

New Holland Honeyeater

Phylidonyris novaehollandiae

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Hunter Bird
Observers Club

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New Holland Honeyeater (Photo: Steve Merrett)

Description

Adult birds are mostly black and white, with a conspicuous yellow wing panel and yellow edges to the upper tail. Their breast is heavily streaked, and they have an obvious white iris and a white eyebrow. Additional plumage points are discussed in the section further below which compares them with White-cheeked Honeyeaters.

Males and females look quite similar: the differences are subtle and not useful in the field. Immature birds are duller – for example brown on the back rather than blackish, the breast streaking is more muted and they lack a white iris. They attain adult plumage at around two years of age.

New Holland Honeyeaters are nectivores (they also take insects) and their numbers fluctuate depending on local conditions. Although they favour heath and forests with heath-type understorey, they are a common garden bird in

many parts of their range. Usually they are active and conspicuous wherever they occur.

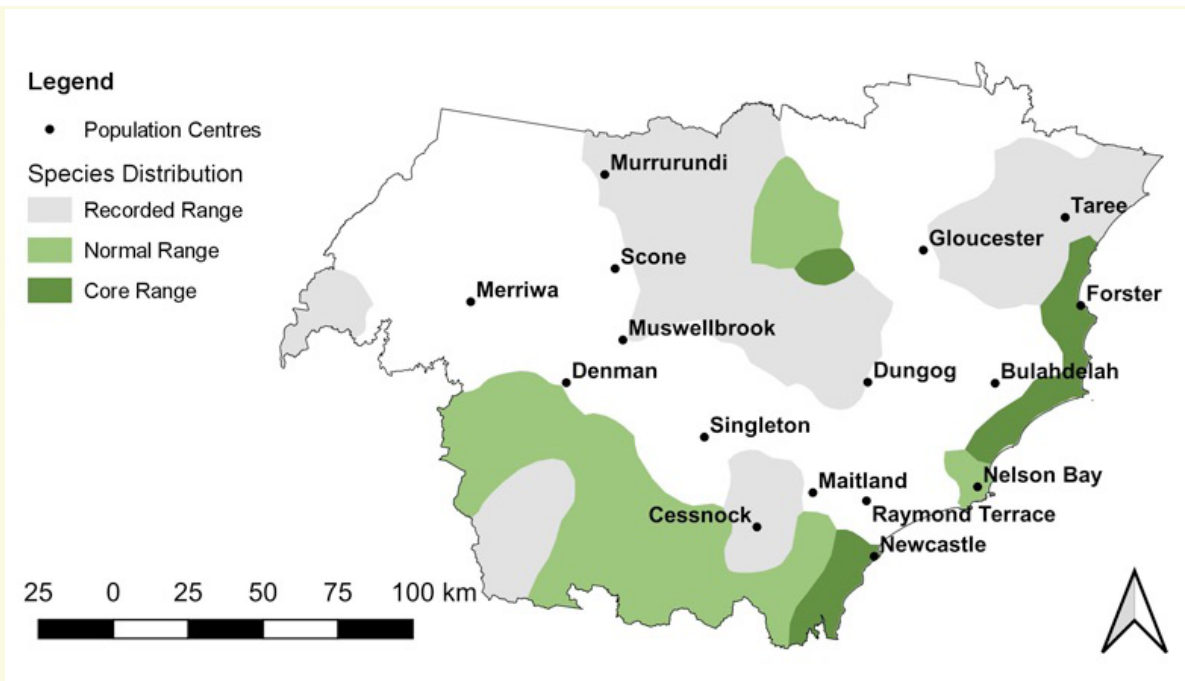


A juvenile bird – lacking white iris and with somewhat more muted coloration. (Photo: Alan Stuart)

Regional Status

New Holland Honeyeaters are a breeding resident of our region, with a widespread distribution wherever there is suitable habitat for them. This leads to an interesting situation where the two places that they are most often recorded are at about sea level (in coastal heath) and at above 1,000m (in heathy forests in the Gloucester and Barrington Tops).

In most years there is an autumn influx into the Gloucester Tops, when the local *Banksia* species are flowering. Many other honeyeater species also arrive there at that time.



The distribution of the New Holland Honeyeater in the Hunter Region (map by Dan Williams)

New Holland or White-cheeked?

These closely-related species look somewhat similar and they often are found in the same habitat. Care must be taken so as to get the identification correct. Key differentiators are that the White-cheeked Honeyeater has a single large white patch on the side of its face, whereas the New Holland Honeyeater has two smaller white patches (a cheek plume and a malar patch); the White-cheeked Honeyeater has a dark iris; also it lacks bristles on the throat – New Holland Honeyeaters have the latter feature, which generates a noticeable “beard” effect.



New Holland Honeyeater displaying all of its identification features. (Photo: Rob Palazzi)

Sub-species

Five sub-species are recognised – one each in WA, Kangaroo Island, Tasmania, and some Bass Strait islands, and the nominate subspecies *novaehollandiae* (Eastern New Holland Honeyeater). The latter has a wide distribution in south-eastern Australia, from the Eyre Peninsula up to about Noosa and extending to the inland foothills of the Great Dividing Range. The differences between the five subspecies are subtle and describing them is beyond the scope of this relatively brief information sheet.

About the name

New Holland Honeyeater

The name is entirely descriptive – it's a honeyeater, and it occurs in Australia (which for a time was known as "New Holland"). Many other species could have been given this name!

Phylidonyris novaehollandiae

The species name is from the Modern Latin *Nova Hollandia*, ie it's the latinised version of New Holland. The genus name is an insight into the world of taxonomy and how it changes as new knowledge is uncovered. In the 1830s, during an era when Australia's honeyeaters were first being closely investigated by scientists, several species of honeyeater were considered to

be closely related to the sunbirds. Their scientific name means “affectionate part-sunbird” and is a combination based upon *Philedon* (“affectionate”) and *Cinnyris*, which is a sunbird genus.

Why affectionate? ‘We’re glad you asked. It’s because the call of Molucca’s Black-faced Friarbird sounds like “let’s kiss” in the Moluccan language. That’s why the friarbird genus is called *Philemon*. What that has to do with the New Holland Honeyeater is anyone’s guess. It seems surprising that the genus name hasn’t been revised in the subsequent 190 years of taxonomic effort.



New Holland Honeyeater (Photo: Rebecca Citroni)

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 HANZAB (the Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds) • 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). *Information in this fact sheet is provided exclusively to members of the Hunter Bird Observers Club*

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