

RECORDS OF THE SLATE-BACKED THORNBILL FROM THE GREAT VICTORIA DESERT. The Slate-backed Thornbill *Acanthiza robustirostris* Milligan (1903) was first described from a pair of birds collected by F. Lawson Whitlock at Day Dawn, Western Australia in 1902.

In July and August 1914, Captain S.A. White procured specimens of *A. robustirostris* in and around the Musgrave and Everard Ranges in the north-west of South Australia (White 1915a, 1915b). Several of these specimens are held in the White collection of the South Australian Museum and are labelled under the synonyms *A. marianae* or *A. moorilyanna*. All other records of this species in South Australia have been from mulga *Acacia aneura* habitat in the far north-west of the state (Close and Jaensch 1984). Badman (1979) recorded small numbers in mulga as far east as Alka Seltzer Bore (26°18'S, 136°01'E).

The species is also widely distributed across central Western Australia and southern latitudes in the Northern Territory (Blakers *et al.* 1984, Parker 1970). Records of *A. robustirostris* in the Great Victoria Desert were submitted to the RAOU Atlas Scheme in 1979 by J. Bransbury. These records were considered unconfirmed by Black and Badman (1986) in their review of the avifauna of this region. The latter authors considered it probable that the species is restricted to the far northern limits of the Great Victoria Desert.

During a survey of the eastern Great Victoria Desert between 26 June and 12 July 1990 a total of 13 *A. robustirostris* were seen by the authors and others. These birds, when seen, were either alone or in pairs at three localities on the Anne Beadell Highway between Serpentine Lakes and Vokes Hill Junction (28°33'S, 130°40'E). All observations were from open mulga woodland (1-3 m tall) over an open understorey of native fuschia *Eremophila latrobei* var. *glabra*, Charleville turkey-bush *Eremophila gilesii*, dead-finish *Acacia tetragonophylla*, *Prostanthera baxteri* var. *sericea* and various grass species.

The birds were very active and were typically hovering and gleaning insects from the outer foliage of mulgas and to a lesser extent *E. gilesii*. They were not observed on the ground. The following description is of a pair seen on 30 June 1990, 47 km W of Vokes Hill Junction. The birds were in close proximity to Inland Thornbills *A. apicalis* and Chestnut-tailed Thornbills *A. uropygialis*.

Description: *Upperparts*: dark grey with brown secondaries, edged white. *Uppertail* coverts and rump chestnut, paler than *A. uropygialis* and not extending to the uppersurface of the rectrices as in *A. apicalis*. *Tail* black, tipped white. *Underparts*: off-white

except for pale buff on flanks. *Head*: forehead dark grey, with fine black striations extending to the crown. *Ear* coverts lightly dappled off-white. *Narrow white orbital ring* surrounding the eye and an indistinct pale supercilium present. *Bill* dark and noticeably stouter than in *A. uropygialis* or *A. apicalis*. *Iris* and legs dark.

The calls were varied, including a high pitched 'see' indistinguishable from *A. uropygialis* and harsh calls similar to *A. apicalis*. The combined features of dark grey upperparts, pale chestnut rump and uppertail coverts, streaked forehead and dark eye serve to identify these birds as *A. robustirostris*.

The nearest records of *A. robustirostris* are at least 120 km N of the Anne Beadell Highway (Close and Jaensch 1984). The species was not observed in any other habitat on our survey of the Great Victoria Desert and may therefore require stands of mulga of mixed age with an *Eremophila* understorey. Whitlock (1940) mentions that in Western Australia these birds almost always place their nest in an *Eremophila* shrub. The distribution of *A. robustirostris* in South Australia may be correlated with the distribution of the mulga communities described here.

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