
BIRD IN THE HAND

Spiny-cheeked Honeyeater *Acanthagenys rufogularis*

W. E. Boles, *The Australian Museum, Sydney.*

N. W. Longmore, *Queensland Museum, Brisbane.*

The Spiny-cheeked Honeyeater is a large honeyeater (Meliphagidae), widely distributed through the semi-arid zones of Australia. It has a very distinctive appearance: mottled grey-brown upper-parts and crown with pale olive edging to feathers, whitish rump, dark graduated tail with white tips, throat and breast cinnamon-brown, belly and flanks pale buff with dark brown streaks, side of the head blackish-brown and a bicoloured bill. Extending from the gape towards the rear of the head is a large patch of pale coloured spines, contrasting with the darker side of the face.

AGEING

The following key gives the diagnostic features for separating the different age classes of this species. It is based primarily on N.S.W. specimens but should be applicable for all mainland birds. The most reliable characters are iris colour, feather structure and colour, and form of the cheek spines (Boles and Longmore 1983).

Adult

Iris: Blue-grey.

Spines: Thick, stiff and white, occasionally with some thinner spines with white barbs underneath.

Plumage: As described above.

Crown: Greyish-brown with pale olive-grey tips.

Immature

Iris: Blue-grey, often with a brown inner ring around the pupil.

Spines: Thin with yellow barbs along the distal half, often with some adult spines mixed in.

Plumage: As for adult.

Crown: Greyish-brown with pale olive-grey tips.

Juvenile

Iris: Brown.

Spines: Thin with yellow barbs along the distal half.

Plumage: Loose and fluffy; pattern as for adult but much fainter and indistinct.

Crown: Warm brown.

SEXING

The sex of immature and adult birds can be determined with a high degree of accuracy by differences in wingspan length (following the methods of Disney 1974). Males are larger with a span greater than 340 mm while females are less than 336 mm. There is a small overlap between these values in which the sexes cannot be reliably separated.

Caution should be taken when applying this guide to the sexing of individuals with worn wing feathers. The relative differences between sexes will be apparent but the measurements will be slightly smaller.

References

- Boles, W. E. and N. W. Longmore (1984), 'Age changes in the spines of the Spiny-cheeked Honeyeater', *Corella* 8: 21-23.
- Disney, H. J. (1974), 'Topography, colour and measurements' in Lane, S. G. (ed.), *Bird in the Hand, Bird Banders' Assoc., Aust., Sydney.*

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Figure 3. Cheek spines of Spiny-cheeked Honeyeater.
a. Adult spine showing thick white shaft.
b. Juvenile/immature spine showing small yellow projections present on barbs when unworn.
c. Juvenile/immature spine showing loss of yellow projections from barbs due to wear.

