

NORTHERN TERRITORY RECORDS OF THE THICK-BILLED GRASSWREN *Amytornis textilis* AND RUFOUS FIELDWREN *Calamanthus campestris*. Here, we present in the journal literature, the rediscovery of the Thick-billed Grasswren and the first published record of the Rufous Fieldwren in the Northern Territory (NT).

Thick-billed Grasswrens: The range of the Thick-billed Grasswren in the NT has contracted severely since European settlement (Higgins, Peter and Steele 2001). It was once distributed throughout the entire Finke River drainage basin, but no confirmed sightings have been recorded in the NT since 1936 (Parker 1972); accordingly, Reid and Fleming (1992) concluded that the species was 'apparently extinct' in the NT.

In recent years, however, there have been two reports of the species in the far south of the NT in the vicinity of the Finke River floodout. During a survey of the area in April 1994, Thick-billed Grasswrens were recorded several times (J. Reid, pers. comm.) from a location near Charlotte Waters (25°57'S, 134°59'E; Brandle and Reid 1998; Eldridge and Reid 2000). A year later, another sighting was reported from a location in the same general vicinity (P. Wilkins, pers. comm.).

Despite considerable searching by the current authors and others in subsequent years, the species was not seen again in the NT until a recent banding exercise in the area conducted as part of a project designed to locate and monitor NT populations of the species. A pair of Thick-billed Grasswrens was captured in a mist-net at the location of the 1994 sighting on the morning of 27 August 2003. A male was heard calling on the evening prior, and nets were set up the next morning at first light. We captured a male weighing 21.3 g at 0845 h and a 20.5 g female at 0930 h. The habitat was a drainage line amongst gibber, dominated by old-man saltbush *Atriplex nummularia* (dwarf variant) and bluebush *Maireana* sp. We found no evidence of breeding (e.g. nests or young), but the fact that the male was calling suggests that the pair was reproductively active. The species is thought to give song only at the height of breeding through the period of nest-building and laying (Higgins *et al.* 2001). The area had received substantial rainfall in early August and puddles of water were still present during our visit. The vegetation at the site was actively growing in

response to the rainfall, and insects including grasshoppers and mosquitoes were abundant. Central Australian Thick-billed Grasswren populations have been reported previously as breeding in response to rainfall (Higgins *et al.* 2001).

Later, at 0900 h on 21 September 2003, two pairs of Thick-billed Grasswren were observed at the banding site. Neither pair appeared to have leg bands, although it was difficult to obtain a clear enough view of each bird to confirm this.

Thus at least two and probably three, pairs of Thick-billed Grasswren inhabit this area. The most northerly records of *A. textilis modestus* in the recently published *New Atlas of Australian Birds* are well south of the border between the NT and South Australia (Barrett *et al.* 2003).

Rufous Fieldwrens: While searching an area of similar habitat approximately 8 km to the west of the Thick-billed Grasswren site (25°58'S, 134°56'E), three pairs of Rufous Fieldwren *C. campestris isabellinus* were observed by separate observers on 28 August 2003. The males of each pair were calling from prominent shrubs (mainly *Atriplex nummularia*) and this suggests breeding was occurring. The Rufous Fieldwren has been reported previously as breeding in response to rainfall (McGilp 1923).

There are no NT records of this species listed in the *Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic birds* (Higgins and Peter 2002), the *New atlas of Australian birds* (Barrett *et al.* 2003), or Storr's (1977) Checklist. However, the NT Fauna Atlas Database, maintained by the Parks and Wildlife Service of the Northern Territory, contains two records: one each from 1982 (25°56'S, 134°55'E) and 1987 (25°20'S, 132°45'E). The 1982 record is very close to our 2003 record and it is interesting to know that the species is still present 20 years on, despite not having been observed in the intervening period. As with the Thick-billed Grasswren, Reid and Fleming (1992) considered the Rufous Fieldwren to have undergone extensive declines in parts of arid Australia since European occupation. Currently, the conservation status of the relevant subspecies of both species discussed here is 'Least Concern' (Garnett and Crowley 2000).

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