

Predation of an Eastern Yellow Robin Nest by a Small Bird, the Brown-headed Honeyeater

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Nest success in Eastern Yellow Robins *Eopsaltria australis* can be as low as 17% (Marchant 1986, L. Zanette unpublished data). Predation is thought to be the principal cause of nest failure in birds, yet predators are rarely seen in the process of taking eggs or nestlings. Avian nest predators are generally assumed to include only large birds such as currawongs *Strepera* spp., butcherbirds *Cracticus* spp. and kookaburras *Dacelo* spp. I describe my direct observation of predation on an Eastern Yellow Robin egg by a small bird, the Brown-headed Honeyeater *Melithreptus brevirostris*. I suggest that small birds may be more significant as egg predators than previously recognised.

On 28 September 1994 I went to monitor an Eastern Yellow Robin nest on the New England Tablelands near Armidale, New South Wales. The nest was at a height of approximately 7.5 m, in a New England Stringybark *Eucalyptus caliginosa* and

incubation had begun on 24 September. I sat 15 m from the nest and began watching at 1043 h when the female Robin was not on the nest nor was she seen nearby. A flock of Brown-headed Honeyeaters was foraging in the vicinity. At 1044 h one of them went to the unattended nest and began pecking. Once the pecking had ceased, the Honeyeater remained with its bill in the nest, presumably consuming the contents of the egg it had broken. The Honeyeater continued until the Yellow Robin female returned and displaced the Honeyeater from the nest. The Honeyeater stayed close to the nest tree despite the female's attempts to chase it away. At 1047 h the female sat on the nest and the Honeyeater left to rejoin the flock.

The Robin left the nest again at 1053 h with an apparently intact egg in her bill and dropped it about 15 m away. She returned to incubate at 1055 h and had not left the nest again by the end of the watch at 1147 h. During that time, a Brown-headed Honeyeater perched near the nest three more times but did not try to displace the incubating female and left each time without being chased.

At the end of the watch I retrieved the discarded egg. There was a rectangular hole across the width of the egg and the contents were gone. There were no signs of yolk or albumen on the ground.

It appears that Brown-headed Honeyeaters are opportunistic nest predators. The Honeyeater reported here was easily displaced from the nest once it was detected. Also, what was assumed to be the same individual continued to return to the nest, though in the presence of the incubating female it could not take further advantage of such a rich food source.

My presence near the nest tree could have precipitated the predation if my approach caused the female to flush from the nest, thereby exposing the eggs to this opportunistic nest predator. However, when I have observed females flushing from their nests, they generally remain in attendance near the nest tree. In this case, the female was not seen in the vicinity and she did not respond immediately to the Brown-headed Honeyeater's presence, suggesting that she was not attending the nest at the beginning of the watch, but was more likely engaged in another activity like foraging.

Small birds may be more significant as egg predators than has previously been recognised. From 1994 to 1997, I monitored approximately 350 Eastern Yellow Robin nests. I have seen several depredated eggs in these nests with puncture marks of a similar size and shape to that described here. Further, Hobbs (1990) observed a Brown-headed Honeyeater puncturing and consuming the contents of an egg in the nest of another robin species, the Red-capped Robin *Petroica goodenovii*.

Hobbs did not report any interaction between the Robin and the Honeyeater, and did not mention whether or not the nest was active at the time the incident occurred. Detail of this sort is essential. It is important to distinguish between nest predators and scavengers. Only animals that take eggs from active nests can be considered nest predators. Those that take eggs from abandoned nests are scavengers.

References

- Hobbs, J.N. (1990), 'Nest predation by two species of honeyeater', *Aust. Birds* 24, 3-4.
Marchant, S. (1986), 'Breeding of the Eastern Yellow Robin *Eopsaltria australis*', in Keast, A., Recher, H.F., Ford, H. & Saunders, D. (Eds), *Birds of Eucalypt Forests and Woodlands: Ecology, Conservation, Management*, 231-240, Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union and Surrey Beatty, Sydney.

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