

The Yellow-spotted Honeyeater

By A. J. MARSHALL, R.A.O.U., Penshurst, N.S.W.

The Yellow-spotted or Lesser Lewin Honeyeater (*Meliphaga analoga*) is a dweller in the jungles, forests and mangrove swamps of the far north, its range extending from Cape York to the Rockingham Bay district. In many ways this tropic honey-bird greatly resembles its close relative, the Yellow-eared or Lewin Honeyeater (*M. lewini*); their voices carry the same decisive quality, they lay much the same type of eggs in similar nests, and they have many unmistakable mannerisms in common. The range of *M. lewini* is generally accepted as being from about the Barron River in the north, through central and southern Queensland and New South Wales to Victoria. I observed both species at Cardwell, Tully, and in the Barron Gorge in 1932, and again in the following year, and was fortunate enough to find the rarer form (*M. analoga*) nesting on several occasions.

With the "Red Thrush" (*Calluricincla megarrhyncha*) and the Pale Yellow Robin (*Eopsaltria capito*), the Yellow-spotted Honeyeater is, in my opinion, the most trustful and confiding bird of the north. Pause anywhere in the scrub, "squeak" for a moment or two, and one of the trio will almost certainly approach out of curiosity. The Thrush comes cautiously; the Robin approaches somewhat timorously at first (yet frequently at length approaching within inches of one's face); but the Honeyeater throws caution to the winds and generally dashes impulsively up to the caller at the very first "notes".

Towards the middle of November, 1932, I was exploring a dry mangrove swamp skirting the Hinchinbrook Channel when a small olive-hued bird darted from a leafy shrub growing at the fringe of the swamp. Here the mangroves gave way to timbered grasslands, the haunt of the Lemon Flycatcher (*Myiæca flavigaster*), Nutmeg Pigeon (*Myristicivora spilorrhoea*), Spangled Drongo (*Chibia bracteata*), Shining Starling (*Aplonis metallica*), and a host of other equally notable forms. A whistle soon induced the runaway

bird to return, and, having ascertained its identity—it was a Yellow-spotted Honeyeater—I commenced to search the leafy bush for its nest.

It was a wonderfully well-concealed structure, being completely hidden by long drooping leaves, and suspended from four twigs—one at each side of the nest. Deep and almost cup-shaped, it was built chiefly of bark shreds, cosily lined with fluffy white plant-down, and exteriorly decorated with pale-green lichens from the surrounding mangrove trunks. The nest contained two fresh eggs which were of a delicate pinkish-white ground colour and irregularly spotted with red at the base. Whilst I was taking rough measurements of the nest and a description of the eggs and surroundings, the sitting bird fluttered anxiously about, often flying to a half-opened nearby blossom and pretending to sip the nectar whilst she watched my movements. A single sharp call note was occasionally given.

When I arrived next morning the nest was warm, but the owner was not in the immediate vicinity, and no amount of whistling would induce it to return. Large-billed Warblers (*Gerygone magnirostris*), Sun-birds (*Cyrtostomus frenatus*) and a Lemon Flycatcher, however, all paid me a visit as I whistled to the absent Honeyeater. The Flycatcher was most agitated; it “churred” twice after the manner of its brown relative, and emitted a melodious succession of five sharp “pee-pees” as it flew excitedly around.

On the following day the eggs of the Honeyeater were warm, yet the owners were again absent. As the nest was situated several miles from my camp, I was not able to devote it as much attention as was desirable. On returning from a trip to Ban Yan Creek some four days later, I found the owner again absent, but as before, the temperature of the nest reassured me that all was well.

A further trip to the scrubs to the north kept me away from the Honeyeater for yet another seven days, and on my return the eggs were much stained and had the appearance of being heavily incubated. Both birds were now about, and rarely failed to approach when called. After another five days’ absence from Rockingham Bay, I arrived “home” and found two young Honeyeaters occupying the nest. The young were estimated to be about three days old, so that if the eggs were perfectly fresh when the nest was discovered then the period of incubation for *M. analoga* would appear to be about fifteen days.

The nest seemed to be in the same condition as when first observed; it had not as yet in any way contrived to break away from its “moorings” as do so many of the suspended type of Honeyeaters’ homes.

Here is a quotation from my note-book, written on the spot, and dated 5/12/32:—

"The nestlings at this stage (three days) utter only a faint squeak. The female (?) is now so tame that her wings brush my shoulder as I stand beside the nest watching her tend the young. Her alarm note is a sharp "queak-queak-queak", and the note most often used while foraging is a single melodious "chip". Besides the latter call, a series of four or five thin squeaks is oft-times given, as well as a more beautiful succession of perhaps ten notes quickly repeated—reminiscent of *M. lewini's* loud rattling notes, but greatly inferior in tone and volume.

"Both parents feed the young, but one (the more shy) usually eats any food it gets. The babies are fed on nectar obtained from the just-opening buds of the mangroves and other flowers. Insects, too, are adroitly captured on the wing, and are brought to the nest for the nestlings' consumption. When approaching the nest the adults never come directly; instead, they come up through the foliage from the rear and it is usually not until the leaves around the nest begin to quiver that I am sure the young are being fed. When vacating the nest, the Honeyeater drops to within a foot from the ground and flits silently away over the mangrove "suckers", often carrying away excreta, which is discarded on the journey across the dry cracked mud of the swamp."

Two days after the above was inscribed I arrived on the site and was not a little grieved to find the nest damaged and the young ones gone. The nest, which was probably inaccessible to all except avian enemies, was found to have a large hole torn in the side where some rapacious claw had been inserted. I used the squeaking whistle with which the birds by now were quite familiar and both adults came in answer to my calls. They seemed, however, to be utterly indifferent, for on this occasion there was no fluttering about, or excited cries; they were silent and aloof, and refused to come closer than the lowest limbs of an overhanging mangrove.

As I left the district on the following day I was unable to acquire further notes on the behaviour of this little-known Honeyeater. I cannot refrain, however, from recapitulating the story of "Jacky", the familiar Yellow-spotted Honeyeater which endeared himself to "Beachcomber" Banfield when he lived on Dunk Island. The versatile "Jacky" learned that the bananas hanging ripening in the pantry of the Banfield bungalow were much more palatable than those in the garden. "Jacky" also learned how to get through the wire netting into the pantry, and, if the pantry door happened to be closed, he would call loudly and imperiously until it was opened for him to gain access to his favourite fruit!

Another instance of the surprising trustfulness of the "Yellow-spot" is related by Mr. A. H. Chisholm* when he tells of a mainland experience with this charming species. Mr. Chisholm relates having stolen right up to a sitting bird, and actually plucked her from the nest in order to make a precise description of the bird to assist in the determination of the species.

**Birds and Green Places*, p. 73.