

**THE EVOLUTIONARY BASIS OF MORPHOLOGICAL AND
BEHAVIOURAL VARIATION IN THE NEW HOLLAND HONEYEATER
(*PHYLIDONYRIS NOVAEHOLLANDIAE*)**

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Summary	7
Declaration	9
Acknowledgements	10
CHAPTER 1: GENERAL INTRODUCTION	12
<i>Evolution</i>	12
<i>Natural Selection & Adaptation</i>	14
<i>Ecotypic rules</i>	16
<i>Island rule</i>	17
<i>Climate change</i>	18
<i>The Model – The New Holland Honeyeater (<i>Phylidonyris novaehollandiae</i>)</i>	20
<i>Aims</i>	21
<i>Organisation of the thesis</i>	23
References	25
CHAPTER 2: NEW HOLLAND HONEYEATER (<i>PHYLIDONYRIS NOVAEHOLLANDIAE</i>)	
MICROSATELLITES: ISOLATION AND CHARACTERISATION OF 15 NOVEL MARKERS USING AN ENRICHMENT METHOD	34
Foreword	34
Abstract	35
Main body	35
Acknowledgements	38
References	39
Table 2.1	41

CHAPTER 3: SEX DETERMINATION BY MORPHOLOGY IN THE NEW HOLLAND

HONEYEATER (*PHYLIDONYRIS NOVAEHOLLANDIAE*): CONTRASTING TWO POPULAR

TECHNIQUES ACROSS REGIONS.....	43
Abstract	43
Introduction	43
Methods	46
Results	50
Discussion	51
Acknowledgements	53
References	55
Table 3.1.....	61
Table 3.2.....	62
Table 3.3.....	63
Table 3.4.....	64
Figure 3.1	65
Figure 3.2	66

CHAPTER 4: DIVERGENCE IN THE NEW HOLLAND HONEYEATER (*PHYLIDONYRIS*

NOVAEHOLLANDIAE): EVIDENCE FROM MORPHOLOGY AND FEEDING BEHAVIOUR..... 67

Abstract	67
Introduction	68
Methods	71
<i>Study species</i>	71
<i>Study sites</i>	72
<i>Morphology</i>	72
<i>Niche breadth</i>	74

<i>Seasonal effects</i>	75
Results	76
<i>Morphology</i>	76
<i>Foraging technique</i>	76
<i>Foraging substrate</i>	76
<i>Plant genera used for foraging</i>	77
<i>Niche breadth</i>	77
<i>Foraging time</i>	77
Discussion	78
Acknowledgements	83
References	84
Table 4.1	95
Table 4.2	96
Table 4.3	97
Figure 4.1	98
Figure 4.2	100
Figure 4.3	102
Figure 4.4	104
CHAPTER 5: CLIMATE DRIVES DIVERGENT NATURAL SELECTION IN THE NEW HOLLAND HONEYEATER (<i>PHYLIDONYRIS NOVAEHOLLANDIAE</i>: PASSERIFORMES: MELIPHAGIDAE) IN SOUTHERN AUSTRALIA	105
Abstract	105
Introduction	106
Methods	109
<i>Study species and sites</i>	109
<i>Sample collection</i>	110

<i>Sex determination</i>	110
<i>Morphology</i>	111
<i>Molecular genetic analysis</i>	115
<i>Sex-biased dispersal</i>	116
<i>Isolation by distance</i>	117
<i>Genetic population structure analysis</i>	118
<i>Rainfall</i>	120
<i>Morphology-rainfall correlation</i>	120
<i>Phenotypic and genetic differentiation (P_{ST}, $Pseudo-Q_{ST}$, and F_{ST})</i>	121
Results	123
<i>Morphology</i>	123
<i>Molecular Genetic analysis</i>	124
<i>Isolation by distance</i>	124
<i>Genetic population structure analysis</i>	125
<i>Rainfall</i>	127
<i>Morphology-rainfall correlation</i>	127
<i>Phenotypic and genetic differentiation (P_{ST}, $pseudo-Q_{ST}$, and F_{ST})</i>	127
Discussion	128
Acknowledgements	136
References	138
Table 5.1.....	158
Table 5.2.....	159
Table 5.3.....	160
Table 5.4.....	161
Figure 5.1	162
Figure 5.2	164
Figure 5.3.	165
Appendix 5.A	167

Appendix 5.B	170
Appendix 5.C	172
Appendix 5.D	173
Appendix 5.E	174
Appendix 5.F.....	177
Appendix 5.G.....	178
Appendix 5.H.....	179
Appendix 5.I.....	181
Appendix 5.J.	182
CHAPTER 6: GENERAL DISCUSSION	183
Main findings.....	183
Perspectives for future research	187
References	191

SUMMARY

This thesis discusses the current field of evolutionary biology and examines patterns and processes of divergence in the morphology and behaviour of a key model species, the New Holland Honeyeater (*Phylidonyris novaehollandiae*). More specifically, the cause of phenotypic divergence between island and mainland populations, and populations exposed to different climatic conditions, is investigated in *P. novaehollandiae*. Island-mainland comparisons showed that island birds were larger than mainland birds in tarsus (2.5%) and bill length (3.7%), had a wider foraging niche (mostly due to greater insect consumption), and foraged more from the bark and air (sallying). Island birds also had longer foraging times than mainland birds, which may be evidence for reduced resource availability. This evidence, and evidence from the literature, suggests that a paucity of resources on Kangaroo Island has most likely driven niche expansion, facilitated by the absence of some bird species on the island. Larger body size in island birds appears to be a response to local conditions on the island and may be driven by natural selection or population-scale phenotypic plasticity. Comparisons across a climatic cline showed that variation in all morphological traits in males and two of four morphological traits in females correlated with variation in rainfall. Additive genetic variation exceeded that of neutral genetic variation for all morphologic traits, indicating a strong signal of selection -- the observed environmental correlation suggests an environmental driver. These observations are consistent with the hypothesis that, in drier climates in South Australia, reduced and unpredictable nectar availability drives natural selection for increased aerial insect foraging (and maybe dispersal) efficiency. The lack of correlation found for some female traits was most likely explained by female biased-dispersal weakening the signal of the

selective source. The findings of this research add to a body of research that aims to understand and predict the evolutionary response of organisms under a changing climate.

DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text.

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Steven A. Myers

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "S a Myers". The signature is written in dark ink on a light-colored background.

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