

## PINK ROBINS IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA

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### SUMMARY

Observations of the Pink Robin *Petroica rodinogaster* in South Australia since 1963 have been of uncoloured birds in all but one case. The majority have been from the South East and from coastal or near coastal sites. Identification of the uncoloured Pink Robin is not difficult: it is a very brown robin and the tan double wing bars and lack of white in the tail are diagnostic. Four recent sightings in the Mt Lofty Ranges indicate that the species is capable of wide dispersal from its breeding range in eastern Victoria (or Tasmania) despite extensive habitat destruction over the intervening area.

While the Rose Robin *Petroica rosea* has been seen more frequently in the Adelaide region over this period, the Pink Robin may yet have been the species that was observed in the Mt Lofty Ranges last century following the reported taking of an immature male by Gould below Mt Lofty in 1839.

### INTRODUCTION

On 17 May 1992 I observed a small brown bird along the access track to the northern part of Little Dip Conservation Park (37°14'S, 139°47'E). The habitat was dense swamp paper-bark *Melaleuca halmaturorum* scrub west of Lake Robe. The bird proved inquisitive and fluttered towards the car, perching on either side and above it, allowing easy viewing over about five minutes at distances as close as 2 m. The Scarlet Robin-sized bird was a fairly uniform brown colour and slightly paler below. Two pale fawn wing bars were obvious, as was an eye-ring of similar colour. I did not

observe any pale spot on the frons. No white was present in the tail, though occasionally the outermost margin of the tail appeared slightly paler. While I had no previous experience of the species, I was certain that the bird was an uncoloured Pink Robin *Petroica rodinogaster*.

### THE STATUS OF PINK ROBINS IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA

This topic has been reviewed previously (Paton *et al.* 1968; Paton 1970; Rowley and Paton 1978; Reid *et al.* 1984). Paton (1970) pointed out that Gould's specimen of a Pink Robin from 'below Mt Lofty' cannot be traced. Reid *et al.* (1984) found it impossible to be certain of any sightings of Pink Robins in South Australia other than in the South East. They raised doubt about the three specimens of Broadbent's of 1875-76 since their origins are uncertain, and the observations in the Mt Lofty Ranges of Pulleine and Morgan in the 1880s because of lack of descriptions. They also questioned the validity of the more recent report of a male Pink Robin from Bridgewater in the Mt Lofty Ranges (Thomas 1948).

Their doubts stemmed largely from the more frequent and authenticated observations of Rose

Robins *Petroica rosea* since 1967, which their paper reviewed. Surprisingly Reid *et al.* (1984) appear to have overlooked the unequivocal description of an uncoloured Pink Robin observed by C.I. Baxter in Kyeema Conservation Park (35°17'S, 138°42'E) in September 1978 (Baxter 1980). Rather than being the fifth published sighting of the species in the Mt Lofty Ranges as stated, Baxter's report might now be regarded as the first recently authenticated one. Another published observation of a Pink Robin in the Mt Lofty Ranges is that of E.F. Boehm at Anstey Hill Reserve (34°49'S, 138°44'E) on 2 April 1981 (Bransbury 1984). Otherwise all published reports of this species in South Australia are from the South East. These are the two birds mist-netted at Woolley's Lake (37°03'S, 140°42'E) and one at Culburra (35°49'S, 139°58'E) in 1963 (Paton *et al.* 1968) and the observations in three successive years 1976–78 by Rowley (Rowley and Paton 1978). All have been of uncoloured birds. In South Australia the Pink Robin was recorded in only one 10' grid square in the Lower South East during the conduct of the Australian Bird Atlas Survey from 1977–81 (Blakers *et al.* 1984).

In SAOA Newsletters there are four further observations of presumed uncoloured Pink Robins: one at Pt MacDonnell (38°03'S, 140°42'E) on 16 July 1983 (Ashton 1983); one on Youngusband Peninsula opposite Long Point (35°42'S, 139°10'E) on 6 April 1985 (Smith and McIlwain 1985); one at Stirling (35°01'S, 138°43'E) on 8 June 1987 (Mart 1987); and about five birds at Lake Fellmongery (37°10'S, 139°46'E), near Robe, from 1–4 April 1988 (Fotheringham 1988).

Three further records of Pink Robins in the South East were obtained by contacting many observers in 1992 and subsequently. Peter Penney (pers. comm.) recorded an uncoloured bird in Honan's Scrub, a Native Forest Reserve between Mt Gambier and Glencoe, in May 1989. Doug Fotheringham reported further sightings of uncoloured birds from Lake Fellmongery in April 1989 and also supplied a report of a fully coloured male Pink Robin, seen a number of times at L. Fellmongery on 5–7 April 1985. His letter to me of 2 July 1992 reads as follows (*inter alia*):

"It was clearly different from the Scarlet Robin with which I was very familiar. The second time I observed it I had Slater's Field

Guide with me and was able to carefully key it out from the other robins...[noting] particularly the absence of white from its wings and tail,...its pink breast and very black upper markings."

A further observation of an uncoloured Pink Robin has been made at Kersbrook (34°47'S, 138°51'E) during May and June 1997 (Cox and Cox 1997).

## DISCUSSION

Reid *et al.* (1984) state that the Rose Robin and the Pink Robin are regarded as accidental visitors in South Australia. Their observations and subsequent reports in the SAOA Newsletter suggest that the occurrence of the Rose Robin is a reasonably frequent "accident", at least as far as the Adelaide Plains and Mt Lofty Ranges are concerned. In the South East there have been few reports, namely a male seen by SAOA members in Bangham Conservation Park (36°35'S, 140°57'E) on 18 April 1987 (SAOA 1987), a female mist-netted in the Coorong north of Old Cantara (36°15'S, 139°42'E) on 25 April 1988 (Allen 1988) and a male in Penola Conservation Park (37°20'S, 140°38'E) in June 1997 (C. Rogers pers. comm.). Charles Pawsey (*in litt.* 14 June 1992), in response to my search for Pink Robin records, mentioned records of uncoloured Rose Robins at Millicent (37°37'S, 140°21'E) in September 1979 and April 1980, but he could "only presume [their] correct identification".

In contrast the majority of Pink Robin sightings in South Australia have been from the South East, including those of Ashby (1927) and McGilp (1945), which Reid *et al.* (1984) regarded as equivocal because of lack of detail. McGilp reported a male: both sexes have been seen in recent years east of the State border near Nelson (38°03'S, 141°01'E) (P. Penney pers. comm.).

Of all records of these two species in the last thirty years other distinctions can be recognized. Reid *et al.* (1984) reported 13 recent sightings of the Rose Robin from the Adelaide Plains and Mt Lofty Ranges, one from the Lower North and one from Eyre Peninsula. Hackett and Hackett (1988) observed one at Swan Reach Conservation Park (34°40'S, 139°27'E) in the mallee. South Australian observations of Rose Robins have been of 13 adult males and seven

uncoloured or part coloured birds. In contrast there have been recent records of 17 uncoloured Pink Robins and only one coloured male.

It is scarcely conceivable that many adult male Pink Robins have been overlooked. Pizzey (1980) indicates that the post-breeding dispersal of this species is mostly of uncoloured birds. It is however highly likely that uncoloured Rose Robins are overlooked, being the same size and almost identical in the field to immature Red-capped Robins *Petroica goodenovii*, the distinction being in the distribution of white (or pale buff) in wings and tail and the often inconspicuous buff frontal patch in the Rose Robin. The fantail-like behaviour of the Rose Robin with tail elevation and drooping of wings has been stressed by Paton (1970) and Reid *et al.* (1984). This characteristic only recently caused me to question the identification of an immature Red-capped Robin seen at Milang (35°24'S, 139°58'E) between 13 and 27 July 1997. The bird was exhibiting the very active behaviour described, and a very small buff frontal patch could be seen on a number of occasions, but the tail was white only along its outermost feathers, not on the tips of the outer three. If it is assumed that at least as many uncoloured Rose Robins as coloured males disperse to South Australia, it is evident that they are overlooked or misidentified, the few published reports being of hand-held, usually mist-netted birds.

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Received: 21 July 1997