

Bird Notes

The first specimen record of Short-tailed Grasswren *Amytornis merrotsyi* Mellor, 1913 (Maluridae)

ANDREW BLACK

INTRODUCTION

In September and October 1912 A. L. (Les) Merrotsy took three skin specimens and two clutches of eggs of a grasswren he had observed near Yudnamutana in the North Flinders Ranges (Parker 1982). John White Mellor (1913) recognised the grasswren as new and called it the Chestnut-mantled Grasswren, *Amytornis merrotsyi*, separated from the Striated Grasswren, *Amytornis striatus* by its chestnut crown and mantle, lack of black moustachial stripe, shorter tail and stronger feet. Its English name was unfortunate because Striated Grasswrens from more arid environments further north proved to be even more rufous [though not more 'chestnut'] over the crown and mantle and, by the time grasswrens were next reported from within the Flinders Ranges by Close and Hatch (1971), Merrotsy's grasswren had long been regarded as a Striated Grasswren of no special distinction (Condon 1968/9, Ford and Parker 1974).

Parker (1982) obtained further skin specimens and showed that it was a well differentiated form and worthy of subspecific status. Later Christidis (1999), on genetic and Schodde and Mason (1999), on morphological grounds returned it to full species with the suitable and potentially more enduring name of Short-tailed Grasswren. More recently Christidis *et al.* (2010) went further, showing that it is not even among species genetically close to the Striated Grasswren but belongs to a separate evolutionary

grasswren lineage. Baxter and Paton (1998) reported 'Striated Grasswrens' from the Gawler Ranges and they too proved to be Short-tailed Grasswrens, now recognised as the subspecies *A. merrotsyi pedleri* (Christidis, Horton and Norman 2008).

Amongst archival documents in the South Australian Museum, Adelaide (SAMA) is a list of birds, mammals and reptiles received from the Gawler Ranges in the year 1873. The document named 33 bird species collected by Frederick William Andrews during probably his third collecting excursion to the Gawler Ranges and included one '*Amytis striatus*'. Since Andrews is not known to have collected within the range of the Striated Grasswren population on the southern margin of the Gawler Ranges, that entry suggested that he might have collected a Short-tailed Grasswren.

During the conduct of morphological (Black *et al.* 2010) and genetic (Austin *et al.* 2013) studies of grasswren phylogeny, European Museum Bird Curators and Collection Managers were approached for information about any early *Amytornis* specimen in their collections.

Dr Konrad Schwartz (*in litt.* 27, 29 February 2012) responded from Staatliches Museum für Naturkunde, Stuttgart that their collection contained a male specimen (9398) of '*Amytornis striatus*' from South Australia, obtained in 1883 through the Basel trader Gustav Schneider, a



Figure 1. Lateral view of the mounted grasswren specimen from South Australia 1883 in Staatliches Museum für Naturkunde, Stuttgart. (K. Schwartz)



Figure 2. Dorsal view of the Stuttgart grasswren specimen, showing rich red-brown coloration and strong almost black streaking. (K. Schwartz)

former taxidermist in Wiesbaden and Stuttgart and natural history conservator in Basel. Evidence for the identity and provenance of this specimen will now be examined.

The specimen

Dr Schwartz forwarded several images of the specimen (Figures 1, 2) which can be readily identified as a male Short-tailed Grasswren, *A. merrotsyi*. It is distinguished from Striated Grasswren by the following: absence of black moustachial or malar stripe, strong rufous dorsal tones with dark streaking, breast streaks

extending to the throat, short tail (two independent measurements 62 and 63 mm - range 60-70 mm for Short-tailed, 77-90 mm for male Striated Grasswren) and heavier bill (Schodde and Mason 1999). The specimen is strongly striated from chin to breast and its rich red-brown dorsal tone with almost black streaking are both characteristic of the Gawler Ranges subspecies (Christidis, Horton and Norman 2008).

Provenance

During the early years of the South Australian Institute Museum (SAIM, forerunner of SAMA) its collections were intended primarily for public education with an emphasis on the exotic. The Board and the museum's first Curator, Frederick George Waterhouse, therefore valued its collectors for their ability to provide local species as 'duplicates' for exchange with collections in other colonies and overseas (Hale 1956).

When Waterhouse retired in 1882, his successor Wilhelm Haacke continued the practice and, late in that year, reported to the Board that he had arranged to exchange nearly all of the museum's 1,000 or so duplicates with Gustav Schneider of Basel, whose collections "from all parts of the world" were "identified by first class specialists" (Horton, Black and Blaylock in prep.). There is little room for doubt that the historically unique Stuttgart specimen is the Gawler Ranges Short-tailed Grasswren taken by F. W. Andrews in 1873.

DISCUSSION

Because the SAIM's early collections were intended for public display they suffered from exposure and insect attack and almost all bird skins were discarded in the years immediately following Waterhouse's retirement in 1882 (Hale 1956). After their star collector and competent

ornithologist, F. W. Andrews, died in 1884 much scientific information about local species was lost and therefore unavailable in 1899 to the founding members of the South Australian Ornithological Association, including J. W. Mellor, its foundation Secretary. Three other grasswren species had already passed through the SAIM. Striated Grasswrens were sent to E. P. Ramsey and George Masters in Sydney and Eli Waller in Brisbane in 1867-68, their place of origin and collector being unknown, and Andrews collected at least five Western Grasswren, *Amytornis textilis myall*, specimens in the Gawler Ranges between 1871 and 1873 (Horton, Black and Blaylock in prep., Black 2014). Even earlier Governor George Grey sent a presumed Thick-billed Grasswren to the British Museum in 1843 (Sharpe 1883) and Frank Gibson sent a specimen of that species to SAIM from Edeowie in the North Flinders Ranges in 1869 (Black 2014).

The Stuttgart grasswren's initial identification on its label was '*Amytornis textilis*' but this was later amended to '*striatus*'. Perhaps the former name was provided by Schneider and, by implication, also by Haacke, despite Waterhouse's and/or Andrews' appreciation that it differed from examples of '*textilis*' that Andrews had provided. While those two species are very distinct, not all early workers identified them correctly. A Thick-billed Grasswren sent from the SAIM for the Paris 1878 International Exhibition was listed as a Striated Grasswren (Black *et al.* 2013) and John Gould himself (1840-1848, 1865) misidentified Lesson's (1831) illustration of a Western Grasswren as a Striated Grasswren. Furthermore all grasswrens were likely to be identified at the time by reference to Gould's (1840-1848, 1865) flawed taxonomy of the genus, based on collections from only three general localities; inland northern New South Wales (*A. striatus* and '*A. textilis*' [= *modestus*]), Shark Bay, Western Australia (*A. textilis*) and the southern interior of Western Australia ('*A. macrourus*' [= *textilis*]).

Waterhouse sent several collections of bird specimens to Gould for identification, including

some of the 55 species F. W. Andrews collected while a member of the Lewis Lake Eyre Expedition of 1874-1875. One of those was the Eyrean Grasswren, *Amytornis goyderi* (Gould 1875). It was therefore the fifth grasswren species to pass through the SAIM in less than a decade but the material was dispersed, rather than brought together for taxonomic review by Gould or by any other person.

Andrews' specimen of the Gawler Ranges Short-tailed Grasswren, taken in 1873, preceded Merrotsy's discovery in the Flinders Ranges by 39 years and his record came over 120 years before any other report of the Gawler Ranges population.

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Andrew Black
South Australian Museum
North Terrace
Adelaide, South Australia 5000
abblack@bigpond.com