

REMARKS ON SOME RESULTS OF JOHN GOULD'S VISIT TO SOUTH AUSTRALIA IN 1839

S.A. PARKER

In June and July 1839 John Gould, the 'Father of Australian Ornithology', visited South Australia (Gould 1865a, b; Hindwood 1938; Sauer 1982). Of his longer sojourn in New South Wales a good deal is known; by contrast, of his researches in South Australia little has come down to us beyond a few tantalizing fragments that raise more questions than they answer. The present article addresses itself to three of the numerous obscurities that characterize this chapter of Gould's Australian tour: the identity of the type-locality 'The Belts of the Murray', the identity of the South Australian thornbill listed by Gould as the Western Thornbill *Acanthiza inornata*, and the historical status of the Red-lored Whistler *Pachycephala rufogularis* on the Adelaide Plains.

'THE BELTS OF THE MURRAY'

'The Belts of the Murray' is the type-locality of several taxa described by Gould, including the Southern Scrub-robin *Drymodes brunneopygia*, Chestnut Quail-thrush *Cinlosoma castanotum*, Black-backed Wren *Malurus splendens melanotus*, Shy Hylacola *Hylacola cauta*, Redthroat *Pyrholaemus brunneus*, *Acanthiza pyrrhopygia* (a synonym of the Inland Brown Thornbill *A. apicalis*) and Gilbert's Whistler *Pachycephala inornata*¹. It was probably Gould's remark (1865a: 384) that he had been 'near the bend of the River Murray' that led Hindwood (1938: 99, 106) to suppose that Gould had reached the great North-West Bend near Morgan. Below, I argue that this was not the bend referred to by Gould, and suggest a restriction of the type-locality 'The Belts of the Murray'.

Gould, accompanied by the Surveyor-General Captain Charles Sturt, left Adelaide for the Murray scrubs on 17 June 1839 (Hindwood 1938: 99). On 26 June he recorded the Purple-gaped Honeyeater *Lichenostomus cratitius* 'on the ranges near the Upper Torrens' (Gould 1865a: 513). On 1 July he collected an Australasian Bittern *Botaurus poiciloptilus* 'above Gleeson's Station, while journeying towards the Murray' (Gould 1865b: 313-314). That the bend of the Murray he struck soon

after was the one at Caloote south-west of Mannum rather than the North-West Bend over 100 kilometres further north is strongly suggested by his remark (1865a: 384) that he found the Redthroat 'tolerably abundant in the Belts of the Murray, about forty miles (64 km) to the northward of Lake Alexandrina.' My reconstruction from these scanty clues is that Gould's party traversed the Mount Lofty Ranges by following the course of the River Torrens, left the main upper course of the latter to cross the saddle west of Tungkillo, and thence headed east-south-east to descend from the ranges near Palmer, from where they followed the course of Reedy Creek south-east to Caloote. I have not yet been able to trace 'Gleeson's Station', though it is possibly the original site of Caloote itself. Leaving the river, Gould spent a night and part of two days in the inner of the two belts of vegetation through which from the top of the range he had descended the Murray winding. He was then compelled, apparently through lack of water, 'to beat a hasty retreat back to the ranges', presumably retracing his footsteps to the Palmer district. During a week's stay under the ranges, he made daily visits to the outer of the two belts (Gould in Hindwood *loc.cit.*, and Gould 1865a: 322). From the above, it seems reasonable to refine the type-locality 'Belts of the Murray' to 'in and between the districts of Palmer and Caloote, South Australia.'

ACANTHIZA INORNATA IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA

The Western Thornbill *Acanthiza inornata* is not known to occur outside south-western Western Australia. Yet Gould (1865a: 370) claimed to have collected specimens of this species on 'the small low islands at the mouths of Spencer's and St. Vincent's Gulfs.'² Cleland (1937: 213), commenting on this report, noted 'Mr. Sutton informs me that *A. chrysorrhoea* [Yellow-tailed Thornbill] and *A. pusilla* [Brown Thornbill] on Wedge Island are the only species recently found on or recorded for those parts.' Sutton would have drawn his information from Mellor (1907: 199), who recorded these two species on Wedge I. in January 1907 (though

Mellor's *A. pusilla* would almost certainly have been the form now known as *A. apicalis*.

The islands referred to by Gould, however, were almost certainly those of the Kingscote Spit off Kangaroo Island — Busby Islet in the Bay of Shoals and the Beatrice Islets in Nepean Bay. According to Hindwood (1938: 99-100), Gould visited Kangaroo Island from Adelaide in July 1839, landing at Nepean Bay. From there, the islets of Kingscote Spit are easily accessible. Gould's reference to them as being 'at the mouths of Spencer's and St Vincent's Gulfs', though possibly unusual, would not be unique; for, William White, who landed on an islet in Kingscote Spit (probably Busby) on 13 May 1894 (White *ms.*) referred to it (*in* Campbell 1901: 973) as 'a small island at the entrance of St. Vincent Gulf.'

Rather than ask what *A. inornata*, a woodland-loving bird of south-western Australia, was doing on the low, sandy, samphire- and *Nitraria*-clad islets of Kingscote Spit, we should enquire with what other thornbill Gould could have confused it. The most likely candidate is *A. iredalei*, the Slender-billed or Samphire Thornbill, from which *A. inornata* differs mainly in being uniform above, *i.e.* in lacking the small contrasting patch at the upper base of the tail formed in *A. iredalei* by the pale buffy-yellow upper tail-coverts. Not being aware of *A. iredalei*, which was not formally described till 1900, Gould could well be excused for identifying specimens of the latter as *A. inornata*, especially if some or all of the upper tail-coverts had fallen out of his specimens during collection or preparation.

A. iredalei is widespread in inland South Australia, mainly in samphire, saltbush and bluebush, with an apparently isolated population in the Ninety-Mile Desert inhabiting low dense heath and cutting-grass swamps. It has also been recorded in samphire flats along the coasts of Spencer's Gulf at Tumby Bay and from Redcliff to Port Broughton, and Gulf St Vincent from Price to the Adelaide district. Its occurrence on the low shrubby islets of Kingscote Spit, while of the greatest interest, would thus be less startling than that of *A. inornata*. Unidentified thornbills seen by Mr Allen Lashmar (*pers. comm.*) in samphire at the southern ends of American River, Kangaroo Island, could also have been *A. iredalei*. Fur-

ther investigations on Kingscote Spit and in the American River-Pelican Lagoon area are warranted.

THE RED-LORED WHISTLER ON THE ADELAIDE PLAINS

In South Australia the Red-lore Whistler *Pachycephala rufogularis* is known chiefly from the Murray Mallee and adjacent districts, wherein it has been reported north to Calperum, west to the Sandleton district, Chapman's Bore and Wundersitz Scrub, and south to Mount Rescue Conservation Park and Bunn's Bore. Beyond these limits there is a single record only, from the Adelaide Plains, based on specimens collected by Gould in 1839. Of this record, Gould (1865a: 215) wrote '...I usually met with only one at a time, hopping about on the ground in the thinly-timbered forest which surrounds the city of Adelaide.' He did not state how many specimens he obtained, but in that he described the plumages of the adult male, the adult female (wrongly) and the young male, it must have been at least three.³

Had *P. rufogularis* been resident on the Adelaide Plains, it would be easy to understand why it is so no longer, for the original scrub was removed almost entirely soon after European settlement. However, insofar as any resident population encountered by Gould might have been expected to linger on for the next few decades at least, it is significant that the shortly subsequent searches for it by Samuel White (1835-1880) were unsuccessful. '...this bird puzzled my father very much,' wrote S.A. White (1919), 'and I know he had several conversations with Gould about it, stating that he had hunted the country for many miles around Adelaide for the bird, but had never seen it, and had come to the conclusion there was some mistake; but Gould assured my father that he procured it near the township of Adelaide.' However, Gould's record remaining singular, doubts about the provenance of his specimens and the possibility that they merely represented phases of Gilbert's Whistler *P. inornata* lingered (e.g. Ashby 1919, and references in Parsons & Morgan 1935).

It was left to S.A. White to rediscover *P. rufogularis* and verify its status as a distinct species. He rediscovered the bird in the Ned's Well district near Perponda in the Murray

Mallee in November 1911 (White 1912, 1913). That all subsequent South Australian records of *P. rufogularis* have come from the Murray Mallee and adjacent districts has led to the belief that if the species ever occurred on the Adelaide Plains it is now long extinct there.

Gould obtained his specimens of *P. rufogularis* in the winter. To the problem they pose, I propound the following solution, that *P. rufogularis* was not (at least within historical times) a resident on the Adelaide Plains, but chiefly an autumn-winter visitor. This would explain why Samuel White failed to find it there so soon after Gould's visit if Samuel, reasonably enough, searched for the bird during those months when he thought it would be most active, the months of spring and summer.

Whistlers are usually assumed to be relatively sedentary. A recent study (Parker in prep.), however, has shown that some individuals of the south-eastern Australian populations of the Golden Whistler *P. pectoralis* disperse widely after the breeding season. That *P. rufogularis* too may undertake some post-breeding movement, and therefore that it may never have been more than a non-breeding visitor to the Adelaide Plains, is given some support by two recent specimens of this species: B32861, immature (? sex), Para Hills, northern suburb of Adelaide, 10 October 1976, presented by G.J. Osborne (this bird had flown into a garden window and died) and B33721, immature female, shore of Lake Alexandrina near Snake I., 7 March 1980, collected by H.J. Eckert in rushes and Lignum adjacent to a swamp.

That the first was found in a suburban district and the second in rushes and Lignum — both highly atypical habitats — suggests at the very least that they were transients. If the hypothesis that *P. rufogularis* was never more than a non-breeding visitor to the Adelaide Plains is correct, then its present apparently negligible occurrence in the area may be largely attributable to the great decline of its breeding populations through the extensive clearing of the Murray Mallee.⁴

¹When Gould (1865a: 216) synonymized his *P. inornata* with his *P. gilberti*, he gave the distribution of the combined taxon as 'the interior of Western Australia' only, overlooking his earlier statement (Gould 1841) that the type-material of *P. inornata* was from the 'Belts of the Murray in South Australia.'

²Where these specimens are, if they still exist, remains to be determined. The greater part of Gould's collection, including most of the material upon which he based his great work *The Birds of Australia*, was acquired by the Academy of Natural Sciences, Philadelphia, in 1849, most of the remainder passing after Gould's death in 1881 to the British Museum (Natural History) (Meyer de Schauensee 1957). Certainly the specimens in question are not among those listed under *A. inornata* by Sharpe (1883: 293-294), nor has a recent search at the Academy of Natural Sciences brought them to light (M. Robbins *in litt.* 6 Oct. 1983).

³Although Stone & Matthews (1913) and Ashby (1919) reported the type of *P. rufogularis* to be in the Academy of Natural Sciences (Ashby stating in addition that it was 'marked "Adelaide"'), it was not listed among the types in that institution by Meyer de Schauensee (1957). According to Dr M. Robbins (*in litt.* 6 Oct. 1983), however it is still to be found there, a male registered 15255, together with a second Gouldian specimen of the same species, 15254, an immature male also from South Australia. The type of *P. inornata* Gould might also have been expected to be found at Philadelphia, but was listed by neither Stone & Matthews nor Meyer de Schauensee, nor has it been revealed there by a recent search (M. Robbins *in litt.* 6 Oct. 1983).

⁴B32861 was originally misidentified as an immature *P. inornata*. This error thus constitutes an instance of the presence of *P. rufogularis* being masked (albeit temporarily) by confusion with *P. inornata*. Conceivably, other such instances might have occurred that, involving sight-records, would not have been susceptible to subsequent re-examination and correction. The difficulty in distinguishing between immatures of these two whistlers will be discussed in a forthcoming article.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For their valuable contributions to this article I should like to thank Messrs H.J. Eckert, L. Joseph, A.F.C. Lashmar, L.P. Pedler and Dr M.B. Robbins of the Academy of Natural Sciences, Philadelphia.

REFERENCES

- Ashby, E. 1919. Some of Gould's types. *Emu* 18:311-312.
 Campbell, A.J. 1901. *Nests and Eggs of Australian Birds*. Sheffield: Pawson & Brailsford.
 Cleland, J.B. 1937. The history of ornithology in South Australia, Pt 1. *Emu* 36: 197-221.
 Gould, J. 1841. Descriptions of new species from Australia. *Proc. zool. Soc. Lond.* for 1840: 159-165.
 ——— 1865a, b. *Handbook to the Birds of Australia*, 1, 2. London: privately published.
 Hindwood, K.A. 1938. John Gould in Australia. *Emu* 38: 95-118.
 Mellor, J. 1907. Ornithological notes of an expedition to Kangaroo Island and Spencer's Gulf, in January, 1907. *Proc. Roy. geogr. Soc. Australas.* (S. Aust. Branch) 10: 185-199.
 Meyer de Schauensee, R. 1957. On some avian types, principally Gould's, in the collection of the Academy. *Proc. Acad. nat. Sci. Philad.* 109: 123-246.
 Parsons, F.E. & J.N. McGilp. 1935. The two red-throated whistlers. *Emu* 35: 113-126.
 Sauer, G.C. 1982. *John Gould. The Bird Man. A Chronology and Bibliography*. Melbourne: Lansdowne.

- Sharpe, R.B. 1883. *Catalogue of the Passeriformes or Perching Birds in the Collection of the British Museum, 7. Cichlomorphae, Pt 4*. London: Trustees of the British Museum.
- Stone, W. & G.M. Mathews. 1913. A list of the species of Australian birds described by John Gould, with the location of the type-specimens. *Austral avian Rec.* 1: 130-180.
- White, S.A. 1912. rediscovery of *Pachycephala rufogularis* (Gould). *Emu* 11: 212.
- 1913. Field ornithology in South Australia. *Emu* 12: 179-185.
- 1919. Gould's types. *Emu* 19: 72.
- White, W. ms. 1894. (Fieldnotes accompanying eggs of cormorant spp. in the South Australian Museum).

*South Australian Museum, Adelaide, S.A.,
5000*

Accepted 7 October 1983