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THE SUNBIRD

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GRASSWREN *AMYTORNIS DOROTHEAE* SURVEYS NEAR MT ISA (1990 - 1995)

PETER L. HARRIS & DAVID STEWART

ABSTRACT

Surveys for the Carpentarian Grasswren *Amytornis dorotheae* were conducted in spinifex plant communities west and north of Mt Isa from 1990 until 1995. Observations at 70 localities produced 92 records of this species. Up until September 1991 birds were detected mainly by observing and listening in likely habitat; after that a replay tape recorded near Gunpowder was used. The year round surveys were conducted subsequent to the initial regional sighting of this species at Gunpowder, 95 km north-northwest of Mt Isa on 23 June, 1990 (Harris 1992). Details of all sightings were recorded in original field notebooks whilst the first author resided in Mt Isa until 6 May 1995. Kalkadoon Grasswrens *Amytornis ballarae* co-occurred with Carpentarian Grasswrens at 10 of these localities.

INTRODUCTION

As a resident of Mt Isa (20° 43.6' S, 139° 29.5' E) one of us (PH) had conducted regular surveys from the early 1970's for Kalkadoon Grasswrens *Amytornis ballarae* in the surrounding country within a radius of approximately 150 kms from Mt Isa. After finding the first

locally recorded Carpentarian Grasswrens *Amytornis dorotheae* at the headwaters of Goat Creek near Gunpowder (19° 55' S, 139° 05' E) 95 km NNW of Mt Isa on 23 June 1990 (Harris 1992), subsequent surveys mainly targeted this species. Previously, Carpentarian Grasswrens had been reported from only three locations within approximately 300 km NW of the above locality; in Queensland at Lagoon Creek Gorge on 27 May 1986 (Westmoreland Station) (17° 32' S, 138° 02' E) and later on 31 May 1986 at Hell's Gate (Cliffdale Creek Station) (17° 33' S, 138° 19' E) (McKean & Martin 1989). Back in June 1974 they were recorded at China Wall just over the NT border (17° 44' S, 137° 48' E) (McKean and Martin 1989).

In May 1991 one of us (DS) recorded calls of *A. dorotheae* at the Gunpowder locality and gave a copy of this sound to PH in October 1991 to incorporate playback into his survey technique. PH continued to search successfully for *A. dorotheae* up to 1995 when he left Mt Isa. The following sighting records are based on original field notebooks and joint discussions held in March 2009. The results of contemporary searching for locations where *A. dorotheae* occurs in the Mt Isa region during 2008 have not been spectacular (G Harrington pers comm) and may suggest a possible change in status for this species. The following historical records are a valuable addition to our knowledge of the occurrence of this elusive bird.

METHODS

Surveys for Carpentarian Grasswrens *A. dorotheae* were conducted in remote rugged and normally inaccessible country NW of Mt Isa in every month of the year (Figure 1). Many survey trips were undertaken on private property requiring prior permission to be sought from property owners. During early surveys a conservative approach was taken by searching for *A. dorotheae* at localities near Gunpowder and also along the road to Lady Annie mine near where Beruldsen (1992) had reported it on 30 January 1992. Prior to this in

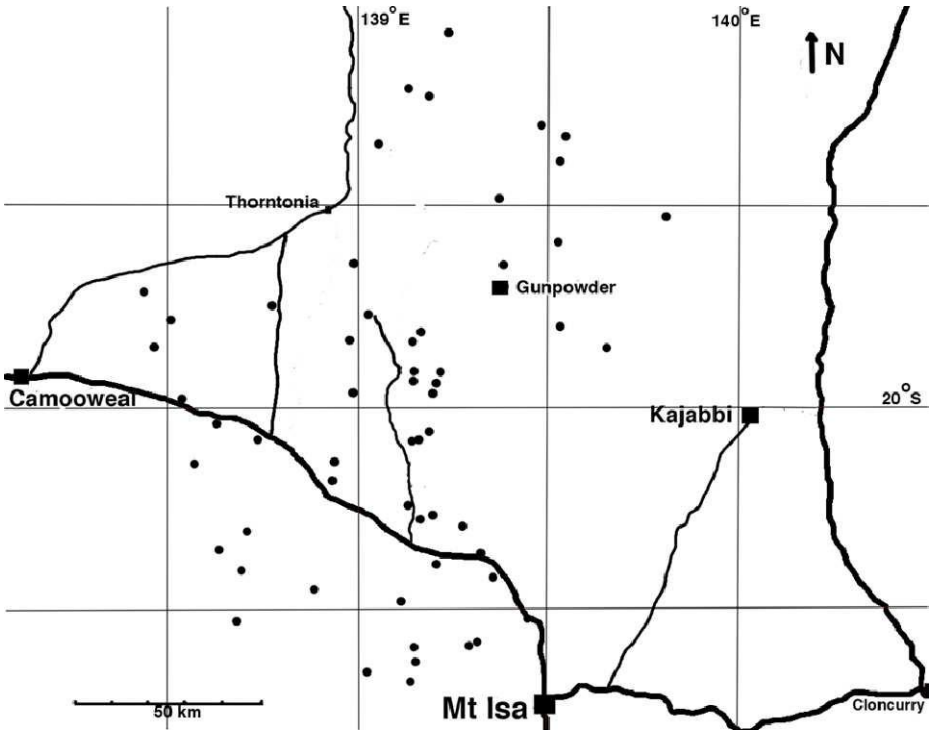


Figure 1: Localities (●) where Carpentarian Grasswren were recorded from 1990 - 1995.

The 59 localities shown include all 68 in Table 1 but some adjacent locations are combined.

May 1991, (PH) saw birds at two localities on Highland Plains Station at $18^{\circ} 23' S$, $138^{\circ} 13' E$ and $18^{\circ} 24' S$, $138^{\circ} 14' E$ north west of Lawn Hill Gorge NP which, considering also the records of McKean & Martin (1989), encouraged the prospect of finding the species more widespread in suitable habitat.

Searches were made in suitable terrain for the habitat type described by Harris (1992) (Figure 3). From 1992 onwards playback of *A. dorotheae* calls recorded from the Gunpowder site was used to stimulate the



Figure 2: Carpentarian Grasswren *Amytornis dorotheae*

Photograph: Graeme Chapman



Figure 3: Carpentarian Grasswren habitat near Gunpowder.

Photograph: Graeme Chapman

responses of birds and an effort was made to search as many suitable 10 minute grids as possible. Using playback increased dramatically the chances of locating this cryptic species and allowed PH to survey more area of habitat with concomitant success. Field notebooks were used to record sighting details and to list other birds observed at each location visited.

The calls of all other malurids present including *A. ballarae* are distinctive (Harris 1992) and readily separated from those of *A. dorotheae*. This allowed many areas with suitable geological and vegetation type to be surveyed efficiently with some confidence. In response to playback in suitable habitat, if birds responded they usually revealed their presence by calling. Sound equipment used was a Sharp AC/DC radio cassette recorder. The responding calls of *A. dorotheae* were heard from up to 35 metres distant, but only in calm conditions. The high frequency contact calls in particular are very difficult to detect, especially if wind or other environmental noise is present. The numbers of birds responding to calls detected at each location in Table 1 (Page 9). are reported. Often only a single individual was seen or heard, but more than one bird may have been present.

RESULTS

Over the five years of the survey 92 sightings of Carpentarian Grasswrens (Figure 2) were recorded at 70 localities (Table 1) across 45 different 10 minute blocks (Figure 1) in the region NW of Mt Isa. Two sightings were on Highland Plains station (now part of a National Park) NW of Lawn Hill Gorge NP. Often sites in apparently suitable habitat failed to yield any detectable response from Carpentarian Grasswrens (Figure 3). This doesn't mean of course that they weren't there – just that there was no response. Presence is a lot easier to prove than absence. A number of sites S and E of Mt Isa were also surveyed, with negative results and it was concluded the geology or habitat was unsuitable for the species. *A. dorotheae* was found only in habitat containing *Triodia spp.* and was not found further to the W or NE where plant communities containing spinifex are replaced by cracking clay plains.

The behaviour of the birds was highly cryptic and as individuals usually remained hidden they were difficult to count or sex. In over a third of the locations surveyed (32) only one bird was detected, though it is probable that other individuals were also present at the time. Nevertheless 176 birds were detected during the survey mainly using the playback method. At the majority of sites (77) just one or two birds were seen or heard in response to playback and the sizes of their groups were not easily assessed. Groups of three birds were found at a further ten sites (only individuals in one of these groups were reliably sexed) and groups or families containing four and six birds were detected at the remaining five locations (Table 1).

An active nest of *A. dorotheae* containing two eggs was found at Beetle Creek on May Downs Station 20° 35.23' S, 139° 18.14' E on the 25 March 1995. The nest was 25 cm off the ground and its entrance faced east. It was located in a hummock of spinifex (*Triodia pungens*) 24 m from the creek. During a second visit on 1 April 1995 the birds were still incubating both eggs but on 6 May the nest was found intact but empty. Assuming a 30 day nesting cycle, they may well have fledged.

DISCUSSION

In apparently suitable habitat Carpentarian Grasswrens were often absent or, if present, did not respond to playback calls in ways that enabled them to be detected. When they did respond to playback calls they did so at any time during daylight. No Carpentarian Grasswrens were recorded S and E of Mt Isa (Figure 1) where the dominant geology did not support the known habitat and no Carpentarian Grasswrens were detected in other habitats.

The most favoured geology in the area surveyed is laminated siltstone with the highest ranges formed from sandstone/quartzite. The vegetation type is low, open woodland, dominated by *Eucalyptus*

leucophloia (Snappy Gum), sometimes in association with *E. herbertiana* and *Corymbia capricornia*. Sparse shrub species include the wattles, *Acacia alleniana*, *A. gonoclada*, *A. hammondi*, *A. hilliana*, *A. megalantha*, *A. monticola*, *A. orthocarpa* and *A. retivenia*. Lancewood, *A. shirleyi*, a tree species forming dense stands may also be found. Hummock grasses (spinifex), *Triodia burkensis*, *T. longiceps*, *T. molesta*, *T. pungens* and *Plectrachne pungens* always form the ground cover. These hummock grasses grow slowly and take several years to regenerate after fire. Northwest of Mt. Isa Carpentarian Grasswrens were also found in habitat away from ridges in almost flat topography with continuous *Triodia spp.* and sparse *Eucalyptus spp.* In places, Carpentarian Grasswrens were found adjacent to spinifex covered quartzite ranges with sparse eucalypt and shrub cover, habitat more suited to the Kalkadoon Grasswren, *A. ballarae*. *A. dorotheae* and *A. ballarae* were found to be sympatric at ten localities listed in Table 1. Kalkadoon Grasswrens are generally more common in rugged country nearer Mt Isa.

It is interesting to note that the frequency of finding larger numbers of birds at a location (four and six individuals) is highest from early May until early July after the breeding season (four of five locations in Table 1). These counts may have contained young birds as only one other location (Headwaters of Beetle Creek, 13 November 1993) yielded four birds at other times. Groups containing up to 5 individuals have been reported previously (Higgins *et al.* 2001). One or two birds were most frequently detected (Table 1). The most frequently surveyed location (Beetle creek drainage) visited nine times from 20 November 1993 to 6 May 1995 yielded successive counts of 2, 6, 1, 3, 2, 2, 2, 2, and 2 *A. dorotheae* and records of *A. ballarae*. The assumed monogamy of *A. dorotheae* (Higgins *et al.* 2001) is supported by this series of surveys because only two birds were detected prior to and following the incubation of two eggs in one nest in 1995.

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We thank station owners and managers of Calton Hills, May Downs, Thorntononia, Haslingden, Barkly Downs, Yelvertoft, Flora Downs, Split Rock, Koolamara, Bortala, Chidna, Alsace, Mellish Park, Barr Creek, Morella, Riversleigh, Undilla and Highland Plains who gave PH permission to visit their properties. Graeme Chapman refereed this article and both he and David Rounsevell kindly assisted in preparing it.

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Table 1. Locations of Carpentarian Grasswren *Amytornis dorotheae* NW of Mt Isa.Key: M= Male, F= Female; # = One nest, re-visited; * = Two species present (*A. ballarae* and *dorotheae*)

Date	Birds	Location / Property	Latitude / Longitude		Map Sheet (1: 100,000)
			°S	°E	
	<i>* A. ballarae</i>	Field Notebook 9			
23-06-90	2M, 1F	95 km N of Mt Isa, Calton Hills. (Harris 92)	19° 56.0´	139° 09.0´	Mammoth Mines
07-07-90	6	"	"	"	"
14-07-90	2M, 1F	"	"	"	"
04-08-90	2	500 m N of Mt Kelly. "	19° 54.0´	139° 09.0´	"
29-09-90	2*	" (<i>* A. ballarae</i> present)	"	"	"
15-12-90	3	95 km N of Mt Isa. "	19° 56.0´	139° 09.0´	"
02-02-91	2	"	"	"	"
22-05-91	2	25.5 km N of Highland Plains HS.	18° 23.0´	138° 13.0´	Bowthorn
23-05-91	3	2.5 km SE of above location.	18° 24.0´	138° 14.0´	"
01-06-91	4	North of Mt Kelly, Calton Hills	19° 53.0´	139° 09.0´	Mammoth Mines
27-07-91	3	Goat Creek. "	19° 56.0´	139° 09.0´	"
21-08-91	2	Goat Creek. "	19° 56.0´	139° 12.0´	"
23-08-91	2	Camp 6, head of creek. "	19° 58.0´	139° 11.0´	"
14-09-91	1	Paradise Creek headwaters. "	19° 51.0´	139° 10.0´	"
21-09-91	2	Paradise Creek. "	19° 49.0´	139° 11.0´	"
		Field Notebook 10			
22-02-92	2	Johnson Creek from (Beruldsen 1992). "	20° 17.0´	139° 09.0´	Kennedy Gap
05-04-92	2	400 m from Johnson Creek. "	"	"	"
04-05-92	4	5 km E of Lady Annie Road. "	20° 03.5´	139° 09.0´	"
10-05-92	2	Upper Judenan Creek. "	20° 03.0´	139° 10.5´	"
10-05-92	1	4 km E of Lady Annie Road. "	20° 04.0´	139° 05.0´	"
15-05-02	1	Johnson Creek. "	20° 16.0´	139° 11.0´	"
23-05-92	1*	Buckley River drainage. " (<i>* A. ballarae</i>)	20° 18.0´	139° 15.5´	"
30-05-92	2	Wilfred Creek. "	20° 20.0´	139° 17.0´	"
31-05-92	2	41 km N of Mt Isa. "	20° 23.0´	139° 19.5´	"
14-06-92	2	Seymour River, Thorntonia.	19° 21.0´	139° 03.5´	Mt Oxide
12-07-92	2	North of Johnson Creek, Calton Hills.	20° 16.0´	139° 06.5´	Kennedy Gap
30-08-92	2	North of 29 mile Bore. "	20° 22.8´	139° 19.6´	"
13-09-92	2*	South of Camooweal Road, May Downs.	20° 23.5´	139° 12.2´	"
03-10-92	1	North of Mingera Creek. "	20° 25.4´	139° 09.6´	"
06-10-92	2*	Spring Ck., 22 km N of Mt Isa, Haslingden.	20° 31.9´	139° 26.9´	Mt Isa

Field Notebook 10 (continued)				
31-10-92	1*	Wilfred Creek, May Downs.	20° 25.4', 139° 21.3'	Kennedy Gap
07-11-92	1	Mosquito Creek. "	20° 38.7', 139° 09.9'	Mt Isa
07-11-92	2	" "	20° 35.9', 139° 09.2'	"
07-11-92	3	Mingeum Creek drainage. "	20° 29.8', 139° 07.3'	Kennedy Gap
08-11-92	2*	North of Templeton River. "	20° 40.7', 139° 08.3'	Mt Isa
08-11-92	1	North of Templeton River Road. "	20° 36.3', 139° 17.1'	"
22-11-92	2	Saint Smith Range, Barkly Downs.	20° 32.6', 138° 40.4'	Templeton
28-11-92	2	Pilpah Range. "	20° 24.4', 138° 42.5'	Yelvertoft
28-11-92	2	Centre of Pilpah Range. "	20° 20.9', 138° 36.2'	"
28-11-92	2	Ogilvie Range. "	20° 18.4', 138° 42.7'	"
05-12-92	3	East of monument, Yelvertoft.	20° 11.3', 138° 55.8'	"
12-12-92	2	Whistler Creek, Flora Downs.	20° 09.0', 138° 34.3'	"
12-12-92	1	South Ogilvie Range, Barkly Downs.	20° 25.8', 138° 51.7'	"
10-01-93	2	29 mile Bore, Calton Hills.	20° 23.0', 139° 19.5'	Kennedy Gap
23-01-93	2	29 mile Bore. "	20° 23.0', 139° 19.5'	"
Field Notebook 11				
03-04-93	3	South of highway, Flora Downs.	20° 02.6', 138° 37.1'	Yelvertoft
03-04-93	1	North of h/way, Woorona Ck., Split Rock.	19° 58.9', 138° 32.2'	Undilla
04-04-93	2	South of highway, Flora Downs.	20° 04.3', 138° 42.2'	Yelvertoft
18-04-93	2	North of Saga Creek, Koolamara.	19° 58.1', 138° 59.8'	Undilla
19-04-93	2	North east of monument, Yelvertoft.	20° 08.7', 138° 56.8'	Yelvertoft
01-05-93	2	South of O'Shannassy River, Split Rock.	19° 42.6', 138° 25.8'	Camooweal
02-05-93	1	East of Emu Creek. "	19° 46.9', 138° 31.0'	Undilla
02-05-93	2	Harris Creek, headwaters, Thorntonia.	19° 44.8', 138° 47.4'	"
08-05-93	2	Nowranie Creek tributary, Split Rock.	19° 52.2', 138° 28.6'	Camooweal
22-05-93	1	Galah Creek drainage, Koolamara.	19° 50.3', 138° 59.2'	Undilla
23-05-93	1	Russell Creek drainage. "	19° 45.9', 139° 02.7'	Mammoth Mines
29-05-93	1	" "	19° 38.4', 138° 59.6'	Undilla
05-06-93	1	Mistake Creek drainage, Bortala.	19° 48.9', 139° 31.8'	Alsace
05-06-93	1	Bull Creek drainage. "	19° 50.7', 139° 37.9'	Alsace
04-07-93	2	Spring Ck., 22 km N of Mt Isa, Haslingden.	20° 31.9', 139° 26.9'	Mt Isa
15-07-93	2	Thornton Creek, tributary, Thorntonia.	19° 37.8', 138° 59.9'	Undilla
19-07-93	1	Dynamite Creek drainage, Bortala.	19° 36.2', 139° 31.2'	Alsace

Field Notebook 11 (continued)				
22-07-93	1	North Mt Oxide Mine, Chidna.	19° 27.8', 139° 23.3'	Mt Oxide
24-07-93	1	Gunpowder Creek, N of Mines, Bortala.	19° 38.8', 139° 23.5'	Mammoth Mines
01-08-93	1	Spring Ck., 22 km N of Mt Isa, Haslingden.	20° 31.9', 139° 26.9'	Mt Isa
14-08-93	1	Myally Creek drainage, Chidna.	19° 22.1', 139° 32.1'	Myally
15-08-93	1	"	19° 18.5', 139° 33.2'	"
22-08-93	1*	Mistake Ck. drainage, 7 km NW of Alsace.	19° 32.5', 139° 49.5'	Alsace
22-08-93	1	5 km NW of Alsace.	19° 33.3', 139° 49.8'	"
11-09-93	1	Mosquito Creek, May Downs.	20° 39.1', 139° 02.8'	Mt Isa
12-09-93	1	Beetle Creek drainage, May Downs.	20° 36.1', 139° 18.3'	"
18-09-93	2	Fiery Creek, Mellish Park.	19° 05.4', 139° 13.6'	Mt Oxide
25-09-93	1*	Myally Creek drainage, Chidna.	19° 18.2', 139° 29.0'	"
11-10-93	1	Fiery Creek drainage, Mellish Park.	19° 13.3', 139° 08.1'	Mt Oxide
11-10-93	1	Fiery Creek, Mellish Park.	19° 14.4', 139° 11.3'	"
13-11-93	1	3 km W of Beetle Creek, May Downs.	20° 36.3', 139° 17.2'	Mt Isa
13-11-93	4*	Headwaters Beetle Creek, May Downs.	20° 36.6', 139° 17.0'	"
13-11-93	3*	"	20° 35.0', 139° 17.9'	"
20-11-93	2	Beetle Creek. "	20° 35.2', 139° 18.1'	"
27-02-94	2	29 mile Bore, Calton Hills.	20° 22.8', 139° 19.5'	Kennedy Gap
05-03-94	2	"	20° 22.8', 139° 19.5'	"
Field Notebook 12				
07-05-94	6*	Beetle Creek drainage, May Downs.	20° 35.2', 139° 18.1'	Mt Isa
31-07-94	2	Johnson Ck., Calton Hills (Beruldsen,92).	20° 17.0', 139° 09.0'	Kennedy Gap
20-08-94	1	Beetle Creek drainage, May Downs.	20° 35.2', 139° 18.1'	Mt Isa
17-12-94	3	"	20° 35.2', 139° 18.1'	"
24-12-94	1	Templeton River drainage. "	20° 29.1', 139° 24.2'	Kennedy Gap
04-02-95	2	Beetle Creek drainage, May Downs.	20° 35.2', 139° 18.1'	Mt Isa
18-02-95	2	"	20° 35.2', 139° 18.1'	"
25-03-95	2#	Nest found. "	20° 35.2', 139° 18.1'	"
01-04-95	2#	"	20° 35.2', 139° 18.1'	"
30-04-95	2	Bull Creek drainage, Bortala.	19° 52.2', 139° 38.2'	Alsace
06-05-95	2#	Beetle Creek drainage, May Downs.	20° 35.2', 139° 18.1'	Mt Isa

A YELLOW *ZOSTEROPS* SIGHTING AT SAWTELL

GEORGE E. CHAPMAN

While photographing Yellow Thornbills at Boambee Lookout (30° 21.4' S, 153° 6.5'E) Sawtell, in New South Wales on the morning of 22 February 2009, I spotted a solitary bird in a small tree off to the side of the main group and took one photograph of it. A flock of Silvereyes were also in the vicinity. I reviewed the photograph later (including checking the colour balance) and realised that the bird in question was not a Thornbill at all, but clearly a specimen of the genus *Zosterops* with greenish yellow head, bright yellow underparts and olive/brown primaries and tail feathers. The bill is mid grey, though this is not obvious in the photo since most of the bill is in shadow, however it becomes more apparent when the exposure of the RAW image is increased. Also, the legs appear to be fairly pale.

The photograph was circulated to a number of amateur and professional ornithologists who offered a range of opinions as to the possible nature of the bird. These fell into three categories: (i) that it is a vagrant or escapee non-native species (ii) that it is a vagrant Yellow White-eye, *Z. luteus*, or (iii) that it is a highly unusual colour form of the Silvereye, *Z. ateralis*.

The only non-native *Zosterops* species which seems a possibility in terms of appearance and location is the Yellow-fronted White-eye, *Z. flavifrons*, native to Vanuatu (del Hoyo *et al.* 2008), which is over 2,000 km distant from Sawtell across large stretches of unbroken ocean. No *Zosterops* species are listed in the Australian Department of Environment's "2007 Inventory of Exotic (non-native) Bird Species known to be in Australia", (<http://www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/trade-use/publications/inventory-exotic-bird07.html>). It therefore seems very unlikely that the bird is either a vagrant or escapee non-native *Zosterops* species.



**Figure 1 Unknown
Zosterops from Boambee
Lookout**

**Figure 2 Molongle
Creek *Z. luteus*.**



The bird's appearance matches quite closely the appearance of *Z. luteus*, apart from the bill and leg colour. This may be due to some degree of immaturity in the bird: descriptions of immature *Z. luteus* are lacking (Higgins *et al.* 2006). It has been noted by some experts who have viewed the photograph that the colour of the underparts is brighter than is usual for *Z. luteus*, though Higgins *et al.* (2006) report the colour of the underparts as bright yellow, as do the main bird field guides (Morcombe 2004, Pizzey & Knight 2007, Simpson & Day 2004, Slater *et al.* 2003). This is borne out by some photographs (e.g. del Hoyo *et al.* 2008, photograph on p.413). The nearest known population of *Z. luteus* is approximately 1,500 km N of Sawtell, in the coastal region between Bowen and Ayr in tropical east Queensland. A photograph of a *Z. luteus* specimen from that region (Molongle Creek, 19° 50.1' S, 147° 42.1' E) taken in October 2008 is shown for comparison. In this case the underparts are a more greenish yellow than is indicated in the published works above, but consistent with those expert observations noted previously. The bill and legs of this *Z. luteus* specimen are dark, as are all photographs and field guide illustrations of *Z. luteus* which I have examined. The same applies to *Z. lateralis*, though to a lesser extent.

The remaining possibility for the identity of this bird is that it is an unusual colour variant of *Z. lateralis*, a species which is notorious for colour variability (Higgins *et al.* 2006). The pale bill and legs would be consistent with a leucistic form and the bright yellow colour of the underparts would suggest that the melanin in the feathers of those parts is substituted by carotenoids, hence it could also be described as xanthochroic. I have not been able to find any previous reports of this type of colour variation in *Z. lateralis*.

This bird is therefore almost certainly either a vagrant, possibly immature *Z. luteus* or a previously unreported colour variant of *Z. lateralis*. The evidence of a single photograph of indifferent quality does not allow either of these possibilities to be eliminated. As far as I am aware, there have been no further reports of sightings of the bird.

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