



Blue-faced Honeyeater *Entomyzon cyanotis*

Plate 20

Photo: B. & K. Richards

Blue-faced Honeyeaters Feeding Yellow-throated Miner Nestlings

On 6 February 1994, on the outskirts of Leeton (in the Riverina district of New South Wales), I was bird-watching with Keith Hutton. Our attention was attracted to a juvenile Blue-faced Honeyeater *Entomyzon cyanotis* begging on the edge of a Yellow-throated Miner *Manorina flavigula* nest. The former had the yellow juvenile facial skin and appeared able to fly well. The nest contained three small nestlings with eyes still closed; they were identified as Yellow-throated Miners from their size and shape (e.g. bill and head), later confirmed when they were feathered. Time prevented further observations on that day. As we left, an adult Blue-faced Honeyeater landed in a neighbouring tree with food, appearing to entice the juvenile away from the nest. Adult Miners were present and showed a strong attachment to the nest, although they tolerated the Blue-faced Honeyeaters.

I revisited the area on 11 February for approximately 45 minutes. As the nest area was approached, Blue-faced Honeyeaters were seen visiting the nest. At least three immatures (second-year birds with green faces: Clancy 1994) and two adults were feeding the Miner nestlings which were now feathered and identifiable. Yellow-throated Miners were also attending the nest. Over the duration of the watch, the Miners visited the nest about two or three times for every Blue-faced Honeyeater visit. The juvenile Blue-faced Honeyeater was not seen on this second visit.

It was not until both species met at the nest that any interaction occurred. There were two events that were particularly noteworthy. First, an immature Blue-faced

Honeyeater sat on the nest edge. A Miner attempted to visit and feed the nestlings, but retreated a short distance when challenged by the Blue-faced Honeyeater. Not deterred, the Miner returned to the nest to feed the nestlings, but the food was intercepted by the Honeyeater. The Honeyeater then in turn attempted to feed the nestlings, but the Miner tried to reclaim the food. The Honeyeater then ate the food. The Miner left the nest, followed shortly afterward by the Honeyeater.

On the second occasion, two immature Blue-faced Honeyeaters flew to the nest. The bird without food defended the nest against the one with food. The latter ate the food then left. Over approximately 10 minutes, the former prevented other Blue-faced Honeyeaters and two to three Miners from feeding the nestlings. They all waited in a nearby tree. Eventually one of the Miners approached the nest and half-heartedly attempted to feed the young. When challenged, it surrendered the food to the Honeyeater, which fed the nestlings. Eventually the Blue-faced Honeyeater left.

The nest was about 8 m high, in a roadside strip of Sugar Gum *Eucalyptus cladocalyx* and close to a large stand of Black Box *E. largiflorens*. It was constructed of grass and suspended in a horizontal fork by the rim. It was not a typical Miner's nest for the local area (K. Hutton pers. comm.), being larger and bulkier than is usual for that species. However, it was not an old Blue-faced Honeyeater's nest, as the latter are cup shapes constructed of bark strips and built in vertical forks (e.g. Frith 1976, Beruldsen 1980). It may have been built by a third species and appropriated by the Miners, as I have a record of Noisy Miners *M. melanocephala* using the old nest of an Olive-backed Oriole *Oriolus sagittatus*. The nest at Leeton was showing wear, with the rim frayed, and was unusually deep (20 cm) with a hole on one side. The nestlings could be seen at the base, and had a short climb to the rim.

The history of the nest is not known, nor which species built it or incubated the eggs. However, the Miners showed by far the stronger attachment to it and became agitated if I approached it too closely. The Blue-faced Honeyeaters played no such defensive role, their only role being to feed the nestlings.

This episode provides further evidence of communal breeding in the Blue-faced Honeyeater, and indicates that feeding of young is a basic response to a stimulus in honeyeaters. For instance, Longmore (1991) observed a pair of Blue-faced Honeyeaters feed a begging juvenile Australian Magpie *Gymnorhina tibicen*, and Tyson (1993) observed Yellow-tufted Honeyeaters *Lichenostomus melanops* (a communal species) feeding Yellow-faced Honeyeater *L. chrysops* nestlings. Such a response would allow co-operative breeding to evolve easily in associations between individuals.

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References

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