White-plumed Honeyeater

Ptilotula penicillata

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Hunter Bird Observers Club

Affiliated with BirdLife Australia

An adult White-plumed Honeyeater in breeding plumage (photo: Rob Palazzi)

General Comments

This is a grey-olive honeyeater widely known for its familiar cheery call. Adults are yellowish olive-grey above, and pale brownish grey below, and have a diagnostic white neck-plume. The upper part of the plume is diffusely bordered in black. Males and females look alike although males are slightly larger. Only the female broods, but both parents feed chicks.

The bill, gape and eye-ring of adult birds change from yellow in non-breeding plumage to brown and thence to black in breeding plumage. These colour changes reverse after the breeding season.

Juveniles are greyer than adults and only have an indistinct neck plume. They moult into an adult-type immature plumage at around 3 months and full adult

plumage at about 12 months.

This is principally a bird of inland woodlands close to water, but it has adapted to parks and gardens in the cities and towns within its range.

An adult White-plumed Honeyeater in non-breeding plumage, on a hot day (photo: Mick Roderick)

Distribution changes

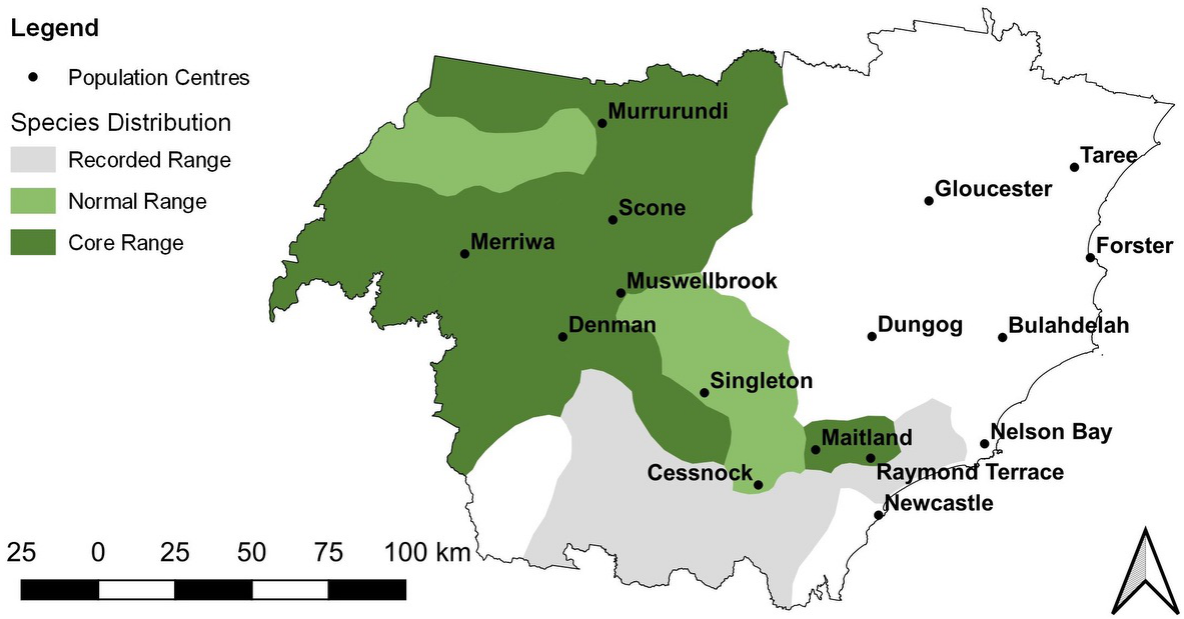
White-plumed Honeyeaters are generally considered to be sedentary, although with some local movements in response to changing conditions. However, their range in NSW apparently has changed. John Gould's 1837 record of one at Dartbrook was apparently the first for that area (and therefore it perhaps was the first ever Hunter Region record of one). The NSW & ACT Atlas documents several similar incursions into other parts of NSW.

European settlement led, amongst other things, to the creation of farm dams. The resultant more widespread availability of permanent water might have

benefitted this species.

Regional Status

The White-plumed Honeyeater is a resident of the drier parts of the mid- and upper-Hunter Valley (including its Goulburn River tributary). There, it often is the most abundant of the honeyeaters, especially if a reliable water supply water is available (a river, creek or dam). It is absent from wetter forests such as those in the north-eastern sections of the region.



Distribution of the White-plumed Honeyeater in the Hunter Region (map by Dan Williams).

Subspecies

Four subspecies are recognised – the one occurring in the Hunter Region (the Eastern White-plumed Honeyeater) is the nominate race *penicillata*. The three other subspecies are found in the central and western parts of Australia, extending to the Shark Bay coastline and a spur into the Kimberley.

About the name

White-plumed Honeyeater

White-plumed is descriptive, for the line of feathers on the side of the bird's neck. For a while, Australian honeyeaters were called honeysuckers. The first known local use of honeyeater was by Latham in 1823. When John Gould came along a couple of decades later, he formalised and standardised the term.

Ptilotula penicillata

The genus name is from the Greek words *ptilon* feather and *otis* ear – and the

species name is from the Latin *penicillus*, paintbrush. All of which is about the plume of white feathers on the side of the neck. *Ptilotula* is a diminutive of *Ptilotis*, which is where the etymological roots first point us. The latter genus was once in use for several of the honeyeater species, including the six species nowadays classified as being in the *Ptilotula* genus. Short-circuiting a long story of taxonomic history, *Ptilotis* is now defunct as a genus name and its former members are classified as being either *Ptilotula* or *Meliphaga* honeyeaters

An immature White-plumed Honeyeater, with a yellow bill (the black tip is beginning to develop). The white plume is already distinct but note that it lacks a dark upper margin. (photo: Dawn Riggett).

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Names. A Complete Guide • Richard Schodde and Ian Mason (1999). A Directory of Australian Birds (Passerines) • James Jobling (2010). The Helm Dictionary of Scientific Names. Christopher Helm, London.

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