

## Some Remarks on the Nesting of the Brown-backed Honeyeater

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During December, 1930, when I spent about three weeks in the Cairns district, North Queensland, many tropical species of birds were observed breeding. With the exception of the Peaceful Dove (*Geopelia placida*), White-breasted Wood Swallow (*Artamus leucorhynchus*) and Yellow Figbird (*Sphecotheres flaviventris*), the species most commonly observed nesting was the Brown-backed Honeyeater (*Gliciphila modesta*). About two miles from the Cairns railway station many of these birds were breeding in the tea-tree swamps, and although the birds were at times observed in the forest country about the swamps, in no case did I see a nest in any other type of tree than the *Melaleuca*. Although this bird is sometimes found in open forest country, in the main its domestic economy seems to be built up around the *Melaleuca*, as not only do they in the vast majority of cases seem to nest and feed only in the tea-tree swamps, but the paper-like bark of the tea-tree was the only material used in the construction of the 39 nests I examined.\*

A peculiar feature of the nesting of these birds is that they seem to have a distinct colonisation instinct, and groups of 21, 10 and 8 nests respectively were found. These groups contained nests with eggs and young in all stages of development. Each group of nests was confined to an area of not more than a circle of 50 yards diameter, and although there was a huge area of similar country, I did not find any isolated nests.

The nest is an elongated oval-shaped structure with side entrance near the top—much the shape of a Blue Wren's nest but larger. The size of the nest varies considerably but an average nest measured as follows:—Length over all, 8 inches; diameter, 3.75 inches; internally 5 inches deep by 2 inches diameter; entrance hole 1.5 inches diameter. Nests as long as 9.3 inches and as short as 6.75 inches were seen—a rather large variation in size. All the nests were constructed throughout of the soft paper-like bark of the tea-tree and were suspended at the very extremity of twigs of those trees. The location varied from 6 feet to 50 feet from the ground, and nests were found in both dead and leafy twigs. In the construction of the nest coarser strips of bark are used for the actual nest and finer strips of the same material for the lining.

\*A. J. North, in *Nests and Eggs*, Vol. II, p. 78, speaks of "an abnormal nest, having fibre mixed with the tea-tree bark".

One nest kept under observation was constructed in four days and contained a clutch of three eggs within seven days of the birds' commencing to build. The two birds worked together, and in one day had completed the general outer framework, consisting of long strips of bark—some fully twice the length of the bird itself. The hooded or upper portion of the nest was practically finished at the same time; it was much more crudely made than the lower portion and was very little added to after the first day's work. At the end of the second day (December 11) the outer appearance of the nest was that of a completed one. The third day (December 12) was busily spent by the birds in lining their home—the lining consisting of fine bark, mostly lying loose in the bottom of the nest to a depth of almost  $1\frac{1}{2}$  inches. On the fourth day very little was done by the birds, and on the fifth, sixth and seventh days eggs were laid. I do not know at what time of the day the first egg was laid, as it was present in the nest when I climbed to it at 10 a.m., but the other two were laid between the hours of 9 and 10 a.m. Other nests were slower in construction.

All nests in the colonies of eight and ten nests contained young, but the colony of 21 nests contained 10 with eggs, six sets of three and four sets of two eggs. Three eggs or young birds was the maximum number seen in any nest. No Cuckoos' eggs were seen, but eleven nests contained young birds which appeared to be Brush Cuckoos (*Cacomantis pyrrhophanus*), and a pair of the Honeyeaters was observed feeding a young Brush Cuckoo, which had already left the nest.

The birds were in constant attendance on the young, which they fed on insects, some of which were caught on the wing and some—among which was a small species of ant, which was to be found in thousands on every tea-tree—picked up off the trees. Only once were the birds seen at a nest which contained a full clutch of eggs. Possibly in the humid atmosphere of the tropical swamps the heat by day is sufficient for incubation purposes if the bird sits at night and during any colder weather. In most cases the eggs were more than half-buried in the loose bark in the nest, and possibly that serves to keep the eggs warm, so that with the hood above to keep out possible rain, incubation could be carried out without full parental care.

The eggs of this species are usually recognisable at a glance not only from those of any other Honeyeater, but also from those of any other Australian bird. The usual type is a pale, flesh colour when fresh, but pure white when blown, with distinct dark violet or black spots scattered sparsely over the surface with a slight tendency to zoning at the larger end. They are elongated oval in shape, close-

grained, smooth and lustreless, measuring about .8 by .5 inch. Others, less common, are of a compressed oval shape with a zone of minute black spots at the larger end.

**Black-breasted Buzzards Near Melbourne.**—It is rarely that southern Victoria is visited by birds confined to the interior of Australia, but on November 16, 1930, a pair of Black-breasted Buzzards (*Hamirostra melanosterna*) was seen in the vicinity of Lilydale, which lies 24 miles east of Melbourne. When first seen from a distance they were flying high, and I regarded them as Swamp Harriers (*Circus approximans*), as a pair of these birds had nested in the locality a few years previously. After a time one of the birds descended low enough for a hill to be in the background, and it was then noticed that its plumage instead of being brown was black. Eventually both birds came sailing overhead, and it was then that they were definitely recognised as Buzzards by the conspicuous white patches under the wings. For over half-an-hour they remained in view, keeping close together, and soaring in circles, usually at a great height from the ground; then suddenly they disappeared in a northerly direction. They appeared to be very powerful fliers, as there was a strong north wind blowing, which they could travel against with hardly a movement of the wings.

The wide variation in the plumage of these birds has often been commented upon by ornithological writers. Specimens range from brown to black. These two birds were very dark in appearance, which suggested that they were old birds. It was also noticed, as the birds passed overhead, that the centre tail feathers were slightly longer than the outer ones, although one important work on Australian ornithology states that the tail is "practically square." Owing to the tail feathers of all the specimens in the Melbourne Museum being badly worn at the tips, I am unable to verify this statement as being of general application.

Lilydale is by no means the most southern limit from which this bird has been recorded. In *The Emu*, Vol. XVII, page 103, the late Colonel W. V. Legge reported that in November, 1916, he had seen a single specimen pass over his homestead in Tasmania, flying in a north-easterly direction. It is quite likely that on rare occasions these birds come into Victoria, especially in the north-west corner of the State, where, I understand, one was shot a few years ago. In the collection in the Melbourne National Museum there are two specimens collected long ago in the vicinity of Swan Hill, which is on the northern boundary of Victoria.—D. J. DICKISON, R.A.O.U., Melbourne, Victoria.