

## THE WESTERN WARBLER ON EYRE PENINSULA

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The Western or White-tailed Warbler *Gerygone fusca* was first recorded on Eyre Peninsula in 1865, when Masters collected specimens in the Port Lincoln district (North 1903). This record was overlooked by South Australian ornithologists however, as the species was not listed as occurring on the peninsula in any of the early State checklists. Sutton (1927) included it in the South Australian list on the basis of specimen evidence from the far north-west corner of the state, as did Terrill and Rix (1950) and Condon (1962). But there was no mention of it on Eyre Peninsula until the second edition of Condon's *Handlist* (1968) when the 1865 record was given. Also listed in this edition was H.T. Condon's own heard record in the Lincoln Reserve in 1966; and along with the specimen record of Masters, these are the only known reports of the Western Warbler on Eyre Peninsula up to the present. This is, perhaps, rather surprising as the species is reasonably plentiful in suitable habitat in the south of the peninsula; but it might have been anticipated, for relatively little work has been done on the birds of this area (Eckert 1972).

In 1973, members of my family and I made four trips to Eyre Peninsula — in January, April, September and December. On all four occasions the Western Warbler was observed in the south, and on the latter trip the species was found nesting. The details of these sightings are discussed, while the sightings of John Eckert made in January, 1974 are also recorded.

We located the species in four separate areas in 1973: Tod River Reservoir where it was seen on all four occasions; between Koppio and Yalunda Flat (40 km north of Port Lincoln) in late April and early September; at Warunda Creek Reserve (2 km north of Warunda) in late April and early December; and at Big Swamp where it was only seen in late April. Eckert (pers. comm.) found on January 22, 1974 a pair five kilometres north-east of Big Swamp, both of which were collected, and a flock 11 kilometres north-east of the swamp near Tootinella, one specimen being taken.

Field description — Grey-brown above, a slightly warmer brown around the head; off-white below with buff flanks. Indistinct, pale eyebrow and dark lores widening into a spot in front of the eye. When fanned, the upper surface of the tail has a dark centre and sub-

terminal band with diagnostic white 'windows' and white tip. In flight and when fanned, the undersurface of the tail is white with a dark subterminal band. The primaries and secondaries are edged with buff along the inner surfaces. The sexes are similar.

### HABITAT

The Western Warbler favours the Sugar Gum *Eucalyptus cladocalyx* woodland areas on southern Eyre Peninsula, but it is not restricted to this species of eucalypt (which grows to a maximum height of c. 12 to 13 metres on the peninsula). It was commonly seen in Blue Gums *E. leucoxydon* at Warunda Creek, and at Big Swamp it was in River Red Gums *E. camaldulensis* (the only species of eucalypt in the area of observation). On one occasion in September near Yalunda Flat, it was observed in olive and almond trees and also a *Casuarina* sp. Nevertheless, as Condon (1968) rightly states, the Western Warbler is a bird of both "treetops and thickets," and it was not uncommon to see it foraging in *Acacia pycnantha*, small eucalypts and ti-tree in Sugar Gum areas, sometimes only a metre or so from the ground. For the most part on southern Eyre Peninsula, it is a bird of the predominantly-eucalypt savannah and sclerophyll woodland areas.

In this light, Condon's (1968) 'heard' record in the Lincoln National Park must be considered unusual as, to the best of my knowledge, the vegetation of this area is entirely mallee and heath. Possibly the Western Warbler does occasionally stray into the mallee — McGill (1970) gives its habitat as including "mallee country" — but for the time being, it is best that the record be only tentatively accepted pending more knowledge of the species' habitat preferences and movements on the peninsula.

### CALL AND HABITS

The lilting song of the Western Warbler is diagnostic and probably the species' best field-guide. However the initial 'starting up' notes (which were far more noticeable in December during the breeding season) could be confused with the calls of the Grey Fantail *Rhipidura fuliginosa*. In all cases though, warblers followed the 'starting up' notes with the main song and this is virtually unmistakable, being a sweet, slow, melancholic cadence. It was

noted that those birds heard in September and December gave calls of variable length, but those heard in April all seemed to have the one song of about six notes. It is this latter call which has the unfinished air about it described by Serventy and Whittell (1967), although the improvised songs heard later in the year seem to lack this quality.

Apart from the typical, "Sleepy Dick" song including 'starting up' notes, three other calls were noted. In April at Tod Reservoir, a single bird was heard to give a two-note call several times. At Warunda Creek in December, a contact call described at the time as "a thin, little chattering" was given by a female as it flew to its nest. As well, a number of warblers were observed on the September trip in a small stand of Sugar Gum saplings at Tod Reservoir. They were obviously involved (by their behaviour and calls) in a territorial dispute; and the agitated calls given on this occasion seemed to be in fact a series of prolonged 'starting up' notes.

The Western Warbler is by no means secretive in its habits. But due to its small size, sombre plumage and quick movements, it can be easily lost in the upper canopies of eucalypts where it spends a good deal of its time. Outside the breeding season, it remains silent for long periods while it feeds in eucalypts or larger shrubs (where it is more readily noticed) only occasionally breaking forth in a short song. It often hovers outside the foliage in a manner similar to the Weebill *Smicrornis brevirostris* with which it commonly associates, but can be immediately distinguished from this species by its diagnostic white tail markings.

One noticeable trait rarely mentioned in the literature is the fluttering behaviour predominantly indulged in by male birds when singing or near the nest. This consists of lifting the wings away from the body and then trembling the tail and wings violently with the body slightly lowered towards the horizontal position. Jackson in Campbell (1912) mentions similar behaviour with respect to the Western Warbler in north-western New South Wales as does T. Austin from Cobbora, N.S.W.: "It has an extraordinary habit of continuously shaking itself, just as though all its feathers were wet" (Mathews 1920). Otherwise it has gone unrecorded like many other aspects of this interesting species. Both the White-throated Warbler *Gerygone olivacea* and Brown Warbler *G. richmondi* are known to act similarly (Chaffer 1960); so this form of behaviour is possibly typical of the whole genus.

## BREEDING NOTES

Breeding was confirmed only in December at Warunda Creek. Three nests were found, all situated in Sugar Gums, the first being placed in a fairly open canopy close to a large bough at a height of ten metres, while the second and third were both reasonably well concealed in thick, leafy canopies at five and six metres respectively.

The nest of the first pair was placed high in a tree and so could not be inspected at close quarters. The birds had apparently finished building it, since they were never seen carrying nesting material, and the nest, as much of it as could be seen, appeared complete being both 'tailed' and domed. The second nest was under construction when found, and consisted merely of a rope of dead grasses and fine shreds of bark attached at the top to twigs. After three days, the nest proper including the dome had been partly constructed and an entrance facing south was easily discernible, although it was not hooded.

Only one bird, presumably the female, did the work of building the nest while its mate sang close by. The pair usually returned with material at intervals of between one and five minutes though occasionally staying away for as long as ten minutes. Usually the presumed male followed the female in her search for material, but on occasions they became separated. When this happened, the female wanting to go back to the nest and knowing where the male was, would fly towards him, give the contact call and without stopping go straight to the nest now closely followed by the male. On the other hand, if she did not know his whereabouts she would fly to the nest canopy and give a few subdued notes to alert him. Not until the male had returned and started to sing did she then approach the nest.

When adding material to the nest, the presumed female would cling to the sides with her tail pressed against the structure. Then, after placing the material in its correct position, she would flutter down to the tail-piece before flying away. Austin in Jarman (1953) mentions that she thereby elongates the structure; but perhaps the tail-piece serves as a 'launching pad,' so that she doesn't have to fly directly off from the partly completed nest chamber and possibly damage the flimsy structure. It has been suggested too that the Western Warbler adopts an "explosion" method for creating the nest chamber after building a solid, compact structure (James and James 1974). We saw no evidence of this. Although a hood

is often mentioned as being diagnostic of the nest of the Western Warbler (White 1912; McGilp in White 1921; North 1903), no nest that we found had one. This could be accounted for by the fact that two of the nests were incomplete and the third one partially obscured by foliage.

In summary, this rarely recorded bird seems to be reasonably plentiful on southern Eyre Peninsula west and north of Port Lincoln in Sugar Gum woodland areas. Its call and the large areas of white in the tail are distinctive field guides, while its plumage is unlike any thornbill *Acanthiza* or related species found in South Australia. On the basis of our records, it would appear that Western Warblers are present on the peninsula throughout the year, although the species is thought to be migratory in both the Eastern States (McGill 1970) and south-western Australia (Serventy and Whittell 1967). While this paper gives brief notes on the more distinctive habits of the Western

Warbler, its habitat and plumage, there are still many questions to be answered on its ecology, breeding biology and status on Eyre Peninsula.

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