

Feather Fascination!

with local Birdwatcher,

Jim Butler

TONGUE-DARTING SINGER

THE Brown Honeyeater (14cm), like most of the 75 Australian Honeyeaters, has a specialised tongue for feeding on nectar and pollen. This functional tongue design is encoded in their genus name *Lichmera*, the Greek word "to lick" or "to dart the tongue". Its nondescript brownness is captured in its species name *indistincta*!

The extensible, finely mop-tipped tongue has evolved to efficiently soak up the pooled liquid nectar stored in flowers. When full of nectar, the laden tongue tip is



retracted into the mouth and squeezed out against its roof so that the nectar runs down into the throat. The bill is striking too. The bill is black, long, slender, pointed and curved noticeably downwards; well adapted for probing deep tubular flowers and for lethally picking insects off leaves. The curved shape of the beak and the distinctive yellow tuft behind its eye are diagnostic.

The Brown Honeyeater is adaptable with respect to food as illustrated by their changed behaviour in the recent drought in the Western Suburbs. Ed Frazer at Brookfield reports that there are still lots of them around even though there are few plants flowering. To get them through the lack of nectar they have switched to feeding predominately on insects which are captured by hovering near the canopy. During the drought they were also coming to the dams to bathe and drink but not recently when there was rain and morning dew.

The Brown Honeyeater is found throughout Australia except for Victoria and South Australia. It has adapted to the diverse Australian habitats in the warmer areas. It is most easily found by identifying its glorious voice. It has a clear, rolling, musical call which is very loud for the size of the bird and it can be heard during much of the day.

Go bush and listen to the tongue-darting, nondescript brown bird!

~ Jim

Contact Jim: beautifulbirds@y7mail.com

Digital Bird Guide: <http://www.moggillcreek.org/>

Image: Brown Honeyeater with
tongue extended.
Ed Frazer at Brookfield