

Blue-faced Honeyeater

Entomyzon cyanotis

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Hunter Bird
Observers Club

Affiliated with BirdLife Australia



Adult Blue-faced Honeyeater (photo: Rob Palazzi)

General Comments

This is a large, bold and unmistakable species. The substantial deep-blue bare patch of skin around the eye is diagnostic (NB the bare patch is yellow or yellow-green in juvenile and immature birds). Birds have olive upper parts, black head and neck (with a white nape band and white malar stripe), white underparts, charcoal-grey throat and bib. In flight, the underwing coverts and base of primaries are cinnamon pink. The base of the bill is light blue.

Males and females look similar – males are larger but there is considerable overlap of biometrics. Only the female incubates (the males sometimes bring nesting material).

Juveniles have yellow facial patch and grey-brown iris, and the base of their bill is yellow. At around six months, they develop immature plumage – in this

phase, the facial patch becomes yellow-green, while the iris and base of the bill gradually change towards adult colours. Also, the wing coverts are yellow rather than cinnamon pink. Full adult plumage and soft part colours are acquired midway through the second year.

Blue-faced Honeyeaters are gregarious, and aggressive to other species. They are undeterred by attacks from Noisy Miners, and they sometimes join with Noisy Miners to repel unwanted visitors.



Inter-species aggression – Blue-faced Honeyeater and Noisy Miner (photo: Rob Palazzi)

Regional Status

The Blue-faced Honeyeater is a breeding resident in the Hunter Region. Its preferred habitats are open woodlands close to water, thus it is uncommon in the drier areas to the west of the region and in higher altitude areas. Within its main range in the region, it is regularly seen in suburban parks and gardens.

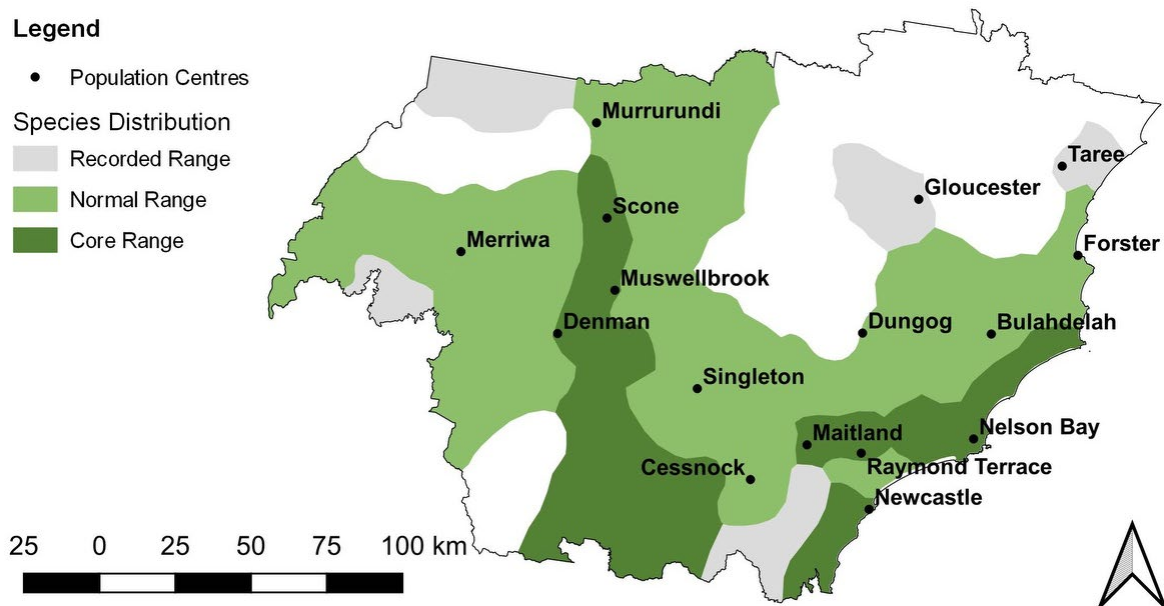
The NSW Atlas considered it to be a sedentary species, and birds in northern Australia are sedentary too. In the Hunter Region that might not be completely correct – birds sometimes appear in a particular suburban area and then just as quickly disappear – suggesting that there may be some localised movements.

Legend

- Population Centres

Species Distribution

- Recorded Range
- Normal Range
- Core Range



Distribution of the Blue-faced Honeyeater in the Hunter Region (map by Dan Williams).



An immature Blue-faced Honeyeater – it has a yellow base to its bill, but the facial patch is yellow-green and the iris has already turned to cream/white (photo: Marg Clarke)

Sub-species

In BirdLife International's taxonomy two sub-species are recognised – Eastern

Blue-faced Honeyeater subspecies *cyanotis* (which has a wide distribution in eastern Australia – encompassing Victoria and much of non-arid NSW and Queensland) and the Cape York Blue-faced Honeyeater which is subspecies *griseigularis*. The latter is substantially smaller than the nominate subspecies *cyanotis*.

The IOC recognises a third subspecies *albipennis*, White-quilled Honeyeater, which occurs in the Northern Territory and Kimberley areas. However, BirdLife International treats this as a separate species. In flight, it has very obvious white patches in its wings.

Nest recycling

Blue-faced Honeyeaters often recycle material from an old nest of theirs and/or they steal material from the nest of another species. Although occasionally they build a nest from scratch, most of the time they commandeer another nest and build on top of that. Their favourite is the large domed stick nest of the Grey-crowned Babbler – one study found that up to 90% of Blue-faced Honeyeater nests were originally used by a babbler. In areas where Grey-crowned Babblers are scarce, they take over nests of other large honeyeaters (friarbirds etc) or, less frequently, Australian Magpies and Magpie-larks.

About the name

Blue-faced Honeyeater

“Blue-faced” is descriptive, and accurate (for adult birds). The first use of “honeyeater” was for a bird in South Africa (it is now called a honeyguide) but the term was soon being applied to birds in Australia. In the early 19th century the English naturalist John Latham (sometimes called the “grandfather” of Australian ornithology) was even using it for everything from bee-eaters to robins to whistlers, and a lot more as well. In 1848, John Gould formalised and standardised the term.

Entomyzon cyanotis

There is consensus about the origins of the species name *cyanotis* – it combines the Greek words *kuanos*, dark-blue or sea-blue, and *ōtis*, eared. The origins of the genus name *Entomozon* are disputed. HANZAB suggests it derives from a Greek word for notch, *entomi*, and the Latin term for honeyeater, *myzon* – thus referencing the bird’s allegedly prominent nostrils.

Fraser and Gray suggest it means insect-sucker, from the Greek words *entomos*, insects, and *muzaō*, suck. It's worth noting that Latham specifically mentioned "a filamentous tongue used for extracting small insects from between the broken bark of trees" when he studied this species. Incidentally, Latham prepared formal descriptions of this species multiple times and he gave it at least six different common names!!



An immature Blue-faced Honeyeater. Note the yellow on the primaries (ie "quills") (photo: Marg Clarke).

Design Rob Kyte at Conservation Matters 0420 821 460 Text by Alan Stuart based on information mainly sourced from • HBOC's Hunter Region annual bird report series • Volumes 1-7 of BirdLife Australia's HANZAB (the Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds) • Volumes 1-3 of the NSW Field Atlassers' Atlas of the Birds of NSW and the ACT • Bird in the Hand (ABSA information sheet series) • Menkhorst et al. (2017). The Australian Bird Guide • Ian Fraser & Jeannie Gray (2013). Australian Bird Names. A Complete Guide • Richard Schodde and Ian Mason (1999). A Directory of Australian Birds (Passerines).

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