

THE RECORDS OF THE SPECKLED WARBLER FROM SOUTH AUSTRALIA

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The South Australian records of the Speckled Warbler *Sericornis (Chthonicola) sagittatus* are problematic. The latest commentator, H. T. Condon (1969:112), wrote: 'It is claimed that a number of specimens were taken at Tarpeena, north of Mt Gambier, in October, 1868. Others were supposed to have been collected in the vicinity of Lake Eyre (1875), [and] Coralbignie (Gawler Ranges, July/August, 1883). The claimed occurrence of the species in this State is doubtful.' In the present note I suggest that the five South Australian records, three of which were based on specimens collected by F. W. Andrews, are in fact referable to the superficially similar Calamanthus *Sericornis fuliginosus*.

The first record of the Speckled Warbler

from South Australia is that referred to by Cleland *et al.* in Cain (1937), of nine specimens from Tarpeena, 24 km north of Mount Gambier, collected by Andrews in 1868. These specimens cannot be traced in the South Australian Museum, and it is likely that Cleland *et al.* based their remark on a *ms.* list of Andrews, now also lost. The next record is of a specimen taken by Andrews on the 1874-75 Lewis Expedition to the Lake Eyre district¹ (Waterhouse 1875); this too is now missing. The third record is of two specimens from Coralbignie, Gawler Ranges, collected by Andrews between July 26 and August 20, 1883 (Cleland *et al. op. cit.*). There is a Speckled Warbler specimen in the SAM bearing these data — B7690, registered *and labelled* by

John Sutton on January 25, 1927. As it is also the only specimen with this data ever entered in the SAM register, it is probable that Cleland *et al.* took their figure of two specimens from another of Andrews' *ms.* lists, now lost. Cleland *et al.* furthermore considered this to be the skin of which North (1901-04:261) wrote: 'I have received for examination . . . a skin obtained by the late Mr. F. W. Andrews in the Gawler Ranges on the 26th September 1882. Mr. Zietz informs me this is the only instance he has known of its being found in South Australia.'

The other two records of the Speckled Warbler from South Australia are Cain's (1937) sighting at Lake Salmon near Lake Torrens, and the report from the Alawoona district in the Murray Mallee, which latter McGilp (1943) regarded as being referable to the Calamanthus.

The present known range of the Speckled Warbler is south-eastern Australia north to Suttors Clk in Queensland (Storr 1973: 105), and west to the western end of the Grampians in Victoria (Emison *et al.* 1978:342). Although recorded in lowlands, it is essentially a bird of hilly country and has been found up to at least 3,300 ft. (1006 m). Its preferred habitat is open forest with short sparse grass on stony hillsides and ridges (Frith 1969:329, McGill 1970:75, Hall 1974:198 and pl. 5b). In this light, the South Australian records are clearly anomalous.

The simplest solution to the problem is that the South Australian records of the Speckled Warbler are in fact referable to the superficially similar Calamanthus or Fieldwren *Sericornis fuliginosus*. The Coralbignie, Lake Eyre and Lake Torrens districts carry much saltbush and other chenopods, favoured habitat of the inland form *S.f. campestris*. As for the Tarpeena district, the original habitat (judging from what remains) seems to have been dense stringybark woodland with a heavy undergrowth of bracken fern, and a good deal of swampy ground suitable for the form *S.f. fuliginosus* (J. M. Bourne *pers. comm.*). This explanation is far more likely than the alternatives — that Andrews falsified his data, that the Speckled Warbler was once widespread in South Australia in highly atypical habitats, or that these early records were due to individuals of this strongly sedentary species wandering well beyond its normal range. In considering the possibility that Andrews' specimens were misidentified, one must remember that these were still early days in Australian ornithology, that aids to identification were few and incomplete, and *South Australian Museum, Adelaide, S.A. 5000.*

that F. G. Waterhouse, then curator at the SAM, was finding it necessary to send many of Andrews' specimens to John Gould for determination (Sutton 1929).

Such an explanation, however, might seem to overlook an important fact — the existence in the SAM of the Speckled Warbler skin labelled as having been collected by Andrews at Coralbignie. But is this evidence incontrovertible? The neglect and abuse suffered by the bird collections at the SAM during and shortly after Waterhouse's time (Sutton 1927, Hale 1956) were such that the descent of any specimens at all from this early period is a marvel. It is possible that the specimen in question, B7690, was accidentally mislabelled. It is even possible that one of Waterhouse's successors, understanding from a *ms.* list that there ought to be material of the Speckled Warbler from Coralbignie in the SAM but finding none, took a real Speckled Warbler to be one of the skins in question and relabelled it accordingly. It is worth recalling here that this skin bears no label earlier than Sutton's.

One other record of the Speckled Warbler deserves mention here, that of Learmonth (1947), who, reporting it from the Nelson district of western Victoria, wrote: 'Speckled Warbler. Yet another species of the thick rushes and sedges; is generally in company with *Calamanthus*.' Almost certainly the two 'species' under observation here were the males and females of *Sericornis f. fuliginosus*, a form of the Calamanthus showing marked sexual dimorphism.

- 1 Incorrectly listed by Cleland *et al.* as the Elder Exploring Expedition.

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