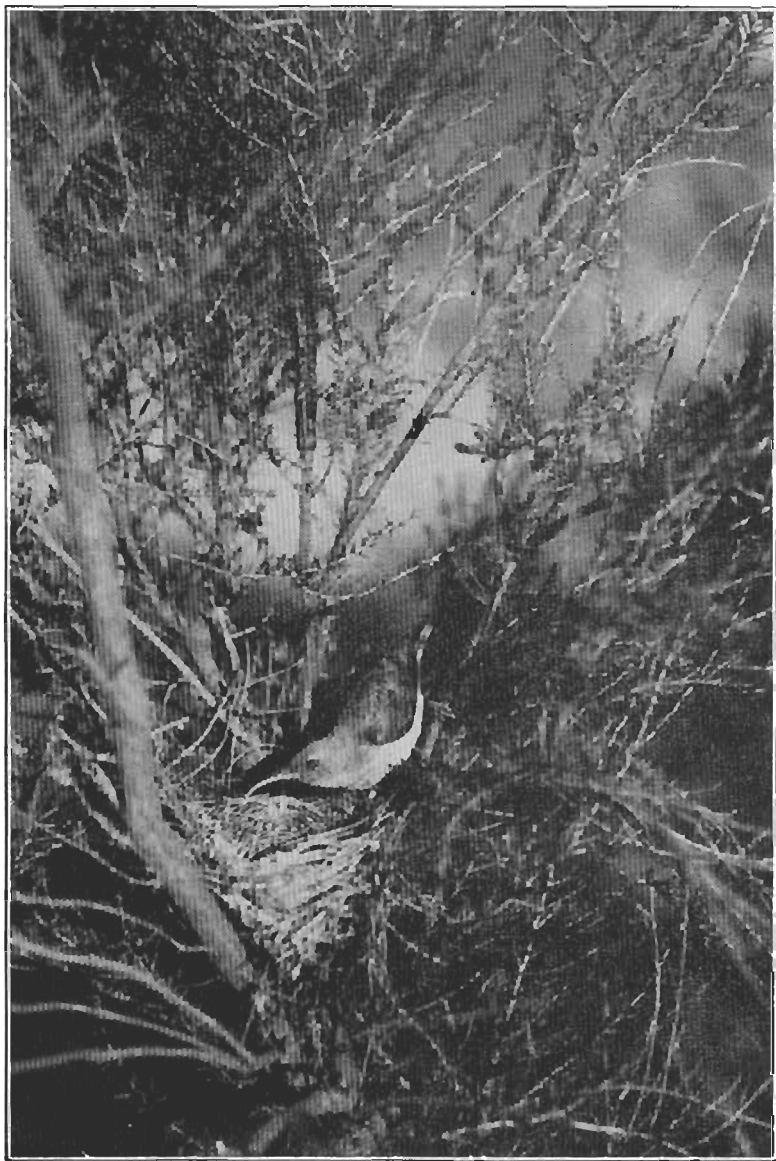
The female came to the nest once to perhaps three or four visits of her mate. She stayed in the foliage for some minutes and, although I could not make certain, I think that possibly on occasion the returning male took food from her and fed the young. The food appeared to be entirely insects and chiefly small dragon-flies. The male removed excreta on several occasions. When the female came from the thicker foliage she would generally stand or hang motionless for many seconds a foot or so from the nest before finally gathering the courage to move right down to the young birds. When the camera was finally removed she quickly returned to the nest and sat on the nestlings.

I do not know whether Cohn's experiences with this pair of birds and the others were similar to mine, but I record them in detail as little appears to have been written on the habits of the species. Later I ascertained that the birds were to be found also in the "Whipstick" scrub—an area of stunted mallee trees (chiefly *Eucalyptus viridis*, *E. Behriana*, *E. polybractea* and a little *E. incrassata*) and heathy growths to the north-west of Bendigo. Here the birds were drinking, in company with other Honeyeaters, at a dam by the roadside. No nests were found, however.

Cockatoo-Parrots Visit Southern Victoria.—Rarely is the Cockatoo-Parrot (*Leptolophus hollandicus*) recorded in the south of Victoria, and then only at long intervals. Early in November, 1937, a small flock of seven was seen near Bream Creek, south of Geelong. So intent on their own affairs were some of the flock that it was possible to stand directly under the dead tree on which they alighted without disturbing them. It was thought worth while to follow up the observation, but on the occasion of our second visit the Cockatoo-Parrots were not located.

It is generally believed that the spasmodic appearance of inland forms coincides with drought conditions in the north, and some authorities have gone to considerable trouble to co-ordinate the cause and effect. Is it not possible that a series of good seasons, and consequent "breeding up," may produce an overflow, which has to seek new territory? By checking over our own bird-lists with the published records, we sometimes find that even with good seasons, inland birds visit us more often than is generally supposed.—BLANCHE E. MILLER, St. Kilda, Vic., 10/12/37.

Owing to the departure of Professor Wood Jones for England, the series of articles on the Olfactory Organ of the Tubinares has been temporarily discontinued, but will be commenced again later.



Female Black Honeyeater at nest.

Photo. by Marc Cohn.