

# THE SUNBIRD

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## BIRDS RECORDED ON A VISIT TO SOUTH GOULBURN ISLAND, NORTHERN TERRITORY

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### INTRODUCTION

South Goulburn Island lies off the coast of the Northern Territory at 11°40'S, 133°20'E. It is often known simply as 'Goulburn Island' and also by its Aboriginal name, Warruwi. It is low-lying with a single township on Mardbal Bay on the east side of the island. There is a small local fishing industry and an airstrip with regular connections by light aircraft to Darwin. The population, largely Aboriginal, is about 300. Uninhabited North Goulburn Island lies close to the north.

In general, small offshore islands have a rather depauperate fauna though they may support breeding colonies of sea-birds. There has been little published specifically on this subject as it relates to the Northern Territory. However, J.L. McKean, who was actively involved in a survey of the Sir Edward Pellew group of islands in the Gulf of Carpentaria, organised by the CSIRO Division of Wildlife Research, observed that bird species diversity was affected by both island size and distance from the mainland. He also found that there were a few specialised species more common on the islands than on the adjoining mainland (*pers. comm.*). This confirms observations elsewhere in Australia, for example, Maatsuyker Island, Tasmania (Milledge, 1972).

I visited South Goulburn Island from 16 to 20 February 1981 and recorded 68 bird species. Of these, 13 were migratory waders *Charadriiformes*. The island is approximately 14 Km x 7 Km at its widest points and lies approximately three kilometres from the mainland (Fig. 1).

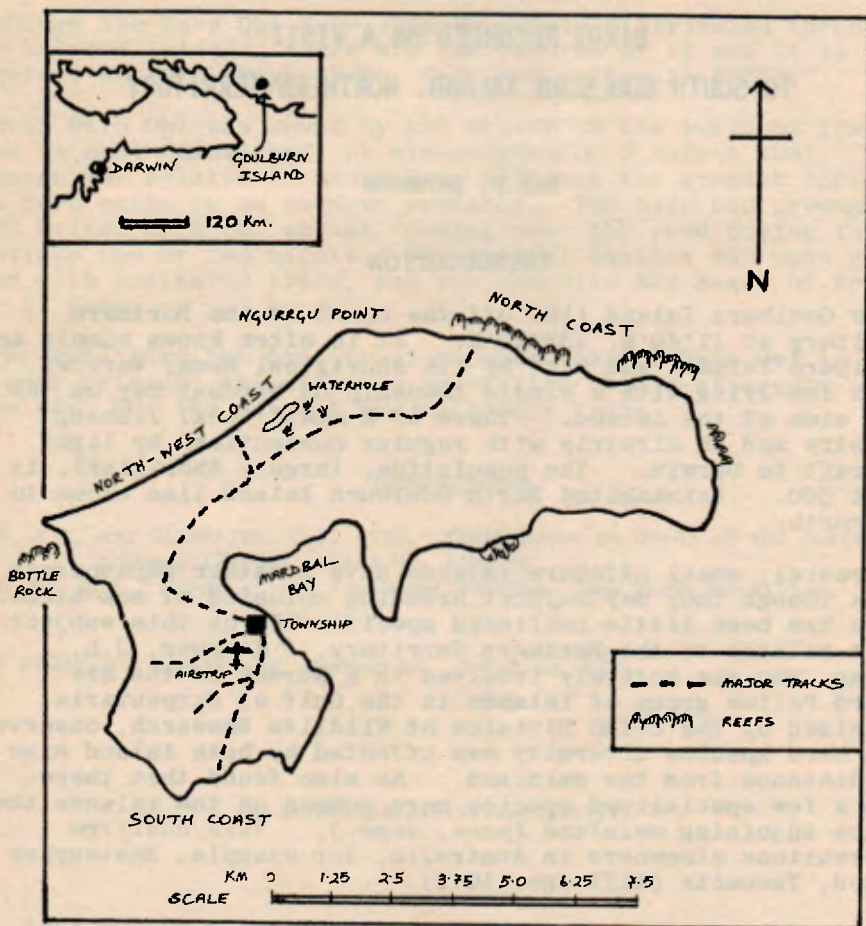


Figure 1: South Goulburn Island



## HABITATS

Most of the island is dominated by open forest, eucalypt woodland consisting of such species as *Eucalyptus tetradonta* and *E. miniata*. There is apparently no real monsoon forest though fragments of this habitat exist on the north-west and north sides of the island. Mixed forest (using Crawford's definition, 1972) occurs in patches, generally on less well-drained soils and includes in addition to the eucalypts, species of *Pandanus*, *Acacia* and *Melaleuca*.

There are small, fairly pure stands of *Melaleuca* spp. on water-logged soils and there is a permanent small freshwater waterhole in the north-west of the island. Coastal habitats consist of mangroves and open shore with sandy beaches and rocks. There are a few small creeks draining the island.

## SPECIES LIST

Australian Pelican *Pelecanus conspicillatus*

Two fishing at creek mouth on north coast of the island, 18 February.

Pied Cormorant *Phalacrocorax varius*

Five birds in flight off south coast, 18 February; 3 in flight off north coast, 19 February.

Eastern Reef Egret *Egretta sacra*

Quite common on the coasts, with a 3:1 preponderance of grey birds over white.

Striated Heron *Butorides striatus*

Quite common in mangroves around the island.

Wandering Whistling-Duck *Dendrocygna arcuata*

Only two records; 1 bird over the airstrip, 16 February and 2 in pool in the mangroves near the township, 20 February.

Brahminy Kite *Haliastur indus*

An adult bird seen near the township, 16, 17 and 20 February.

Whistling Kite *Haliastur sphenurus*

One near the township, 20 February.

Brown Goshawk *Accipiter fasciatus*

An immature in open country near the north-west coast, 16 February.

White-bellied Sea-Eagle *Haliaeetus leucogaster*

Quite common; adult and immature birds seen. A disused nest on the north coast was likely to belong to this species.

Australian Hobby *Falco longipennis*

One on dead paperbark near the waterhole, north-west coast, 17 February.

Bush Thick-knee *Burhinus magnirostris*

Heard overnight near township, 16 February.

Beach Thick-knee *Burhinus neglectus*

Quite common on the coasts, in contrast to its rather spasmodic occurrence around Darwin.

Masked Lapwing *Vanellus miles*

Common in open areas such as on the fringes of the township and around the airstrip. A pair mobbing a White-bellied Sea-eagle near the north-west coast on 17 February. Shirley Hendy and Margaret Fuller saw a pair with at least two young on the airstrip on 28 January.

Grey Plover *Pluvialis squatarola*

A single bird on the coast near the township, 16 and 20 February.

Lesser Golden Plover *Pluvialis dominica*

Quite common on coasts; about ten birds on the football pitch near the township from 16 to 20 February.

Mongolian Plover *Charadrius mongolus*

Common and widespread on the coasts, with a maximum of 20-25 birds on the south coast, 18 February.

Large Sand Plover *Charadrius leschenaultii*

Two on south coast, 18 February.

Ruddy Turnstone *Arenaria interpres*

Widespread on rocky coasts, with a maximum of 10-15 birds near township, 16 February.

Eastern Curlew *Numenius madagascariensis*

One on south coast, 18 February.

Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus*

Widespread on coasts, usually close to mangroves.

Grey-tailed Tattler *Tringa brevipes*

Common and widespread on coasts, with a maximum of about 20 near township, 20 February.

Common Sandpiper *Tringa hypoleucos*

Widespread in small numbers on the coasts.



Greenshank *Tringa nebularia*

Two on south coast, 18 February.

Terek Sandpiper *Tringa terek*

Quite common on coast around the township with a maximum of about 40 on 20 February.

Sharp-tailed Sandpiper *Calidris acuminata*

Four or five on coast near township, 16 February, with 4 birds, perhaps the same, on football pitch nearby, 17 and 18 February.

Red-necked Stint *Calidris ruficollis*

Four or five on rocks on the south coast, 18 February; 1 near township, 20 February.

Silver Gull *Larus novaehollandiae*

A single bird seen over Mardbal Bay near the township, 16, 17, 18 and 20 February.

Crested Tern *Sterna bergii*

Common off the coast, with birds passing almost continuously through the channel between North and South Goulburn Islands, 19 February.

Torresian Imperial-Pigeon *Ducula spilorrhoa*

Five overhead, south of the township, 16 February.

Peaceful Dove *Geopelia placida*

Common, especially in mangroves and in mixed forest, feeding with next species.

Bar-shouldered Dove *Geopelia humeralis*

Very common, especially in or close to mangroves.

Emerald Dove *Chalcophaps indica*

One in mangroves near township, 18 February.

Sulphur-crested Cockatoo *Cacatua galerita*

Recorded near township every day, 16-20 February.

Red-collared Lorikeet *Trichoglossus rubritorquis*

Common in woodland, often in pairs.

Red-winged Parrot *Aprosmictus erythropterus*

Common in open forest.

Oriental Cuckoo *Cuculus saturatus*

One in mangroves near township, 16 February.

Little Bronze-Cuckoo *Chrysococcyx malayanus*

A singing bird seen in mangroves near township, 20 February.

Common Koel *Eudynamis scolopacea*

A bird heard and seen in fragment of monsoon forest on north-west side of island, 18 February. Birds in and near township, 19 and 20 February, with a bird calling in a mango tree in the township on 19 February. A bird heard near the south coast, 18 February.

Pheasant Coucal *Centropus phasianinus*

Birds present north and south of township, 16 to 20 February.

Southern Boobook *Ninox novaeseelandiae*

Bird calling at night in township, 16, 18 and 19 February.

Blue-winged Kookaburra *Dacelo leachii*

Common in open forest.

Forest Kingfisher *Halcyon macleayii*

One near township, 18 February.

Sacred Kingfisher *Halcyon sancta*

One in mangroves south of township, 16 February; 1 or 2 in mangroves on south coast, 18 February.

Rainbow Bee-eater *Merops ornatus*

A few birds near township and south and north coasts; birds near township on 18 February included full-grown immatures.

Dollarbird *Eurystomus orientalis*

Birds recorded from near township and north and south coasts.

Singing Bushlark *Mirafra javanica*

Quite common in open areas, especially around the airstrip. Singing overhead in the moonlight at 2200 hours, 17 February, near township.

Richard's Pipit *Anthus novaeseelandiae*

Common in open areas.

Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike *Coracina novaehollandiae*

One on edge of township, 17 February; 2 on north side of township, 18 February. This species is largely absent from the Darwin area at this time of year.

White-bellied Cuckoo-shrike *Coracina papuensis*

Common in open forest, the fringes of mangroves, mixed forest and around the township itself.



Varied Triller *Lalage leucomela*

Quite common in paperbark swamps, mixed forest and mangroves.

Lemon-bellied Flycatcher *Microeca flavigaster*

Common in paperbark swamps and mangroves.

Leaden Flycatcher *Myiagra rubecula*

Two single females in mangroves near township, 20 February.

Shining Flycatcher *Myiagra alecto*

Female seen and other birds heard in mangroves near township, 20 February.

Northern Fantail *Rhipidura rufiventris*

Recorded in mangroves near township on 16, 17 and 20 February; a singing bird in mangroves on south side of island, 18 February.

Golden-headed Cisticola *Cisticola exilis*

Very common in open areas with rank grass and regenerating low scrub; bird carrying nesting material near township, 16 February.

Helmeted Friarbird *Philemon buceroides*

16 February: Two single birds in open forest to south of airstrip and 2 single birds in open forest near the north-west coast of the island. All these birds showed rather small casques, but identification of the subspecies was not possible.

This is a new locality record for a species previously recorded in the Northern Territory from the Darwin area, Melville Island, Gove and the western Arnhemland escarpment. Interestingly, the open forest habitat is atypical; around Darwin the species favours mangroves and monsoon forest.

For notes on the distribution and subspecies in the Northern Territory, see Schodde, Mason and McKean (1979).

Silver-crowned Friarbird *Philemon argenticeps*

Common in open forest around the island but also found in mixed forest and gardens in township. Very noisy and active. Bird feeding on flowers of *Grevillea dryandri* near township, 17 February.

Brown Honeyeater *Lichmera indistincta*

Common and in full song. Mainly a bird of the mangroves. Darwin birds sing little and are not territorial at this time of year.

Rufous-banded Honeyeater *Conopophila albogularis*

Quite common but largely confined to mangroves and adjoining vegetation, such as *Melaleucas*. Did not venture into the township and was not very vocal. Again there is a contrast with Darwin birds which are common in city and suburban gardens and at this time of year, vocal, active and breeding.

Red-headed Honeyeater *Myzomela erythrocephala*

One record, of 4-5 birds in mangroves north of the township, 20 February.

Mistletoebird *Dicaeum hirundinaceum*

Quite common in open forest.

Striated Pardalote *Pardalotus striatus*

Three separate birds calling near north-west coast, 17 February; 2 in township area, 18 February; 1 calling north of the township, 20 February. This species is generally considered to be absent from Darwin at this time of year. On returning to Darwin, I had no record of it until 22 March.

Yellow Oriole *Oriolus flavocinctus*

Quite common in mangroves and *Melaleucas* but avoiding open forest. Regular in mango trees in the township.

Spangled Drongo *Dicrurus hottentottus*

Quite common in mangroves and adjoining vegetation; also in mango trees in the township.

White-breasted Woodswallow *Artamus leucorhynchus*

Recorded near township on 18 and 20 February; about 10 birds on a dead tree on north coast of island, 19 February. This species is generally absent from Darwin at this time of year.

Grey Butcherbird *Cracticus torquatus*

One or two on north side of island, 17 February; others on south side, 18 February.

Pied Butcherbird *Cracticus nigrogularis*

Common in open forest, with many full-grown immatures.

Torresian Crow *Corvus orru*

Common, especially around township where it scavenged freely in yards and garbage-bins. Generally widespread on the island but less plentiful away from man.



## DISCUSSION

There are two main features of these observations when compared with records from the Darwin area. Firstly, some species behave differently and are apparently at a different stage in their breeding cycle. Secondly, some species that could reasonably be expected at Goulburn Island were apparently absent.

In the first category, we have the presence of Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike, Striated Pardalote and White-breasted Woodswallow when they are largely or totally absent from Darwin. In addition, the behaviour of Brown Honeyeaters suggested breeding at a time when it is inactive in Darwin. With the Rufous-banded Honeyeater, the reverse seemed to apply; this species also showed some difference in choice of habitat. Beach Stone-curlew was more common and widespread than it seems to be on the mainland.

In the second category, some species which are common suburban birds in Darwin were apparently totally absent from Goulburn Island. These species are conspicuous, flourish close to man and are difficult to overlook. What seemed to be suitable habitat was present. The most striking absentees were White-throated Honeyeater *Melithreptus albobularis* which is a common bird of the open forest in the north of the Territory, White-gaped Honeyeater *Meliphaga unicolor*, a common garden bird in Darwin and Green Figbird *Sphecotheres viridis*, another common and conspicuous suburban bird.

Grey-crowned Babbler *Pomatostomus temporalis* was another surprising absentee from the open forest though this species is no longer very common in the immediate Darwin area, probably because of damage to its habitat from cyclone Tracy, burning and urban sprawl. It remains common away from the city itself. McKean (*pers. comm.*) reports that the bird was also absent from the Sir Edward Pellew group although common on the mainland opposite in similar habitat.

Whilst these are only the observations of a short single trip, they do suggest that the offshore islands of the Northern Territory may have noticeable faunal differences from the mainland. This fact cautions against making generalisations on habitat, breeding and seasonal occurrence based on observations from a limited area, such as Darwin. I encourage observers who travel in the north of the Territory outside Darwin to keep careful records of all species and to publish the results.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For help on Goulburn Island, I am grateful to Sister Philippa Rhodes and to Allen Sagiba and the Warruwi Community Council who granted me permission for the visit. Dr. Shirley Hendy made some preliminary arrangements for me and with Sister Margaret Fuller, contributed the breeding record of Masked Plover.

John McKean of the Conservation Commission of the Northern Territory reviewed the draft of this paper and contributed some personal field observations from the Sir Edward Pellew group.

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THE RAILS OF THE BLACKALL -  
CONONDALE RANGE REGION WITH ADDITIONAL COMMENTS  
ON LATHAM'S SNIPE GALLINAGO HARDWICKII

G.V. CZECHURA

INTRODUCTION

The bird fauna of the Blackall-Conondale Range and adjacent lowlands (Maroochy, Mary and Stanley River drainages) in south-east Queensland has attracted the attention of bird watchers for many years. Conondale Range, for example, supports a number of rare and localised species among the 175 species recorded there (Roberts, 1977).

Although dominant habitats in the region are subtropical rain-forest and open forest, small areas of freshwater wetland are present. These freshwater ponds, swamps, marshes and streams are known to support a total of fifty-six species of 'water-bird' (Roberts, 1977, 1979; MacEvoy *et al*, 1979; *pers. obs.*). The following note comments on eight species of rallid recorded from these habitats. Additional observations are included on a migratory wader, Latham's Snipe *Gallinago hardwickii*.

DESCRIPTION OF HABITATS

The following broad habitat categories, and abbreviations used in the text, are listed below. This classification is based on simple structural features of the vegetation and surface water conditions.

RESERVOIRS (R): Large bodies of impounded water, usually some vegetation growth associated with margins. Apart from several small weirs, this habitat type is associated with the Somerset Dam headwaters (Kilcoy area), Borumba Dam (Imbil area), Ewen Maddock Dam (Landsborough area), Wappa and Coolabin Dams (Yandina area). Permanent.

FARM PONDS (FP): Small earth ponds of variable size constructed on farms. Edge vegetation present or absent. Semi-permanent.

EPHEMERAL PONDS (EP): Small water-filled depressions which are temporarily available during the wet season.

FRESHWATER SWAMPS (FS): Variably sized areas of open water surrounded by low dense vegetation. Floating aquatic vegetation commonly present on open waters. Reed beds present or absent. Permanent.

TREE SWAMPS (TS): Similar to above, except that dense trees and tall shrubs (e.g. *Melaleuca* spp.) are present with open water usually confined to the area around the bases of this vegetation. Permanent.

FRESHWATER MARSH (FM): Dense reed beds growing on low-lying waterlogged land. Surface water in small pools or narrow channels, if present. Permanent to semi-permanent.

EPHEMERAL MARSH (EM): Reed beds or grassy areas which only become moist during wet weather. Flooded paddocks are included here.

OPEN RIVERINE (OR): Rivers or creeks where trees do not shade surface water during the day. Permanent.

CLOSED RIVERINE (CR): As above, except trees shade surface water during the day. Permanent.

EPHEMERAL CREEKS (EC): Temporary streams and soaks.

#### LIST OF SPECIES

Buff-banded Rail *Rallus philippensis*  
(FP, EP, FS, TS, FM, EM, EC):

The most common rail, usually encountered singly or in pairs, where dense vegetation exists. Often forages along the margins of ponds and swamps. Occurs in both lowland (i.e. below 500m above sea level) and upland areas. Breeding records: Maleny, Woodford, Kilcoy, Conondale, Kenilworth, Nambour (September to December).

Lewin's Rail *Rallus pectoralis*  
(FP, FS, EM, CR):

A rare species recorded from Booloumba Creek, Maleny and Conondale. Lewin's Rail is usually associated with quite dense cover near areas of standing water. C. Corben (*pers. comm.*) has seen this rail in thick vegetation along Booloumba Creek, Conondale Range (November 1980). Sightings of single birds are made as they move around the edges of thick vegetation or while crossing roads. Pairs are rarely recorded. These birds, on occasion, may forage in gardens and on short pastures. Foraging has been noted both during early morning and towards dusk. A single bird was spotlighted at night beside a small farm pond near the township of Conondale in October 1974. Adult birds are very shy and easily disturbed, but young birds are more approachable. Breeding record: Maleny where three young birds were observed with parents early December 1969.



Baillon's Crake *Porzana pusilla*  
(R, FS):

Rare. The only regular sightings are of birds on freshwater swamps in the Woodford area (September to April). Sightings have also been made near Maleny. One bird was seen in dense grass in the vicinity of a small stream (October 1970) while occasional birds have been seen in thick rushes along a small weir on Obi Obi Creek, south of the town of Maleny (November 1969, October 1970, November 1972).

Australian Crake *Porzana fluminea*  
(CR):

A single bird was observed in dense cover of *Callistemon* spp. fringing Little Yabba Creek, Conondale Range (C. Corben pers. comm.) in November 1976.

Bush-hen *Gallinula olivacea*  
(CR):

Rare. Known to frequent dense streamside vegetation along Little Yabba Creek, Conondale Range and dense thickets of fern, lantana and bushes in the vicinity of water. In December 1980 a pair of birds at Maleny was observed foraging on short pasture during overcast, misty weather. These birds are noisy and may be easily observed during wet, overcast weather. All sightings have been made during the period late October to mid-February.

Dusky Moorhen *Gallinula tenebrosa*  
(All habitats):

Very common. This is the most widespread of all the rallids. These birds are most numerous in the vicinity of deeper waters with suitable cover. Feeds in shallow waters amongst vegetation along waters edge. Breeds on most large swamps and ponds in the area (September to February).

Purple Swamphen *Porphyrio porphyrio*  
(R, FP, FS, TS, OR, CR):

Common, not quite as widespread as the preceding species as it is more closely associated with large pools of still water. Sometimes more locally numerous than Dusky Moorhen. Commonly encountered foraging away from water on short pastures. Absent from waters lacking fringing vegetation. Breeding recorded from Somerset Dam, Woodford, Maleny, Borumba Dam, Mapleton, Nambour, Wappa Dam and presumably other areas (late July to December).

Eurasian Coot *Fulica atra*  
(R, FP, FS, OR, CR):

Uncommon. Numbers are variable. Usually associated with deep open waters, where it feeds by diving or taking surface food items. Breeding recorded from Somerset Dam, Woodford, Maleny, Nambour, Borumba and Wappa Dams (September to December).

Latham's Snipe *Gallinago hardwickii*  
(FS, FM, EM):

Uncommon. Shows a decided preference for shallow freshwater areas with dense vegetation although occasional individuals may be seen on open pastures. Readily takes advantage of ephemeral marsh conditions. Recorded in both upland and low-land freshwaters. Summer visitor: September to April.

#### COMMENTS

Most of the rails and crakes recorded in the Blackall-Conondale Range area are considered to be either nomadic or migratory (Pizzey, 1980). Lewin's Rail, Baillon's Crake and Bush-hen show very irregular patterns of occurrence, with all sightings recorded between August and April. Buff-banded Rails are more obvious in some years than in others but are rarely encountered between late May and early July.

Many freshwater swamps and marshes have been drained for agricultural purposes and in recent years additional areas have also been 'reclaimed' for housing developments. Consequently, a number of swamps which supported good numbers of rails in the late 1960's now no longer exist (e.g. Maleny, Nambour, Woodford, Kilcoy). Drainage of freshwater wetlands is the most serious threat facing many rail species and is recognised as a major problem in the management of these birds (Sanderson, 1977).

Another serious threat to these birds is predation by domestic and feral cats. Observations in the Maleny area during the period 1967-70 indicated that cats preyed regularly on Buff-banded Rails (as evidenced by remains) and also took a pair of Lewin's Rails in addition to their brood of three chicks.

On the other hand, some species (Dusky Moorhen, Purple Swamp-hen and Eurasian Coot) have readily taken advantage of man-made reservoirs and ponds, provided suitable vegetation for breeding and cover exists along the margins. Removal of stands of tall rushes from the margins of a small weir near Maleny during 1973 and 1974 caused a temporary decline in the population of Purple Swamp-hen until regrowth occurred in 1976-1977.



The draining of marsh and swamp habitats has caused Latham's Snipe to disappear from some of its traditional haunts on the Blackall Range and in the Nambour area. In particular, two areas near Maleny which were drained and planted to pasture in the mid-1970's, had been favoured localities for snipe in the 1960's. Both Frith *et al* (1977) and Naarding (1981) have suggested that Latham's Snipe is becoming less common on its Australian wintering grounds. Naarding (*op. cit.*) viewed continuing reclamation of swamps and marshes as particularly damaging. In addition the species is losing breeding grounds in Japan because of industrialisation (Johnsgard, 1981).

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BLACK-WINGED MONARCH  
NEAR CAIRNS, NORTH QUEENSLAND

D. MAGARRY

The range in Australia of the Black-winged Monarch *Monarcha frater* is generally considered to be in Cape York Peninsula, north of the Claudie River (Frith, 1976; Pizzey, 1980; Slater, 1974; Storr, 1973) although MacDonald (1973) indicates that it may occur as far south as the Atherton Tablelands.

On 23 January 1982, David Stewart and I visited a small creek near Edmonton, 12 Km south of Cairns in the upper reaches of the Cairns Inlet. The weather was fine, very hot and humid. The creek is lined with mangroves and in this particular area there is also a patch of scrub containing melaleucas, acacias, acacia cedars and poison peach.

A Mangrove Robin *Eopsaltria pulverulenta* was seen soon after we entered the area and then a call, normally associated with a Black-faced Monarch *Monarcha melanopsis* was heard. The bird was readily located, feeding on insects 5m above the ground. It looked exactly like a Black-faced Monarch except for the wing pattern and dark tail. The outer primary feathers were dark grey or black with the secondaries pale grey, exactly as the Black-winged Monarch is illustrated in Slater (1974). The tail was dark grey or black. The facial markings were very distinct, excluding the possibility of it being a juvenile bird. There was no doubt that, according to the available literature, the bird we were watching was a Black-winged Monarch. We watched it for some ten minutes as it chased insects.

Other birds in the area were Bar-shouldered Dove *Geopelia humeralis*, Varied Triller *Lalage leucomela*, Variegated (Lovely) Fairy-wren *Malurus lamberti* and Yellow-spotted Honeyeater *Meliphaga notata*.

It is uncertain whether the Black-winged and Black-faced Monarchs are distinct species or races of the same species (MacDonald, 1973). Pizzey (1980) and Slater (1974) consider that they both have similar calls. My observations of both these birds would support this view.

This record extends the southern range of the Black-winged Monarch in Australia by at least 500 kilometres.



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## APPARENT HYBRIDISATION BETWEEN TWO SPECIES OF FAIRY-WREN

MALCOLM WILSON

Hybridisation between two distinct species whose ranges broadly overlap is rarely documented, so the following observation is of interest.

Several years ago, Mr. Michael Hirst and I observed a male Red-backed Fairy-wren *Malurus melanocephalus* in company with Superb Fairy-wrens *Malurus cyaneus*, near the township of Bowenville, approximately twenty-four kilometres south-east of Dalby, south-east Queensland.

On 5 January 1980, Mr. Neil McKilligan of the Darling Downs Institute of Advanced Education, Toowoomba, saw what he thought to be a male hybrid between a Red-backed Fairy-wren and a Superb Fairy-wren, in the same locality. Subsequently, Michael Hirst and I had several excellent views of the apparent hybrid on a number of occasions. It was observed in eclipse plumage in the company of Superb Fairy-wrens on 24 September 1980. Unfortunately, the plumage details were not recorded. When seen in full breeding plumage during November 1980, the bird was always alone. At no time while under observation did it associate with other Fairy-wrens, even though its territory adjoined that of a group of Superb Fairy-wrens. No female Red-backed Fairy-wrens have been seen in this area.

The bird had a well-defined territory, approximately 100 metres by 100 metres, along a creek. The predominant tree in this area was *Acacia stenophylla*, with Weeping Willow, *Eucalyptus camaldulensis* and *Callistemon* spp. also present. Long grass grew as a ground cover with *Acacia farnesiana* and various weeds. The bird was observed both on the ground and high up in *Acacia stenophylla*. It spent its time preening between active feeding periods. Its call sounded like that of the Superb Fairy-wren.

The bird's plumage was bright and boldly patterned. It can be most easily visualised if one imagines a bird with the head of a Superb Fairy-wren and the body of a Red-backed Fairy-wren, except that the apparent hybrid had two shoulder patches of orange-gold.

The following description was agreed on by five observers: Messrs Neil McKilligan, Roy Wheeler, Michael Hirst, Roy Hando and myself.

The head, neck and body were predominantly black. Two-thirds of the crown was covered by a blue sheen and the ear coverts were a bright, iridescent blue. These blue areas were



slightly less extensive than in the Superb Fairy-wren. The breast was black, with an indistinct blue sheen. The belly feathers were also black but showed grey bases when ruffled. It had a black back between the orange-gold shoulders, and brown wing feathers. The tail was dull black with a blue tinge on its outer feathers. The bill and eye were black and the legs pale brown. The colour of the lower back, rump and flanks was not recorded.

It has been suggested that the bird described may have been a melanistic Variegated Fairy-wren *Malurus lambertii* but this seems unlikely. A melanistic bird would be expected to be darker than the normal form in every respect but this bird's flight feathers were no darker than those of the Variegated Fairy-wren and it had paler shoulder patches and legs.

If, as seems likely, the bird was a hybrid, one parent must have been a Red-backed Fairy-wren. The other parent would then have been either a Superb Fairy-wren or a Variegated Fairy-wren. A point by point comparison of the plumage of these two with the hybrid was found to be unhelpful. Each species had five points of resemblance with the hybrid out of the fourteen body parts compared. The hybrid was more like the Superb Fairy-wren in the distribution of blue on the head but resembled the Variegated Fairy-wren in having discrete shoulder patches of colour instead of a "saddle". Some circumstantial evidence for a Superb Fairy-wren being the other parent comes from the observed associations of a Red-backed Fairy-wren, and later of this bird, with Superb Fairy-wrens in the area. Furthermore, M. Hirst who has lived in this area for over fourteen years has no records of the Variegated Fairy-wren.

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AN UNEXPECTED SIGHTING OF RED-NECKED AVOCET  
RECURVIROSTRA NOVAEHOLLANDIAE AND CHICKS

J.C. WALTER

A Red-necked Avocet *Recurvirostra novaehollandiae* was seen near the road between Diamantina Lakes and Davenport Downs stations (23°52'S, 141°08'E) on the 29 August 1981, approximately four kilometres from the nearest sizeable body of water in the Diamantina channels, and about 200 metres from a dry watercourse.

The bird at first appeared to be alone and was in the middle of a vast plain covered with *Craspedia pleiocephala* (yellow top), which was flowering prolifically due to the heavy rain which had fallen in the area about two months previously after an extensive dry period. On sighting the bird, our party stopped. Col Lloyd and I left our vehicles to take photographs. At this stage, a second adult bird arrived calling loudly. After observing them for a short time, it became obvious that the birds were approaching and becoming increasingly agitated the closer they came.

We then realised that there were three chicks advancing directly towards us. They were taking no notice of the parents' calls and appeared to be attracted to the vehicles. The chicks, which were still in the downy stage, were covered with pollen from the *Craspedia* and were perfectly camouflaged. The *Craspedia* was in full bloom and very heavy with pollen. As the chicks and the flowers were about the same height, the former had become covered with pollen. They advanced to within six metres of where I was standing alongside my vehicle when I ran out of film and spoke. Only then did the chicks acknowledge the parent birds as one parent put on a broken wing distraction display and began calling loudly.

The parents led the chicks away across the road in front of us at a fairly fast rate. The *Craspedia* was approximately 150mm high and the chicks only marginally taller.

We were interested to see Avocets with chicks so far from water in the middle of a plain. It is possible that the birds bred on a small ephemeral claypan well away from the main channels, and they were left stranded when the water dried up. It was also interesting to note how well the chicks blended in with the *Craspedia* due to the covering of pollen.

I felt that the chances of the chicks surviving would be slim indeed unless they were strong enough to cover the distance to shallow water where they would be able to search for the aquatic animal life they would need to exist.



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## BOOK REVIEW

THE COMPLETE BIRDS OF THE WORLD by Michael Walters. 1980.  
Sydney/Wellington: Reed. Hard Cover. 340 pages.  
180 x 250 mm. Recommended Retail \$34.95.

This book is a taxonomic list of bird species. It includes living species, forms whose status is doubtful (i.e. those known only from old travellers' accounts, bones or taxonomically obscure specimens), and those known to have become extinct since the end of the last ice age. The emphasis is on families and species, and each family is briefly described at the head of its list of species. Each species entry begins with the scientific name in bold face, the authority who first used it, and an English name in light upper case. Sometimes an alternative English name is given.

The brief species notes include distribution, habitat, food, nest sites, clutch sizes and breeding behaviour. The contents comprise: a contents table (a listing of bird families in the text by scientific and English names), an introduction, the list (325 pages), the bibliography of 66 references, one page of addenda items, an index of scientific family names and an index of English family names. The book does not give any information about its author.

The three-page introduction is devoid of detailed information about the guidelines used in taxonomy or scientific nomenclature. It states that the list follows Peters' *Checklist of the Birds of the World* and various specialised studies since then.

Nowhere does the text refer to orders, and it rarely discusses sub-families. Since this is designed as a taxonomic list, I find this regrettable. A few pages listing families by orders, or a double-page diagram of an avian 'family tree', would have put the whole book in perspective. In bird taxonomy, orders are important as they are generally clear-cut and easily definable. Sub-families also may be useful and their inclusion would have broken up some of the larger families, thus permitting quick identification of species groups.

In the text, families follow one another in unbroken succession, with inadequate spacing making it difficult to find any particular taxon. There is no marked separation between families regardless of their differences. For example, the reader is given no indication that when he moves from Podicipedidae (Grebes) to Diomedidae (Albatross), the jump is more significant than to the next family, Procellariidae (Petrels). This is because Albatross and Petrels are closely related and belong to the same order, while Grebes are quite distinct from either. Even for the largest order (Passeriformes) there is no hint of its commencement, which is surprisingly hard to find. Many of the families close to either side of this division would be outside the experience of most Australian ornithologists.

Opinions on taxonomic arrangement differ widely, but this book provides little evidence of this (except at species level). The sequence of families and species appears to be excellent, although the credit for this may be Peters'. The family descriptions are in general terms, and many distinctive or diagnostic traits are overlooked. There are also many inconsistencies and some factual errors.

For example, it recorded two examples related to the structure of birds' feet. A bird's foot will often immediately identify it to ordinal and sometimes familial level. I felt that this aspect was insufficiently



dealt with. The aspects considered were foot webbing and zygodactyly (the reversing of the outer toe so that two toes are directed forwards and two backwards).

There are a total of fifteen families which possess webbed feet. The book mentions only two families as possessing webbed feet: the Anatidae (ducks, geese and swans) and the Laridae (gulls and allies). I imagine that everybody knows this, which is perhaps all the more reason to mention it for the thirteen other families. Furthermore, grebes (not one of the fifteen) are described as having 'lobate webbed feet' which is confusing, as their forward toes are individually lobed.

There are fifteen bird families with partial or permanent zygodactyly. This feature is mentioned for only one of these, the Coliidae (Coliidae), and the description is incomplete. The unusual foot of the Coliidae is highly mobile and two, three or four toes may be directed forward.

The text is set out similarly to a dictionary with the scientific name of the first and last species on the page printed conspicuously at the top. Whilst this is excellent procedure for a dictionary, it is meaningless for a taxonomic list. The only useful page heading would have been the name of the order and family.

The two indexes are no more than exact alphabetical rearrangements of the contents table, and are therefore redundant. An index of generic names, rather than scientific family names, would have been well worth the extra pages to enhance the accessibility of the text. The English names index is clumsy. For example, the entry 'Finches' only directs the reader to Fringillidae, thereby ignoring Emberizidae, Catamblyrhynchidae, Cardinalidae, Estrildidae and Ploceidae. These families (as delineated in this book) all fit within the broad term 'finches' and contain members with the common name ending 'finch'. Many common group names are not listed in the index, including Stilt, Avocet, Harrier, Kestrel, Cockatoo, Lorikeet, Thornbill and Pardalote. To find these (and many others), it is necessary to guess which group the author has decided to allot them. An expanded index of common names would have been valuable.

The introduction states: "In selecting English names ... I have generally tried to use the shortest, most convenient and most euphonic name" (what about accuracy and unambiguity?). Considering this, I fail to understand his use of 'Bare-eyed Partridge Bronzewing' for 'Partridge Pigeon', and White, Grey or Vinous-chested Goshawk rather than Varied Goshawk for *Accipiter novaehollandiae*. On the other hand, it was good to see the use of 'Baza' rather than 'Cuckoo-Falcon' for the *Aviceda* genus. Also, the names of our parrot species are mostly those we use, rather than the somewhat distorted ones used by most northern hemisphere bird fanciers.

Inconsistencies are not hard to find. Amongst the Turnicidae, two of fifteen species are called 'Hemipodes', and the others 'Buttonquails'. Our *Turnix maculosa* is called Australian Hemipode, yet it is only one of seven Australian members of the group. *Haliastur indus* is called a kite, whereas *H. sphenurus* is called an eagle. Orange-winged is inappropriately used for the amalgamation of the sitellas, rather than the obvious Varied. Amongst our finches, 'Firetail' is not used as a group name but, strangely, *Neochmia phaeton* is called a waxbill and its close relative *N. ruficauda* a finch, as is the Red-browed Finch which has often been linked with waxbills.

There are many errors in relation to bird distribution. For example, there is no mention of the following species as occurring in Australia: Spotted and Laughing Turtle-Doves, Blackbird, Song Thrush, Goldfinch, Greenfinch,

Skylark and Nutmeg Mannikan. Introductions are apparently recorded at random, as the Common Starling and Common Myna are listed for Australia.

The introduction states that in "a good many cases no information is given under a species where information is in fact known". The explanation offered is obscurity of journals. It then goes on to say: "Areas such as South America and Australasia are particularly deficient in this respect". I see no reason why Australia should be regarded as deficient, as there are many fine, accessible books and journals which could have been used. The bibliography includes only two references covering Australasia, one of which is over fifty years old.

In the book's favour, it presents a large amount of data and covers every bird species known, or thought to have existed, in geologically recent times. In some areas it is quite detailed, and no doubt the bulk of the information is correct in spite of my criticisms.

This book is of mediocre printing, is in many ways poorly conceived and has more than its fair share of errors. It is without a single illustration. It seems overpriced at its nominal \$34.95, but is selling in some Brisbane bookshops for approximately \$5.00, for which price it is good value as a list of the birds of the world. The Library of the Queensland Ornithological Society has a copy.

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