

**NEW HOLLAND HONEYEATERS ATTEMPTING TO FEED AND BROOD NESTLING WILLIE WAGTAILS.** On 22 November 1991 a pair of Willie Wagtails *Rhipidura leucophrys* began building a nest in our garden at Beaumont. During the first few days of nest-building the birds were extremely aggressive towards two New Holland Honeyeaters *Phylidonyris novaehollandiae* which fed at fuchsias about three metres from the nest. There were not as aggressive towards Blackbirds *Turdus merula* or White-plumed Honeyeaters *Lichenostomus penicillatus*, which were also in the vicinity, but they still harassed them.

The nest was completed by 8 December and incubation began about 10 December. At this stage the Wagtails were not as aggressive to other birds in the vicinity except for a Laughing Kookaburra *Dacelo novaeguineae* on 10 December and a Red Wattlebird *Anthochaera carunculata* on 12 December.

The eggs hatched on 25 December and by 1 January 1992, when the chicks were being fed, their heads and open mouths could easily be seen above the rim of the nest. On 2 January, immediately after the chicks had been fed and the parents had moved away, a New Holland Honeyeater flew from a kangaroo paw, at which it had been feeding, directly to the nest. It apparently fed the chicks, then, after a few moments, spread its wings and began to brood them. However, it scarcely had time to get settled before one of the parents returned and chivied it away.

On several occasions subsequently a New Holland Honeyeater approached the nest but was not seen feeding or brooding the chicks again. The Wagtails showed little aggression towards the Honeyeaters at this time. On 7 January one Wagtail chick looked weaker than the rest and was dead by 2030 h. The remaining two chicks left the nest between 0700 and 0930 h the next day.

Bransbury (1984) described several New Holland Honeyeaters attending and attempting to brood nestling Dusky Woodswallows *Artamus cyanopterus*. In this case the Honeyeaters were nesting nearby and he suggested that this unusual behaviour was a response to the stimulus of breeding and the presence of chicks in a nest. No New Holland Honeyeater nests were found in the vicinity of the Wagtail nest. These Honeyeaters normally breed in autumn or spring (Paton 1985). Nesting in late December or early January is unusual in the Adelaide area (Ford 1980).

Cooperative breeding in honeyeaters involves members of the family group feeding nestlings of the breeding pair. Such cooperative breeders might, from time to time, feed nestlings from another species, particularly of the same genus. Tyson (1993) has now recorded the cooperatively breeding Yellow-tufted Honeyeater *Lichenostomus melanops* feeding nestling Yellow-faced Honeyeaters *L. chrysops*. New Holland Honeyeaters, however, usually breed as pairs (Paton 1985; Armstrong 1990) and are not known to be cooperative breeders, though they may, occasionally, feed free-flying

chicks of near relatives (Armstrong 1990). Now they have been recorded feeding or brooding quite unrelated, non-meliphagid passerines, namely Dusky Woodswallows and Willie Wagtails. If feeding unrelated nestlings is not such a rare event, then the observation of more than two adults of the same species attending a nest is not a reliable indicator of cooperative breeding.

#### REFERENCES

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