

PAINTED HONEYEATERS OVER-WINTERING AT GLUEPOT RESERVE, SOUTH AUSTRALIA. The Painted Honeyeater *Grantiella picta* is seldom recorded in South Australia and is therefore considered a vagrant to the state (Higgins, Peter and Steele 2001). In South Australia it is listed as rare (*National Parks and Wildlife Act, 1972*), while nationally it is regarded as near threatened and declining throughout its range (Garnett and Crowley 2000). Generally the species has been little-studied (Oliver *et al.* 1998), particularly in the non-breeding season, and movements in this period are not clearly understood (Higgins, Peter and Steele 2001).

This note reports the occurrence of a long-staying and possibly over-wintering flock of up to seven Painted Honeyeaters just north of Old Gluepot Homestead, Gluepot Reserve in South Australia (33°44'33.5"S, 139°59'22.4"E) from 21 July until at least 27 September 2000.

A single Painted Honeyeater was first reported in the vicinity of Old Gluepot Homestead on 21 July 2000 and over subsequent weeks two to four birds were reported by visiting bird watchers (P. Waanders, pers. comm.). On 12 August Colin Rogers (CR) visited the site with three other birders. As there were initially some questions about the accuracy of the location, a tape of Painted Honeyeater calls was played (Buckingham and Jackson 1992). Almost immediately a Painted Honeyeater flew into a tree near the observers. The group followed the bird for a short distance into the mallee and played the tape a second time. Several Painted Honeyeaters then appeared with a maximum of six birds being observed over 45 minutes, ending at approximately 0930 h CST. As no attempt was made to systematically count all birds in the vicinity and no further tape recordings were played after the initial contact, it is possible that there were more birds present. Rohan Clarke (RC) searched the site for an hour on 7 September without locating any Painted Honeyeaters. On 9 September he returned to the site and located a minimum of seven Painted Honeyeaters, observing them for over an hour. The last report the authors received was of six birds still present on 27 September (C. Coleborn, pers. comm.), however it is possible the birds remained there for longer as few people visited the site in subsequent weeks.

On most occasions the birds were located in

broad swales between low dunes. These swales supported an open mallee habitat that has not been burnt for almost 50 years. Tree species included red mallee *Eucalyptus oleosa*, yorrell *E. gracilis*, white mallee *E. dumosa*, beaked red mallee *E. socialis*, sugarwood *Myoporum platycarpum* and leafless cherry *Exocarpos aphyllus*, whilst shrubs included wait-a-while *Acacia colletioides*, common emubush *Eremophila glabra*, broom emubush *E. scoparia* and hop-bush *Dodonaea* sp. The mallee eucalypts and wait-a-while supported mistletoe *Amyema* sp., while yorrell and sugarwood were in flower and the leafless cherry was bearing fruit. Although the birds were associated with a mistletoe infestation, when observed feeding the Painted Honeyeaters appeared to be gleaning insects from the bare branches by probing below any loose strips of bark, and taking nectar from the blossoms of yorrell. Both authors noted considerably more bird activity near the Painted Honeyeaters than in similar habitat elsewhere in the area, suggesting birds were concentrating at a food-rich site. Other nectarivorous and/or frugivorous species observed included Purple-crowned Lorikeets *Glossopsitta porphyrocephala*, Red Wattlebirds *Anthochaera carunculata*, Yellow-plumed *Lichenostomus ornatus*, Brown-headed *Melithreptus brevirostris*, White-fronted *Phylidonyris albifrons*, Black *Certhionyx niger* and Pied *C. variegatus* Honeyeaters, and Mistletoebirds *Dicaeum hirundinaceum*. Also present was a large mixed-flock of White-browed *Artamus superciliosus* and Masked *A. personatus* Woodswallows. The Painted Honeyeaters engaged in chasing activity with Yellow-plumed Honeyeaters (CR) and White-browed Woodswallows (RC) and with each other. Hopton (1998) previously observed chasing activity between Painted and Yellow-plumed Honeyeaters.

Of the six birds observed by CR, two appeared to be adult males. The other four were less boldly marked and at least one of these appeared to be a juvenile. Males were identified by the stark contrast between the white of the ventral surfaces and the clean black of the dorsum. A distinctive coral-pink bill and white ear patch were also noted. Black streaking on the flanks of the males was not as prominent as indicated in most field guides (e.g. Pizzey and Knight 1997; Simpson and Day 1999) although one observer noted some streaking. Bright yellow in the wings and tail of

the males was also noted. Although these birds were identified as males at the time, subsequent examination of the literature raised some doubt about the assignment of gender on the basis of plumage appearance. Tremont and Williams (1999) suggest that examination of museum skins of adult birds revealed no consistent gender difference in plumage and the presence or absence of streaking on the flanks is also no guide to gender. In view of this uncertainty it may be safer to identify as adults, without assigning gender, those birds which exhibited a stark contrast between the white of the ventral surfaces and the clean black of the dorsum.

In contrast to boldly patterned adults, four birds were browner above, lacked an ear patch and prominent pink bill and generally lacked the clean lines of the adults. At least one appeared to be a juvenile. This bird was relatively brighter brownish above with a more dishevelled appearance than the adults. RC also identified at least two adults in the group he observed and his notes concur with the description provided by CR. Peter Waanders and RC each took several photographs.

These observations constitute one of only a handful of records from South Australia. Hopton (1998) documented a male near the southern boundary of Cox Scrub Conservation Park in June 1997 and listed four previous substantiated records from South Australia. More recently a single Painted Honeyeater was observed at Froggy Dam, Gluepot Reserve on 12 June 1998 (Richard Willing, pers. comm.; MacKenzie 1998). Notably, all previous confirmed records refer to single birds although there is an unsubstantiated report of a 'colony' near Curdimurka (Lendon 1970; Matheson 1981). The Painted Honeyeater is known to migrate to semi-arid regions of central and western Queensland and central Northern Territory when not breeding (Hall 1974; Morris, McGill and Holmes 1981; Blakers, Davies and Reilly 1984). However they have been little studied in the non-breeding period because of their dispersed distribution and secretive behaviour at this time (L. Conole in Garnett and Crowley 2000). The period of residency (at least 68 days) by the birds discussed here and the previous record of the species on the reserve suggest these observations refer to over-wintering birds. With increasing numbers of birdwatchers visiting the newly-established (July 1997) Gluepot Reserve it should prove possible to determine if Painted Honeyeaters

regularly use this remote area of mallee as an over-wintering site.

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