

## FEEDING HONEYEATERS

J.S. Robertson, Queensland

It has been demonstrated in many places that free flying honeyeaters of various species readily accept artificial feeding. My local honeyeaters have proved they are no exception. The bulk of the honeyeaters at my feeder are Browns, (Gliciphila indistincta) but Whitethroateds (Melithreptus alboocularis), Mangroves (Meliphaga fascioocularis), and an odd Fuscous (Meliphaga fusca) are regulars too. It was no surprise that such opportunists as House Sparrows (Passer domesticus) and Starlings (Sturnus vulgaris) should have a try to check what the honeyeaters found so good, but Grey Butcher-birds (Cracticus torquatus) and Spangled Drongos (Chibia bracteata) as regulars were unexpected. The Silvereyes (Zosterops lateralis) and Scarlet Honeyeaters (Myzomela sanguinolenta) try to sneak in but the Browns chase them away.

The feeding mixture used is three tablespoons of sugar per quart of water. In busy times the birds drink more than 5 pints daily, or three pounds of sugar per week. At first red plastic screw type bottle tops were used; these are chain stores items, 4" in diameter by  $\frac{5}{8}$ " deep and resemble my red hibiscus flowers. They were accepted so readily that in no time it was a tedious job to keep them full. A siphon feeder was substituted. This consists of a glass pint milk bottle inverted over a plastic tray 5" x 4" x  $\frac{3}{4}$ " deep - previously a quarter plate photographic developing dish. The whole holds 27 fluid ozs. and keeps the hungry hoard quiet for a time. If it empties there is soon such a pile up of birds in the vicinity that the resulting clamour is most noticeable. Fortunately Brown Honeyeaters are wonderful songsters.

The siphon feeder is mounted on one wall of a wire netting trap which stands 3 ft. above ground, on four timber slats supported on four galvanized iron pipe legs. This homemade trap is 18" x 15" x 12" high. Both end walls are top hinged to make drop doors with openings of 15" x 10". When used as a trap, the doors are dropped simultaneously by a bird on either of the treadles or as a pull-string operation. A plastic push-on type bottle top, with hinged flap removed, is used on the milk bottle top to reduce the opening to a size readily blocked by one finger when being re-mounted full of mixture. The inverted bottle is slipped into a wire loop against the trap wall with the plastic push-on top stood into a serviette ring to keep it up  $\frac{1}{2}$ " from the floor of the feeding tray. Maximum refill value is obtained by first filling the tray so that the outlet of the bottle is submerged when stood in the ring. When the feeding birds

lower the fluid level in the tray below the bottle inlet, this admits air bubbles to the bottle and so discharges mixture to restore the fluid level in the tray. The resulting gurgling alarms newcomers but they soon ignore it. A second serviette ring became necessary in the tray to thwart bathing in the sticky fluid.

It is most amusing to watch a dozen honeyeaters, shoulder to shoulder, around the tray, all with heads bobbing up and down, and half a dozen more hopping around the floor trying to squeeze in. The siphon feeder is 32 ft. from my big window and about 10 ft. below it, so visibility is good; the 3 ft. diameter bird bath is 10 ft. closer to the house.

From time to time census attempts are made with binoculars to assess the banding position. Over a timed period, incoming birds entering the end doors are counted and booked under species and whether banded or not. This requirement means that many feeding birds do not get booked as it is necessary to be able to see the left leg to determine whether they are banded or not - all my bands are on the left leg. Such a 30 minute count showed Brown Honeyeaters, banded, made 45 visits, unbanded 65; Whitethroated, 4 banded, and nil unbanded. Another 30 minute count showed banded Browns making 79 visits, unbanded 49; Whitethroated, banded 31 and 4 unbanded. These tallies, of course, represent visits to the feeder and not individuals. This point was emphasised by the solitary Fuscous, which is banded, as it made 4 visits in the first 30 minute period, and a fortnight later 5 visits in a 20 minute period.

Generally the siphon feeder is maintained as a free feeder, whilst two funnel traps sited 20 yards away take samples of retraps and provide a supply of new birds for banding. However, when used as a trap the clatter of the closing doors and their locking rods disturbs the birds very little and they are soon back feeding again. These activities have included the banding of 122 Brown Honeyeaters; 12 White-throated; 15 Mangrove and 1 Fuscous Honeyeater; also 4 Grey Butcher-birds and 2 Spangled Drongos. The Honeyeaters were weighed and measured too.

Daily bookings are made of replenishments to the feeder, with time of day and quantity of mixture added. This in turn gives fluid ounces consumed daily and shows that marked population variations occur. No doubt there are many causes. The main one seems to be availability of other food locally as there was a marked drop in usage when the melaleucas suddenly blossomed.

Most birds arrive in a hurry, as from afar, fill their

tanks and go. Some loll about in the feeder, notably a Whitethroated juvenile, affectionately known as 'Piggy'. This bird used to stay as much as half an hour, hopefully trying, at intervals, to suck up even more. There are the inevitable pests, so sure of their early and painless release, that they just go in everywhere for the fun of it. Their band numbers can often be guessed from their behaviour patterns. The feeding peck order is Mangroves, Whitethroated, Fuscous and Browns. Lately they have been feeding together amiably.

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### POLES TOO SHORT?

My net poles are the standard 8 feet lengths of  $\frac{3}{4}$ " wooden dowelling rods. Several times lately I have found myself wishing that they were 9 feet or even 10 feet long because of very uneven ground or perhaps the height of feeding bushes or obstacles near the net. A simple, effective and light solution was readily available in bamboo boots for the poles.

By selecting bamboo poles with a tube diameter to match my poles, it was easy to cut the bamboo above a joint to provide a six inch sleeve and various lengths below to accommodate any desired extension of net pole lift. Half a dozen of these bamboo boots of various lengths take little room in the car, are light to carry, and satisfy that occasional urge for taller poles. I do not attach the boots to the poles. The net is rigged normally and if found desirable the pole is lifted and stood into the open end sleeve of the bamboo extension.

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