

## THE GREY HONEYEATER: A REVIEW OF DISTRIBUTION AND VARIATION

J. B. PATON

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### SUMMARY

Published records of the Grey Honeyeater *Conopophila whitei* are reviewed. The second South Australian record is presented, so bringing the number of published records to nineteen. The species has been recorded from two distinct geographical regions. Variation in plumage and bill colour is discussed. Further investigation is required to clarify the basis of this variation.

There are few published records of the Grey Honeyeater *Conopophila whitei*. This paper summarizes and discusses these records and reports the second sighting of the bird in South Australia thus extending its known range eastwards some 500 kilometres.

### HISTORICAL

The Grey Honeyeater was described and named by North (1910) from specimens (three adult males, an adult female and a nestling) sent to him by H. L. White. These specimens, together with a nest and eggs, had been collected by F. Lawson Whitlock in July 1909 near Lake Way, Western Australia (North 1910, Whitlock 1910). North (1910) erected the monotypic genus *Lacustroica* for the specimens. This name means 'lake dweller' but, as Whitlock (1924) pointed out, is a misnomer since Lake Way is usually dry and the specimens were taken some kilometres from its shore.<sup>1</sup> North's specific name, *whitei*, honoured H. L. White's son Alfred who was at that time the youngest member of the Australasian Ornithologists Union. Indeed, Whitlock (1910) referred to the species as the Alfred Honeyeater.

<sup>1</sup> Schodde (1975), following Salomonsen in Peters (1967), merged *Lacustroica* in *Conopophila* because of their similar bills and nearly identical eggs. Both taxa also have a waxy-yellow tinge to the leading edge of the primaries, albeit much reduced in the Grey Honeyeater (S. A. Parker, pers. comm.; see Discussion).

The Lake Way specimens were used for a painting of the species by Ellis Rowan, well known for her paintings of flowers. This painting was reproduced as the frontispiece of Volume 9 of *The Emu* and the original was later presented to H. L. White by the Council of the Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union (Dickinson 1951). Also, a photograph of Alfred White appeared as Plate IX of the same volume of *The Emu*.

Whitlock, however, had procured a specimen of the Grey Honeyeater in 1903 at Day Dawn, Western Australia (Whitlock 1924). It had been sent to the Western Australian Museum but its significance was not appreciated at the time. The specimen subsequently became the type of *L. w. neglecta*, a subspecies named by Mathews (1916) who said only that the bird was "more buff below and darker above" than the Lake Way specimens. The description and presumably the illustration of the Grey Honeyeater in Mathews (1923) were both based on this specimen which is now in the American Museum of Natural History (Cowles 1968). Mathews (1923) also stated in his description of *L. w. neglecta* that the rump is white but he did not depict this in his illustration nor has it been recorded by subsequent authors. However, one bird in Rowan's painting has a white rump. Mathews used the vernacular Inconspicuous Honeyeater.

In November 1920, Mellor obtained a specimen of the Grey Honeyeater approximately 15 kilometres N of Ajana, near the mouth of the Murchison River but he did not fully describe it (see Mellor 1921). It was exhibited at the February 1921 meeting of the South Australian Ornithological Association when comment was made that Rowan's plate in *The*

LOCALITY	NUMBER ON FIGURE 1	DATE OF RECORD	REFERENCE AND NOTES
Wave Hill	1	Jan 1963	Parker (1969) ; bird banded photographed and released ; D. Stewart observer
Tanami Range	2	May 1952	Parker (1969) ; specimen in Australian Museum, Sydney.
Frewena	3	July 1975	Cassals (1976)
Boggy Pool	4-8	April 1923	Whitlock (1924) ; with thornbills ; specimen in Nat. Mus. Vict.
Yuendumu road		Aug 1967	Parker (1969) ; observer B. Gill
Hamilton Downs		Nov 1978- May 1979 Aug 1967	Roberts (1980, 1981) ; field descriptions given. Parker (1969) ; observer B. Gill
North of Musgrave Ranges — exact locality uncertain	9	April-May 1967	Glover (1968) ; C. Austin observer ; exact locality not given ; breeding
Granite Downs	10	June 1965	Cowles (1967) ; specimen in British Museum ; seen with thornbills
Hamersley Range	11	Aug 1976	Wells and Wells (1977) ; breeding ; description given ; with thornbills
Julia Bore	12	Aug 1978	Curry (1979) ; breeding ; description given
Edmond Station	13	Sept 1978	Menkhorst (1979) ; breeding ; description given
Lake Way	14	July 1909	North (1910) ; Whitlock (1910). type series collected and now in National Museum of Victoria, Melbourne ; breeding
Ajana	15	Nov 1920	Mellor (1921) ; specimen in S. A. White Collection
Day Dawn	16	May 1903	Mathews (1916, 1923), Cowles (1968) ; type of <i>L.w. neglecta</i> collected — now in American Museum of Natural History
Wanjarri	17	1940-1970	Moriarty (1972) ; breeding records
Yalgoo	18	Oct-Nov 1975, Oct 1976	Wells and Wells (1977) ; breeding ; field description
4 km WSW Cordillo Downs	19	May 1980	this paper

Table 1. Summary of published records of the Grey Honeyeater.

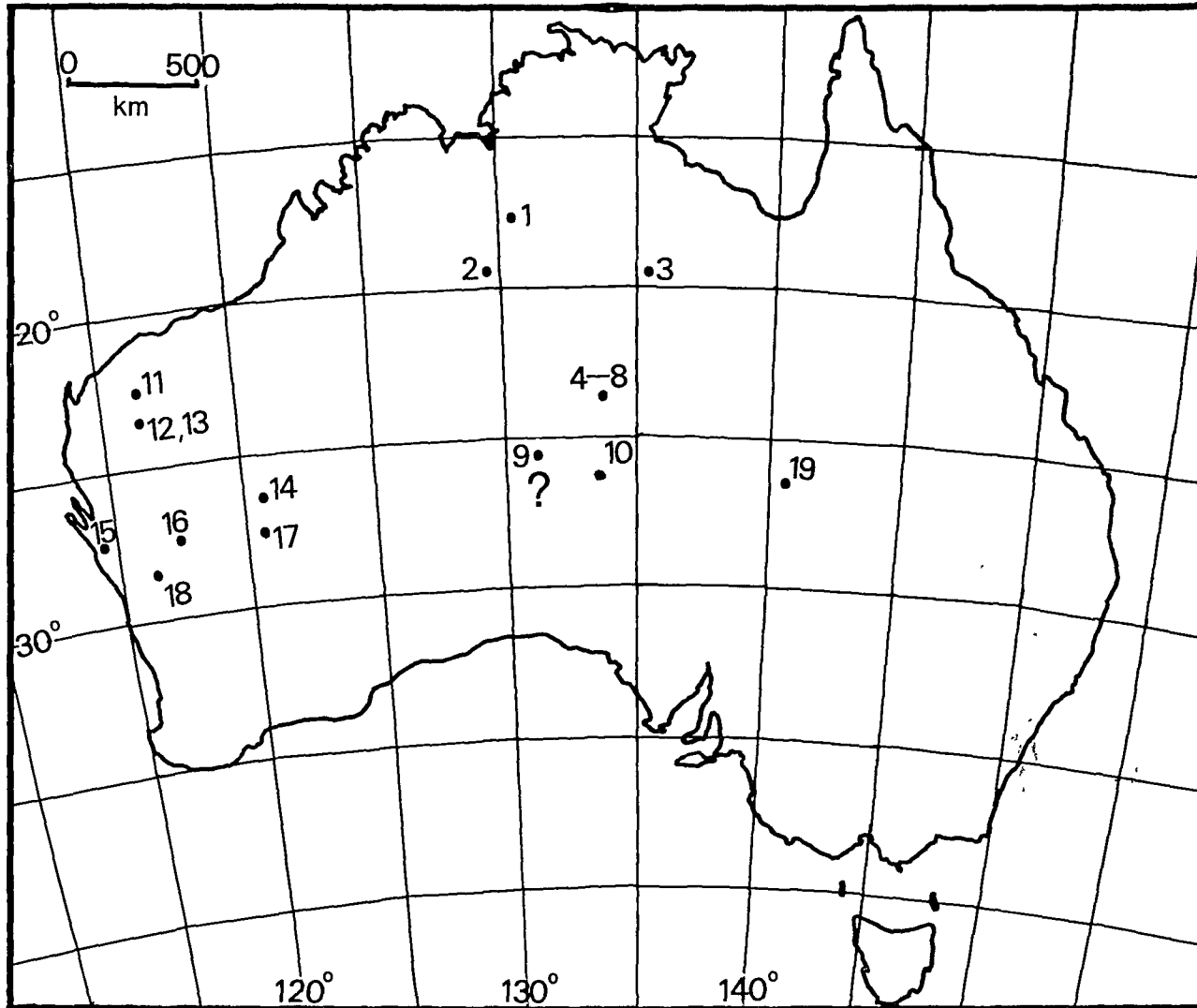


Figure 1. Map of Australia showing localities of published records of the Grey Honeyeater.

Emu was misleading because "these birds here depicted showed a slight yellowish tinge, especially on the wings, which is not correct" (Anon 1921). This specimen is now in the S.A. White Collection, Adelaide and, in 1981, I obtained the following data from its label:

Collected 6/11/21 [*sic*] 10 miles N Ajana  
W.A. Iris: brown; Feet: slaty horn; Bill: light  
horn, base of lower mandible very light horn;  
Sex: male.

The colour of this bird is a greyish brown (not grey) with the edges of the wing feathers paler and buffish, and with very narrow pale buff tips to the tail feathers. A paler eye ring, darker lores or yellowish tinge on the wings could not be seen. Wing and tail feathers were worn. In general colour, the bird is most like the illustration in Pizzey (1980). However, the label on the specimen is probably not the original one since the date of November 1921 must be incorrect.

More recently, observations from Western Australia including breeding data have been published by Wells and Wells (1977), Curry (1979) and Menkhurst (1979). Western Australian records have been made between May and November inclusive.

The first observations of the Grey Honeyeater in the Northern Territory were published by Whitlock who collected more specimens for H. L. White (Whitlock 1924). These specimens are housed with the rest of the H. L. White Collection in the National Museum of Victoria, Melbourne. Four more records from the Northern Territory, including a specimen now in the Australian Museum, Sydney, were discussed by Parker (1969) while the most recent Northern Territory records are listed in Cassals (1976) and Roberts (1980, 1981). Northern Territory records have been made between January and November inclusive.

The first South Australian record was that of a specimen collected on Granite Downs (not Granville Downs *pace* Pizzey 1980) near the Oodnadatta-Alice Springs road. It is now in the British Museum, Tring (Cowles 1967). Details of a second South Australian record are presented below.

Figure 1 and Table 1 summarize all published records.

## SECOND SOUTH AUSTRALIAN RECORD

At 08:30 on 13 May 1980, E. Turnbull, G. Sims, A. Gibson and I were searching (unsuccessfully) for Eyrean Grasswrens *Amytornis godyeri* in the large clumps of Canegrass *Zygochloa paradoxa* that flanked sandhills near Beefwood Tank *ca* 14 km WSW of Cordillo Downs HS in the far North-East of South

Australia (26° 45' S, 140° 28' E). Our attention was drawn to two small birds feeding in a moderately tall Beefwood *Grevillea striata*. Our field notes taken at the time were:

Small birds about size, shape and colour of a silvereye [*Zosterops lateralis*] with straight or almost straight dark (? black) bill, not long; iris red-brown; darker lores; pale unstreaked underparts with faint yellowish buff flanks. Back grey-brown, with yellowish green wash; wing tips and tail darker. Tail not very long, no white on tail, no contrasting rump colour; no dark sub-terminal band. Feeding like Western Warbler [*Gerygone fusca*] probing rapidly; occasionally hovering. Occasional call "Tcht Tcht".

The birds were observed for about five minutes from within *ca* three to six metres and occasionally too close to use binoculars. Nevertheless, they were difficult to describe because of the lack of distinctive features, their rapid movements and the ease with which they remained obscured by leaves and twigs. They appeared to be alone but White-winged Wrens *Malurus leucopterus* were close enough for us to ascertain that the birds were larger than the wrens and about the same size as a Silvereye *Zosterops lateralis*. They moved very rapidly, poking and prying, particularly at the bases of the leaf petioles and occasionally hovering at the edge of the canopy in a manner very reminiscent of Western Gerygones *Gerygone fusca*.

Within half an hour we consulted Slater (1974) and concluded that these birds were Grey Honeyeaters. The Western Gerygone was eliminated by the absence of both a white brow and conspicuous white on the tail and our birds seemed a little larger and leaner than a Gerygone. There was neither freckling about the forehead and ear coverts nor contrasting rump colour nor a dark subterminal tail-band as in thornbills, which would in any case be too small and have relatively shorter tails. There was no conspicuous white eye-ring. The pale greyish-white breast with yellowish buff flanks was similar to the underparts of most Silvereyes seen near Adelaide, although paler (*cf.* Roberts 1981).

The sandhills, which were adjacent to extensive gibber flats, were reasonably well covered (perhaps up to 20% of ground cover) with small shrubs particularly Canegrass and a scattering of tree-like shrubs principally Beefwood but with some Red Mulga *Acacia cyperophylla* and Bloodwood *Eucalyptus* sp.

## DISCUSSION

### *Comparisons of descriptions*

Cowles' (1967) specimen showed a faint whitish eye ring but Mathews (1923) and North (1910) did not describe an eye ring in adult

specimens. Wells and Wells (1977) noted pale eye rings in the field on some occasions. North (1910), Wells and Wells (1977) and Menkhorst (1979) all recorded a yellowish or white eye ring in nestlings or recently fledged chicks. The photograph in Reader's Digest (1976) is clearly of an adult bird feeding a well-feathered nestling with orange gape and pale eye ring and not, as given in the caption, "one parent feeding the other as it incubates the eggs". Curry (1979) suggested that the pale eye ring is a characteristic of young birds. The Cordillo Downs birds had no eye ring and so were probably adults.

North (1910) and Cowles (1967) using specimens, and Curry (1979) and Roberts (1980) in their field observations mentioned that the tail is tipped white, though not conspicuously. Mellor's specimen has worn tail feathers narrowly tipped with buff. We noticed no white on the tail tips of the Cordillo Downs birds but may have overlooked any white because of worn feathers or because we were looking for more obvious white such as is found on the tail of Western Gerygones.

Except in immature birds, an olive-green wash on the wings and back has been recorded neither in Western Australian specimens examined by North (1910), Mathews (1923) and Mellor (1921) nor in the field by Wells and Wells (1977), Curry (1979) and Menkhorst (1979). However, Whitlock (1924) thought that the birds he saw in the Northern Territory were browner and more brightly coloured than those he saw in Western Australia. Cowles' specimen had flight feathers "edged with olive-yellow above" and Roberts (1980) referred to an "olive tinge to the wing feathers". The Western Australian specimens were collected in the spring, probably during the breeding season, and feathers could have been worn. Mellor's specimen with "no adornment" (Mellor 1921) had worn primaries whereas Cowles' specimen with its olive-yellow tinge was in "fresh plumage". It seems possible that either the Cordillo Downs birds had recently moulted and the new feathers had not lost their yellow-green tinge, or that they were first season birds which had lost the pale eye ring of juveniles but still retained olive-green plumage on the wings. Alternatively, geographical variation in plumage colour may be involved.

There are discrepancies in descriptions of bill colour. Slater (1974) and Pizzey (1980) in their field guides, Cowles (1967) in describing the Granite Downs specimen and Roberts (1980) in field observations all state that the bill is black.

My field impression of the Cordillo Downs birds was that their bills were certainly dark and probably black. However, Whitlock noted the bills of the Lake Way specimens as "dark horn, the base of the lower mandible pale" (North 1910) while the label on Mellor's Ajana specimen cites the bill as "light horn, base of lower mandible very light horn". Mathews (1923) in describing the Day Dawn specimen gave the culmen as being black but the base of the lower mandible flesh-pink. (It is not clear whether Mathews was citing Whitlock's observations). Furthermore, Wells' photograph in Reader's Digest (1976) suggests a dark grey not black bill and Curry (1979) noted that the bill was blue grey at the base.

Bill colour is therefore variable but the significance of the variation is unclear.

#### *Distribution*

The published records are from two regions (see Figure 1): one in Western Australia lying between 20°-30° S and 115°-125° E and the other in South Australia and the Northern Territory lying between 17°-26° S and 129°-141° E. Eleven other unchecked records kindly made available to me from the Atlas of Australian Birds at the beginning of 1981 do not change this pattern. The absence of records from between 125°-129° E is likely to be due to that region's general inaccessibility.

#### *Associations*

Some observers (See Table 1) have seen Grey Honeyeaters in association with acanthizids. The Cordillo Downs birds were alone and no acanthizids were seen anywhere in the vicinity.

### CONCLUSION

To summarise, Western Australian records have been made between May and November and include all but one of the breeding records. They include records of a yellowish or greenish wash on the wings and pale eye rings, but these features have only been recorded in juveniles. Bill colour, when recorded, has varied from "black culmen, with base of lower mandible flesh-pink" to "light horn".

Records from the Northern Territory and South Australia on the other hand have been made principally between April and August. One bird has been seen with a pale eye ring but some, including a specimen, have had a yellowish tinge on the wings and black or near black bills.

Clearly there are problems of variation in the Grey Honeyeater that warrant closer study. I hope that the above notes will lead to their resolution.

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1 Dashwood Road, Beaumont, S.A. 5066.