

YELLOW CHAT *Epthianura crocea* AT TOLDEROL GAME RESERVE. Historically the Yellow Chat was considered to be a patchily distributed inhabitant of swampy coastal and sub-coastal areas across northern Australia from Rockhampton to west of Broome (Cayley 1961). In January 1972 a small population of the species was discovered along two bore drains on Coorabulka Station in SW Queensland (Ford and Parker 1972, 1974). Yellow Chats subsequently were found frequenting several other bore drains in that area (Reynolds, Walter and Woodall 1982). In addition, numerous and widespread sightings of the species have been made from the Barkly Tablelands of the Northern Territory (Strong and Fleming 1987). At times large numbers have been recorded from this inland area.

The Yellow Chat was first recorded in South Australia in September 1982 (Black *et al.* 1983). At least 15 birds, including a breeding pair, were located at the bore drain of Pandiburra Bore. They have been recorded frequently at that locality since. At least 30 were present there in August 2001 (JE, pers. obs.). However a visit to Pandiburra Bore on 26 August 2002 revealed that cattle had almost completely eaten and trampled the reed and sedge growth nearly to the waterline. No Yellow Chats could be found there. Two unsubstantiated reports of Yellow Chats have been made from Goyders Lagoon, within c. 50 km NE of Pandiburra (SAOA 1990; Mitchell 1993). The intermittent nature of occupation detailed by Higgins, Peter and Steele (2001) and evidenced by the former example suggests that the Yellow Chat recolonises whenever grazing pressure eases sufficiently to allow adequate regrowth of vegetation. It appears plausible that a nomadic population ranges throughout the area.

On 22 April 2002, a chat was flushed from an area of sedge and salt water couch *Paspalum vaginatum* at the edge of the track approximately 100 m west of the bird hide at Tolderol Game Reserve near Langhorne Creek. It alighted on bare mud beside a samphire bush *Sarcocornia* sp. 15 m from the track and sat quietly with its back to the observers. Although the rump was quite bright yellow it was regarded as a female Orange Chat *Epthianura aurifrons*. Eye colour was not checked, even though it should have been discernible at that distance. About two hours later it was encountered again 500 m to the east, once more at a track's edge, in samphire, sparse sedge and milk thistles *Sonchus oleraceus*. Approach

was made to within 10 m before it retreated a short distance and perched on a low bush. Three White-fronted Chats *E. albifrons* which had been further away, quickly departed. It descended and began to forage unconcerned, once again at the edge of the track. The bright yellow rump was again noted. When the bird turned it showed a small black crescent marking where the throat meets the breast indicating that the bird was a male Yellow Chat. Ascertaining that the eye colour was pale not dark made confirmation easier.

The bird was not seen again until 26 April 2002 when it was found on a property adjoining Tolderol to the west some 2 km from the original sighting. It was foraging in sedge-like grasses along a track and moved at times into adjacent samphire. The bird allowed vehicular approach to within 15 m. It was collected and is now in the South Australian Museum, Reg. No. B 49,500. As Pandiburra Bore is the only South Australian location from which specimens have been taken it was considered sound ornithology for present and future workers to be given the opportunity to assess the identity and sub-specific status of a bird found at such distance from there. The skull of the specimen, confirmed by dissection to be a male, was almost fully pneumatized. Two features which indicated that the bird might not have been fully mature were dark patches at the upper sides of the gullet and a narrow yellow outer ring surrounding a dull white iris. Also indicative of the bird being sub-adult, was its plumage, which showed little yellow on the crown and patches of white on the undersurface, particularly in the throat region. It was markedly paler than the male depicted in Black *et al.* (1983). The black crescent was also smaller than that described, however several authors have commented on the variability of this feature (Ford and Parker 1974; Horton 1982; Black *et al.* 1983; Strong and Fleming 1987). The middle toe was compared with that of Orange Chat specimens and was markedly longer. This feature would be difficult to recognise in the field.

Although Ford and Parker (1974) cautioned against treating the Yellow Chat trinomially, Schodde and Mason (1999) have suggested that at least three races are recognisable. The small size of the breast band and pale dorsal surface indicate that this bird would belong to the nominate race *crocea*. While the other two races are regarded as reasonably sedentary, nominate

crocea is now considered as regionally nomadic (Schodde and Mason 1999). This mobility was first postulated by Ford and Parker (1974) and supported by Black *et al.* (1983) and McAllen and Bruce (1988). The occurrence of a bird at Tolderol Game Reserve provides an unexpected example of support to this theory. Assuming that the bird originated from the nearest known populations either at Pandiburra Bore or in nearby SW Queensland, the movement would have involved a journey of at least 1000 km. Presumably dispersal was forced when dry conditions returned to the inland following good seasons and population build-up coupled with habitat loss such as that described from Pandiburra.

The Yellow Chat has not been recorded satisfactorily in New South Wales although five occurrences have been reported, the earliest in 1920. All have been rejected for various reasons (Higgins, Peter and Steele 2001). This highlights the difficulty in achieving acceptable sight records with similar species. In two of these instances the supposed Yellow Chat was with a large party of Orange Chats. It may be possible that the bird at Tolderol Game Reserve travelled south in company with Orange Chats. Although considered an inland species, some Orange Chats come to the vicinity of Tolderol Game Reserve in most years (JE and ML, pers. obs.). A party of five was present less than 5 km from there for several weeks in late January and early February 2002. Tolderol Game Reserve has habitat with loose affinities to wetland at Pandiburra bore drain and may have offered familiar sanctuary. The bird did not appear to be stressed and its stomach contained plentiful insect remains.

The comparative approachability of Yellow Chats was first noted by Ford and Parker (1974)

and later by Reynolds *et al.* (1982) and Black *et al.* (1983). The bird at Tolderol Game Reserve allowed vehicular approach to within 10–15 m. Therefore chats appearing to be unusually tame should always have eye and rump colour checked. This may draw attention to a vagrant.

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