

The Spiny-cheeked Honeyeater

by Nick Atchison, Taronga Zoo, Sydney, New South Wales

NATURAL HISTORY

The spiny-cheeked honeyeater, *Acanthagenys rufogularis* is a medium sized honeyeater and a common inhabitant of drier areas of Australia. A beautiful bird, its plumage combines subtle colour combinations of buff, black, white and grey. Its most striking and unusual features though are a two-tone bill of pink and black, and ice blue, somewhat fierce-looking eyes. The characteristic bristly white cheek patches running back from the gape gives this birds its name.

The spiny-cheeked honeyeater is considered to be nomadic or partly migratory in the northern parts of its range, but more sedentary towards the south (Blakers et al, 1984; Longmore 1991). It lives in drier woodlands, mallee and acacia scrub, and has also been found in mangroves and riverine woodlands (Longmore, 1991).

It is very active and vocal, often living in flocks when not breeding (Longmore, 1991). It is boisterous and frequently quarrels amongst its own kind or with other species. It has a wonderful bubbling song, often given from a perched vantage point or combined with a display flight, where the bird rises high above the canopy before descending back into the trees. It also has a short "quock" call, reminiscent of the wattletbirds *Anthochaera* sp., to which it is related.

It is mostly arboreal in its lively searches for food, seeking out manna, nectar from flowers and hunting for insects amongst the foliage. Hawking insects in flight is another feeding technique used by the spiny-cheeked honeyeater. It will also take fruits and berries such as mistletoe, seeds, small lizards and nestling birds (Longmore, 1991; Frith, 1977).

Spiny-cheeked honeyeaters build a cup nest of grasses, plant stems and other fibres which are held together with cobwebs. The nest is built from 1 to 13 metres above the ground and two, sometimes three eggs are laid (Longmore, 1991; Frith, 1977).

CAPTIVE MANAGEMENT

The spiny-cheeked honeyeater does well in captivity. They are aggressive but can be kept in flocks when not nesting. However a dominant male will usually terrorise spiny-cheeked honeyeaters other than its mate when the breeding season begins. At Taronga Zoo there have also been instances of males attacking females which may have been incompatible. In view of the aggressive nature of this species, special care should be taken when introducing two or more birds together, similar to the introduction of aggressive parrot species. A 'soft' introduction technique is used on most bird species at Taronga Zoo. This technique involved placing the new bird in a cage inside the aviary for a few days before it is released to facilitate acceptance by the resident bird(s). The caged bird should be provided with plenty of cover to withdraw in the event of aggression by the aviary's resident. In most cases these soft introductions work well, but if the resident bird will not accept the newcomer when released then an introduction in neutral territory away from the aviary is necessary. Plenty of 'distraction material', such as fresh foliage and flowers, should be placed in the aviary at the time the new bird is released from its cage to help divert the resident bird's attention.

Spiny-cheeked honeyeaters have been housed with various other species of birds at Taronga Zoo. These include the hooded parrot *Psephotus dissimilis*, swift parrot *Lathamus discolor*, Cloncurry parrot *Barnardius barnardi macgillivrayi*, turquoise parrot *Neophema pulchella*, apostlebird *Struthidea cinerea*, and the spotted bowerbird *Maculata guttata* to name a few. Combinations of species have always been in large aviaries. Species including finches and smaller honeyeaters have not been housed with spiny-cheeked honeyeaters at Taronga Zoo because of the risk of harassment.

DIET

Spiny-cheeked honeyeaters are maintained on an insectivorous bird mix (includes grated hardboiled egg, grated cheese, Luv tender chunks broken into smaller pieces in a blender, vitamins and calcium mixed together in a base of powdered up wholemeal cake), a selection of finely diced fruits (apples, pears, paw paw, kiwi fruit, soaked currants) and a slice of orange spiked onto a branch. A daily treat of mealworms and occasionally the contents of an insect

trap (comprised mostly of moths of various shapes and sizes) is also given. When breeding, they are given mealworms and maggots ad lib, and the contents of the insect trap increased to twice daily. Wombaroo Lorikeet and Honeyeater Food is given twice daily. Fresh flowers including grevillea, banksia and eucalyptus should be given as frequently as possible as the spiny-cheeked, like any honeyeater species, will enthusiastically feed on this natural food source. This brightens the daily routine of the birds and also the keeper, as they are a delight to watch in their excited response to a new bunch of flowers.

HOUSING

They are active birds and show themselves best in a large planted aviary. At Taronga Zoo they are also successfully housed and bred in smaller, cement floored aviaries measuring 2.8m x 1.6m x 2.1m high. The smaller aviaries are provided with a good supply of brush for nesting purposes. The birds will also retreat behind this cover, especially when housed in a smaller aviary where people can approach them too closely for their liking. For the most part though, they are bold and visible inside an aviary.

This species can be destructive to certain types of vegetation and have destroyed eucalyptus saplings inside their aviary by piercing holes around the edges of all the leaves. However, damage to plants has only been a problem in aviaries with very little vegetation.

Planting aviaries with shrubs that act as a food source will greatly enhance the life of any honeyeater species. Banksias, grevillias etc will be exploited fully by honeyeaters when in flower. There is no question that the birds prefer this natural food over prepared formulas, and, when not in flower, the shrubs provide perching and help to attract and conceal insects which the birds will hunt out.

OTHER REQUIREMENTS

Fresh foliage such as eucalyptus will provide them with a lot of activity when placed in the aviary. They dive in amongst the leaves, inspecting both sides of every leaf for hidden insects and spiders. Fresh leafy branches should be a regular feature in the husbandry routine of this species, especially if the birds are not kept in a planted aviary. Planting native trees and shrubs in the garden could be considered so as the flowers can be harvested and fed to the honeyeaters. As previously mentioned, fresh flowers should be used to supplement their regular diet.

BREEDING AND DEVELOPMENT

Spiny-cheeked honeyeaters have bred a number of times at Taronga Zoo, nesting in the spring and summer months. A fairly flimsy nest of grasses, coconut fibres and cobwebs is constructed and normally the birds attempt at least two nests in a season. Their nests are usually built in shrubs or brush placed in the aviary and are quite well concealed. In one case the female made her nest in a basket that held nesting material up off the aviary floor. Here she nestled into the coconut fibres and arranged them into a cup around herself, resulting in a much sturdier nest than any she had built for herself.

They need to be provided with plenty of suitable nesting material such as cobwebs, coconut fibre, grasses and hessian strands (cut into 10cm lengths). If not, their nesting attempts can be disastrous with eggs falling through nests that are too flimsy or being laid from the perch because a proper nest could not be constructed. If the birds are having problems with nest building, starting them off with wire cups filled with nesting material may be a solution, if they will take to them.

Two to three eggs are laid which take about 14 days to hatch. Eggs are incubated by the female. Both parent birds have been observed to feed the chicks moths and maggots. They were very selective about the moths they chose to feed the chicks, discarding any that were too large or the wrong colour. Orange and red were two colours that the birds avoided.

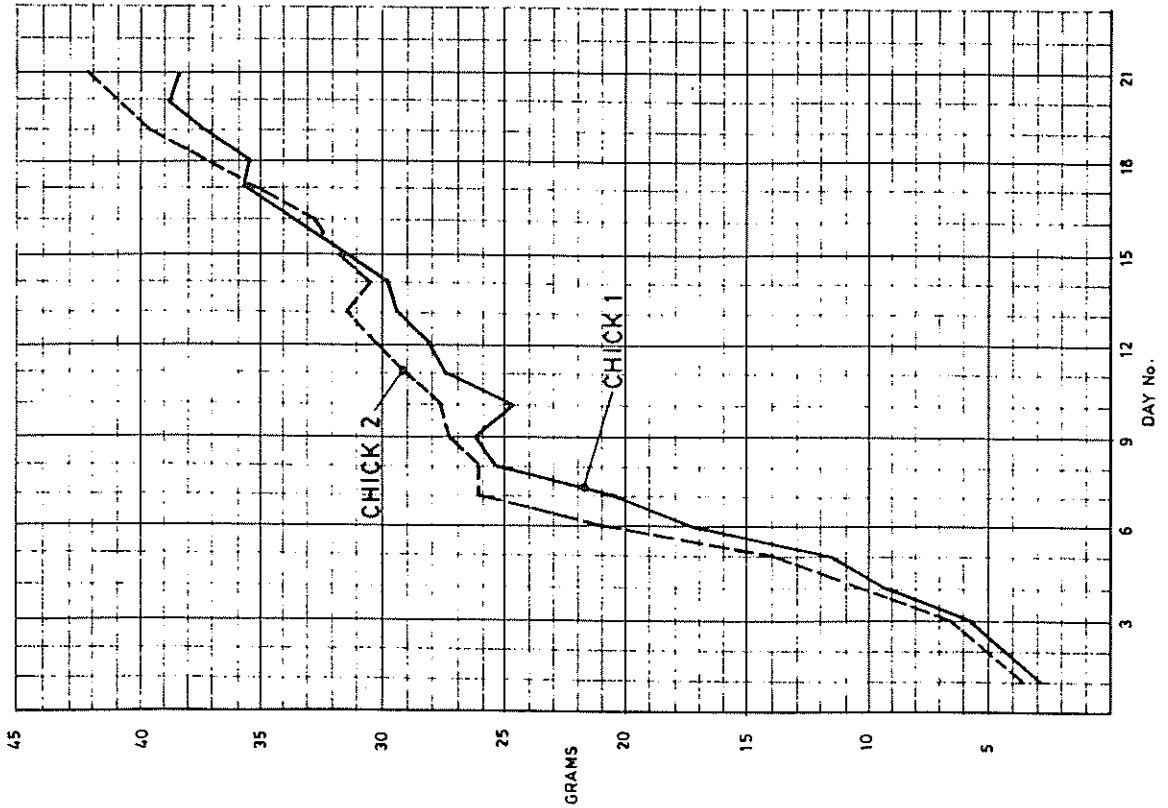
The adults were very tolerant of nest disturbance, with the chicks being weighed and checked daily (see graph). The adults attempted to distract the person checking the nest with distress calls and bill snapping, and a very convincing broken wing display (which fooled most of us at some stage into thinking we had a seriously injured bird on our hands)

Chicks hatch with naked skin patchily covered with thick fuzzy down. The eyes start to open at five days, being fully open at eight days. Pin feathers start to develop in the wings

at five days, and down the sides of the breast and belly at seven days. The pin feathers start opening at eight days.

The chicks begin to move from the nest into the surrounding branches at about 13 days old. When fledged, they tend to remain still amongst the branches, occasionally moving out into the open.

The growth rates of two sibling chicks are described in the accompanying graph.



Weights of chicks hatched at Taronga Zoo 16-12-1992 (weight in grams)

CONCLUSION

The spiny-cheeked honeyeater is an attractive, hardy aviary bird. It is an ideal subject for aviculturists with time and space to cater for its slightly more demanding needs. Although it presents some difficulties with its aggressive disposition, these can be overcome with thoughtful management and a careful selection of companion species. Those persons seeking to venture away from seed-eating birds may like to give some thought to this unusual and elegant softbill species.

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