

THE BROWN HONEYEATER IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA

W. E. MATHESON

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SUMMARY

Brown Honeyeaters *Lichmera indistincta* were seen at four separate localities in the Far North-West of South Australia in 1980: Ernabella, Mt Lindsay, Victory Well and near Eyutalyera Creek. There was one definite breeding record. Two specimens were taken for the South Australian Museum. Two previous records of the species in South Australia are reviewed and evidence for possible north-south seasonal movements of the birds is discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Brown Honeyeaters *Lichmera indistincta* are widespread in Western Australia, the Northern Territory, Queensland and north-eastern New South Wales. Their range includes northern South Australia (Condon 1968, Pizzey and Doyle 1980). In tropical Australia they are common and conspicuous birds all year round in *Eucalyptus* woodlands, but further south they are migratory — e.g. in New South Wales where they arrive in May-June (Reader's Digest 1976). The likelihood of migratory movements of Brown Honeyeaters in South Australia is discussed below.

There is only one previously published record of Brown Honeyeaters in South Australia. G. A. Keartland, the ornithologist with the Horn Scientific Expedition in 1894, found Brown Honeyeaters at "several places on the homeward track along the Stevenson Creek" (North 1896). An examination of the journal of the expedition's leader, Charles Winnecke, indicated that the observation was made between 31 July and 2 August 1894 and that the Expedition camped at Oolabarinna Waterhole, 26° 42' S, 135° 23' E, on 1 August and at Willow Well, 26° 53' S, 135° 30' E on 2 August (Winnecke 1897; see Figure 1).

There is a further, unpublished record of the Brown Honeyeater in South Australia. J. Neil McGilp collected a clutch of eggs at Carriewerloo, 50 km WNW of Port Augusta, on 28 August 1932. McGilp had originally identified the eggs as belonging to the White-fronted Honeyeater *Phylidonyris albigrons* which was present on Carriewerloo at the time and nesting freely (McGilp 1932). In the space of about five hours, McGilp noted 22 nests of White-fronted Honeyeaters with eggs and many with newly-hatched young. The clutch in question, (now in the South Australian Museum SAM B18487, see Plate 1), was re-identified as of the Brown Honeyeater by S. A. Parker (pers. comm.). Presumably after taking a number of

clutches, McGilp stopped checking the incubating bird, hence his misidentification of the clutch. The nest of the Brown Honeyeater, like some of the White-fronted Honeyeater nests which McGilp recorded and took eggs from, was in a clump of mistletoe in a "Pinwood".

McGilp (*op. cit.*) also recorded Pied Honeyeaters *Certhionyx variegatus* and Black Honeyeaters *C. niger* nesting along a wooded watercourse in the same area. S. A. Parker (pers. comm.) suggested that some Brown Honeyeaters may have been travelling with these other species as they sometimes do in Central Australia.

Alternatively, the presence of Brown Honeyeaters at Carriewerloo in 1932 may have been due to extremely favourable seasonal conditions in southern and central Australia. Bromley (1933) reported that rainfall in the settled areas was above average in 1932 and that in the Far North-West rainfall was 50-100 mm above average. Furthermore, due to "persistent monsoonal activity" there were especially good rains from February to May and again from August to November in 1932. Rainfall over most of Central Australia was also above average.

OBSERVATIONS IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA IN 1980

A. The first observations were made at Ernabella, 26° 18' S, 132° 08' E, in late January-early February (S. J. Debus, *in litt.*). Brown Honeyeaters were present in small numbers in the village and immediate surroundings. Ernabella adjoins Ernabella Creek which contains mature River Red Gums *Eucalyptus camaldulensis*. In addition, Corkwood *Hakea divaricata* was flowering at the time. Prickly Wattle *Acacia victoriae* occurs in dense stands along the Creek. The exotic species White Cedar *Melia azedarach* and Athol *Tamarix* spp are widely planted in the village.

B. On 3 June, F. J. Badman (pers. comm.) saw at least four Brown Honeyeaters at 26° 16' S, 134° 26' E along a small sandy watercourse, a tributary of Eyutalyera Creek, itself a tributary of Stevenson Creek. He collected a specimen, the first for South Australia, which is now in the South Australian Museum. The specimen was identified as an immature or sub-adult by S. A. Parker. A brief description of it follows:

Specimen, SAM B33166: upperparts, dull brown tinged with yellow; wings and tail, grey-brown edged with yellow; underparts, creamy-grey; small indistinct yellow patch behind and below eye (this was seen more clearly on two other birds than on the specimen); eye, brown; legs, blue-grey; bill, dark brown; gape, yellow; total length, 127 mm.

It was seen with at least two larger Brown Honeyeaters, presumably adults (?males) and all were noticeably smaller than White-plumed Honeyeaters *Lichenostomus penicillatus* with which they were associated.

The habitat was Mulga *Acacia aneura*, Gidgea *A. cambagei*, *Eremophila* spp and Bladder Saltbush *Atriplex vesicaria* along and bordering a small watercourse. A few River Red Gums were growing along the creek banks. The Brown Honeyeaters were seen in the Mulga, Gidgea and *Eremophila* spp. Eyutalyera Creek is very similar to Stevenson Creek, the former being an area that has seldom been visited by ornithologists, at least in recent years.

C. R. Jaensch has supplied the following three records:

On 28 August, Brown Honeyeaters were heard calling at Mt Lindsay 27° 02' S, 129° 53'

E. They were with Grey-headed Honeyeaters *Lichenostomus keartlandi* in thick mallee-shrub cover along a gully. At least six were seen in flowering *Melaleuca corrugata* along a small tributary creek later in the day. On 29 August two were mist-netted near the tributary creek (see Plate 2). One was collected and is now in the South Australian Museum. Brief descriptions follow:

Specimen, SAM B33582: Adult; legs, blue-grey; iris, grey with thin brown inner ring; bill, blackish; mouth, orange; gape and eyering, blackish; skull fully pneumatised. Other bird: gape, yellow; iris, brown; mouth, orange; eye rim, blackish; legs, blue-grey; bill, blackish; rump, fawn; yellow on primaries and sides of tail.

On 3 September at Victory Well, 27° 03' S, 132° 31' E, in the Everard Ranges, Brown Honeyeaters were seen in a thicket of Titree *Melaleuca glomerata* in the mouth of a pound east of Mt Illbillee 27° 02' S, 132° 29' E. The birds were also in mallee and Porcupine Grass *Triodia* spp. and shrubs adjacent to a creek. At least 10 and possibly 20 were present, calling constantly. They were feeding on mistletoe in Mulga and probing among leaves of Prickly

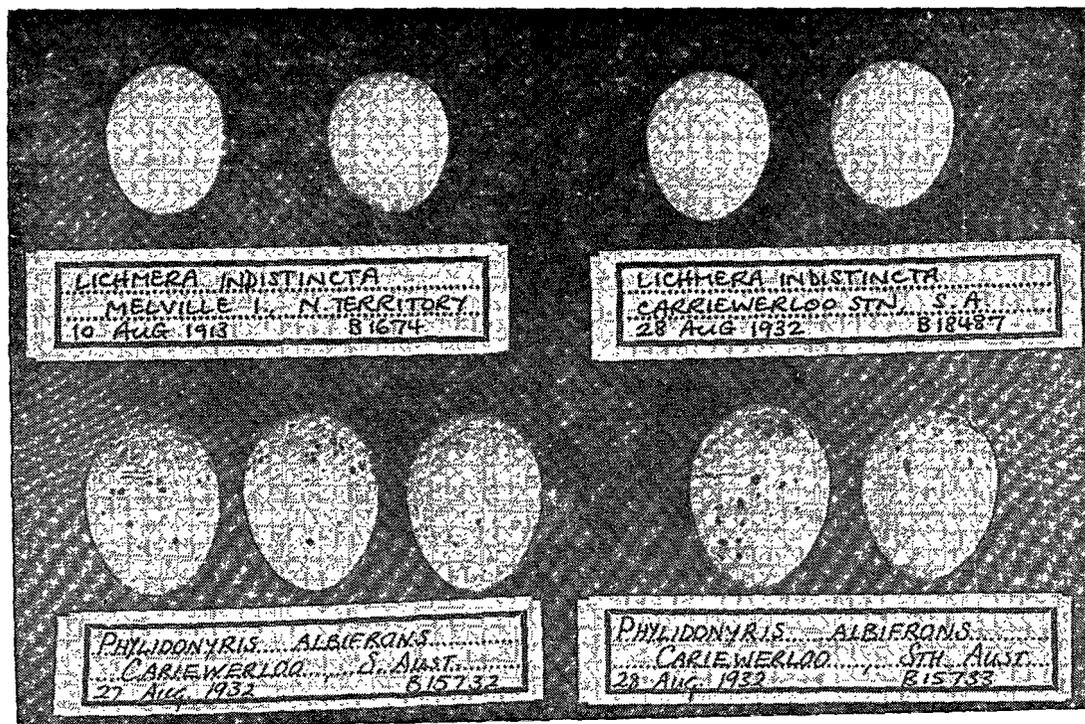


Plate 1. Top row: Brown Honeyeater clutches from Melville Island, N.T. (left) and Carrierwerloo, S.A. (right).

Bottom row. White-fronted Honeyeater clutches from Carrierwerloo, S.A.

(Photo courtesy S. A. Parker)

Wattle. K. Shurcliff (pers. comm.) spent April-May and September-December in this area in 1975 and 1976 but did not see Brown Honeyeaters. No trees were flowering at the time except for a solitary mistletoe.

D. Brown Honeyeaters were seen by the author at Ernabella between 30 September and 3 October. A pair was seen daily in Prickly Wattle 20m from the village effluent lagoon. They called constantly each morning between 06:30 and 08:00. The call, which was tape-recorded, strongly resembled that of the Clamorous Reed-warbler *Acrocephalus strenuus*. The birds were seen at very close range, sometimes as little as two metres. Occasionally they left the Prickly Wattles to feed in a nearby Corkwood and from time to time they were seen attacking/pursuing White-plumed Honeyeaters. However, they did not attempt to attack Spiny-cheeked Honeyeaters *Acanthogenys rufogularis* feeding in the same Corkwood. The Brown Honeyeaters also fed on the flowers of the Prickly Wattles which were flowering profusely at the time.

A nest was located on 3 October 45 cm from the ground in a Yellowtop *Senecio* sp. at the base of a Prickly Wattle. The nest was 50 mm in diameter and 60 mm deep. It was composed chiefly of twigs and cobwebs and was lined with down. The two eggs were pale pink with one end darker. Each time the incubating bird returned to the nest it sat facing west. While the nest was being examined the bird hovered anxiously nearby and returned to the nest as soon as the observer withdrew to a distance of a little more than a metre.

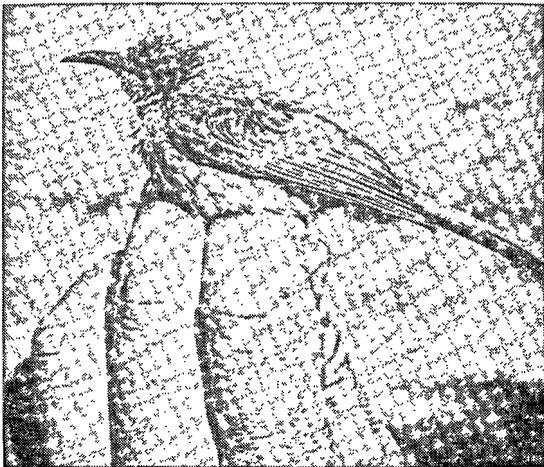


Plate 2. A Brown Honeyeater mist-netted at Mt Lindsay on 29 August 1980.

(Photo courtesy R. Jaensch)

Brown Honeyeaters were heard calling regularly in at least two other localities along Ernabella Creek during this period suggesting to the author that these birds were also nesting.

Figure 1 shows the localities of Brown Honeyeater records in the Far North-West of South Australia.

RECORDS NEAR SOUTH AUSTRALIA

There are records of Brown Honeyeaters occurring near far northern South Australia. In the Northern Territory, Ford (1976) and M. and B. Borella (*in litt.*) recorded them in the Alice Springs district in 1975 and September 1968 respectively. Storr (1967) said that Brown Honeyeaters are moderately common in water-side thickets in the southern ranges of the Territory. In Queensland, Ford and Parker (1974) saw Brown Honeyeaters at 35 km S of Winton and at 18 km E of Fermoy. Chenery (1924) saw them at Adavale, 185 km W of Charleville and Berney (1938) saw them at Longreach.

Brown Honeyeaters were common at Eyre, south-eastern Western Australia, 32° 15' S, 126° 18' E, in August-September 1980 (L. Dunkley, pers. comm.), in coastal scrub. Similar scrub extends much further east and it is possible that Brown Honeyeaters may reach South Australia by way of this vegetation.

In view of these records it is not surprising that there were four records of Brown Honeyeaters in South Australia in 1980.

DISCUSSION

All but one of the observations in South Australia presented above recorded Brown Honeyeaters between June and October, the exception being the January-February record from Ernabella.

It is considered that the records are consistent with a seasonal movement of Brown Honeyeaters into the north of South Australia during winter and spring, returning north after breeding. This is essentially similar to the species' movements in New South Wales (Reader's Digest 1976) and in the southern Northern Territory (S. A. Parker *in litt.*). (It is therefore worth noting that M. and B. Borella (*in litt.*) found a Brown Honeyeater nest with eggs at Alice Springs in September 1968). The birds seen at Ernabella in January-February 1980 could have been stragglers or young from the previous breeding season. Further observations are needed to establish whether Brown Honeyeaters are present in suitable habitat in South

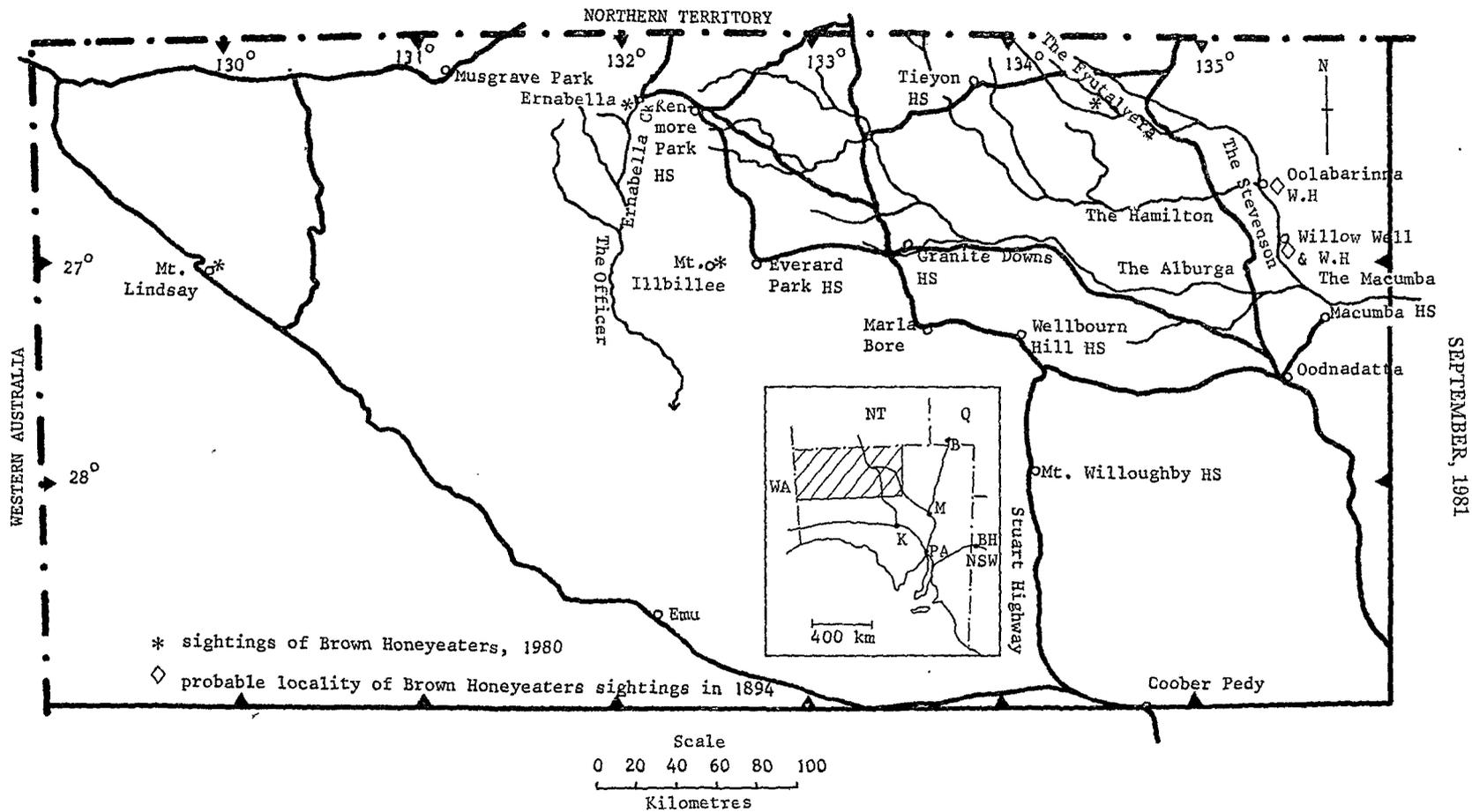


Figure 1. Map of far north-western South Australia showing localities of Brown Honeyeater records discussed in the text.

Australia's Far North all year round, or whether in fact they occur on a strictly seasonal basis.

The 48-year absence of Brown Honeyeater records in the north of South Australia could be due to either the absence of the species during that time, or what seems more likely, an absence of observers in the appropriate region(s) when Brown Honeyeaters were present. It should be noted that the bird is inconspicuous and, unless giving its Clamorous Reed-warbler-like call, could be easily overlooked.

The 1932 record from Carriewerloo is anomalous as it was made some 800 km to the south-east of all other sightings in the State. Carriewerloo is in a region that has been occasionally visited by ornithologists. Despite the inconspicuous nature of Brown Honeyeaters, it seems unlikely that, if present, they could have been overlooked there during the past 48 years.

7 Blue Gum Court, Athelstone, S.A. 5076.

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