



# ENDANGERED!



## GREY HONEYEATER

Last year, we found a fragile nest about head high near the end of a mulga branch. It was made of plant fibres woven together with spider's web and was so fine we could see right through it. One large white egg was flecked with angular red patches that were more concentrated around the girdle. Even as we inspected the nest, two small, nondescript birds moved quietly about the canopy. They were grey honeyeaters and this was their nest.

Grey honeyeaters lack obvious markings. They are little bigger than a thornbill, but with no russet on the rump; they are also rather like a western gerygone, with less obvious white outer tail feathers. In fact, their plumage is soft grey all over with perhaps a faint greenish wash on the wings and a paler belly. Only young birds add modest variety, with a pale eye ring.

While foraging, they move about

the canopy in search of outer twigs for food, though much less energetically than a thornbill. Their diet includes mealy bugs (they adorn the outside of their nests with the woolly white covers) and mistletoe berries, but they probably eat many other things. Occasionally, they utter a short call that is distinctive when one knows it, but hard to follow up because it is so infrequent. Often, they sit silent and motionless on an upper branch, but when they do fly to another tree their movement is direct and fast.

Grey honeyeaters were described scientifically as recently as 1910. We now know they occur in South Australia, the Northern Territory and through the mulga lands of Western Australia from Yalgoo to the Pilbara. Despite this vast

range they are seldom reported. *The Atlas of Australian Birds* (the culmination of five years' field work across the nation by members of the Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union) mapped 16 sightings, doubling the number of records. Only seven nests had been reported before this one.

These unobtrusive birds are easily overlooked, but that alone cannot account for the paucity of records. Birds of mulga woodlands have been studied quite intensively at many sites, yet grey honeyeaters are seldom encountered.

Nobody knows what makes some mulga woodlands habitable. In many places, mulga has been affected by fire, grazing and even by water shadows where roads and railways have disrupted the flow of water after heavy rain. Have these factors affected grey honeyeaters? Nobody knows. Perhaps no other bird with a comparable range is so seldom seen.

BY TONY START AND PHIL FULLER

Photo - Babs and Bert Wells

# LANDSCOPE

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Wildfires are synonymous with Western Australian summers, but what can be done to lessen the threat to life and property? Lachlan McCaw discusses the problem on page 49.



Daisies belong to the Asteraceae family, one of the world's largest families of flowering plants. Suzanne Curry presents some of them in 'Delightful Daisies' on page 41.



Aborigines have eked out a living in the harsh Western Desert region for thousands of years. Their intimate knowledge of the desert is helping scientists learn more about its plants and animals. See 'Digging Sticks and Desert Dwellers' on page 10.



'Rainforests and Bats', on page 34, tells the story of the recent LANDSCOPE Expedition to the Mitchell Plateau.



Can images from space help locate desert mammals? See 'From Buckshot to Breakaways' on page 23.

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## COVER

Cape Barren geese live on the islands and rocks of the Archipelago of Recherche. A few years ago their numbers appeared very low and their survival was in doubt. However, a recent survey of the islands has brought good news with a marked increase in the bird's population.

The illustration is by Philippa Nikulinsky.



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