

# Notes on *Amytornis modestus* collected by J.R.B. Love and A.L. Merrotsy in 1913

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Information is provided on the skins and eggs of the Thick-billed Grasswren, *Amytornis modestus*, collected by J.R.B. Love and A.L. Merrotsy in 1913, based on the unpublished diary of Love (1913). At that time the genus was poorly understood and no specimens of *A. modestus* were known at the South Australian Museum, Adelaide (SAMA). A specimen collected in July 1906 by Dr A. Chenery at Todmorden Station north-west of Oodnadatta (SAMA B7356) was evidently not located at SAMA until later (Sutton 1923, SAOA 1928), being part of a collection of old neglected material with missing or incomplete data that was not registered until the 1920s (P. Horton pers. comm.). It was not until after Parker's (1972) clarifying paper that much confusion in the identification and taxonomy of *A. modestus* and related taxa was largely resolved.

On 27 December 1912, J.R.B. (Bob) Love and friend A.L. (Les) Merrotsy departed 'Leigh's Creek' (near Copley in the Flinders Ranges) on a horseback expedition bound for Darwin (Love 1913). During the journey they saw grasswrens 'at intervals as far north as Barrow Creek NT, usually among the rocks and low bushes of a ridge, though at times also among the low bushes of the plains' (Love 1917a). Love and Merrotsy took these all to be *A. merrotsyi*, recently described by Mellor (1913) from skins and eggs Merrotsy had obtained near Yudnamutana in the northern Flinders Ranges in July 1911 (Love 1913, Parker 1982).

During their trip Love took three grasswren specimens that were later forwarded by his

brother to SAMA with associated notes (Love 1917a). On 10 September 1914 the skins were sexed and registered as unspecified *Amytornis* by museum curator F.R. (Robert) Zietz with comment: 'all more or less damaged by *Anthrenus*' [Museum Beetle]. Unfortunately Love's notes of their observations of grasswrens and of the Gibberbird *Ashbyia lovensis*, also recently described from three specimens Love had obtained at Leigh's Creek in 1910 (Ashby 1911), were not published until 1917 (Love 1917a & b), having been misplaced at SAMA (editors' note with Love 1917b). The notes on *A. lovensis* gave the first description of its nest and eggs. Soon after the skins had been donated to SAMA Love requested (letter in SAMA files dated 23 October 1914) that one of the grasswrens, his 'unsexed' bird, be given to his friend and ornithologist, Edwin Ashby.

Love also found a grasswren's nest and took two eggs for his collection, one broken (Love 1913). He made the unbroken egg and associated data available to Ashby, who mistakenly ascribed both the egg and his skin to the Eyrean Grasswren *A. goyderi* (Ashby 1915).

Parker (1972) described two of Love's skins at SAMA, both *A. modestus*; an 'adult male collected at 'Fountain Springs, 13 January 1913' (SAMA B1395) and an 'adult female' from 'Oodnadatta, 20 January 1913' (SAMA B1394). Based on the habitat descriptions and the localities provided, Parker (1972) concluded that later during the trip, near Barrow Creek, Love and Merrotsy had seen Dusky Grasswrens *A. purnelli*, then undescribed.

More details of the grasswren material collected by Love and Merrotsy follow, based on Love's (1913) diary. Information on the SAMA specimen labels is given in double quotation marks.

**SAMA B2994. Egg.** Registered 1 September 1920. On original label "Douglas Ck. Jan. 13 *Amytornis merrotsii* goyder".

Love and Merrotsy camped at Douglas Creek (c. 28° 45'S, 136° 21'E) on 9-10 January en-route from William Creek to 'Old Umbum Station' [Old Umbum ruins 28° 27'S, 136° 23'E]. Love (1913) noted that a nest with two eggs was discovered by Merrotsy on the morning of 10 January between Douglas Creek and 'Loddon Springs' [= Loudon Springs 28° 35'S, 136° 25'E], a distance of about 20 km. One of the eggs was broken 'but can be mended' and the adults 'were followed to a blue-bush [*Maireana* sp.] where they crouched, less than two feet away, only moving when closely disturbed'. Later a third bird was observed. The nest was in a 'blue-bush close to the ground, domed, side-entrance and was formed of blue-bush twigs and grasses' (Ashby 1915, Love 1917a). Ashby (1915) described only one egg so presumably the broken egg did not survive the trip. Love (1913) also noted that 'a fortnight ago a thunderstorm passed over this country, leaving half an inch of rain, with the result that the birds have taken advantage of the sudden growth of grass and herbage, to hastily lay eggs'. Love further reported (1917a) that an additional two inches [50 mm] of rain had fallen in December 1912.

Parker (1972) quoted the collection date from a SAMA label as '*A. textilis*, Douglas Creek, 13 Jan. 1920 [sic] Coll. J.R.B. Love.' This label is no longer present, the only label other than the original being one written by Parker himself, with the date 13 January 1913 (P. Horton pers. comm.). On this date the expedition was at Fountain Springs, not Douglas Creek. The date on Love's original label "Jan. 13" may have been misinterpreted as 13<sup>th</sup> January. The correct collection date should be 10 January 1913.

**SAMA B1395. Skin.** "Fountain Springs, 13 January 1913, sex ? Presented by J.R.B. Love 10/ix/1914."

The expedition passed Fountain Springs (28° 21'S, 136° 17'E) on the way to Warrina (28° 11'S, 135° 50'E), a siding on the Adelaide to Oodnadatta railway and a small town at the

time. According to Love (1913) a 'fine male' grasswren (presumably sexed on dissection) was collected on 15 January north of Fountain Springs on the way to 'Bly Bore' [= Little Blyth Bore 28° 12'S, 136° 00'E] a distance of about 35 km.

The skin is entered in SAMA 1914 Register Book as unsexed but was redetermined as an adult male by Parker (1972). Although now in poor condition it has no chestnut feathers among the few left on its flanks (P. Horton pers. comm.). It was originally labelled "*Amytornis merrotsii*" but changed to *A. modestus*. On the back of the label written by John Sutton, Assistant Honorary Curator of Ornithology at the time, is "relaxed and re-made 17/6/27". The correct collection date should be 15 January 1913.

**SAMA B1394. Skin.** "Oodnadatta, 20 January 1913, female. Presented by J.R.B. Love 10/ix/1914."

No mention of any birds was made by Love (1913) from Oodnadatta, where he and Merrotsy camped from 20-22 January 'at the dam, ½ mile from the town'. However Love (1913) recorded that they spent time skinning birds the next day at Macumba Waterhole [near Old Macumba Homestead 27° 04'S, 135° 31'E]. Presumably these were birds collected around Oodnadatta.

The skin is entered in SAMA 1914 Register Book as a female, confirmed by Parker (1972) as an adult female. It was originally labelled "*Amytornis merrotsii*" but changed to *A. modestus*. On the back of the label is "relaxed and re-made 17/6/27", again in John Sutton's hand.

**SAMA B1393.** A third skin, also from Oodnadatta but with no date, was registered as a female at SAMA on 10 September 1914 but cannot be traced (P. Horton pers. comm.). I believe this was the skin given to Ashby.

There is some confusion over the provenance of Ashby's specimen, in part due to the apparent

lack of collection data provided by SAMA to him with Love's specimen, and Love's subsequent absence interstate on pastoral duties. This resulted in Ashby's belief that his was one of a pair of adults collected at the same locality as the egg, namely Douglas Creek (Ashby 1915). No mention is made by Love (1913) of securing any adults there, so Ashby's (1915) statement that 'Mr. Love was able to secure the parent birds' was probably incorrect. Ashby's specimen was subsequently described as a female from Fountain Springs, collected on 21 January 1913 (SAOA 1928). He may therefore have later concluded that his female was paired with the male from that locality (i.e. SAMA B1395). The date of the specimen concurs with the SAMA registration data, when Love was camped at Oodnadatta.

Ashby's (1915) determination of Love's material as *A. goyderi* may have been influenced by S.A. White, who in 1913 had observed and collected a similar grasswren in the Northern Territory that he took to be *A. goyderi* (White 1914). At that time identification of *A. goyderi* relied on Gould's (1875) type description and plate (Gould and Sharpe 1876, reproduced in A.J. Campbell 1923), the then only known (and type) specimens collected on Macumba Station being at the British Museum of Natural History (BMNH). After collecting another similar bird in the far north-west of South Australia in 1914, White (1915a and b) had doubts about its identity. After examining Gould's plate, White (1915c) concluded that his specimen, together with other specimens in SAMA (presumably Love's), were not *A. goyderi* but of an unknown allied species (Parker 1972).

Sutton (1923) did not include Love's specimens in his list of 'Birds of South Australia' so presumably there was still doubt about their specific identity at that time. A.G. Campbell (1927) reviewed the genus based on an examination of skins at the Museum of Victoria plus a selection of others, including Ashby's (listed as No. 623). Campbell (1927) re-identified

Ashby's specimen as *A. modestus* but suggested 'it may be that the pallid variety of *A. modestus* [from the Lake Eyre district] is the long-lost *A. goyderi*'. Subsequently in September 1927 Ashby sent his skin 'as it had pale underparts' to the BMNH for comparison with the types of *A. goyderi* (SAOA 1928). Ashby's accompanying letter to BMNH noted, based on Sutton's (1927) discussion on the type locality of *A. goyderi*, that it was 'unlikely that two species of *Amytornis* so nearly allied would both occur in similar country within 50 miles of one another'. Not aware of the third Love skin, Parker (1972) assumed that it was SAMA B1395 (from Fountain Springs) sent to BMNH, although SAOA (1928) indicated that it was not SAMA B1395 but the one in Ashby's collection (i.e. SAMA B1393).

The response by Dr P.R. Lowe of BMNH dated 15 November 1927 indicated that Ashby's specimen clearly belonged to *A. modestus*, particularly on the basis of bill shape (SAOA 1928, Condon 1951). The BMNH 'day book' has an entry for 15 November 1927, "Edwin Ashby, 1 *Amytornis modestus* returned after identification by Dr Lowe" (M. Adams BMNH pers. comm.). Assuming SAMA B1393 was the skin sent to BMNH, it was presumably destroyed when much of Ashby's extensive collection was lost in a bushfire in March 1934 (Condon 1941).

Love (1913) also mentioned seeing a life-like representation of an *Amytornis* carved on stone by a local man, Jim Kite, at Charlotte Waters (25° 55'S, 134° 54'E). Charlotte Waters is on the old telegraph route about 25 km N of Abminga and 10 km N of the SA - NT border. It is interesting to note that this is now the only area in the Northern Territory where *A. modestus* still occurs (Eldridge and Pascoe 2004). It is also encouraging that *A. modestus* is still extant near all of Love and Merrotsy's reported localities from South Australia (Black, Carpenter and Pedler 2011).

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