The Eastern Spinebill as Migrant

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The question of Spinebill migration is considered, and figures are given of Spinebills caught during two years' mist netting on coastal heaths in north eastern New South Wales. These figures appear to indicate a regular seasonal movement of Spinebills into this area during the winter months, with complete absence of the species from September to March.

The possibility of movements of Eastern Spinebills (*Acanthorhynchus tenuirostris*) was raised by Lane (1964) and Wilson (1964). The Spinebill appears to be a definite autumn-winter visitor to the coastal heaths near Hastings Point and Kingscliff, in the extreme north-east corner of N.S.W. The seasonal nature of the visitation is well illustrated numerically by the banding data (Table I) for the coastal heath areas.

TABLE I

Period	No. of mist netting days	Spinebills banded
(a) Oct., 1963 - March, 1964	36	Nil
(b) 12.4.64 - 22.8.64	17	14
(c) 29-8-64 - 13.3.65	26	Nil
(d) 20.3.65 - 8.5.65	15	39
(e) 15.5.65 - 19.9.65	29	854
(f) 25.9.65 - 9.10.65	4	Nil

Periods (a), (c) and (f) above show the absence of the Spinebills over the summer half-year. Period (b) (and probably period (d)) illustrates the normal winter visitation in small numbers. Period (e) shows the major influx of the species in to the coastal strip of northern N.S.W. and southern Queensland during the winter of 1965.

Of the 14 birds banded during the winter of 1964, four were retrapped in the same area during the winter of 1965. This is a comparatively high retrap rate for a small passerine which is completely absent from the area over the summer half year, and indicates that the coastal heaths are a regular wintering area for some Spinebills. It is not known where the species spends the summer; in view of the relatively high retrap rate, this is probably at no great distance, perhaps in the timbered areas of the Great Dividing and MacPherson Ranges, inland from the coastal strip.

During March and early April, 1965, juveniles predominated, and only one of the first 15 birds banded was old enough to be sexed. During the winter the adult plumage was gradually acquired by the birds present, and by early August only a few birds were being aged as juveniles. After May there were a few juveniles too young to be sexed —two in early June, and a very isolated one on 18.7.65.

For the whole of the influx of 1965, males consistently outnumbered females by about three to one. As neither Lane nor Wilson mention a high male/female ratio, it appears that this feature of the 1965 influx was abnormal. Numbers banded in 1964 are probably too small to be significant, but gave even numbers of males and females.

TABLE 2

Sex distribution of Spinebills banded in 1964 *and* 1965.

Year	Males	Females	Not sexed (too young)	Total
1964	7	7	—	14
1965	636	228	29	893

The 1965 influx of large numbers of Spinebills into the coastal areas coincided with large scale migration through the areas by several species of honeyeaters, but actual migratory flights of Spinebills were never seen. Examination of the retrap data for the winter of 1965 indicates a general drift through the area of very large numbers of Spinebills, possibly a reflection of the vast amount of nectar available over large areas from the flowering (*Banksia integrifolia, B. serratifolia*) and several species of melaleucas. Although most birds appear to have drifted through the area, some undoubtedly wintered in the heath—for example, 011-13346 was banded a little north of Hastings Point on 29.5.65, and was retrapped in the same area on 14.6.65, 4.7.65 and 19.9.65.

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