

Scarlet Honeyeaters taking shelter

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The Scarlet Honeyeater *Myzomela sanguinolenta* is a breeding resident of the Hunter Region (Stuart 2012). In summer, small flocks are often recorded. They occur in larger numbers (20-50 birds) where blossom is abundant. There are fewer records in winter when birds are less vocal and some may have migrated north.

At 9:45am on 29 January 2013 I arrived at the Harrington Breakwater to survey shorebirds on nearby sandbars. The weather had been rough (strong winds, heavy rain) for the previous ~48h from the effects of ex-cyclone Oswald moving south. About an hour before I arrived, the rain stopped and the wind eased although gusty conditions continued. A group of six Scarlet Honeyeaters flew over me while I was getting gear from the car. As I walked to my survey point, more birds flew by, either as single birds or in small flocks. This continued for the ~40 minutes of my survey, with 5-10 birds/minute passing for much of the time. The maximum flock size seen was ~10 birds, and the frequency dropped towards the end. Conservatively, 200-300 Scarlet Honeyeaters flew past, and probably many more.

Initially I was unsure from where they were coming. Then I noticed birds were emerging from the breakwater. On close inspection it contains numerous cavities that would provide shelter for small birds in the harsh conditions of the previous days. I saw a female Scarlet Honeyeater land on the breakwater and disappear into it. Another female landed at my feet (initially on my shoe) and rested for about a minute. She appeared to be in a weak state, perhaps from exhaustion or lack of food.

It is rare that I record more than 20 Scarlet Honeyeaters in the Harrington environs during my regular visits. The migration period for southern birds is March-April in an eastern coastal pattern (Higgins *et al.* 2001, Griffioen & Clarke 2002) hence it is unlikely that this was a migration-related event. The presence of such high numbers is unusual. Perhaps birds from a wide range were sheltering within the breakwater during the adverse conditions or perhaps the cyclone brought them in. HANZAB does not cite any use by Scarlet Honeyeaters of anthropogenic structures for shelter (Higgins *et al.* 2001).

REFERENCES

- Griffioen, P.A. and Clarke, M.F. (2002). Large-scale bird-movement patterns evident in eastern Australian atlas data. *The Emu* **102**: 99-125.
- Higgins, P.J., Peter, J.M. and Steele, W.K. (Eds) (2001). 'Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds Volume 5: Tyrant-flycatchers to Chats'. (Oxford University Press: Melbourne.)
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