

Yellow-faced Honeyeater

Caligavis chrysops

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Hunter Bird
Observers Club

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A Yellow-faced Honeyeater, taken in the Tomalpin Woodlands (photo: Jim Smart)

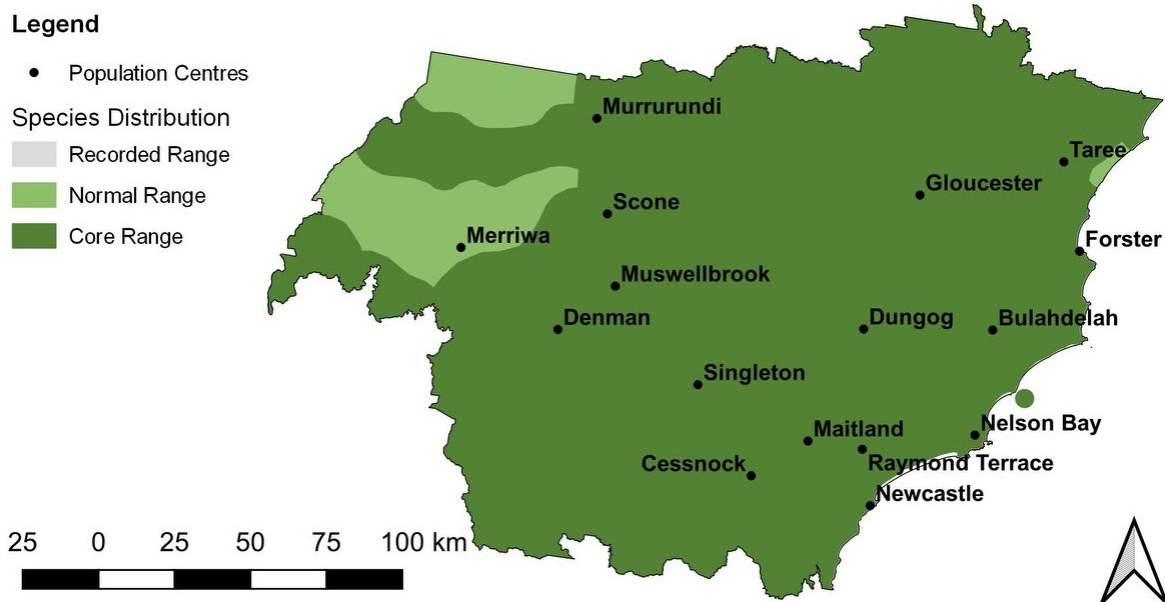
Description

This is a small, plain honeyeater – it is mainly grey/brown but it has a prominent yellow facial stripe (with areas of black above and below). The facial stripe is easily seen when the bird is stationary – which mostly it is not! Males and females are almost identical – males are slightly larger but the differences are small and they are not a useful field indicator. Only the female incubates.

Juvenile and immature birds differ marginally from adults: for example, their iris is brown instead of dusky blue, and their black bill has a brownish nasal groove. Spotting the differences from an adult bird require a high quality photograph or to have the bird in hand. Birds reach full adult plumage at around two years of age.

Regional Status

The Yellow-faced Honeyeater is arguably the Hunter Region's most common and most widespread species of honeyeater. Many birds appear to be resident (but, see below) and there are regular breeding records. As the distribution map indicates, there is nowhere in the region where Yellow-faced Honeyeaters are not recorded – they are found anywhere where there is woodland or forest habitat.



Yellow-faced Honeyeater distribution in the Hunter Region (map by Dan Williams)

Sub-species

There are three sub-species of Yellow-faced Honeyeater. Two sub-species have limited ranges: those being in South Australia (*samueli*, in Mt Lofty Ranges)

and Queensland (*barroni*, in the wet tropics). Our bird, the South-eastern Yellow-faced Honeyeater, is the nominate sub-species *chrysops*. It occurs in forests and woodlands from eastern South Australia to central east Queensland (Dawes Range).

Annual migration

Most of the southern-based South-eastern Yellow-faced Honeyeaters migrate to parts of northern Australia in mid-autumn, before returning to their southern breeding grounds in August or September. At “pinch-points”, evidence of the autumn migration can be spectacular, with hundreds of thousands of birds sometimes passing through on a daily basis. Many of the known pinch-points are in the Southern Highlands and the Blue Mountains, where migrating flocks have to use the narrow passes between mountains. Elsewhere on their migration route, the honeyeater flocks can be dispersed over much larger areas, and thus the migration is less obvious.

The southwards migration in late winter and early spring usually is much less obvious. Although normally there are many reports of small flocks on the move, there aren't any indications that suggest that there are hundreds of thousands of birds on the move on any given day. Possibly, this indicates that the southwards migration occurs over a longer time period and over a wider area. But almost nothing is known about this. For example, although many Yellow-faced Honeyeaters have been banded, to date there are no records from anywhere in Australia of banded birds being found more than a few kilometres away from the original banding site.

Recently in the Hunter Region, large numbers of birds were discovered to be moving through the Mt Sugarloaf/Pambalong area in mid-autumn. It is intriguing that there were no prior records of that behaviour, which possibly indicates a change of pattern, perhaps associated with deterrents such as new freeways (for example).

Another unknown is whether the Hunter Region's Yellow-faced Honeyeaters stay here all year round, or if some or all of them migrate northwards in autumn and are replaced by southern birds. It's amazing that so little is known about one of our most common passerines!



Yellow-faced Honeyeater at Awabakal Nature Reserve (photo: Rob Palazzi)

About the name

Yellow-faced Honeyeater

“Yellow-faced” is a simple descriptive term. However, the derivation of “honeyeater” is more complicated. In the early 19th Century the term was being used for all sorts of Australian birds including various robins and whistlers. The term “honeyeater” was also in use for various overseas creatures e.g. for the guild of African birds which later became known as “honey-guides” and for animals such as the Ratel (“the honey-badger”). Lewin (in 1808) used the term “honeysucker” when naming several of our “honeyeaters”. In 1848, the ornithologist John Gould formalised and standardised the term into its current usage.

Caligavis chrysops

The genus name derives from the Latin words *caligo*, meaning obscurity, and *avis*, meaning bird. In other words, it has been named as an unprepossessing bird. The species name is from the Greek word *khrusos*, meaning gold or golden.



Yellow-faced Honeyeater at Soldiers Point (photo: Trevor Murray)

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).

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