

NIDIFICATION OF THE YELLOW-FRONTED HONEYEATER IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA

By E. F. BOEHM, Sutherlands, S.A.

One of the first sets of eggs of the Yellow-fronted Honeyeater (*Meliphaga plumula*) to be taken in this State was collected by Drs. A. Chenery and A. M. Morgan, at Concipidney, on August 4, 1902. Dr. Chenery subsequently found several other nests with clutches of from two to three eggs in small shrubs on the slopes of the Flinders Ranges from the month of June to September. G. M. Mathews (*Birds of Australia*, XI: p. 539) describes a set of two eggs from Balah Station, Morgan, taken from a nest in a small shrub, close to the ground, on July 31, 1909. J. Neil McGilp (*S.A. Orn.*, XVI: p. 50; 1943) found three nests in Eucalypts in the foothills of the Flinders Ranges, and obtained one set of two eggs, in 1917, which is, I believe, now in the Australian Museum.

During the breeding season in 1943 and 1944, the writer searched for nests of the species in the Mallee scrubs north-east of Sutherlands. One nest found on August 24, 1944, contained two freshly-hatched young. It was suspended from two parallel branchlets in the thick foliage of a Red Mallee (*Eucalyptus oleosa*) sapling, 5 ft. 2 in. from the ground. Cup-shaped, with a fairly deep cavity, the nest was constructed of grass-stems, wool, and spiders' egg-bags. Dimensions of nest: Length, 7 cm.; width, 6 cm.; width of cavity, 4.8 cm.; depth of cavity, 3.5 cm.

The young left the nest on September 6, which makes the nestling period 15 days, with a possible margin of error of not more than 12 hours. This pair of birds must have had

eggs at least as early as August 9. Discovery of the nest was made when the female flew low over the ground like a badly wounded bird, with a quick fluttering of the wings after the manner of a Wren (*Malurus*).

On a later occasion, when the young were out of the nest only one day, the female did the wounded-bird stunt along the ground for a distance of five or six yards before flying up into a low Mallee.

In the vicinity of the nest the scrub consists of about 180 low trees and clumps of shoots on the acre. The trees range in height from 8—12 ft. and the clumps of shoots are 4—7 ft. in height. Only a few shrubs of *Zygodphyllum fruticulosum* stud the ground between the trees and clumps of shoots. When feeding the young, the parents often reached the nest alternately at intervals of two minutes, with insects gathered among the leaves and branches of the Mallee within 100 yards of the nest. As a rule, a bird would settle in a nearby tree before flying to the nest with the food. Occasionally insects were obtained among the *Zygodphyllum* shrubs close to the ground. When flying in the direction of the nest from a distance the birds flew straight and fast like an olive-green dart.

Another nest was discovered when in the course of construction, and was found on October 14, 1944, to contain two fresh eggs. They were collected and are now in the McGilp Oological Collection, S.A. Museum, regd. No. B.23527.

There are two sets of eggs of the Yellow-plumed species (*M. ornata*) in the S.A. Museum, Nos. 16277 and 19220, which closely resemble the above-mentioned set of *M. plumula*.

Built of wool, spiders' egg-bags, and stems of the grass *Schismus barbatus*, the nest was suspended from three branchlets in fairly thick foliage in the top of a clump of tall mallee shoots, 8 ft. up from the ground. The female was very reluctant to leave the nest. It was lined at the bottom with woolly perianths of *Bassia sclerolænoides*, and the walls of the cavity were lined with horse-hair and a few *Schismus* stems. Dimensions of nest: Width, 8 cm.; height, 4 cm.; width of cavity, 5.5 cm.; depth of cavity, 2.5 cm.

At times the birds indulge in erratic flight 20 or more feet above the scrub, and on alighting, give loud, guttural calls somewhat like the throaty notes of the White-eared Honeyeater (*M. leucotis*). The call may be

written phonetically as "it-wirt, wirt, wirt, wirt." Once or twice I have seen a male perched on a tall shrub sing beautifully with Canary-like notes. When the breeding season approaches, a bird is frequently seen chasing another through the clumps of mallee shoots. I have previously (*Emu*, XLIII: p. 220; 1944) pointed out that the species is stationary here.

During the greater part of the year, the birds feed on insects such as scale, caterpillars, moths, etc., but when the Mallee is in blossom they frequent the flowering trees and take honey as well as insects that haunt the blossoms. Although occurring in the same district as the Yellow-plumed species, Yellow-fronted Honeyeaters choose a different environment. They are not seen in the tall, open Mallee scrub which the former prefers, and choose instead the more dense Mallee where clumps of shoots are interspersed among the low trees. They are paler birds, being more greyish coloured on the nape and mantle, and the pallid yellowish, olive-tinged ventral surface is marked only with faint mottling on the chest, instead of the bold stripes of their congener. Above the bright yellow ear-plumes there is a distinct line of black which *M. ornata* does not possess.