

The status of the White-fronted Honeyeater in central-western Queensland

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Abstract

Previously considered a rare visitor to central-western Queensland, the White-fronted Honeyeater *Purnella albifrons* is shown in this review to be a regular if erratic visitor and at least an occasional breeder in the region.

Introduction

The White-fronted Honeyeater *Purnella albifrons* has been considered an outlier in Queensland from its main range to the south and west. Storr (1984) described it as ‘apparently a rare visitor to arid western interior’ of the state. Higgins *et al.* (2001) noted very few records from Queensland while citing Storr (1984), and their distribution map is almost completely blank for the central-west and the Channel Country. They further noted that ‘there are no published [breeding] records from Qld’. The distribution map for the species in Barrett *et al.* (2003) shows records in Queensland are sparse and scattered, and only as far north as the vicinity of Diamantina National Park (23°S), and the vicinity of Welford National Park (25°S). Schodde & Mason (1999) simply encompass the whole of the Channel Country in a dotted line designated ‘irregular range’.

Recent records suggest that the species is more regular and more widely spread in Queensland than has been documented. In this review I update previous assessments using my own records from the Channel Country, supplemented with records from eBird (2017). The observations here include a breeding record at Welford National Park (NP), and some observations on food plants. The area of interest is central-western Queensland, part of the Channel Country, and bounded roughly by Bladensburg NP to the north, Idalia NP to the east, Welford NP to the south and Diamantina NP to the west, an area which encompasses Lochern NP.

Methods

My records of White-fronted Honeyeater have been accumulated during a wider investigation of birdlife in the Channel Country, for which the overall methodology has been described elsewhere (Ley *et al.* 2011). Each of these records is unique by month and one minute of latitude and longitude, i.e. a species cannot be recorded more than once in a given grid block and month. Thus records included here are separated from each other spatially and/or temporally, thereby minimising the possibility of double-counting individual birds. The most visited of the locations named was Welford NP which was surveyed regularly from 2012-2019. Visits to the other locations were more sporadic.

Additional records of the species from the area of interest were sought from eBird (2017). As befits a mobile species whose movements are apparently erratic and possibly nomadic, and

which may follow the flowering of favoured plants, there are a very few isolated records at outlying sites, such as Longreach sewage treatment plant, to the east at St George and even as far as Brisbane, and to the north at Dajarra and Richmond (eBird 2017). These are not considered further.

Results

Table 1 summarises 45 records of the White-fronted Honeyeater from the area in question, including six records from checklists submitted to eBird (2017). A majority of the records were from Welford NP where the most ornithologically productive year was 2012 (pers. obs.), which was preceded by a period of unusually high rainfall (Shane Hume, pers. comm.). In that year there were 14 records from the Park, all in the period April-August suggesting continuous occupancy during that time. Bird surveys were continued in the Park every year for the next seven years and from 2013 to 2018 the most records in any year was two (2015), while there were no records in 2018, a dry year. A second concentration of records occurred in July 2019, another productive time that was preceded by relatively high rainfall earlier in the year: White-fronted Honeyeaters were present at four locations in and near the Park and nested at one (Table 1).

Table 1. Records of White-fronted Honeyeater from central-western Queensland. AL, author.

Date	No. recs.	Observer	eBird Checklist
Bladensburg National Park (n=10)			
29-Aug-06	1	L&C Ezzy	S30621889
22-Oct-09	2	AL	
16-Dec-12	1	AL	
19-Jul-15	1	John Lowry	S24310797
25-Apr-16	1	AL	
28-Apr-16	1	Peter Valentine	S29787482
19-Mar-17	1	AL	
21-Mar-17	1	AL	
10-Aug-18	1	Mark Ley	S47911421
Idalia National Park (n=6)			
May-18	6	AL	
Welford National Park (n=24)			
Apr–Aug 2012	14	AL	
26-Feb-13	1	AL	
11-Feb-14	1	AL	
1-Jun-15	1	AL	
4-Jun-15	1	AL	
15-Oct-16	1	AL	
27-Feb-17	1	AL	
21-Jul-19	2	AL	
26-Jul-19	1	Tyde Bands, Matt Wright	S58479277, S5848459
27-Jul-19*	1	Tyde Bands, Matt Wright	S5840032, S58479368
Diamantina National Park (n=2)			
23-May-96	1	AL	
18-Aug-05	1	AL	
Lochern National Park (n=3)			
6-Jun-18	1	AL	
21-May-18	1	AL	
24-May-18#	1	AL	

* near Oakham property just outside S boundary of Welford NP.

from Noonbah Station which adjoins Lochern NP to west.

The species was observed foraging, presumably on floral nectar, in Western Bloodwood *Corymbia terminalis* at Bladensburg NP (John Lowry, eBird checklist S24310797), a mistletoe at Idalia NP, Spotted Emu-bush *Eremophylla maculata* at Welford NP and Diamantina NP, and Harlequin Emu-bush *E. duttonii* at Lochern NP (Angus Emmott pers. comm., 16 Jun 2014; Plate 1). In addition, at Bladensburg National Park, individuals of this species, Brown Honeyeater *Lichmera indistincta*, Black Honeyeater *Sugomel nigrum* and White-plumed Honeyeater *Ptilotula penicillata* have been seen probing the flowers of Yellow Bush Pea *Sesbania cannabina*, and carrying its pollen on their faces, suggesting that this plant provides nectar (pers. obs.).

On 21 July 2019 two fledglings were observed at Welford NP (Plate 2). Adult birds nearby behaved in an agitated fashion and appeared to be trying to lure the observers from the vicinity of the young, which were only able to fly or flutter for short distances low in the vegetation (Catherine Hirsch, Maggie Overend, Marion Roper, pers. com., 18 April 2020).



Plate 1. White-fronted Honeyeater and Harlequin Emu-bush at Lochern National Park, 6 June 2014. (Angus Emmott).

Discussion

The White-fronted Honeyeater occurs more widely, albeit sparsely, in Queensland than has been previously acknowledged. The 2014 sighting at Lochern NP was the first record for the district by a long-term resident observer (Angus Emmott, pers. comm. 16 June 2014), which hints at the possibility that the species is expanding its range into new areas or becoming more regular in western Queensland, but it seems more likely that the increase in number of records is due to an increase in birdwatcher activity in the region, which is revealing what has always been the case. The rise in popularity of eBird (2017), with its easily updated and widespread

publicly-available recording of sightings, and accessibility of submitted data, has undoubtedly contributed to redefining the species' distribution, which on the basis of these records, extends into the Channel Country, where it is a regular, if erratic, visitor and at least an occasional breeder.

The White-fronted Honeyeater is highly nectarivorous and is often recorded in association with plants in flower (Higgins *et al.* 2001). Seven species of Emu-bushes (*Eremophila* spp) are listed as recorded sources of nectar by Higgins *et al.* (2001), to which can now be added the Harlequin Emu-bush. Breeding of the White-fronted Honeyeater has not previously been recorded in Queensland, at least up to mid-2000 (Higgins *et al.* 2001). The presence of newly fledged young at Welford National Park on 21 July 2019 confirms that the birds bred there and, using the incubation and nestling periods detailed by Higgins *et al.* (2001), the eggs were evidently laid in the last week of June.



Plate 2. Newly fledged White-fronted Honeyeater at Welford National Park 21 July 2019. (Marion Roper).

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