

Breeding of the White-plumed Honey-eater near Sydney

By K. A. HINDWOOD, Sydney, N.S.W.

The White-plumed Honeyeater (*Meliphaga penicillata*) has an extensive distribution throughout a goodly part of Australia, and is generally found in open-forest country. It has taken kindly to settlement and frequents gardens and parks in and about the cities of Melbourne and Adelaide. Until recent years it was considered to be but an autumn and winter straggler, or nomad, to the environs of Sydney, though elsewhere in New South Wales, particularly west of the Dividing Range, it is quite numerous.

A. J. North does not mention the species in his two lists, 1889,⁽¹⁾ and 1898,⁽²⁾ of the birds of the County of Cumberland (Sydney district); nor is it recorded therefrom in his important work, *The Nest and Eggs of Birds found Breeding in Australia and Tasmania*, the relevant part of which, dealing with the White-plumed Honeyeater, was published in 1907⁽³⁾.

The first specimens from the County of Cumberland appear to be four in the Australian Museum collected by Robert Grant at Helensburgh on June 10, 1916 (specimens 0.29157-8-9-60). Subsequent records, up to 1944, were summarized in *The Australian Zoologist*⁽⁴⁾ as follows—

The White-plumed Honeyeater, or 'Greenie,' occurs in the county mainly during the autumn and winter months. The absence of sufficient data does not permit of any definite conclusions as to its status with us. It seems to be an irregular and uncommon visitor to the Sydney district. Apparently the birds observed are wanderers from places west of the Blue Mountains, where the species is common. Its occurrence in the county may be associated with adverse conditions in its normal range. P. A. Gilbert records (*The Emu*, vol. 34, January, 1935, p. 205) it as rather plentiful during April, 1934, in the Sutherland-Menai area, and states that at that time 'The summer and the autumn were exceptionally dry in some parts of the west.' Other recorded localities and dates are:—Helensburgh, 10.6.1916 (several specimens in the Australian Museum); Douglas Park, 3.4.1938 (several); and Balmoral, 9.12.1939 (a few). The date of this last record is unusual. The birds were observed in a patch of open forest. I do not know of any nesting records for the county.

Additional records have accumulated since 1944 and it is now apparent that the White-plumed Honeyeater is widely distributed throughout the Sydney district, though nowhere can it be considered plentiful. At the present time its status is that of a resident breeding species. Perhaps, in the years ahead, it will become one of the common birds of Sydney, as it is in Melbourne.

The invasion and colonization of a new area by a species may pass unnoticed at first, due possibly to the small number of birds taking part in the movement or, more likely, to

the absence of observers to record the happening. In the case of the White-plumed Honeyeater we have a clue in the remarks of P. A. Gilbert, who states⁽⁵⁾—

Sometimes the White-plumed Honeyeater (*Meliphaga penicillata*) visits the coast in small parties during the autumn. This is decidedly a western Honeyeater in distribution. It was rather plentiful last April (1934) near the George's River, between Sutherland and Menai. The summer and autumn were exceptionally dry in some parts of the west. Certain movements may be termed meteorological being brought about by either excessive rain or drought. The rain compels some birds to seek drier parts, or conversely attracts waterfowl. The drought causes infrequent or unusual visitations to more favoured parts. These movements, therefore, are distinct from seasonal and rhythmical movements of regular visitants.

It is logical to assume that, in the autumn of 1934, other parts of the Sydney area received their quota of White-plumed Honeyeaters, though unrecorded at the time, and that some of the birds remained to breed. An early indication that the species was breeding near Sydney came from David Leithhead who noted, during the spring of 1948, birds nesting in the grounds of the public school at Penrith, on the western border of the County, near the foothills of the Blue Mountains. About the same time, J. S. P. Ramsay observed adults feeding two 'stub-tailed' young out of the nest at Woolwich, a Sydney suburb. On October 16, 1948, E. Hoskin and G. Marshall saw adults feeding young out of the nest at North Sydney (St. Leonards) Park. A similar observation was made by P. A. Gilbert at Lakemba on January 14, 1949. Later—August 6, 1949—J. S. P. Ramsay watched a pair of birds building in a jacaranda tree at Woolwich; within a day or two the birds removed the nesting material and built elsewhere.

During August, 1949, two nests, each containing young, were found by E. Hoskin in leafy fig trees (*Ficus Hillii*) in North Sydney Park, the respective dates being August 20, and August 28. Both nests were later collected; among the materials used by the birds were many bits of coloured wool and thread, including a long piece of blue cotton, still with the needle attached, woven into the nest. The needle was hanging loosely on the outside. Did some imaginative reader whisper 'Tailor-bird,' or 'Stitch-bird'? A third nest, in course of construction, also built in a fig tree (*F. Hillii*) was found by E. Hoskin on October 2, 1949, about 50 yards from the two earlier nests which were only 25 feet apart.

White-plumed Honeyeaters are not uncommon in the grounds of Taronga Zoological Gardens, and twenty to thirty may be observed on a quiet day when the noise of many children and of broadcast music is not loud in the land to distract one's attention and submerge one's sense of hearing. The birds have been seen to feed on nectar from flowering

shrubs and trees, also on scraps of food in the animal enclosures. A nest containing young was found by A. R. McGill in the Zoo grounds on September 10, 1949.

Young birds out of the nest, being fed by adults, were seen by E. Hoskin and R. Boughtwood at Glenfield, near Liverpool, on September 22, 1949. The most recent nesting record concerns two pairs that nested in the grounds of the Penrith Public School during October, 1949. They nested there the previous year. Both nests were in clumps of mistletoe about 35 feet from the ground.

The number of sight records for the Sydney area is now fairly extensive; single birds, pairs, or small parties have been noted at various times of the year in suburban gardens, public parks, in less settled areas, and in forest country. Localities include Parramatta Park, Roseville, Chatswood, Sydney Domain, Cammeray Park, Ramsgate, Liverpool, and Bantry Bay (Middle Harbour). Particular mention may be made of the occurrence of the species in the grounds of the State Abattoirs at Homebush Bay where M. Goddard observed several birds throughout 1941-2, but was unable to locate any nests. During October, 1946, I observed a number of birds at Cobbitty, 35 miles southwest of Sydney. In August, 1949, John Cunningham found the species fairly common in the same locality. There seems small doubt that the birds breed both at Cobbitty and Homebush and I imagine they also breed in Parramatta Park, from the observations I have made in that locality.

It is obvious from the above remarks that the White-plumed Honeyeater is here to stay. It is a cheerful kind of bird, well able to adapt itself to the altered conditions caused by human settlement. While Melbournians may look upon the species with a degree of indifference, we, in Sydney, think more highly of this interesting addition to our nesting birds.

My thanks to the various observers mentioned in the text, for information supplied.

REFERENCES

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5. Gilbert, P. A. 'The Seasonal Movements and Migrations of Birds in Eastern New South Wales,' *The Emu*, vol. 34, pt. 3, January, 1935, pp. 200-209—see page 205.