

The White-plumed Honeyeater on Eyre Peninsula

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The White-plumed Honeyeater, *Ptilotula penicillata*, is common in open eucalypt woodlands across eastern and central Australia. Red Gum, *Eucalyptus camaldulensis*, is especially favoured (Jones 1981, Blakers, Davies and Reilly 1984, Loyn 1985, Higgins, Peter and Steele 2001). In South Australia White-plumed Honeyeater occurs in the north and east, extending west to Port Augusta and the Stuart Highway (and just further to the Baxter Hills – McGilp 1932), and in the far north-west (Condon 1969, Blakers, Davies and Reilly 1984).

There are a few widely scattered reports of White-plumed Honeyeater from Eyre Peninsula. Weidenbach (1924) noted it as “frequently seen” in the Cleve Hills, and Jenkin and Waterman (1965) listed it for Coffin Bay. Mack (1969) recorded a pair nesting in Red Gums at Bascombe Well Conservation Park and Vincent (1974) recorded one at Coolanie in the Cleve Hills. Eckert, Parker and Reid (1985) however, regarded its status on Eyre Peninsula as unconfirmed because these reports contained insufficient supporting details.

A recent biological survey of Eyre Peninsula that included ten sites in Red Gum woodland did not record White-plumed Honeyeater (Brandle 2010), and GC had not previously recorded the species during numerous visits to the region since 1986. Eucalypt woodlands on Eyre Peninsula are

isolated from the north by semi-arid low open woodlands dominated by Western Myall, *Acacia papyrocarpa*, over chenopods. Red Gum woodland occurs widely in the south-west of Eyre Peninsula, where Reid (1978) noted the unusual occurrence of Yellow-plumed Honeyeaters, *P. ornata*, instead, a honeyeater normally confined to mallee.

While driving across Eyre Peninsula on 17 January 2011, GC stopped briefly in Kimba under the shade of some street trees. Above were heard repeated ‘chip, chip, chip’ calls that sounded like young White-plumed Honeyeater. Realising its significance, the source of the calls was followed to ensure they were not *P. ornata*, a relatively common species in this district. Two adult and two immature honeyeaters were located about 15 m up in the canopy of a flowering Sugar Gum, *Eucalyptus cladocalyx*. Their unstreaked, pale yellowish-green appearance and presence of white neck plumes identified them as White-plumed Honeyeater. An adult also visited the flowers of planted Coral Gums, *E. torquata*, in a nearby garden. Feeding in the same trees were several Red Wattlebirds, *Anthochaera carunculata*.

GC visited Kimba again briefly on 27 October 2011 when several White-plumed Honeyeaters were seen and heard in the same area, although time did not permit a search for any nesting activity. On 22 March 2012 White-plumed Honeyeaters were found to be widespread in flowering eucalypts in the town, particularly Coral Gum and SA Blue Gum, *E. leucoxylon*. Also of interest on the latter visit were several New Holland Honeyeaters, *Phylidonyris novaehollandiae*, present in many towns on Eyre Peninsula but not previously observed at Kimba (GC pers. obs.).

ES has observed birds while living at Whyalla since the late 1980s. A single White-plumed Honeyeater was first seen there on 1 September 1995, with a pair the following day. They were not seen again until December 1998 and bred in early 1999. They were then reported only occasionally until large rains in January 2007, with several present since.

Our observations suggest that White-plumed Honeyeater is gradually colonising towns on Eyre Peninsula, with small populations now established at Kimba and Whyalla. White-plumed Honeyeater is well known to colonise plantings of ornamental eucalypts in suburban areas, including areas outside of its historic range (Hindwood 1950, Jones 1981).

Read (1999) noted that White-plumed Honeyeater had become abundant in eucalypt plantings at Roxby Downs township by September 1990, only a few years after its establishment in 1986. It is likely that homestead gardens with ornamental eucalypts have provided stepping stones for dispersal through non-eucalypt habitats, possibly aided by above average rainfall in recent years. Read (1999) noted the likely source of birds at Roxby Downs to be Andamooka and Roxby Downs homestead gardens, with the closest naturally occurring eucalypts (Red Gums) 40 km away.

It is most likely that the source of Eyre Peninsula birds is Port Augusta, where the species is common (GC pers. obs.). P. Langdon (pers. comm.) also observed a single White-plumed Honeyeater in planted eucalypts at Pandurra Homestead on 24 September 1974, 35 km SW of Port Augusta.

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