

= Black honeyeater =

The black honeyeater ( *Sugomel nigrum* ) is a species of bird in the family of honeyeaters , Meliphagidae , and the sole species in the genus *Sugomel* . The black honeyeater exhibits sexual dimorphism with the male being black and white while the female is a speckled grey @-@ brown ; immature birds look like the female . The species is endemic to Australia , and ranges widely across the arid areas of the continent , through open woodland and shrubland , particularly in areas where the emu bush and related species occur .

Black honeyeaters feed on nectar , and have a long curved bill to reach the base of tubular flowers such as those of the emu bush . They also take insects on the wing , and regularly eat charcoal left behind at campfires . The male engages in a soaring song flight in the mating season , but contributes little to nest building and incubation . Both sexes feed and care for the young . While the population appears to be decreasing , they are sufficiently numerous and widespread to be considered of Least Concern in terms of conservation .

= = Taxonomy = =

The black honeyeater was first described by John Gould in 1838 as *Myzomela nigra* , using the Latin adjective *niger* to refer to the black plumage of the male . The genus name was derived from the Ancient Greek words *myzo* ' to suckle ' and *meli* ' honey ' , and referred to the bird 's nectivorous habits . In 1967 ornithologist Finn Salomonsen transferred the species from *Myzomela* to the genus *Certhionyx* , which also contained the banded honeyeater ( *Certhionyx pectoralis* ) and pied honeyeater ( *Certhionyx variegatus* ) , and later authorities accepted this classification . However , in 2004 genetic study of nuclear and mitochondrial DNA of honeyeaters resolved it as in a natural group with *Myzomela* after all , although it was an early offshoot and quite divergent genetically . It was subsequently reclassified in its own genus *Sugomel* . It is identified as *Sugomel niger* by most taxonomic authorities , and *Sugomel nigrum* by the IOC Birdlist .

DNA analysis has shown honeyeaters to be related to the Pardalotidae ( pardalotes ) , Acanthizidae ( Australian warblers , scrubwrens , thornbills , etc . ) , and the Maluridae ( Australian fairy @-@ wrens ) in a large Meliphagoidea superfamily . The Papuan black myzomela , ( *Myzomela nigrita* ) , found in Indonesia and Papua New Guinea is also known as the black honeyeater . It is a different but related species .

= = Description = =

The black honeyeater is a small honeyeater with a long slender down @-@ curved bill , a small rounded head and slender neck set on a plump body , and a short , slightly cleft tail . It has relatively long , pointed wings compared with other Meliphagidae , and very long wings for such a small bird , the development of which has been attributed to its feeding behaviour of flying between shrubs and hovering over flowers .

The species is strongly sexually dimorphic . Adult males are black and white , with a black head , neck , wings and upperparts , and a black stripe running down from the centre of the chest to the abdomen , and with a white belly , flanks and under @-@ tail coverts . The female ? s crown , ear coverts and upper parts are buff brown , scalloped paler , with a pale eyebrow , and the chest is speckled grey @-@ brown grading into a dull white belly . In both male and female the iris is dark brown and the bill and legs blackish brown . Immature birds are similar to the adult female , however the upper breast and throat tend to be more uniform and the base of the bill is paler . Immature birds are not separable from adults at a distance .

The black honeyeater is quiet outside the breeding season , but calls before and during nesting , often early in the morning . The calls include a soft metallic " chwit , chwit " ; a louder note , a " tieee " , with a monotonously even pitch and spacing at intervals of several seconds ; and a weak " peeee " , usually uttered by breeding males . In high song flights the males give a double noted " tieee @-@ tieee " . A soft scolding call is given by both sexes after the young hatch , which may be a food

call for the young . The species is also heard making a bill snap when hawking insects . It is constantly on the move , hovering and hawking when feeding , and constantly chasing intruders at food sources . Gould described its flight as " remarkably quick , and performed with zigzag starts " .

#### = = Distribution and habitat = =

The black honeyeater is a bird of the dry inland of Australia , being generally widespread if scattered in western Queensland and New South Wales to the South Australian border and occasionally recorded in the Victorian Mallee and Wimmera regions . In South Australia , it occurs in the south @-@ east and it is widespread in the central and northern regions of Western Australia , with some rare records in the south near Kalgoorlie . In the Northern Territory it is widespread around Alice Springs , with some vagrants to the Top End .

It is dependent on the presence of the emu bush *Eremophila longifolia* and related species . As a result , the black honeyeater is found in open woodlands and shrublands of arid and semi @-@ arid regions , as well as in mulga or mallee woodlands , and it will also be found in spinifex savanna where flowering shrubs such as grevilleas and paperbarks occur . It has been noted that the black honeyeater is able to locate emu bushes , even when clumps consisted of only two or three trees and were separated by many kilometres of country , which suggests the importance of this plant @-@ bird association .

The black honeyeaters is considered to be migratory rather than nomadic , with regular seasonal movements related to flowering of food plants , especially the emu bush . Some movements are southwards in spring and summer , moving northwards again in autumn and winter . During severe droughts it has been recorded south of Bendigo and in the Hunter Region . Irruptions ( sudden population increases ) can occur in some areas after rain or the movement of floodwaters .

#### = = Behaviour = =

#### = = = Food and feeding = = =

The black honeyeater feeds on nectar , probing flowers and foliage with its long fine bill . It is mainly found in the crowns of eucalypts , at clumps of mistletoe or in shrubs , especially emu bushes *Eremophila* . Observations over a twelve @-@ month period in South Australia recorded black honeyeaters visiting the flowers of *Eremophila longifolia* , *Eremophila oppositifolia* , *Eucalyptus incrassata* , and *Grevillea ilicifolia* . They were also frequently observed hawking for small insects . The black honeyeater hovers briefly around flowers when feeding . Normally found alone , in pairs or in small flocks , they may sometimes form large mixed flocks at food sources , associating with other birds such as pied honeyeaters and white @-@ browed woodswallows . Like many other honeyeaters , the black honeyeater catches insects on the wing . The male , in particular , will rise to a height of 15 metres ( 49 ft ) to seize an insect in mid @-@ air , and then drop to a regularly used perch .

A study of black honeyeaters at seven sites in Western Australia regularly recorded breeding females eating ash from the campsite fires and often making repeated visits over a brief period of time . It was noted that the birds seemed attracted to the remote campfire with groups of around six hovering around and landing beside the fire , an activity described as similar to " bees buzzing around a honeypot . " After pecking at the ash , some of the females foraged for insects , sallying from the foliage of nearby Wheatbelt Wandoo ( *Eucalyptus capillosa* ) before returning for more ash . The activity of the females approaching the fire ranged from a single peck to sustained feeding for a minute or more . Male birds occasionally landed near the fire , but none were seen to take ash . Well developed brood patches on the birds mist netted near the fires , suggest that the females take ash around the time of laying , and throughout the incubation and feeding period . Wood ash is rich in calcium and it was hypothesised that the females were eating ash to form medullary bone before egg @-@ laying or to repair a calcium deficit after laying . When other small birds , such as

American hummingbirds , were recorded eating calcium @-@ rich ash , bones or shell it was suggested that the bones of small species may not be able to store enough calcium for egg production .

#### = = = Breeding = = =

The breeding season is from July to December ( mostly between August and November ) , or opportunistically after rain . There is apparently some variation based upon location , with birds in West Australia breeding earlier and breeding in March in Queensland . Black honeyeater populations concentrate for breeding wherever the right plants are in flower and there is an abundance of insects , essential for feeding the young . At the beginning of the mating season , males can be seen soaring in " song flights " which consist of a series of zigzagging movements , high into the air , accompanied by constant calling . The birds appear to stiffen themselves , with wings pointed downward , as they rise , while uttering a two @-@ note call .

Breeding pairs of black honeyeaters will nest in groups or loose colonies , with males aggressively defending a small breeding territory against members of their own species as well as other honeyeaters . Both members of the pair seem to be involved in selecting the nest site . The nest is usually situated low on a dead limb or in a fork of a small tree or shrub , though sometimes fallen timber including a fallen Callitris pine is chosen as the nest site . The female gathers nesting material close to the nest site , while the male is engaged in song flights , and she builds the shallow , open , cup @-@ shaped nest from fine twigs , grass , and other plant material bound with spiderweb , lining it with grass , roots , fibre , horse hair , flowers or wool . As the young grow the nest can become flattened to a saucer shape , and may be an almost flat platform by the time the chicks fledge .

The female lays two to three eggs that are 15 millimetres ( 0 @.@ 59 in ) long , 12 millimetres ( 0 @.@ 47 in ) wide and an unusual swollen oval shape . The eggs are slightly lustrous , buffy white in colour and dotted with reddish @-@ brown and grey blotches that often appear in a cloud over the larger end of the eggs . Black honeyeater nests are occasionally parasitised by Horsfield 's Bronze Cuckoo . The female incubates alone , leaving the eggs exposed for short periods during the day to take insects on the wing . When approached , the sitting bird attempts to hide by sinking into the nest and , if unsuccessful in deterring the intruder , will tumble to the ground with outstretched wings , giving weak calls in an effort to lure the intruder away from the nest .

While the female is incubating , the male remains on guard at one of several regular vantage points . The incubation period is around sixteen days , and the fledging period approximately eighteen days . On hatching , the young birds ' eyes are closed , and they are naked except for tufts of down on the head , nape and back . Both sexes feed and care for the young , taking all of the insects for the young birds on the wing . At one nest , two small young were fed every ten minutes or so , with the male bringing food three to four times more often than the female .

#### = = Conservation status = =

The black honeyeater may be adversely affected by the loss of the emu bush to grazing and weed control by farmers . Despite the fact that the population trend appears to be decreasing , the decline is not believed to be particularly rapid ; the current population seems to be of sufficient numbers , and the species has a sufficiently large range , for the species to be evaluated as of Least Concern .