

VARIED LORIKEET IN THE FAR NORTH EAST: A NEW SPECIES FOR SOUTH AUSTRALIA. Several small to moderate-sized flocks of Varied Lorikeet *Psitteuteles versicolor* were observed along the Diamantina River at Clifton Hills Outstation, 26°32'S, 139°27'E, in the State's far North East over several days 30 January–2 February 2003. Attention was drawn to the species' presence by their distinctive call—a typical lorikeet note but with a softer ('phhht') tone than the shriller cries of the Musk Lorikeet *Glossopsitta concinna* and without the buzzing ('zzzz') of the Purple-crowned *G. porphyrocephala*. The birds were intermittently observed over the four days, generally as flocks of 12–20 birds darting along the river through or just above the canopies of the fringing coolibah *Eucalyptus coolabah* woodland. Fine stands of woodland grow next to this long, deep and permanent stretch of the river known locally as Yammakira Waterhole, and other tree species growing with the coolibahs included baubinia *Lysiphyllum gilvum*, Broughton willow *Acacia salicina* and whitewood *Atalaya hemiglauca*. A maximum of c. 45 lorikeets could be accounted for at any time, but I suspect there were more than two hundred birds in the vicinity based on the frequency of flock movements and different-sized flocks observed. Birds were occasionally seen feeding at close quarters on coolibah buds and flowers at which time the red bill, white bare skin around the eye and reddish crown were noted. In flight the plain underwings were noted; the birds were of similar size to a Musk Lorikeet.

This observation is the first record of the species in South Australia, and the locality appears to be further south than has been recorded in Australia before. Accepted observations received for the first Atlas in the period 1977–1981 (Blakers, Davies and Reilly 1984) and the second Atlas (1998–2001: Barrett *et al.* 2003) ranged south to about Boulia (22°53'S, 139°53'E) on the Georgina River in Queensland, although Blakers *et al.* (1984) referred to a possible record near Gin Gin (24°59'S, 151°57'E) in central eastern Queensland (regarded as unconfirmed by Higgins 1999). Storr (1984) had their southern range limits further north again (Mt Isa, Cloncurry, Hughenden). The species is endemic to northern Australia and has a Torresian distribution, occurring in the Kimberley and Top End, east across the Gulf of Carpentaria in north Queensland to the base of

Cape York (Schodde and Tidemann 1996). It does not generally occur in north-eastern Queensland, where east of the Dividing Range the larger Scaly-breasted Lorikeet *Trichoglossus chlorolepidotus* is the local medium-sized lorikeet. Varied Lorikeets are blossom nomads, undertaking irregular movements, sometimes turning up in great abundance in districts when eucalypts come into heavy flower; they are primarily eucalypt pollen and nectar feeders (Higgins 1999). There has been sufficient ornithological study in the far North East of South Australia (summarised by Reid, Badman and Parker 1990; Reid 2000) to conclude that their presence there is an exceptional vagrant occurrence.

The fact that the Varied Lorikeet was locally plentiful around Clifton Hills Outstation in January 2003 is not typical of most vagrant occurrences when a species is found a great distance out of its normal range. Such instances typically involve a sole individual, rarely more than two or three birds, and the impression is gained that the bird or birds involved have lost their bearings, made a mistake. This leads me to believe that the Varied Lorikeets' appearance in South Australia at this time, whilst a vagrant occurrence, was a purposeful movement and perhaps just represented an extreme example of their nomadic tendencies. Eastern Australia had been in the grip of drought for at least the preceding 12 months (Bureau of Meteorology 2006), and until January 2003 when heavy rains fell across the Top End and Northern Territory (NT) gulf region, so too the NT had suffered an extreme rainfall deficit, i.e. from 1 January to 31 December 2002. It seems likely, therefore, that the intensity of flowering (the pollen load and volume of nectar flow) of eucalypts across the wet-dry tropics of the NT and north-western Queensland had been diminished by the drought to the point that Varied Lorikeets were forced to wander further afield to find a eucalypt flowering event of sufficient intensity. Drought-induced bird movements are a familiar phenomenon in Australia (e.g. Keast 1958), but usually they manifest as a coastward movement of arid-zone birds—birds move to the wetter periphery of the continent from central Australia when the inland experiences extended dry conditions (Rowley 1974), and these movements can be continental in scale or more limited. An influx of Yellow-plumed Honeyeaters *Lichenostomus ornatus*

from the Murray Mallee region into the Mount Lofty Ranges in the drought year 1982 is an example of a more modest movement of the same phenomenon (Paton, Reid and Bradley 1983). However, movements in the reverse direction—birds heading into the interior from peripheral regions of the continent in times of drought—are less documented but still consistent with nomadic behaviour: tracking resources irrespective of time of year and direction of travel. One Black Honeyeater *Certhionyx niger* and several Pied Honeyeaters *C. variegatus*, ‘ultra nomads’ according to Keast (1968), were also seen around Yammakira Waterhole, as was a Grey Falcon *Falco hypoleucos*, another species suspected of making drought-induced movements (Olsen 1986). Both honeyeater species were seen in small numbers elsewhere along the Diamantina-Warburton system during the visit, from Ultomurra Waterhole in the south (27°09′S, 138°44′E) to Pandie Pandie Homestead (26°08′S, 139°23′E), further evidence of drought-refuge habitat being provided by the river. In numerous visits to the Cooper Creek and Diamantina rivers in the far North East spanning almost 30 years, I have rarely encountered these species in riverine habitats (e.g. Reid *et al.* 1990; Reid, unpubl. data).

There are good reasons why the Yammakira Waterhole reach of the Diamantina is arguably a prime example of drought-refuge habitat. This part of the Diamantina receives virtually annual river flow (from summer rains in western Queensland), and the depth of the waterhole ensures a permanent natural water supply; it is the deepest known waterhole along the Diamantina River in South Australia (J. Costelloe, University of Melbourne, unpubl. data). To the immediate south, the enormous labyrinthine Goyders Lagoon wetland complex unfolds and acts as a huge sponge—downstream of here river flow is far less reliable and waterholes less permanent.

Finally I speculate whether unidentified parrots seen by H.H. Finlayson (1933) in the southern NT at latitudes 24–26°S in 1932 and 1933 may have been the Varied Lorikeet. In the vicinity of Mount Conner to Mount Ebenezer, early in 1933 (date unspecified, but during January–March), Finlayson observed a parrot: ‘about one-third as large again as a Shell-Parrot [Budgerigar] (*Melopsittacus undulatus*), with a short, broad tail, and heavily built. It was a

brilliant green all over...and without any recognizable markings’. In the previous year at Wollara, a short distance to the north, Finlayson had observed a similar, ‘small stoutly built’ parrot on 4 February 1932: ‘The bird was watering with scores of Shell Parrot at an open trough at noon, and my attention was drawn to it by its larger size and brilliant chlorous green colour, recalling that of the Eclectus Parrot..., but I believe the beak was red or yellow, not black. This was two or three days before a very heavy rain, and after the rain I observed at a distance what I believed to be a small flock of the same species’ (Finlayson 1933: 47). A red cap was not noted by Finlayson, but otherwise the description of size, build and colour matches a medium-sized lorikeet. Again the two years from July 1931 to June 1933 were an *El Nino* period of rainfall deficit, felt particularly keenly across northern Australia.

The years 1932 and 2002 are both classified as *El Nino* events by climate experts with the Queensland Department of Natural Resources and Water (2006). If we tentatively attribute Finlayson’s sightings to the Varied Lorikeet, it is likely that the species has responded twice to extreme climatic events by making significant southward excursions, and it would be interesting to examine the timing (month and year) of records of the species in the Boulia district with respect to both preceding rainfall conditions across northern Australia and the flowering season of coolibahs (December to February in the Channel Country, pers. obs.).

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CORRIGENDA

Please amend the following in the *South Australian Ornithologist*:

Vol. 34, Parts 2 & 3, p. 53, Table 1, Ibis Is. (first occurring), column 5: 6-8/8/00 should be 6-8/7/00.

Vol. 35, Parts 1 & 2:

Hylacola pyrrhopygius should be *Hylacola pyrrhopygia* on p. 1 (thrice, including in the title), p. 9 and the contents page (back cover).

On p. 1, under the subheading *Black-chinned Honeyeater*, line 16: replace 'subspecies' with 'ultratata (subspecies)'.

On p. 2, column one, second last line: replace the remainder of the sentence after 'three' with 'ultratata (subspecies) of *Calamanthus pyrrhopygius* (*H. pyrrhopygia*)' and replace the next sentence with '*C.p. pedleri* (*H.p. pedleri*) is in the Mid North, *C.p. parkeri* (*H.p. parkeri*) occurs in the Mount Lofty Ranges and *C.p. pyrrhopygius* (*H.p. pyrrhopygia*) in the South East.' In the next sentence replace *pyrrhopygius* with *pyrrhopygia*.

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