

SPINIFEXBIRD AT CLAUDE HILLS: A SECOND SIGHTING FOR SOUTH AUSTRALIA. A Spinifexbird *Eremiornis carteri* was sighted in the Claude Hills in the extreme NW corner of South Australia on 15 December 2001. The hills are in Anangu-Pitjantjatara Lands 20 km east of Surveyor Generals Corner. The initial sighting was of a medium-sized bird with a very long tail seen on a spinifex *Triodia* sp. clump at a distance of 30 m. It flew much closer (to 7 m) providing excellent views while sitting and scrambling around a spinifex clump and giving very vocal alarm calls.

It was a slim, light grey-brown bird with a noticeably thick tail at the base. The tail was cocked, half-cocked or dangling while the bird was sitting and flying. It had a rufous to pastel pinkish-red crown, a strong, pale eye stripe, pale bill and dark eye. The bird was unstreaked with pale red-brown upper parts and mostly pale buff underparts, although the base of the tail was a warm red-brown colour. After a few minutes the bird flew and scrambled off and half hid behind spinifex 10 m away, still calling.

The Claude Hills consist of a series of low, ENE-WSW trending ridges. The sighting was on

a flat area on top of a gentle, mostly soil-covered rise a few hundred metres east of old open-cut chrysoprase workings (26°00'25"S, 129°10'59"E). The habitat of the area, as in the hills in general, is dominated by spinifex *Triodia* spp. and moderately dense mallee *Eucalyptus* spp. and acacia *Acacia* spp. woodland with patches of emubush *Eremophila* spp. Spinifex clumps are densely packed and 30-50 cm high. The area is slightly different from that commonly described as the preferred habitat of the Spinifexbird, namely rocky lower slopes of hills, gullies and creek lines (e.g. Storr 1985; Pizzey and Knight 1997). The vegetation was nevertheless thick and lush, appeared to be in beautiful condition and had not been burnt for a considerable time.

The location of the only other record of Spinifexbird in South Australia is c. 400 km to the east (26°58'S, 133°18'E; Hopton and Copley 1999). The nearest records up to January 2002 in Birds Australia's new Atlas of Australian Birds project are 350 km to the NW (Birds Australia, unpubl. data) and a similar distance to the ENE. Storr (1985) places the southern limit of the bird along the WA border in the Sir Frederick Range 220 km due N, a similar position to that in Blakers, Davies and Reilly (1984; grid block 23°S/129°E). The sighting reported here is thus somewhat of an outlier.

This record could be a reflection of one or more factors. Firstly, it may be that this sighting and that of Hopton and Copley (1999) represent birds from permanent or semi-permanent, very low-density populations patchily distributed along the southern margin of the species' range. I spent two weeks during December 2001 in the Wingellina Hills, 8-12 km SW of Surveyor Generals Corner, without sighting the species. The hills have similar geology and morphology to the Claude Hills, thus its apparent absence from the Wingellina Hills further suggests that its southern distribution is very sparse indeed. This region is relatively isolated and has had few bird surveys. The species could thus be more widespread than current records indicate.

Secondly, the Spinifexbird may have extended its southern distribution recently. Although the species is described as sedentary (Pizzey and Knight 1997) it might modify its distribution in response to changes in the vegetation structure brought about by changes in the medium-term

rainfall pattern or fire regime. In the 1960s the region was affected by drought, and dust storms were common (Bureau of Meteorology, pers. comm.). In the last few years, however, the region has had above average annual rainfall. Records from Giles, the only station in the region with continuous records, show that the average annual rainfall for the period 1998 to 2001 was 595 mm (range 375-854 mm) compared to the long-term average of 286 mm. Warburton shows a similar pattern (four-year annual average 456 mm, long-term average 235 mm). Such increased rainfall would allow denser vegetation to develop.

Ambrose *et al.* (1996) show that Spinifexbirds have higher moisture and energy requirements than other arid land birds. Perhaps the development of favourable habitat has allowed them to move south only relatively recently, presumably as one of many fluctuations in their range over time. Whatever the reason for its presence this new sighting is an isolated but interesting record.

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