The Black Honeyeater

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In volume xxxvii of The Emu there were published two interesting papers on this species by Messrs. C. E. Bryant and H. V. Milne, both as a result of observations made in the Bendigo district. This season (1940) a small number of the birds visited Albury and bred in an area of stunted eucalypts (Eucalyptus polyanthemos) less than a mile from the centre of the town. It is interesting to note that all the nests found here were built in the eucalypts and not in bushes of the Hakea type which are common in the area. All were between two and three feet from the ground, and, with the exception of one which was suspended from three twigs, all were built in a fork. As I have been living here for less than two years I cannot say whether the birds regularly visit this district, although none was recorded last season (which was abnormally wet). I am inclined to think, however, that their visits are irregular and would probably coincide with records from Bendigo. A farmer from Jindera, some ten miles from Albury, told me that this year a few birds were breeding on his property, but that it was the first time he had seen them here for about twelve years.

The following notes, resulting from almost daily observation for about six weeks, at six nests, are more or less supplementary to those published in the papers referred to above.

Although five of the nests each contained two eggs, eight of which hatched out, only two young birds reached maturity. There was nothing to indicate what caused the comparatively heavy mortality, and the young birds died within a week of hatching. In each case they were found dead in the nest, but the next morning were lying on the ground beneath it, the adults apparently having removed them. In every instance the adults left the locality as soon as the young birds died, and only those which still had young alive in the nest remained. Five weeks after they arrived, all but two pairs had left the nesting area, and a week later they had also gone. On November 29 I saw about half a dozen pairs, with at least one young bird, about half a mile from where the nests were found. These may have been the same birds.

The birds were first recorded by the writer on October 16, and two days later I found two nests, both about half built; the second was the one which was suspended from three twigs. On visiting the nest several days before the young hatched out I found that one side had broken away from the twig from which it was suspended, and I
had to support the nest with a couple of twigs tied across beneath it. The bird returned and brooded the eggs as soon as I left, and subsequently two young birds hatched out. Part of the twigs and the string tying them to the branch below the nest show clearly in one of the photographs taken after the young hatched.

By October 24 both of these nests contained the full complement of two eggs. Those in the first nest took fifteen days to hatch, and those in the second nest (suspended) took sixteen days. Both young birds from the first nest and one of those from the second died, but the remaining bird lived and finally left the nest on November 24, fifteen days later (hatched on November 9).

On October 27 I found a third nest, containing two eggs which the female was brooding. Four days later, however, the male was brooding and there was no sign of the female. For the following three days I visited the nest every morning and each time found the male brooding, but the female was not seen at all. This male was much more shy than the females, which, when brooding, would allow one to approach to within several feet of the nest before leaving. I was unable to approach closer than about ten feet without flushing the bird, and, once flushed, he would not return as readily as the females at the other nests. He would not face the camera although several days were spent trying to photograph the bird on the nest. On November 7 the nest was deserted and there was no sign of the male. Both eggs were infertile.

I have not been able to trace any previous record of the male assisting in the incubation of the eggs, which, in this case, was possibly caused by the disappearance of the female. Milne (loc. cit., p. 248) states that “while the nest is being built and during incubation the male seldom pays a visit to the site.” Such was also my experience with all the other nests I had under observation, for, although most of the males had a favourite perch close to the nest, none was seen at the nests while they still contained eggs. After the young hatched out, however, several males were seen, and one was photographed sitting on them.

While one of the nests contained eggs the female would not return with the camera set up a few feet away. As soon as the young hatched out, however, she returned readily and sat on the young although the camera was only three feet away; she remained there while I walked up to the camera and changed the film after exposure. Three days later, whilst I was focusing the camera, which was then even closer to the nest than before, she returned and sat on the young, and stayed there while I placed my finger on the edge of the nest, actually touching the bird. Later
in the day I found it difficult to keep her off for a few minutes while waiting for the sun to come out. I had to cover the nest completely with my hand, and even then she was hopping about on the branch a few inches away. She returned as soon as I took my hand away from the nest.

On November 13, when the young birds were four days old, the adults used a new call note—a sharp, metallic “chick, chick” very like that of the Black-fronted Dotterel, and very different from the long indrawn whistle so often used by the male while the female was building and incubating. From that time on, this whistle was seldom heard, both adults using the “chick, chick” call and, occasionally, a harsh scolding note. The next morning, when I approached the nest, the female feigned injury. The male did not, but at another nest containing one young bird almost ready to leave, both adults feigned injury, tumbling about on the ground a few feet away. It is interesting to note that, in the first case, the bird did not commence to feign injury until the young bird was five days old, although I had had the nest under almost daily observation since the first egg was laid, and, until then, the adults were, apparently, quite unconcerned by my presence. After that, the female feigned injury each time I approached and became very agitated when I was near the nest.

Mr. Milne states that no call note is uttered by the hen, but that was not my experience, for the females here called, while building and brooding, with a similar indrawn piping note to that of the male, but it was much quieter and softer. The note was difficult to hear unless one were close to the bird, and that, together with the fact that the females do not call as often (or as loudly) as the males, may have been the reason for Mr. Milne’s impression that they do not call at all. Later, after the young had hatched, they also used similar notes to the male’s, viz. the “chick, chick” and harsh scolding notes.

One point which struck me forcibly, and to which I have not seen previous reference, was the marked similarity of many of the habits of this species to those of the Tawny-crowned Honeyeater. Both inhabit the same type of country—heathy waste-lands, and dwarf scrub lands; both build the same type of nest, usually wedged into the fork of a small bush close to the ground; both have the same habit of flying up spirally, or sometimes vertically, for perhaps forty or fifty feet to catch an insect, then dropping back to the same stick or another close to it; and finally, the long, plaintive, indrawn whistle of the male Black Honeyeater is not unlike one of the calls of the Tawny-crowned species.