

THE TYPE-LOCALITY OF *EPTHIANURA AURIFRONS* GOULD 1838 THE ORANGE CHAT

IAN A. W. McALLAN

John Gould described the Orange Chat *Epthianura aurifrons*¹ in April 1838 in the Appendix to his work *A Synopsis of the Birds of Australia* (Gould 1838a) giving the type-locality as "Interior of New South Wales"². Seven months later, in what Gould had intended to be his original description, the type-locality was given as "In Novâ Cambriâ Australi" (Gould 1838b). Mathews (1922), Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union (1926) and Mayr (1986) all followed Gould's earlier work (1838a) giving the type-locality as variations of "interior New South Wales". I have been able to restrict the type-locality further to an area not usually within the range of the species.

The species-accounts in Gould's *Handbook* (Gould 1865) were usually identical with the text in his *Birds of Australia* (Gould 1840-1848) and the first three parts of the supplement to this work (1851-1859). However the text for *E. aurifrons* is one of the few cases where they were not the same. In the *Handbook* the account starts

"Skins of this species, which were very rare when I first described it, are now common, being sent in abundance from Victoria; that it also inhabits South Australia we know from the circumstance of Mr White informing me that, in an ornithological trip made by him to the north of Adelaide, he saw this bird in great numbers from Port Augusta to the 27th degree of latitude; he states that it lives chiefly on caterpillars, builds in low shrubs, and that the eggs, which are four or five in number, are white or pinkish white spotted with rust red."

¹The orthography of *Epthianura* follows McAllan & Bruce (1988).

²I have been unable to locate the type-specimen of *E. aurifrons*. The specimen was initially placed in the collection of the Zoological Society of London. That collection was closed and sold in 1855 (Scherren 1905), the types to the British Museum and the bulk of the remainder of the collection to the Queen's Colleges of Cork and Galway. The remainder was dispersed between provincial museums and private collections. The fact that the type of *E. aurifrons* is not in the British Museum suggests that it went elsewhere. Possibly Gould donated two specimens to the Rijks Museum in Leiden in 1840, before the publication of part 7 of the *Birds of Australia* (C. Fisher *in litt.*). If so, this would contradict both Breton's and Gould's comments that the type was unique.

The account in Part 7 of the *Birds of Australia* (published in 1842) gave more detail of the earliest record:

"As long since as the year 1837 I had the pleasure of characterizing this species at one of the scientific meetings of the Zoological Society of London, from a specimen which had been presented to the Society's collection by Lieut. Breton, R. N., a gentleman much attached to the zoological science, as exemplified by his numerous donations to that Society, and in his 'Excursions in New South Wales, Western Australia and Van Diemen's Land.'

The Orange-fronted Epthianura must be regarded as a bird of the greatest rarity, for the specimen above mentioned is the only one that has ever come under my notice, and in all probability it is quite unique; hence this is another of the birds to which I would wish to direct the attention of residents in New South Wales, particularly those who have an opportunity of visiting the locality in which it was seen by Lieut. Breton, who, when speaking of Gammon Plains, New South Wales, in the work above mentioned, says 'we shot also some *Platypi*, and a small bird like a Mule Canary (a species of *Saxicola*); this last is exceedingly rare in the colony, and I am not aware that any other person possesses a specimen; there were only three together, and the natives said they had never seen any before.'

Note that Lieut. Breton's account (1833) actually said, "We shot also some platypi, and a small bird like a male canary (a species of fly-catcher)," though these errors of Gould's in copying Breton's text are not important.

Wood (1972) suggested that Gammon (or Gummun) Plains was the name the early European settlers of the Hunter Valley gave, "exclusively to the district of which Merriwa is the centre". He further suggested that the name was derived from the local Aborigines as also noted by Breton:

"In speaking of the Liverpool Plains, the aborigines call them Corborn Comleroy [*sic* = Kamilaroi, the Aboriginal tribe in this part of New South Wales], Corborm [*sic*] implying great as Gammon does small."

Mitchell (1834) also restricted Gammon Plains to this area, but he called it Gummum Plains.

Wood also noted that Breton arrived in New South Wales on 25 August 1832. According to Breton he first visited Goulburn and the Blue Mountains before travelling with a 'Mr B.' to Mr B.'s properties at Wollombi, Gammon Plains and

the Liverpool Plains. Wood gave this 'Mr. B.' as John Marquet Blaxland and noted his initial selection of land at Gammon Plains was of 1280 acres at Bow Creek in 1829. Unfortunately it is not possible to restrict the type-locality to this particular property from Breton's description, for by 1833 the Blaxland family owned a large part of the Merriwa area (Wood 1972).

According to Wood (1972), Breton visited the Hunter during spring. This can also be inferred from Breton's noting flowering buttercups *Ranunculus* sp. on the Liverpool Range a few days after visiting Gammon Plains (see Beadle (1972) for flowering times of *Ranunculus* spp in this area).

Gammon Plains is well to the east of the usual range of *E. aurifrons* as given in Morris *et al.* (1981) where records from Gilgandra, Parkes, Bumbaldry and Rand are considered to be at the extreme eastern limits for the species. There are however two other records from this area, one beyond the historical scope of Morris *et al.* (1981) as it was published before 1925, the other not published.

Bettington (1923), in an article written from Terragong (some seven kilometres north of Merriwa), recorded a party of five or six birds including two males that, "appeared on November 30th [1923] and stayed for about a week in the vicinity of a public road". Furthermore, M. E. McAllan recorded a female on 29-30 November 1980 about 15 km S of Merriwa (pers. comm.).

This area is well known for having a large inland component to its flora and fauna, quite unusual for areas east of the Great Dividing Range (see, for example, Morris *et al.* 1981 and McRae & Cooper 1985). Indeed the open nature of Gammon Plains was noted by Breton less than a decade after the first visit to the area by Europeans:

"Many hundreds of acres have not a single tree upon them, and thousands more are so thinly sprinkled with timber, that there is not the slightest occasion for the axe."

Although the habitat may have been a contributing factor to these records it is probably more significant that all were from drought periods. Breton's record was made during the most severe drought since European settlement (see McAfee 1981). Bettington's record actually refers to *E. aurifrons* being "driven by the dry conditions out of the interior", and M. E.

McAllan's record was during the dry years from 1979 to 1983 when much of New South Wales was under drought. Note also that the three records were in spring or early summer and the birds may have been vagrants indicating some form of dispersal associated with breeding (*E. aurifrons* breeds from August to February, cf. Macdonald *et al.* 1984). Such an eastern irruption with associated breeding occurred in late 1981 (see Lindsay 1982).

The citation for *Epthianura aurifrons* should now be:

Epthianura aurifrons Gould, 1838 (Apr.), Synop. Birds Australia, part 4, app., p. 4 "interior of New South Wales"; redefined as "In Novâ Cambriâ Australi", by Gould 1838 (Nov.), Proc. Zool. Soc. Lond. for 26 Dec. 1837, p. 148; restricted to "Gammon Plains (= Merriwa district, New South Wales)" by McAllan (1989), S. Aust. Orn. 30: 199-201.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I thank the following for their time in investigating my enquiries in this regard: Drs C. T. Fisher, Gerlof Mees, A. Knox, M. Robbins and Richard Schodde; Messrs Murray D. Bruce, Peter Colston and Dr Alan Knox, Tring; J. M. C. Holmes, Dublin; Mark Robbins, Philadelphia and especially Clem Fisher from Liverpool. I also thank Marie E. McAllan for providing me with her record and the staffs of the Australian Museum Library, Macquarie University Library and the State Library of New South Wales.

REFERENCES

- Beadle, N.C.W. 1972. *Students Flora of North Eastern New South Wales. Part II.* University of New England: Armidale.
- Bettington, B.C.J. 1923. Notes from Merriwa. *Emu* 24: 74-75.
- Breton Lieut. W. H. 1833. *Excursions in New South Wales, Western Australia, and Van Diemen's Land, During the Years 1830, 1831, 1832 and 1833.* Richard Bentley: London.
- Gould J. 1838a: A Synopsis of the Birds of Australia. Part 4. —. 1838b [Untitled]. *Proc. Zool. Soc. Lond.* 26 December 1837: 138-157.
- . 1840-1848. *The Birds of Australia.* The author: London.
- . 1865. *Handbook to the Birds of Australia.* The author: London.
- Lindsey, T. R. (ed) 1982. NSW bird report for 1982 [*sic*] in fact records for 1981]. *Aust. Birds* 17: 1-32.
- Mathews, G. M. 1922. *The Birds of Australia* Vol. IX, Part 7. H. F. & G. Witherby: London.
- Mayr, E. 1986. Acanthizidae. pp. 409-464 in Mayr, E. & Cottrell, G. W. (eds) *Checklist of the Birds of the World. A Continuation of the Work of James L. Peters. Vol. XI.* Museum of Comparative Zoology: Cambridge, Massachusetts.
- McAfee, R. J. 1981. The fires of summer and the floods of winter. Towards a climatic history for southeastern Australia 1788-1860. PhD thesis, Macquarie University, Sydney.

- McAllan, I. A. W. and Bruce, M. D. 1988. **The Birds of New South Wales: A Working List.** BIOCON: Turrumurra.
- Macdonald, J. D., Serventy, D. L., and Slater, P. 1984. **Birds of Australia. A Summary of Information.** Second Revision. A. H. & A. W. Reed: French's Forest.
- McRae, R. H. D. and Cooper, M. G. 1985. Vegetation of the Merriwa area, New South Wales. *Cunninghamia* 1: 351-369.
- Morris, A. K., McGill, A. R. and Holmes, G. 1981. **Handlist of Birds in New South Wales.** New South Wales Field Ornithologists Club: Sydney.
- Mitchell, T. L. 1834. Map of the colony of New South Wales. Engraved by John Carmichael, Sydney.
- Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union. 1926. **The Official Checklist of the Birds of Australia.** Second Edition. Government Printer: Melbourne.
- Scherren, H. 1905. **The Zoological Society of London. A Sketch of its Foundation and Development and the Story of its Farm, Gardens, Menagerie and Library.** Cassell: London.
- Wood, W. A. 1972. **Dawn in the Valley. The Story of Settlement in the Hunter River Valley to 1833.** Wentworth: Surry Hills.

46 Yeramba Street, Turrumurra, N.S.W. 2074

Received 8 August 1988; accepted 24 October 1988