

NOTES ON *AMYTORNIS STRIATUS MERROTSYI* MELLOR, A SUBSPECIES OF THE STRIATED GRASSWREN INHABITATING THE FLINDERS RANGES

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INTRODUCTION

Amytornis striatus merrotsyi Mellor, 1913 is one of the very few highly distinctive birds recorded solely from South Australia.¹ To date, it has been recorded only from the Flinders Ranges, where it may well be the only subspecies of *A. striatus* present. Discovered in 1912, it was not found again until 1971, since when it has been encountered on several occasions.

Presented below is a brief review of the information now available concerning this still little-known form, including a recapitulation of its subspecific characters and a discussion of the type-specimens and type-locality.

TAXONOMIC STATUS

Mellor (1913) described *merrotsyi* as a new species, the Chestnut-mantled Grasswren, nearly related to the Striated Grasswren *A. striatus* but at once distinguishable by 'the large amount of rusty-chestnut on the head and mantle, the absence of black beneath the eye and on the ear coverts, and by its much shorter

tail.' Mellor also remarked that its legs and feet were 'larger and stouter.'

Since then, the taxonomic history of *merrotsyi* has been chequered. It has been maintained as a species (Mathews 1923: 198), placed, with status undetermined, within *A. striatus* (Condon 1951, Keast 1958) and synonymized with nominate *A. s. striatus* of the southern mallee (Condon 1962, 1968-69, Ford & Parker 1974). Following the receipt of further specimens (detailed below), *merrotsyi* has become recognizable as a highly distinctive subspecies of *A. striatus* (Parker *et al.* 1978, Parker 1979). It is as Mellor noted, most similar to *A. s. striatus*, differing from the latter and from the desert form *A. s. whitei* by its shorter tail (Table 1) and lack of a distinct black malar bar or 'moustache'; dorsally it is a brighter, more rufous brown than *A. s. striatus*, though not so rufous as *A. s. whitei*. The difference in the size of the legs and feet mentioned by Mellor, however, is not apparent in the present material.

THE TYPE-SPECIMENS

Mellor's account of *merrotsyi* was based on three adult specimens and some eggs collected by A. L. Merrotsy in 'the spinifex or porcupine-grass country to the north-east of Lake Torrens'

¹ The Chestnut-breasted Whiteface *Aphelocephala pectoralis* (Gould, 1871) is another, as is the extinct dwarf emu of Kangaroo Island (Parker, in prep.). The Eyrean Grasswren *Amytornis goyderi* (Gould, 1875), however, is now known also from Queensland (Parker *et al.* 1978).

	Wing	Tail	Tarsus	Exposed culmen
<i>striatus</i>				
Males	60.1-60.5(19)	79.3-95.9(19)	24.5-26.9(19)	9.7-12.1(20)
Females	57.0-62.1(11)	76.2-84.8(10)	22.3-25.6(11)	9.1-11.1(11)
<i>merrotsyi</i>				
Males	61.0,64.1(2)	69.0,69.7(2)	24.7,25.3(2)	12.7(1)
Females	60.2-61.5(4)	64.8-68.1(3)	23.2-25.6(4)	11.0-12.9(4)
<i>whitei</i>				
Males	55.0-62.0(8)	71.0-83.0(8)	22.5-25.0(8)	9.5-11.5(8)
Females	55.0-59.0(8)	72.0-83.0(8)	21.0-24.0(8)	9.5-11.5(8)

TABLE 1. Measurements (mm) of subspecies of *Amytornis striatus*, adults only (measurements of *whitei* supplied by R. Johnstone, Western Australian Museum).

(Mellor 1913, Campbell 1927). Subsequently the skins were believed lost (Keast 1958, Condon 1951, 1962, 1968-69). Their whereabouts are now known once more, however (Ford and Parker 1974), and together with the two known clutches, they are listed below with their accompanying details (original spellings preserved):

- (a) adult female, 6 miles east of Yudanamutana,² 1 Sept. 1912; British Museum (Natural History), reg'd no. 1939.12.9.172, Rothschild Bequest, *ex* Mathews Collection (Warren & Harrison 1971: 349, see also Mathews 1923: 198).
- (b) adult female, Yudanna via Leigh Creek, 1912; S.A. White Collection.
- (c) adult male, north-east of Lake Torrens, Sept. 1912; S.A. White Collection.
- (d) eggs, c/2, 6 miles east of Yudanamutana, 1 Sept. 1912, 'Nest domed, loosely constructed and principally of dried spinifex grass, lined rabbits' fur. Incubation started. Nest placed in spinifex grass at foot of a low hill. Type eggs'; S.A. White Collection, setmark 718/2.
- (e) eggs, c/2, near Yudanamutana via Leigh's Creek, 12 Oct. 1912, 'Nest in the porcupine grass & hen flushed from it & darted away into the thick cover'; S.A. White Collection, *ex* Mellor Collection, setmark 718/2 x.³

No type having been designated in the original description, all three skins have equal status as syntypes.

The type-locality of *merrotsyi* is usually cited as Yudanamutana (*e.g.* by Mathews 1923, Condon 1951, 1962, 1968-69, Keast 1958). Among the notations on the labels of the original specimens appear only two that on a first consideration might reasonably be understood as denoting specific localities: '6 miles east of Yudanamutana' (the female and eggs of 1 Sept. 1912) and 'Yudanna' (the other female). Before delving further into the provenance of Merrotsy's specimens, however, it will be necessary to attempt to determine exactly the whereabouts of Yudanamutana.

Yudanamutana as Merrotsy knew it no longer exists. In its heyday in the 1860s it was a

² Printed as Yudanamutam in Warren & Harrison (1971) and as Yudanamutan in Mathews (1923); now officially spelt Yudanamutana and pronounced Yewd'namut'na, the stress falling on the first and third syllables.

³ Love gave only July 1912 and January 1913 as months in which eggs of *merrotsyi* had been found, and stated that the bird itself had been first discovered in July 1912. Whether, in view of known errors in Love's article (Parker 1972: 158) these dates are to be preferred to those evinced above by the available specimens, is debatable. The date 'January 1913' for eggs of *merrotsyi* is probably referable to the clutch of eggs of the Thick-billed Grasswren *A. textilis* found by Love and Merrotsy at Fountain Springs west of Lake Eyre on 13 January 1913 (Parker *loc. cit.*).

flourishing copper mining centre in the vicinity of Yudanamutana Bore (30° 10' S, 139° 17' E) near the foot of Yudanamutana Bluff. From 1899 to the 1920s it experienced a limited revival but by 1912 was manned by little more than a caretaker to watch over the heavy machinery (H. Mincham pers. comm.).

Recent fieldwork has suggested that *merrotsyi* is quite local in its occurrence. Two searches for it in the vicinity of Yudanamutana Bluff by myself, L. P. Pedler and others in October 1979 and February 1981 were unsuccessful, which suggests that 'Yudanna' may have been used loosely by Merrotsy to denote the district generally. Eastwards, the known population of *merrotsyi* closest to Yudanamutana occurs at The Armchair, which, between five and six miles east-south-east of Yudanamutana, qualifies well for Merrotsy's '6 miles east of Yudanamutana'. This identification is given some support by the possibility that Merrotsy was in fact on his way from Yudanamutana to the then recently-discovered radium deposits in the Mount Painter district, which lay beyond The Armchair in the same direction (H. Mincham pers. comm.). I therefore restrict the type-locality of *Amytornis merrotsyi* Mellor to The Armchair, 30° 13' S, 139° 21' E, North Flinders Ranges.

SUBSEQUENT RECORDS

In September 1971, D. Close and J. Hatch found a population of Striated Grasswrens on Mount Sunderland, *ca* 146 km south-south-west of The Armchair (Close & Hatch 1971, Close pers. comm.). As subsequent events were to show, this constituted the rediscovery of *A. s. merrotsyi* after a gap of 59 years.

On 31 March 1974, H. J. Eckert and G. B. Ragless, in the company of I. A. May, collected the first specimen of *merrotsyi* obtained since the type-series, an adult male (Eckert Collection) from a population at The Armchair located earlier by May. On 20 September 1976, in the company of Mr May, I collected two more specimens at this locality, an adult female and a juvenile male (S. Aust. Mus. B30324, 30325).

On 3-4 April 1974, Eckert and Ragless, in the company of H. Bakker and G. Cornwall, collected an adult female and an immature male (B30899, 30990) on Appealinna Hill, immediately south-east of Mount Sunderland (Ragless and Eckert 1975, Parker 1979). On 15 February 1981, L. and J. Pedler, T. Sim and I flushed two birds at this locality.

All the above records are from the North Flinders Ranges. On 17 May 1974 Mr Ragless made what was to prove the first record of

merrotsyi from the South Flinders Ranges when he observed a single Striated Grasswren at Yarah *ca* 22 km north-north-east of Quorn (Ragless 1975). In July 1981, A. C. Robinson saw several Striated Grasswrens between Middle Gorge and Buckaringa Gorge *ca* 26 km north of Quorn and 8-9 km north-west of Ragless's sighting (Robinson pers. comm.). On 8 November 1981, L. and J. Pedler, L. Joseph and G. Duggan visited Robinson's locality and collected two specimens (adult female B34347, juvenile female B34348) that on the following day I was able to determine as *merrotsyi* (originally a member of this party, I was unavoidably detained in Quorn). On 13-14 November I visited the locality with P. Cockerham and noted there eight individuals of *merrotsyi* in a half-mile square.

In addition to the above records, there are sightings from two further places in the Flinders Ranges that may prove referable to *merrotsyi*, namely the reports of *A. striatus* from near Nelshaby Gorge *ca* 90 km south of Quorn in October 1974 (P. Vincent pers. comm.) and



PLATES 1 & 2. Habitat of *Amytornis striatus merrotsyi* between Middle Gorge and Buckaringa Gorge, South Flinders Ranges. (Photos: S. A. Parker).

September 1981 (G. Duggan 1982), and the report of Shy Hylacolas *Sericornis cautus* from Mount Neil *ca* 28 km north-east of The Armchair (see below).

HABITAT

The population of *merrotsyi* inhabiting The Armchair district affects deep rocky gullies clad with *Triodia* and a shrub-layer of *Eremophila*, *Cassia* and the mallee-form of *Eucalyptus intertexta*. That occurring in the Appealinna Hill and Mount Sunderland districts frequents open stony rises devoid of shrubs and clad largely in *Triodia*. The population between Buckaringa Gorge and Middle Gorge affects stony hillsides, ridge-crests and gullies clad with *Triodia* and dotted with shrubs of *Cassinia* sp., *Prostanthera striatiflora*, *Acacia ligulata* and *Xanthorrhoea quadrangulata*, and trees of the native pine *Callitris* sp. (plates 1 and 2). The habitat at Yarah was reported by Ragless as a stony hillside clothed with dense *Triodia* and a scattering of mallee, *Callitris* and a few shrubs. The habitat of the birds seen near Nelshaby Gorge is low rocky foothills with *Triodia* and dense low mallee-heath (S.A.P. pers. obs.).

Fox (1973) reported seeing a party of Shy Hylacolas *Sericornis cautus* in 'Triodia and mallee' at the summit of Mount Neil (*ca* 28 km north-east of The Armchair) on 19 August 1973. On 29-30 June 1980, F. J. Badman and I visited this area to investigate Fox's report. We found the habitat to be open rocky hillsides clad with *Triodia* and dotted with a very few trees and shrubs of *Codonocarpus pyramidata*, *Acacia tetragonophylla*, *A. victoriae*, *A. confluens*, *Cassia* sp., *Eremophila* spp. and a stunted form of *Eucalyptus intertexta* (the last almost certainly the 'mallee' reported by Fox). This appeared unlikely habitat for Shy Hylacolas, but quite suitable for *merrotsyi*. Correspondence with Mr Fox has strengthened our opinion that the party of birds he saw were indeed the latter, which with its short tail and lack of a distinct black malar bar or 'moustache' would appear somewhat different in the field from the familiar *A. s. striatus* of the Murray Mallee and elsewhere.

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