

BLACK HONEYEATERS FEEDING AMONGST CHARCOAL AND ASH

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Black Honeyeaters *Certhionyx niger* are irregular spring-summer visitors to southern South Australia and often breed during these visits to southern latitudes (e.g. Ford 1978, Paton *et al.* 1983, Blakers *et al.* 1984, Bourne 1987, Cox 1987). In 1985, there were several reports of Black Honeyeaters in the Mt Lofty Ranges and adjacent areas (e.g. see Carpenter 1985, 1986a, b). In this paper, I summarize observations made in 1985 of Black Honeyeaters in and around Para Wirra Recreation Park, approximately 40 km NNE of Adelaide. In particular, I wish to document three incidents of Black Honeyeaters feeding amongst charcoal and ash, a behaviour that I find extraordinary and difficult to explain.

The first Black Honeyeaters were sighted near the northern section of Para Wirra Recreation Park on 28 September 1985 by Garry Fitzpatrick. On 19 October, seven pairs of Black Honeyeaters were present in this area, and three pairs had nests. Two of the nests were in dead *Banksia marginata* and the third in *Hakea rugosa*. All nests were within a metre of the ground. The males associated with these nests were very territorial, calling frequently in high pitch notes and chasing the other male Black Honeyeaters out of their areas.

On the same day, and approximately 1.5 km SSE of the above area, a pair of Black Honeyeaters was seen moving amongst the remains of an old camp fire, busily picking up and swallowing small particles. These particles looked black and appeared to be charcoal. Inspection of the fireplace after the birds had left revealed no obvious food, just charcoal and ash. Returning to the area on 21 October, I observed a single male Black Honeyeater again picking out dark, inanimate objects from the old campfire. This bird was flushed into a mist net and banded. Returning to the area on 26 October, I saw a further two birds fly directly to the centre of the fireplace and commence picking up particles that at times seemed hard to swallow. Both birds were caught and neither was wearing a band. Thus, at least three individuals visited the fireplace.

This is not the first occasion that Black Honeyeaters have been observed foraging amongst charcoal and ash. Coate (1985) reports similar

occurrences from several sites along the Murchison River in Western Australia. Most of Coate's observations were of female birds, with up to four birds feeding simultaneously at one campfire. Coate (1985) was also puzzled by the behaviour of the birds and had a sample of ash analysed. The analysis showed a high level of calcium, and Coate (1985) suggested that females may feed on ash to build up their calcium levels prior to egg-laying. He suspected that the Black Honeyeaters he had observed were preparing to breed. However, male Black Honeyeaters also visited campfires and some other explanation is required for them. Perhaps charcoal or ash provide minerals and other nutrients otherwise lacking in the bird's nectarivorous diet.

Clearly, more observations are required to understand why Black Honeyeaters visit old campfires. In future, people observing Black Honeyeaters visiting old campfires should (1) take a sample of the ash and charcoal for analysis, (2) attempt to determine whether the individuals involved are breeding, and (3) if so, the stage of their breeding. Any observations of other honeyeaters eating ash would also be of interest.

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