Biparental Care in the Brown Honeyeater *Lichmera indistincta*

In honeyeaters, the female carries out most, if not all, of the nest-building, incubation of eggs and brooding of the young (Longmore 1991). The male, however, normally assists in feeding the nestlings and fledglings. Longmore (1991), in his recent book on the biology of the Australian honeyeaters, stated for 32 species that the male and female feed the young, in 14 species the male and female, plus helpers, feed the young, and for 20 species the parental role at this stage of the breeding cycle is unknown. (One 'unknown' species is the Red Wattlebird *Anthochaera carunculata*, in which I have observed both parents feed the young on many occasions.) The only exception to these patterns that Longmore gave is the Brown Honeyeater *Lichmera indistincta*. For this species, he stated that the female alone feeds the young. This statement was based on the brief study of one nesting pair by Cassels (1961), who described only the female feeding the young. She also noted that the male, if he came to the nest to inspect the nestlings, was chased away by the female. Surprisingly, there appears to have been no other study of the breeding of this honeyeater, despite its being common in many urban areas in eastern Australia. Robertson (1969) showed a photograph of a bird at a nest; it was probably a male as it had a black gape, though this bird was not feeding young. Longmore (1991) showed photographs of only yellow-gaped birds, presumably females, at the nest. In this note, I describe brief observations of a Brown Honeyeater nest, in which two birds, presumed to be male and female, clearly fed the nestlings.

A Brown Honeyeater nest was found in a *Callistemon* shrub near an office building at Brisbane Airport (27°23'S, 153°7'E), on 1 August 1997. It was about 2 m above the ground and contained two small young, perhaps 2 or 3 days old. I watched it for just over one hour, starting at 0900 h Eastern Standard Time. One bird sang frequently, and was assumed to be the male parent; the other bird did not sing, but brooded the young, and was assumed to be the female parent. Unfortunately, I did not take a note of the gape colours of the birds, as males have a black gape, while breeding, and females a yellow one (Robertson 1969). As the birds fed for most of the time among eucalypts and the *Callistemon* within 20 m of the nest, most of the time it was easy to keep track of which bird was which. The presumed male visited the nest to feed the young on 18 occasions during the hour and the presumed female fed the young 19 times. The presumed female brooded the young on 15 occasions for a total of 1665 seconds (46% of the time). The last brooding bout extended beyond the hour, and lasted 370 seconds, giving a mean brooding time of 131 seconds. Often, it was difficult to identify food items brought by the parents. On eight occasions they were definitely insects. I suspect that the young were also given *Callistemon* nectar, as parents sometimes flew directly from feeding on flowers to the nest and fed the young. Twice the presumed male chased another Brown Honeyeater that ventured close to the nest.

If my assumption that these two birds were a male and a female is correct, these observations indicate that Brown Honeyeaters are like other Australian honeyeaters in displaying biparental care of nestlings. The only alternative explanation, that the birds were either both males or both females, seems unlikely. Future observers of Brown Honeyeater nests should take note of the gape colours of adults that sing, feed and brood the nestlings.

It is possible that the female of Cassels' pair was exceptionally aggressive, or that her mate had died or deserted her and the purported male that came to the nest was a new bird.

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