

Bird Notes

A recent record of the Plains-wanderer from near Swan Reach, South Australia.

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On 24 March 2006, we were driving out from the settlement at Big Bend on the Murray River, south of Swan Reach, after dusk, at approximately 2015 ACDT. Before reaching the sealed Swan Reach-Walker Flat road (at the approximate location 34°37'04"S, 139°38'09" (not taken with a GPS)), a bird flew low across the unsealed road immediately in front of the vehicle. Despite braking and attempting to miss the bird, the bird and car collided. We stopped, found the bird, which was stunned, and briefly

examined it using the car headlights.

As the bird was alive we decided to hold on to it to see if it would recover from the shock for later release. If it did not recover, the bird would have been a useful specimen, as we suspected it to be a Plains-wanderer *Pedionomus torquatus*. The bird was placed in a box with a T-shirt, and kept in the vehicle while we returned to Swan Reach.

At approximately 2215, we inspected the bird, and found it to be active and seemingly able to function normally. Finding no obvious signs of terminal or debilitating injury (broken wings, bleeding etc), we decided to release the bird. At Swan Reach, we took photos of the bird in the hand (Figure 1) and recorded its description, and further photos were taken at the point at which we released the bird (Figure 2), as close to the collision site as possible. When released, the bird froze at the point where it was put down (when lit by



Figure 1. Photographs of the Swan Reach Plains-wanderer: (left) in the hand, and (right) on release.



Figure 2.
Grassland habitat
with scattered low
shrubs near to
where the collision
with the Plains-
wanderer took
place.

torchlight), but moved away when prompted. We returned to the site the next morning to take photographs of the habitat.

Descriptive notes of the bird and the photographs clearly demonstrate that it was a male Plains-wanderer. Features distinguishing this bird from quails and button-quails include the fine yellow bill, yellow legs, elongated neck, prominent pale bar through the primaries on the upperwing and dark spots and circles with surrounding crescents on the breast feathers.

The Plains-wanderer is classified as endangered in South Australia (Schedule 7 of the South Australia National Parks and Wildlife Act, 1972) and vulnerable nationally (Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act, 1999), but Garnett and Crowley (2000) regarded the species as endangered nationally. The NSW Riverina is the main remaining stronghold of the species, but there are regular records from the North East and Flinders Ranges districts of South Australia (Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts 2008). While there are several historical records of Plains-wanderers from the Murray Mallee region of South Australia, particularly near Waikerie (Bennett 1983; Baker-Gabb 1990), we could

find none after 1984 (e.g. see Barrett et al. 2003; Birds Australia 2008). Furthermore, Baker-Gabb (1998) concludes that there no viable populations remaining in South Australia.

Although one record does not make a significant population, further survey effort in suitable habitats nearby may be valuable. Plains-wanderers prefer sparse grasslands that have substantial areas of bare ground, with much of the vegetation less than 5 cm in height but with scattered grass tussocks 10-30 cm high (Baker-Gabb, Benshemesh and Maher 1990). The habitat in which this individual was recorded appears largely consistent with these preferences (Figure 2).

Plains-wanderer deaths through collisions with vehicles have been reported previously (Bennett 1983). As this record is along a road frequently used by local residents and tourists, the risk of road-kills of Plains-wanderers is not negligible. In situations such as this, vehicle speed limits and interpretative signage may be appropriate.

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