

STATUS OF THE PIED BUTCHERBIRD IN THE LOWER NORTH EAST (OLARY PLAINS) OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA. From 19 March to 18 May 2001, I spent 25 days in the Olary Ridge and Plains region of South Australia surveying birds for the second Australian Bird Atlas (Barrett *et al.* 2003). During that period I made eight separate observations of the Pied Butcherbird *Cracticus nigrogularis* including two or possibly three that indicated local breeding. As these encounters were more than I had expected I reviewed the status of this species in the area.

The area surveyed was generally within 31°–33°S and 139°30′–141°E (i.e. east to the New South Wales border), with approximate limits as follows: in the northwest Mount Victor Station (to c. 31°50′S, 139°30′E); in the northeast Mulyungarie and the southern section of Quinyambie Stations (c. 30°50′S, 140°30′–141°E); in the southwest Braemroo Station (c. 33°10′S, 139°30′E) and in the southeast Oakvale Station (c. 33°S, 140°50′E).

My observations of Pied Butcherbirds were:

1. Oonatra Creek, immediately south of Boolcoomata Homestead (31°59′S, 140°33′E), 14 April; an adult pair and one dependent juvenile bird in the river red gums *Eucalyptus camaldulensis* of the creek and floodout.
2. Mulga Dam, Mutooroo Station (32°39′S, 140°37′E), 30 April; one adult in pearl bluebush *Maireana sedifolia* low shrubland with surrounding black oak *Casuarina pauper* open woodland.
3. Olary Creek north of 'Duffields' Outstation, Mutooroo Station (32°27′S, 140°45′E), 1 May; an immature bird (grey bill) in river red gums near a dam.
4. About eight kilometres west of Mutooroo Homestead (c. 32°28′S, 140°50′E), 2 May; four birds flying north across open pearl bluebush towards a river red gum-lined creek.
5. Near Corella Homestead, Mutooroo Station (c. 32°15′S, 140°55′E), 3 May; one bird.
6. Mingary Creek, south of Mulyungarie Homestead (31°43′S, 140°46′E), 4 May; one adult in the black box *Eucalyptus largiflorens*-lined creek.
7. An isolated billabong of Olary Creek on Maldorky Station (32°22′S, 140°38′E), 8 May; one or two pairs, the second in scattered sugarwood *Myoporum platycarpum* and black oak on the surrounding plain.
8. Quandong Station (32°56′S, 140°21′E), 11 May; two separate adults, one with a juvenile bird in pearl bluebush low shrubland with scattered black oaks.

The birds of the Lower North East were reviewed by K.J. Mack (1970) whose defined area was similar to that outlined above except that it extended further south, to around 34°. Mack had frequent trips north from Waikerie into the area from 1956 to 1969 and included his observations as well as those of experienced observers living near Yunta and at Winkie. Mack described the Pied Butcherbird as uncommon and offered observations from only two localities from the area under consideration, Mutooroo and Lilydale. He noted that it 'frequents River Murray more'. For the North East he described the Grey Butcherbird *C. torquatus* as more common than the Pied without further comment apart from providing one breeding record.

Biological Surveys of the South and North Olary Plains (Forward and Robinson 1996; Playfair and Robinson 1997, respectively) included surveys of birds, the former from 27 September to 7 November 1992 and the latter from 26 August to 7 September 1996. These studies extended further south, to the River Murray beyond latitude 34° as well as further north to latitude 30°. In the southern study the Pied Butcherbird was recorded at only five sites, compared with 53 for the Grey Butcherbird. In the northern study these figures were respectively one and 10.

During my surveys in 2001, in addition to and in comparison with eight separate records for the Pied Butcherbird as listed above, I had 31 records of the Grey Butcherbird, about a third of which were of birds calling at camp-sites in the mornings. Twelve records were from eucalypt-lined watercourses; mostly in river red gums; four were from mallee *Eucalyptus* spp., an infrequently encountered habitat in the area covered; five from moderately dense black oak woodland and one each from mulga *Acacia aneura* and western myall *Acacia papyrocarpa* tall shrublands. Four records of the Grey Butcherbird were from mixed low shrublands with hop-bush *Dodonaea* sp., *Acacia* spp., ballart *Exocarpos* sp. and chenopods *Maireana* spp. with scattered black oak, bullock bush *Alectryon oleifolius* and native pine *Callitris* sp.; and four were from open areas with sparse shrubs around drainage lines

and dams.

Julian Reid *et al.* (1997) reviewed the status of the Pied Butcherbird in the Flinders Ranges and concluded that it was likely to be a transient rather than permanent resident, with the Lower North East the source of birds recorded there from time to time. They speculated the species might be extending its range generally and becoming more abundant in South Australia. They also noted that earlier authors such as Condon (1969) and Parker (in Badman 1979) had overlooked the population in the North East reported by Mack (1970) which, though confirmed by subsequent observations, appeared to them to be a 'perhaps disjointed' population within black oak woodlands.

Compared with the number of my Grey Butcherbird records (31), eight observations of the Pied Butcherbird were certainly more than might have been anticipated from its status as indicated by Mack (1970) and by the Departmental Surveys (Forward and Robinson 1996; Playfair and Robinson 1997). This suggests that it is a moderately common breeding resident in the Lower North East between 140° and 141° east, occupying open woodland habitats of river red gum or black box along watercourses and more open areas of bluebush *Maireana* spp. shrublands with a variable black oak overstorey. Although the Grey Butcherbird is more prevalent in the region, occupying a broad range of habitats, while favouring more closed vegetation communities than its congener, there is some overlapping of habitat-choice by the two butcherbirds. It seems probable that both the population and the breeding status of the Pied

Butcherbird have increased in the Lower North East over the past 30–50 years.

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