

RECENT RECORDS OF THE GREY-CROWNED BABBLER

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INTRODUCTION

The Grey-crowned Babbler *Pomatostomus temporalis* is infrequently reported from the South-East of South Australia, this region representing the western extremity of the species' range in south-eastern Australia. Condon (1969) described it as a declining species in the South-East and listed it as uncommon. Attiwill (1972) did not list it in his review of birds breeding in the Naracoorte district between 1941 and 1971. The most recent record appears to be that of McArthur (in Glover 1975) who reported a single bird from Mt Hope, Millicent, for the three months following 21 September

1972. (Mt Hope homestead is about 9 km NW of Rendelsham). It appears that this is the same bird which Connie Chambers saw in September 1972, and four months later sighted four km closer to Rendelsham. In August 1973 she saw one bird among gums in Rendelsham (C. Chambers, *in litt.*). The following more recent sightings are now presented.

RECENT RECORDS

Nick Reid, Leo Joseph *et al.* saw a single Grey-crowned Babbler on the morning of 29 December 1979 near the southern boundary of the Bangham Conservation Park. One bird was again seen on 27 January 1980 in the same

locality by Leo Joseph and Roger Jaensch (field notes supplied), and again on 5 October and 3 November 1980. In 1979, I saw two Grey-crowned Babblers on 13, 14 and 15 April, 16 June, 3 September, 20 October and 28, 29 December. They were in an area three km S of the Bangham Conservation Park. The immediate area was a sandy rise weeded with Manna Gum *Eucalyptus viminalis*, Brown Stringybark *E. baxteri*, "Bastard Gum" *E. sp.* and flowering *Banksia* spp. There were two small patches of bottlebrush *Callistemon* sp. on the outskirts of this scrub. The understorey was veldt grass and other wild grasses. Completely surrounding this hill was pastureland. On the southern side the pasture formed a long, narrow neck between the hill and another extensive area of scrub. The latter was mainly stringybark and Blue Gum *E. leucoxyton* with a heathy understorey, *Banksia* spp. and some Native Cherry *Exocarpos* sp. There was a small clump of tea-tree between the two pieces of scrub, the distance between the latter being about 150 metres.

The two birds were obviously babblers by their general body shape and colour pattern. However, they were noticeably larger than White-browed Babblers *P. superciliosus*. What was also immediately apparent was the width of the eyebrow and the light colour on the crown. They had a very dark brown back which graded to grey at the neck. The head was a fairly light grey with a very wide eyebrow — so wide that the eyebrows almost appeared to meet at the front of the head. There was a dark brown line through the eye, it being narrow at the end where it met the bill and wider at the neck where it faded into grey. There were no wing bars. Underneath the throat was white, grading through to whitish on the chest and gradually changing colour to the belly, which was chestnut. This became steadily darker as it continued down towards the undertail coverts. The tail was dark brown tipped with white, this showing quite extensively underneath when the bird was in flight; the bill was downcurved, pointed and dark; the legs were dark; the iris was pale. In flight the birds showed a russet orange wing patch.

The birds were fairly inconspicuous, and it was only their contact call which brought them to notice. This was a mewling type call which

I would describe as "chew", and was uttered only if there was some distance between the birds. They had several other calls. One sounded like a combination of the shrill call of the White-winged Chough *Corcorax melanorhamphus* and a coughing note. Another was a collection of four notes — two low prefix notes followed by a higher and a lower note, which sounded like "you-hooo" of someone being called. On several occasions these calls were given antiphonally.

The birds were observed foraging on the ground around fallen timber and *Banksia*, and at the base of stringybark trees. They hopped over the ground in typical babbler style and were rarely seen very far apart. One was seen to take a large grub on a fallen tree trunk. They were also seen to spend a lot of time feeding in stringybark and *Banksia*, where they hopped through the branches with relative ease, never in one place for very long. On the stringybark they worked on the trunk and branches, foraging on the bark itself. In *Banksia* they dwelt mostly on the dead fruits. They visited *B. marginata* more often than *B. ornata*.

On 16 June the two babblers were seen tending a nest (activity indeterminate, lasting at least 15 minutes) in a very open stringybark. It was a bulky stick nest, placed in nearly upright forks near the end of a branch. Nearby were two similar nests at about the same height from the ground, viz. nine metres. One bird was also observed standing on a fallen stick plucking fine grass until the bill was full. This was carried to yet another nest in the top of a stringybark sapling, which was about 25 m from the previous sites.

The 28 December was a very hot day and both birds were seen standing on the edge of a water trough, which was about one km from their usual habitat. There was an open stand of *Casuarina leuhmannii* beside the trough, and the babblers flew into this, where they started foraging among the trunks and branches. This is where they were also seen on 29 December.

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REFERENCES

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