

The Crescent Honeyeater

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Although the Crescent Honeyeater (*Phylidonyris pyrrhoptera*) has a wide range and is common in certain areas, there have been surprisingly few field-notes published. A number of records of its occurrence have been made but, apart from an article by D. J. Dickison (1926), who recorded some excellent field-notes on the nesting and feeding habits of this species at Lilydale, Vic., in 1926, and the earlier works of A. G. Campbell (1900), C. F. Belcher (1914), A. J. North (1909) and others which were published over 50 years ago, this species appears to have been neglected by modern field-workers.

The Crescent Honeyeater, which is also known as the Horse-shoe Honeyeater and the Tasmanian Honeyeater, is distributed throughout the coastal and mountainous areas of south-eastern Australia, but its stronghold is in Tasmania. On the mainland it prefers the moist mountain gullies or the dense, thick belts of tea-tree growing near the ranges, but in Tasmania it is widely dispersed, being found on the coast as well as near the tops of mountains. It definitely prefers cold situations and does not appear to suffer any bodily discomfort even by the presence of snow. However, where snow remains on the ground for long periods the absence of insects or flowering shrubs will cause the birds to move nearer the lowlands in search of food.

There are many Tasmanian records of the birds being seen in suburban gardens during the colder months, and sometimes they will remain to nest. Miss J. A. Fletcher (1928) records that a pair of Crescent Honeyeaters "built their nest and reared their young in a low Pelargonium bush growing in the garden. The nest was only a foot away from a path that was constantly used (September-October, 1927)".

In other areas, where the winter is not so severe, the birds will remain throughout the year. Consequently, in some districts the species is nomadic while in other places it is stationary.

Although it is found in the dense gullies of the mountains from southern Queensland to the Mount Lofty Ranges in South Australia, it is most common in the foothills and the mountain gullies east of Melbourne, the Otway Ranges and the Grampian Range.

There are a number of permanent colonies in the Dandenongs, some 20 miles east of Melbourne, and other groups in the dense tea-tree thickets between Mooroolbark and Lilydale. Campbell (1900) recorded this species nesting in 1879 in the tea-tree scrub at Oakleigh, a suburb that is now fully developed as a residential area.

The loud call of the Crescent Honeyeater can be heard in a number of fern-clad gullies of ranges in eastern Victoria, but during the winter the birds that frequent the higher altitudes move towards the lower regions. They appear to be permanent residents



The male Crescent Honeyeater with small insects for the young birds.

in the gullies and tea-tree scrubs on Wilson's Promontory. Charles Barrett (1920) during a visit made in October, 1919, stated: "It was blossom-time, and Honey-eaters of several species were feasting in thousands. The Crescent Honey-eater — was dominant, and its sharp call 'E-gypt', echoed from every bush and tree." In recent years B. and A. Salter (1959) recorded totals of 152 Crescent Honeyeaters being seen on August 24-25, 1957, and 177 on January 25-26, 1958.

These Honeyeaters are also dispersed throughout the gullies of the Illawarra Ranges of New South Wales, but, although they have been recorded as being common, they do not appear to be as abundant there as they are in Victoria. I have only found them in isolated areas, although there are many suitable habitats in these ranges. This is confirmed by the observations made during the 1954 R.A.O.U. Camp-out at Mount Keira. Many localities in the ranges were visited but A. R. McGill and S. G. Lane (1955), when writing up the report of the birds seen at the Camp-out, stated: "Recorded only at the top of Jamberoo Pass and at Fitzroy Falls".

The Blue Mountains are another area where they can be found and most gullies will contain one or two pairs. However, in that area, my own observations made over many years differ from the statement made by North (1909) that "it is one of the commonest species in the dense undergrowth of the valleys and the precipitous rocky gorges of the higher portions of the Blue Mountains". Some of these birds apparently move down to the Sydney area during the winter months, but they are not in any large numbers. This is an interesting altitudinal migration similar to that which takes place in Victoria and Tasmania. I have recorded the birds on several occasions from the dense gullies in the Royal National Park (20 miles south of Sydney) and have also seen them on the heathlands. On June 30, 1946, I recorded a large flock feeding on the flowers of *Epacris* and *Grevillea* growing beneath scattered gum-trees, at East Willoughby, on the top of a sandstone outcrop overlooking Middle Harbour.

Nesting records for the coastal areas are extremely rare but F. G. Johnston and A. Brinsley (1952) recorded the finding of five nests — four at Bundeena and one at Engadine — between August 28, 1944, and July 31, 1951. On August 15, 1954, A. R. McGill and F. G. Johnston (1955) found another nest at Bundeena.

In western Victoria the birds are common in the Otway Ranges and also in the Grampians. At Barwon Heads, Vic., during August, 1955, E. J. Bound (1957) recorded that there was an unusually heavy blossoming of eucalypts and that Crescent Honeyeaters invaded the flowering trees in numbers rarely seen in that district. On August 28, 1955, 72 birds were counted and a nest located. This appears to be the first nesting record for that area. Elsewhere the species occurs in small numbers and the western limit of its range, apart from a few isolated records, is in the Mount Lofty Ranges and on Kangaroo Island. (Terrill & Rix, 1950.)



Unusual nesting combination. Open, cup-shaped nest of Crescent Honeyeater above and domed nest of White-browed Scrub-wren below.

Occasionally stray birds will be seen in areas far removed from their normal range. V. T. Lowe (1958) recorded the presence of a female Crescent Honeyeater at Mystic Park, Vic., on February 1 and 2, 1958. It is difficult to understand how this bird came to be in the "dry plain areas of the mid-Murray Valley", which is totally unlike its normal habitat. Possibly it had moved westward from the range around Mount Buffalo and the Victorian Alps, where I had listed its occurrence during a visit made to those areas in January, 1956. At a small township called Carraragarmungee, situated a few miles from Wangaratta, where the mountains give way to the plains, Miss Gladys M. Cheney recorded (1915) "Crescent Honeyeater. — The salvia flowers offered honey to these birds, which paid regular morning visits to them." Apart from the observation made by Lowe this is the only record that I can find for the inland areas.

In the Grampian Ranges the population of the Crescent Honeyeater has varied over the past 50 years. G. F. Hill (1907) in 1907 found that "they are numerous in the Grampian Mountains", while Marc Cohn (1927), during a stay of two weeks on the range in September, 1927, recorded that they "appeared to be confined to one pretty spot called Delhi's Dell, on the Daisy Creek above the Silverband Falls". Last year I stayed for two weeks, from August 29, 1959, to September 12, 1959, at Hall's Gap, the small township at the entrance to the Wannan Valley in the Grampians. Crescent Honeyeaters were in almost every dense gully and also in the thick tea-tree scrub growing on the slopes and the tops of the ranges. Four birds were seen in the tea-trees within a few feet of the Mount Victory lookout. Strangely enough, the only place where I did not record them was in Delhi's, now known as Delly's, Dell, but undoubtedly they must have been there as I observed them in areas near-by. There appears to be a small movement from the Grampians into the surrounding countryside at certain times of the year, but the birds do not wander very far.

It is an active species with a very fast flight, which has been aptly described by John Gould (1865): "When disturbed it flits off with a quick darting flight — or shrouds itself from observation among the foliage of the sapling gums". In the Grampians I sat on a rocky ledge, at the top of a waterfall, overlooking a dense, fern-clad gully where there appeared to be at least four pairs of these Honeyeaters. Their loud calls of "E-gypt, E-gypt", and a harsh single note, were heard over a distance of about 100 yards down the gully, and the birds were seen flitting from bush to bush. As I was desirous of learning if the birds were nesting I stayed at my vantage-point for nearly two hours. Gradually I became aware that there were only two Honeyeaters, not four pairs, in the area; the error in my original estimate of the numbers was caused by the extremely fast action and the loud calls of the birds, also in their ability to shelter among the foliage of almost every fern and shrub. Subsequent observation confirmed that only two birds

were in the area and that they were collecting material from lower down in the gully and building a nest below the waterfall.

Having now acquired a better understanding of the habits of these birds, I revisited other areas where I had made previous records and found that in almost every instance I had over-estimated the numbers. This may explain the variations in the records of different observers in other areas.

In the foothills of the ranges east of Melbourne the birds remain in the same area throughout the year and nesting is begun in the latter part of June or early in July. In the near-by Dandenong Ranges, which are some 1,500 feet higher and where snow will sometimes fall during the winter, there is a slight movement of the Honeyeaters down to the lower parts. Nesting may be delayed until August, or even as late as October, although I have heard of nests being found at Sherbrooke Forest during July.

A pair of Crescent Honeyeaters will return to the same nesting area each year and often the new nest will be found built within a few feet of the nest of the previous year.

In the Mooroolbark district a pair of Crescent Honeyeaters nested in the same area for several years. On June 23, 1957, the nest was built in the middle of a dense clump of tea-tree. A small thick branch of gum-leaves had lodged in the fork of a paper-bark at a height of 3 feet from the ground and on this solid base the birds had built their nest. It was constructed of strips of bark and fine fibre, and lined with grass-stems. I visited the nest on July 21, 1957, and it then contained two young birds who were not more than 48 hours old. Before the hatching of the eggs the male was not seen to visit the nest, but now he took his full share of looking after the nestlings. He would bring food to the young birds, feed them, pick up the faeces and fly away with it in his bill. By contrast the female, after feeding the young birds, would swallow the excreta and then brood the nestlings.

The male always approached the nest along the same definite route. Sometimes, when the female was sitting on the nest, the male would remain on a perch near-by and both birds would utter a series of soft, low notes. At the time I recorded these calls as a "whisper-song", and I think that aptly described them.

The birds did not once utter the common call-note, "E-gypt", during my stay in the vicinity of the nest. Their chief call was the single harsh note, which I have found to be used more often than the call-note "E-gypt".

On September 6, 1959, in a gully in the Grampian Range, I found a nest that was being built in the top of a clump of dead ferns that had fallen from an overhanging rockface. The nest was built into a small depression in the top of the ferns and its edges were unattached. Immediately below the nest was the nest of a White-browed Scrub-Wren (*Sericornis frontalis*), which contained eggs. The top of the latter nest was only a few inches below the

bottom of the Honeyeater's nest. Five days later both nests contained eggs, but the Scrub-Wren had apparently deserted as its eggs were cold and the bird was not seen.

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The Naming of the Pilot-Bird

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The range of the Pilot-Bird extends from the Ferntree Gully National Park, 22 miles east of Melbourne, through the humid areas of eastern Victoria and northwards through the coastal areas of New South Wales to the Royal National Park, on the southern shores of Port Hacking. It also occurs on the Blue Mountains as far as Mount Wilson and as far west as Lidsdale, about seven miles north-west of Lithgow. Although large areas of this country had been taken up by selectors prior to 1850, this bird remained undiscovered.

John Gould failed to collect a specimen when he was in the scrubs of the Illawarra district early in 1840, where the birds are still plentiful. It was not until May 14, 1850, that he was able to describe the species, which he named *Pycnoptilus floccosus*, at a meeting of the Zoological Society of London. It had been