

# Notes on the Eastern Whiteface

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A study of the Eastern Whiteface (*Aphelocephala leucopsis*) has been carried out at several regular banding stations in the vicinity of Sutherlands and Bower, South Australia, as part of an area survey on the Mount Mary Plains. No movement of birds between stations had been established until recently (see Recovery Round-up, p. 88) but a fairly high retrap rate has been recorded. It is suggested that early banded birds included residents of territories and some of these have emerged as examples of longevity, while many more recently banded individuals seem to have disappeared. Some netting hints are given.

### Introduction

The Eastern Whiteface is one of the most common birds found on the Mount Mary Plains. (A general outline of the ecology of this region is recorded by Boehm, 1952). Whitefaces are frequently found where scattered shrubs occur in fairly open situations or even where there are few or no trees; they are familiar at most farm and station homesteads. P. T. Sandland (in Mathews, 1923) referred to the species as the most common bird at Balah Station, which is about 45 miles north-east of the present study area.

When work on the banding survey started in the spring of 1964 some 30 Whitefaces had already been banded by visiting banders, Messrs R. M. Gibbs, D. B. Mack and M. H. Waterman in the previous year. In July 1966, banding of the species was discontinued for about two years. By that time 271 birds had been banded in fairly concentrated areas in the Bower and Sutherlands districts. These areas had been selected as sample places for the purpose of the survey.

### Method of Catching

Nearly all birds caught during the survey were taken in mist nets. The number of nets used during each operation or visit varied from five to eleven. The main banding stations are shown on Figure 1, and the number of visits to each is set out in Table 1.

The most effective arrangement of nets is to group them to form a maze among the shrubs where the birds appear numerous, then quietly drive the birds into the maze. Too frequent netting or repeated driving of the same birds results in avoidance of net sites, particularly if conditions make nets easily visible.

TABLE 1

Banding Site	Number of operating days at banding sites.	Number of Days
Black Oaks Block		97
Regrowth Mallee Block		44
Erdora Scrub		31
Erdora Homestead		83
Boxthorn Gully		29
Gejjera Scrub		35
Sundry random sites (Sutherlands-Bower)		12
Total		331

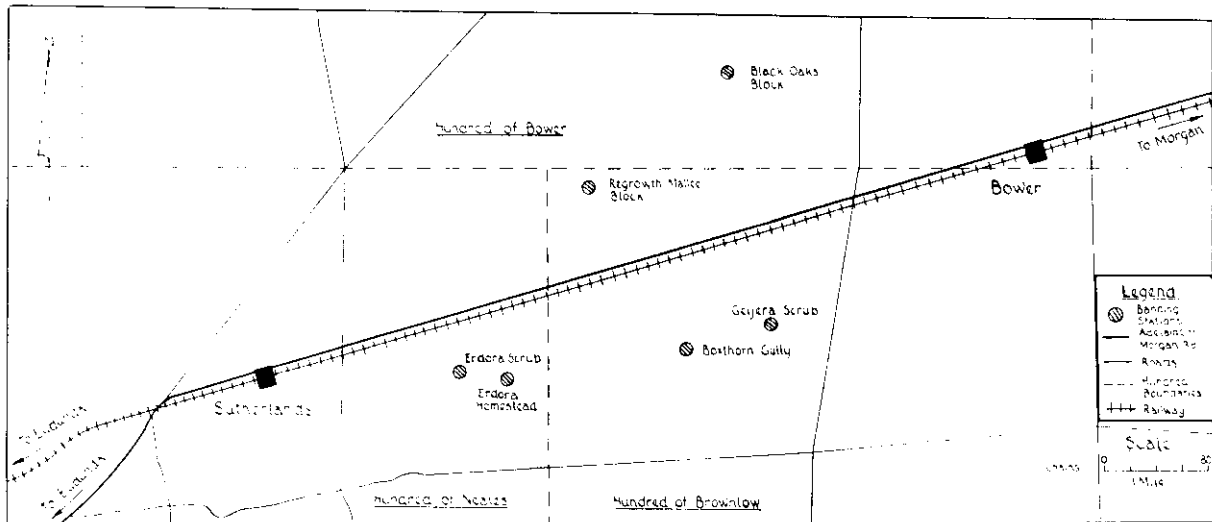
### Banding

Of the 271 banded birds, 72 have been re-trapped at least once and two others were recovered dead, giving a "recovery" rate of 27 per cent to 30 June 70. Table 2 shows the recovery incidence at varying intervals; individuals retrapped or recovered in more than one period are included in each category.

TABLE 2

Recovery incidence; i.e. the number of individuals retrapped at varying intervals after banding.

Number of Individuals	Period in Months
7	under 1
29	1-6
21	7-12
21	13-24
2	25-36
1 (47 months)	37-48
4	49-60
2 (both 66 months)	61-72
1 (80 months)	over 72



• Figure 1. Map of the Sutherlands-Bower district, S.A. showing the banding stations.

Seasonal fluctuations of populations resulting from mortality, departure and arrivals from elsewhere are discussed by Berndt and Meise (1959). They have indicated that there is a general tendency for populations to reach their lowest level just prior to the breeding period. Consequently retrapping from initial banding of resident breeding birds was expected.

However, their findings also indicate the probable reason for the absence of long-interval recoveries of birds banded in the latter half of 1965 and the first half of 1966 while earlier banded birds have been recovered (retrapped). For example at the Black Oaks site (see Fig. 1), of 64 birds banded between mid November 1965 and 31 May 1966, none has been retrapped more than 19 months later but there have been several recoveries of earlier-banded Whitefaces beyond the four-year period. Three of these were banded over 5 years earlier, and one bird (020-49004) was retrapped 6 years and 8 months after banding (see Recovery Round-up, p. 88). One of the 5-year birds had been previously retrapped at the banding place 22 months after banding. Similarly at the Boxthorn Gully site (see also Fig. 1), the "oldest" recovery from 35 birds banded between May 1965 and May 1966 is 28 months, yet one individual (021-29145) banded on 26 April 1965, was retrapped in May 1966, April 1967 and May 1970. Another bird (021-29116) banded at this site on the same day (as 021-29145) was retrapped with it 5 years later.

This is possibly analogous with the findings of Wilson (1967) with the White-browed Scrub-Wren (*Sericornis frontalis*). However, as the elapsed time between catchings in some cases has exceeded 5 years, it is still possible that later-banded birds may be retrapped in the future.

**Weighing**

Some weighing was carried out during the survey; 129 adult Whitefaces averaged 13-14 grammes, with extremes ranging from 12-16 grammes (50 individuals). Three fledglings just out of the nest weighed 11 grammes each and an older juvenile which still showed yellow at the gape, weighed 12 grammes. Details of the weights are as follows:

Weight in Grammes (to nearest gramme)	11	12	13	14	15	16
Adults .....		24	76	53	22	4
Juvenile .....		1				
Fledglings .....	3					

**Discussion**

Banding results have shown little local movement and, until recently, the longest recovery was ¾ mile from banding place. On 6 September 1970 a bird which had been banded at the Boxthorn Gully site on 1 September 1969 was retrapped at the Black Oaks Block, three miles north of its banding place. Observations also

have indicated that some movements certainly occur. The birds involved are probably immature individuals or unattached adults.

During temporary or protracted drought, Whitefaces tend to congregate in favoured feeding places such as gullies and flats with thickets of shrubs. During one such period 32 birds were netted and banded in one of these favoured spots (Boxthorn Gully) during one visit. Some two or three years later, in a period of severe drought (1967-68) the number in the same place had dwindled to a few "pairs" and some single birds.

In dry periods small groups and flocks are sometimes seen along fences and beside roads; when the drought breaks, small parties are then seen apparently on the move across the countryside.

At Erdora Homestead, between September 1964 and April 1966, 27 Whitefaces were banded. The Homestead is remote from any scrub, the nearest being half a mile away. Mist netting at intervals varying from two to six weeks was carried out until the end of 1968, yet no bird has been retrapped or otherwise recovered more than 11 months after banding. Nine of the 27 birds banded were retrapped at periods from 11 days to a little over 10 months after banding. One bird was found dead (fresh) 17 days after banding, and another was found dead beside the main road  $\frac{1}{4}$  mile north of the Homestead.

Thus while Whitefaces are not markedly nomadic in their habits, there is more movement among the local communities than is evident from cursory observation or investigation.

### Conclusion

Many problems remain unsolved regarding movements and habits of the Eastern Whiteface. It is hoped that continued observations and banding, which was resumed in 1968, will eventually find some of the answers.

### References

- Berndt, R. and Meise, W. (1959). *Naturgeschichte Der Vögel*, 1:376-380. Stuttgart.
- Boehm, E. F. (1952). 'Some Ecological Factors Affecting Bird Life in the Region of the North-west Bend of the Murray River, S.A.' *Emu*, 52:296-300.
- Mathews, G. M. (1923). *The Birds of Australia*, XI:33.
- Wilson, S. J. (1967). 'Analysis of Survival Rate Data'. *Aust. Bird Bander*, 5:47-50.

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• Eastern Whiteface using nest built by Zebra Finches.

Photo: P. A. Bourke

## Notice of Meeting

The **Annual General Meeting** of The Bird Banders' Association of Australia will be held in the Hallstrom Theatre, Australian Museum, College Street, Sydney, at 1.30 p.m. on Saturday, 16 January 1971. Dr F. H. Talbot, Director, Australian Museum, will open the meeting and the agenda will include:

1. Reports
2. Election of Officers
3. General Business

A scientific meeting will follow the annual meeting. Mr Peter Balmford will speak on the results and work being done by VORG Penguin Study Group on Phillip Island, and arrangements are being made for a second speaker.

You are assured of an interesting and informative afternoon. All visitors and friends will be welcome.