

Further notes on mallee birds of the far south-west of South Australia

Carpenter and Matthew (1997) discussed the distribution of some mallee birds of the southern edge of the Nullarbor Plain in the far west of South Australia. The region is interesting because it lies on the western side of the Nullarbor Plain and is contiguous with mallee habitats in south-western Western Australia. Carpenter and Matthew found that many mallee birds are more widely distributed along the southern edge of the Nullarbor Plain than previously realised. Rowley and Russell (1998) subsequently provided evidence that supported the occurrence of Blue-breasted Fairy-wrens *Malurus pulcherrimus* in the region.

Between 22 and 30 October 2004 I assisted as ornithologist on a biological and ethnological survey conducted by the South Australian Museum Waterhouse Club of the Merdayerrah Sandpatch region in the far west of South Australia. The study area is in the Nullarbor National Park and extended from the South Australia - Western Australia border east for about 15 km and inland about 9 km. The weather during the survey was generally fine but windy, and followed a year of average rainfall.

The following are notes on some mallee birds recorded during the survey. Carpenter and Matthew (1997) described vegetation in the area.

Emu *Dromaius novaehollandiae*

An adult with six half-grown young 7 km E of Border Village on 29 October. Tracks and dung containing seeds of Bower Spinach *Tetragonia implexicoma* were also seen on the Merdayerrah Sandpatch.

These records suggest that small numbers of Emus breed in the area during winter,

dispersing in summer as food and water resources dwindle.

Black-eared Cuckoo *Chrysococcyx chalcites*

An adult in mallee 9 km east of Border Village on 24 and 28 October.

Brush Bronzewing *Phaps elegans*

Two 8.5 km ESE of Border Village on 27 October, on and near the cliffs at the edge of the sand patch. These were in the same area as reported by Carpenter and Matthew (1997).

Blue-breasted Fairy-wren *Malurus pulcherrimus*

Several pairs and small groups throughout, including at the edge of the sand patch 10.5 km ESE of Border Village, in mallee (particularly Yalata Mallee *Eucalyptus yalatensis*) with denser Dryland Tea-tree *Melaleuca lanceolata* overgrown with Coarse Dodder-laurel *Cassytha melanantha*. Most were in pairs with coloured males displaying a purplish breast. An adult male was collected 10 km NE of Border Village on 27 October (SAM B55194). Some females had darker red-brown eye-rings and lores suggestive of the Variegated Fairy-wren *M. lamberti*, although further information is required to determine whether *M. lamberti* also occurs in the area.

Rowley and Russell (1998) reported pairs of *M. pulcherrimus* 25 and 30 km E of Border Village on 30 September 1997 but did not find them further west until reaching Eyre.

Yellow-rumped Pardalote *Pardalotus punctatus*

xanthopyge (subspecies of the Spotted Pardalote). Pairs at a few mallee sites suggesting that the species breeds locally, although no nest holes were located.

Red Wattlebird *Anthochaera carunculata*

Two were feeding among taller flowering *E. yalatensis* 10 km NE of Border Village on 24 October. This species has previously been recorded nearby at Eucla (Storr 1987).

Yellow-plumed Honeyeater *Lichenostomus ornatus*

None located in the study area. However on 30 October 2004 two were observed about 100 km to the east, in a patch of flowering Red Mallee *E. oleosa* 31 km W of Nullarbor Roadhouse (31° 33' 9"S, 130° 35' 52"E). In Western Australia the species occurs along the Hampton Scarp east to Eucla (Storr 1987).

New Holland Honeyeater *Phylidonyris novaehollandiae*

Up to 20 in flowering Coastal White Mallee *E. diversifolia* and Yalata Mallee 8.5 km ESE of Border Village (31° 49' 49"S, 129° 5' 9"E) on 23 October, declining to 3 on 29 October.

Brown Honeyeater *Lichmera indistincta*

Up to 15 with the above on 23 October, declining to 1 on 29 October.

The Brown and New Holland Honeyeaters were feeding together in thickets of flowering Coastal White Mallee and adjacent patches of Yalata Mallee on the cliff faces overlooking Merdayerrah Sandpatch. Attention was drawn to the Brown Honeyeater by its frequently uttered "plip – plip" and chirruping calls, although it took several minutes to see one as it flitted amongst the dense eucalypt foliage. Although up to 20 individuals of each were present on 23 October, numbers declined during the survey period as flowering of Coastal White Mallee ended. There was no evidence of breeding. Both species were also observed in a flowering bottlebrush (*Callistemon* sp.) in a garden at Eucla during the survey period (M. and A. Chapple, pers. comm.). Brown Honeyeaters were also heard there in July 2005 (C. Kemper, pers. comm.).

There are few reports of the Brown Honeyeater in South Australia. Most are of single birds or small flocks from the far north-west (Matheson 1981, McNamara 1986, Carpenter *et al.* 2003). There is also a clutch of eggs collected in August 1932 from Carrierloo Station in the eastern

Gawler Ranges in the South Australian Museum (Matheson 1981). Matheson (1981) correctly predicted the presence of Brown Honeyeaters along the Nullarbor coast in South Australia.

The New Holland Honeyeater is presumed to be the western subspecies *Phylidonyris n. longirostris*. To the east, the nearest reports of the species are near Streaky Bay (500 km ESE). Neither Brown nor New Holland Honeyeaters have been reported east of Madura, Western Australia, about 200 km to the west (Storr 1987, Allen *et al.* 1984). However, the New Atlas of Australian Birds (Barrett *et al.* 2003) shows a record of the New Holland Honeyeater in the one degree square that includes Eucla (centred at 31° 30'S, 128° 30'E).

Magpie-lark *Grallina cyanoleuca*

A pair with a nest in a planted Tuart *Eucalyptus gomphocephala* at Border Village. Carpenter and Matthew (1997) previously noted a pair with a nest at the same location.

Grey Currawong *Strepera versicolor*

Currawongs were heard and briefly seen in several areas, including two juveniles being fed by adults. The adults had greyish plumage and white wing patches characteristic of the western subspecies "*plumbea*". Carpenter and Matthew (1997) previously noted the species near Border Village.

Silvereye *Zosterops lateralis gouldi*

Widespread in mallee and tea-tree, including on the sandpatch, and an old nest in Coarse Dodder-laurel 10 km NE of Border Village. One was collected 10 km NE of Border Village on 28 October (SAM B55195).

Discussion

Three new mallee birds are reported for the far south-west of South Australia, namely Red Wattlebird, Brown Honeyeater and New Holland Honeyeater.

The Brown and New Holland Honeyeaters were feeding among flowering *Eucalyptus diversifolia*. This mainly winter-flowering mallee has a limited distribution in the region, scattered on the edge of the cliffs between Border Village and Merdayerrah Sandpatch, and in Western Australia on the Wylie and Hampton Scarps (Parsons 1970, Nicolle 1997). It is more commonly associated with wetter areas, becoming prominent on Eyre Peninsula south-east of Streaky Bay (pers. obs.).

The presence of the Blue-breasted Fairy-wren and the western subspecies of both Silvereye *Zosterops lateralis gouldi* and Grey Currawong *Strepera versicolor plumbea* along the southern edge of the Nullarbor Plain in South Australia are confirmed. Evidence of breeding and their occurrence during both autumn and spring suggests that they are resident in the region. Conversely, the absence of Golden Whistler *Pachycephala pectoralis*, Fan-tailed Cuckoo *Cacomantis flabelliformis* and Dusky Woodswallow *Artamus cyanopterus*, found by Carpenter and Matthew (1997) in May 1996, suggests that these may be non-breeding autumn-winter visitors.

As with the report (Carpenter and Matthew 1997), the October 2004 survey failed to detect several mallee species that occur adjacent to the survey area near Eucla, Western Australia (Storr 1987). These include Grey Fantail *Rhipidura fuliginosa*, Jacky Winter *Microeca fascinans*, Western Yellow Robin *Eopsaltria griseogularis*, White-eared Honeyeater *Lichenostomus leucotis* and Yellow-plumed Honeyeater. The Grey Fantail is likely to be a non-breeding winter visitor, dispersing from nesting areas on Eyre Peninsula and south-western Western Australia (Ford 1971). The Jacky Winter, White-eared Honeyeater and Yellow-plumed Honeyeater may associate more with taller mallee habitats that occur along the Hampton Scarp, a habitat that does not extend into the adjacent part of South Australia (Parsons 1970, Storr 1987). More surprising was the absence of the Western

Yellow Robin, a species that commonly occurs in areas with thickets of tea-tree (*Melaleuca* spp.) (e.g. on western Eyre Peninsula – pers. obs.).

In addition to the above records, Rosemary Taplin (pers. comm.) made notes birds seen on the Hampton Scarp about 5 km west of Eucla in Western Australia (about 7 km west of the border) on 22 May 2005. She reported several flocks of 20 to 50 Purple-crowned Lorikeets *Glossopsitta porphyrocephala* flying east, suggesting that the species disperses between South and Western Australia along the southern edge of the Nullarbor Plain, as well as via the eucalypt habitats of the Great Victoria Desert (Ford 1971). Taplin also noted a flock of about fifty “yellow-winged” honeyeaters feeding in profusely flowering Coastal White Mallee on the Hampton Scarp. She identified them as White-cheeked Honeyeaters *Phylidonyris niger* based on the white cheek patches and calls different to the similar New Holland Honeyeater. This report is about 250 km west of records in coastal Western Australia (e.g. only rarely reported at Eyre Bird Observatory – Congreve 1982, Storr 1987). In the south-west of Western Australia the species is generally associated with sand-plain heaths dominated by dryandras and banksias (Higgins *et al.* 2001).

Also of interest is the fragmented distribution of the Yellow-plumed Honeyeater in the region. The mallee vegetation where two were observed 30 km west of Nullarbor Roadhouse is floristically more similar (dominated by Red Mallee *E. oleosa*) to that near Yalata east of the Nullarbor barrier (where Yellow-plumed Honeyeaters are relatively common) than that in the study area (pers. obs.). The distribution of mallee plants and birds in this area require further study.

Other mallee birds that could be expected to occur in the study area are Purple-gaped Honeyeater *Lichenostomus cratitius*, Tawny-crowned Honeyeater *Glyciphila melanops*, Restless Flycatcher *Myiagra inquieta*, Shy

Heathwren *Hylacola cauta* and Common Bronzewing *Phaps chalcoptera*. Various other raptors could also be expected. For example the Square-tailed Kite *Lophoictinia isura* has been recorded on or adjacent the Nullarbor Plain in spring (McGilp 1932, Ashton and Ashton 1983, Debus 1991, pers. obs.).

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