

WHITE BELLIED CUCKOO-SHRIKE IN THE UPPER MURRAY

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In Australia the White-bellied (Little) Cuckoo-shrike *Coracina papuensis* occurs from the Kimberleys through the northern tropical woodlands to the eucalypt woodlands of south-eastern Australia (Reader's Digest, 1976). The western limit of its range is normally the extreme south-east of South Australia, with stragglers reaching Adelaide.

The White-bellied Cuckoo-shrike appears to be a rare spring and summer visitor (early September to late January) to the South-East, with records from Padthaway, the Bool Lagoon-Joanna district and the Penola district. Breeding has been reported from early September to early November in *Eucalyptus camaldulensis*. Records from the Adelaide Plains (south to Noarlunga, north to Gawler R.) and the Langhorne Creek district suggest that *C. papuensis* is an irregular autumn and winter visitor to these parts (Parker *et al*, forthcoming).

A single White-bellied Cuckoo-shrike was sighted by the author on 25 May 1977 at Penkey Island, 11 km ENE of Berri. The bird was observed in Red Gum *E. camaldulensis* forest, lining the Murray River channel, with lignum and samphire flats beyond. The cuckoo-shrike was foraging in the foliage of mature Red Gums on the fringe of an extensive area of open forest, and it allowed approach to within five metres.

The general body shape was thought to be stouter and less slender than that of the Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike *Coracina novaehollandiae*, although the latter was not present in this area at the time. However size was closely comparable with that of the Noisy Miner *Manorina melanocephala*, seen in adjacent trees. No calls were given by the cuckoo-shrike.

Description: upperparts soft grey, paler on the rump but dark on the tail; black primaries and grey secondaries and coverts all pale-edged. Underparts white except for light grey on the upper chest. Legs and bill black. Black on forehead and lores extending to the eye but not beyond, with the exception of a narrow line of black continuing-around the bottom of the eye and delineating a small white crescent behind the eye.

This last character was very conspicuous at close range. I have noted it in other individuals of this species both before and since the observation discussed here. The photograph on p.347 of Reader's Digest (1976) illustrates this feature well, as do several skins of adult birds examined in the South Australian Museum. Moreover the black-mask extends well beyond the eye in non-melanistic phase individuals (presumably all immatures) of *C. novaehollandiae*.

Apart from the distinctive call (a clear whistling *quissick*), the white crescent behind the eye seems to be a useful field character of *C. papuensis*.

Published sightings of White-bellied Cuckoo-shrikes from the Upper Murray and Lower North-Eastern Pastoral regions (*S. Aust. Orn.* 25:82 and 26:30) require confirmation by way of detailed description. The bird described in this article constitutes the first record with description of *C. papuensis* outside the higher rainfall districts of South Australia. The date of this record also falls within the period (February to September) of observations from the Adelaide Plains and Langhorne Creek district. Therefore the cuckoo-shrike may have been using the Murray River valley as a migration corridor between eastern Australia and the Adelaide region. On the other hand it could have been a temporary resident in the area, as the habitat is not unlike that frequented by *C. papuensis* elsewhere.

In any case, movements of the White-bellied Cuckoo-shrike in Southern Australia are poorly understood, requiring further investigation and analysis.

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REFERENCES

- Parker, et al. An Annotated Checklist of the Birds of South Australia, Part 3, forthcoming.
Reader's Digest 1976, Complete Book of Australian Birds.