

Overlapping of Certain Victorian Birds

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Many points concerning closely-allied species on the Australian list are awaiting the ornithologist in the field for solution. That work can best be carried out by naturalists who are situated, geographically, at advantageous points where such birds are most likely to overlap.

The district under observation is 100 miles from the coast—practically in central Victoria—and has a wonderful variety, not only in its forests and scrubs, but in the general outlay of the surrounding country. From the north-west the great Mallee belt stretches down towards Bendigo, and eventually merges into the "Whipstick" scrub, terminating completely twelve miles north of the city. The immediate surroundings of Bendigo, being of the auriferous type of country, support ironbark forests, chiefly, and, when cleared, naturally grow very little undergrowth. Ten miles south brings one to a range of hills running east and west. The undulating country there is well timbered with stringybark, grey box and white gums.

The numerous gullies are a great attraction for many species that move farther north during the winter months. The Rose Robin (*Petroica rosea*) has been recorded on several occasions early in August, and such partial migrants as the Grey Currawong (*Strepera versicolor*), Scarlet Robin (*Petroica multicolor*) and Eastern Spinebill (*Acanthorhynchus tenuirostris*) remain to breed in these typical southern gullies.

Looking south from the top of the ranges one is immediately struck by the absence of ironstone and quartz which occurs in outcrops right up to the hills, where those rocks then terminate and give way to open sheep-raising land of granite formation, traversed by a network of shallow creeks, the banks of which support many huge red gums. The bird life changes completely within half a mile of the range. The White Cockatoo (*Kakatoë galerita*) the Galah (*K. roseicapilla*) and several species of Parrots take the place of forest-frequenting species a short distance away.

The White-backed Magpie (*Gymnorhina hypoleuca*) is particularly well established south of the range, and breeds freely in the red gums that border the small watercourses. The Black-backed bird (*G. tibicen*) is common in northern Victoria and intercepts the former species, interbreeding with it in this district. I have a record of two young birds in one nest, one having the mottled grey back of a female *G. hypoleuca* and the other the black back of *G. tibicen*. These birds were under constant observation, and were kept in captivity, for a long period; but both birds still retained their original plumage after each moult. A close inspection will be made of as many nests as possible in the overlapped

portion of this district, and the results made known at a later date.

The connection of the Mallee and "Whipstick" scrub brings many interesting northern forms to the Bendigo area. These species from the drier portions of the State seem to have reached the southern limit of their range, through a gradual spreading from the north. Naturally, the more common birds of the Mallee are well represented in this scrub, their range being widened by the ever-present instinct of the young of each year to disperse and seek new territories. To the average man this "Whipstick" is "waste" land; but it holds a wealth of interest to the naturalist. Possibly the most common species to be found there is the Shy Ground-Wren (*Hylacola cauta*). The bird is a true Mallee form and does not venture from the heavy cover of the scrub to the undergrowth in the timbered forests in other parts of the district.

The Chestnut-tailed form (*Hylacola pyrrhopygia*) ranges from the coast and is found intermittently through the heavy undergrowth in forest and heath country, right up to the margin of the "Whipstick" proper. These two closely-allied species have similar habits, but their call notes differ greatly. *H. cauta* has, in this district, a very definite and distinct call. It is a pretty warbling note not unlike that of *Petroica multicolor*, and is often repeated, in the mating season, from some vantage point overlooking the scrub. This trilling warbling note is the call commonly used by the species, and from my observations the bird is not a mimic.* I have heard the scrub ringing with the birds' song at the close of a fine spring day.

The call of *H. pyrrhopygia*, however, is remarkable in the fact that it is often a well-produced call note of another species. The bird is comparatively rare in this district, and each bird that has been under observation has used a different call. Whilst I was watching a female Ground-Wren during July, 1934, a loud call, like that of a Brown Treecreeper, began to ring in my ears, and, continuing, a male repeated the call within six feet of where I was standing—with almost incredible volume for such a small bird. During August of the same year the distinct warbling of a Red-backed Parrot was heard in heavy undergrowth, and doubting that this bird would be found in such a position, we proceeded to investigate the owner of the song, and to the amazement of those present *H. pyrrhopygia* repeated the call for several minutes before our presence was noticed. Then dropping like a stone from a dry stick overlooking the scrub, the bird bounced through the dense undergrowth in a series of short flights, disappearing from view in a few seconds.

*See "Various Bird Problems," Chisholm, *Emu*, Vol. xxxv, p. 318.—H.V.M.

Another interesting "overlapping" in this district is that of the Yellow-tailed and Spotted Pardalotes. In my opinion the former bird is probably not a valid species. The principal difference between *Pardalotus xanthopygus* and *P. punctatus* is that the former bird has the bright golden-coloured tail coverts. That could easily be due to climatic conditions over long periods of isolation in these dry scrub-lands. Specimens have not been procured from this district of *P. xanthopygus*, but from close observations in the field, the Pardalotes of the "Whipstick" scrub appear to be losing the golden coverts and a medium colouration of the two species has taken place, giving us a strong belief that a climatic change has taken place with the true Mallee form.* Away from the scrub in the forest country the typical colouration of *P. punctatus* is uniform, showing that the birds that inhabit the scrub-lands are definitely progeny of the Mallee bird.

*This presupposes that the yellow-rumped form developed before the "Whipstick" type. Might it not be more reasonable to suppose that the yellow-rumped form showed a further change to that first occurring in the development of the "Whipstick" type from the typical *P. punctatus*.—Ed.

Stray Feathers

Meliphaga ornata in Southern Victoria.—A feature of a trip by the writer's party of four on August 30, 1936, to Toolern Vale Bird Sanctuary, often referred to in *The Emu* and particularly in Volume xxxiv, pp. 113-121, was the finding of a pair of Yellow-plumed Honeyeaters (*Meliphaga ornata*). This is the first record of the species for the sanctuary, and, it is believed, for a locality so far south. A true Mallee form, it is an addition to the growing list of northern birds found at Toolern, and also to the imposing list of Honeyeaters recorded from the district.

Found in company with the Fuscous (*Meliphaga fusca*) and the White-plumed (*M. penicillata*) Honeyeaters, the Yellow-plumed were easily distinguished from those birds by the striated breast and throat, and distinct yellow ear-tufts. Some of their calls were identical with those of the other species.

The sanctuary again proved its claim as one of the best districts for Honeyeaters in southern Victoria by producing thirteen species. These ranged in numbers from the one pair of Yellow-plumed under notice to hundreds in the case of the White-naped form (*Melithreptus lunatus*). Others recorded were *Melithreptus gularis*, *M. brevirostris*, *Acanthorhynchus tenuirostris*, *Meliphaga chrysops*, *M. leucotis*, *M. melanops*, *Meliornis novæ-hollandiæ*, *Myzantha melanocephala* and *Anthochaera carunculata*. *Zanthomiza phrygia* has also recently been recorded.