



BIRD

Melithreptus brevirostris pallidiceps

Brown-headed Honeyeater

AUS	SA	AMLR	Endemism	Residency
-	-	U	-	Resident



Photo: © Chris Ross

Conservation Significance

The species has been described as 'probably declining' within the AMLR.¹

Description

Small honeyeater, most closely resembling the White-naped Honeyeater (*Melithreptus lunatus*) but lacking a black 'cap' on the head and eye wattle (bare skin) is creamy yellow rather than red (Higgins et al. 2001). There are no appreciable differences between the sexes (Schodde and Mason 1999; Higgins et al. 2001; Willoughby 2005).¹

Distribution and Population

Occurs throughout southern and eastern Australia (Keast 1968). This subspecies occurring in the AMLR also occurs throughout the Murray-Darling Basin (Schodde and Mason 1999).¹

Occurs throughout the AMLR and also in nearby areas of mallee. Populations have been observed for some decades at Sandy Creek CP, near Para Wirra RP, Belair RP and Scott CP (Baxter 1980; Ford and Paton 1976; Paton and Paton 1980; Rix 1976b). In the higher elevations of the AMLR, appears to be present in small numbers (e.g. Laybourne-Smith 1989).¹

A long-term banding study at three sites in the AMLR and one survey of honeyeater numbers at 16 sites in the MLR over one season, both recorded this species at just over 3% of the honeyeater population (Ford and Paton 1977; Paton and Bradley unpublished data). A survey of 90 sites of one hectare during 2001 recorded it as 4% of the honeyeater population (N. Willoughby unpublished data). This survey work suggested that in areas where it occurs, it is present at about 0.5 birds per hectare (Willoughby 2005).¹

Numbers of individuals in the AMLR increase in April and May, and decrease from September to October (Ford 1977; Ford and Paton 1977).¹ The seasonal fluctuation may reflect partial migration out of the region; partial migration between localities; an actual seasonal fluctuation in numbers; and/or a seasonal variation in detected birds (Willoughby 2005).¹

Though a declining species, there has probably been no recent change in the overall spatial distribution in the MLR. It is unlikely that it was ever an abundant species in any area due to its apparent reliance on poor quality resources and large home range. Clearance of good habitat has probably lead to a reduction in its population since European settlement (Attwood and Cale 2002).¹

Post-1983 AMLR filtered records distributed relatively widely, however, now considered rare in the region.^{2,3}

Habitat

The abundance of New Holland Honeyeater (*Phylidonyris novaehollandiae*) was found to be the best predictor of Brown-headed Honeyeater abundance, probably due to a shared preference for resources (Willoughby 2005).¹

Within the AMLR the preferred broad vegetation groups are Heathy Woodland, Grassy Woodland and Mallee.²

Biology and Ecology

Require a large home range, which is larger in the non-breeding season (~48 ha) than in the breeding season (~12 ha). Within the range there are areas of more intense use, or core areas of activity, in which individuals spend 90% of their time. Neither home range nor core areas of activity are defended. The home range for a number of individuals tends to be stable over periods of years. Thus, in the AMLR, they appear to be sedentary (Willoughby 2005).¹

Further information:

Biodiversity Conservation Unit, Adelaide Region
Phone: (61 8) 8336 0901 Fax: (61 8) 8336 0999
<http://www.environment.sa.gov.au/>

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Probably has a complex social behaviour. During the breeding season the most common group size is two although seven was also common. During the non-breeding season the most common group size was seven (Higgins et al. 2001; Willoughby 2005).

Groups appear to have stable roosting sites (Willoughby 2005). On dusk the birds slowly approach the roosting site in small groups, often feeding in the local area, before assembling quietly at the roost. In the morning they generally move in a line, foraging as they go, towards the areas of Blue and Pink Gum in which they spend most of the day foraging.¹

Breeding season between July and December (Simpson and Day 1999; Higgins et al. 2001). Nests are usually built in the drooping, outer foliage of, primarily Eucalypts, but also mistletoes and occasionally other species. They often include fur from live animals, apparently with a preference for white fur. Clutch size is usually two or three eggs, and incubation is approximately 14 days (Higgins et al. 2001).¹

It is likely that only the female builds the nest, but other birds have been observed feeding the female on a number of occasions. Observations of one nest (Noske 1983) found there were five birds in the group; the 'primary pair' (presumably the parents), two other adults and a juvenile. All birds except the juvenile were seen to incubate the nest. The primary pair incubated for 73% of the time and equally shared the task.¹

Use nectar resources when available, but in the absence or lack of nectar, spend much of their foraging time gleaning leaves or bark and probing under bark to collect lerp, manna and honeydew (e.g. Paton 1980, Collins and Briffa 1982, Ford et al. 1986, MacNally 1996, MacNally and McGoldrick 1997, Wilson and Recher 2001). The importance of these non-nectar carbohydrate foods to honeyeaters (and other birds) has since been supported by a number of further studies (Ford and Paton 1985, Recher et al. 1985, Ford et al. 1986, Woinarski et al. 1989, Recher et al. 1991; Recher et al. 1996; Moysey 1997, Oliver 1998a, 2000).¹

Aboriginal Significance

Post-1983 records indicate the AMLR distribution occurs in all Aboriginal Nations - Kurna, Ngadjuri, Nganguraku, Ngarrindjeri and Peramangk.²

Threats

Reasons for population decline and continuing threats include:

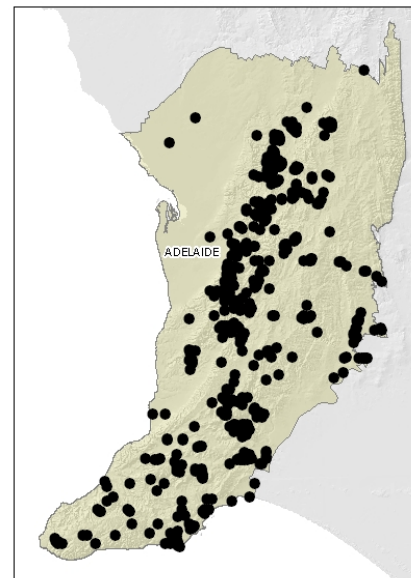
- Habitat loss or degradation and fragmentation:

especially the loss of extensive areas of grassy woodland with limited shrub layer which is regarded as 'good' habitat for this species. Habitat fragmentation may not be highly significant as it does move across cleared country within its home range. It also uses narrow corridors and isolated trees as 'stepping stones' to move between vegetated areas (Willoughby 2005).¹

- Interspecific competition: especially competition with the New Holland Honeyeater (*Phylidonyris novaehollandiae*), a widespread and abundant species, which accounts for 73% of observed aggressive interactions (Willoughby 2005).¹ As woodlands continue to degrade throughout the MLR, with many small clearances creating more edges, Noisy Miner (*Manorina melanocephala*) may encroach more on Brown-headed Honeyeater habitat (Clarke and Schedvin 1999).
- Habitat modification: especially invasion of woody weeds which decrease habitat value (but increase it for New Holland Honeyeaters).¹

Additional current direct threats have been identified and rated for this species. Refer to the main plan accompanying these profiles.

Regional Distribution



Map based on filtered post-1983 records.² Note, this map does not necessarily represent the actual species' distribution within the AMLR.

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References

Note: In some cases original reference sources are not included in this list, however they can be obtained from the reference from which the information has been sourced (the reference cited in superscript).

- 1 Cale, B. (2005). *Towards a Recovery Plan for the Declining Birds of the Mount Lofty Ranges*. Scientific Resource Document for Birds for Biodiversity. Unpublished Report.
- 2 Department for Environment and Heritage (2007). *Adelaide and Mount Lofty Ranges Regional Recovery Pilot Project Database*. Unpublished data extracted and edited from BDBSA, SA Herbarium (July 2007) and other sources.
- 3 Turner, M. S. (2001). *Conserving Adelaide's Biodiversity: Resources*. Urban Forest Biodiversity Program, Adelaide.

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