

Bird Note

Evasive behaviour by a female Plains-wanderer, *Pedionomus torquatus*, on the Birdsville Track, South Australia

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INTRODUCTION

The Plains-wanderer, *Pedionomus torquatus*, is a nocturnal, well camouflaged and wary bird that is almost impossible to detect during the day (Parker *et al.* 2015) and all of our previous observations of this species have been at night while spotlighting. Nevertheless, fortuitous exceptions occur during the day and this note documents the evasive behaviour of a female Plains-wanderer observed in bright sunlight at 9.00 am on 25 September 2010 along the



Figure 1. Location of sighting of female Plains-wanderer on the Birdsville Track showing the wheel ruts into which the bird moved before returning to the western side of the track.

Birdsville Track in the far north of South Australia (SA).

The location is illustrated in Figures 1 and 2 (all photographs by CR). The rough condition of the track and the green vegetation in this desert region were caused by 50 to 200 mm of rain falling across outback SA in the three months prior to the sighting (BOM 2010).

OBSERVATIONS

That morning, while driving slowly north along the Birdsville Track, we saw what was thought to be a quail on the western side of the track. When stopping to get a better look with binoculars we realised that it was not a quail but a female Plains-wanderer. The bird seemed aware of our presence, so we remained in the vehicle and waited. After a short interval it walked into the centre of the track and crouched down in some deep wheel ruts produced when the track had been wet (Figure 1). After a few minutes the bird then walked back to the western edge of the track and into the vegetation (Figure 2), inducing us to drive up and exit from the vehicle while keeping the bird in sight as it moved away amongst the vegetation.

On leaving the vehicle we began to photograph the bird as it walked purposefully away, but after about a minute it disappeared under the vegetation and remained out of sight despite our attempts to discover where it was hiding. A sequence of photographs taken just before it disappeared illustrate the secretive behaviour of this Plains-wanderer.



Figure 2. Habitat where the female Plains-wanderer was photographed on the Birdsville Track

It was initially upright when walking away from the edge of the track amongst the vegetation (Figure 3) and proceeded for several metres before adopting a crouching posture (Figure 4). Almost immediately after crouching, the bird veered to its right and quickly pushed its way under a small shrub (Figures 5 and 6). By the time the bird was in the position illustrated in Figure 6 it was effectively lost from sight through the camera lens. Whether it continued to snuggle further under the shrub is unknown as that was the last photograph taken before it was lost from view.

In attempts to re-locate the Plains-wanderer we walked beyond where it was hiding, but once past its presumed location by at least 10 paces



Figure 3. Female Plains-wanderer walking away from the observers with upright posture

we fortunately looked to the rear and saw that it had emerged behind our backs and was walking away from us across much more open habitat. It was again photographed (Figure 7) before once more disappearing into dense vegetation along the track edge.

We could not find the bird again and were separately searching a more extensive area of habitat when JC flushed another Plains-wanderer from almost underfoot. Good views of it were gained through binoculars as it flew across the track to land in

more dense vegetation to the east. This bird had the white crescentic wing-patches across the primary feather bases that are diagnostic for species identification, but it lacked the spotted neck collar of the first bird and was judged to have been a male. The search for the birds then extended to both sides of the track until it was deemed pointless to continue, especially as the daytime temperature was rising.

The drive northwards along the track was resumed until a camp-site to the south of Coopers Creek was reached, where, over about two hours that night, at least one Plains-wanderer was heard persistently calling from the blackness of the gibber-plains. The 'mooing' calls heard were confirmed to be those of Plains-wanderer by comparing them on-site with recordings of the species.

DISCUSSION

Observations of Plains-wanderers in daylight are unusual, but our sightings were after good rains that may have increased the activity of the birds in daylight, which was possibly related to breeding. Also, the bird heard persistently calling during the night at another location was strongly suggestive of breeding behaviour. The vegetation inhabited by the female (Figure 2) consisted mostly of ephemeral herbs and shrubs with only scattered patches of grass. This vegetation, although dense in places, was relatively sparse and allowed easy



Figure 4. Female Plains-wanderer adopting a crouching posture



Figure 5. Plains-wanderer in crouching posture preparing to evade detection by hiding under a small shrub



Figure 6. The Plains-wanderer effectively camouflaged beneath the small shrub



Figure 7. Female Plains-wanderer, having tried to evade two observers, walked with an upright posture back into more dense vegetation on the track edge

access for the bird while also offering ample opportunity for concealment, as illustrated in Figures 3-6. The hiding and evasive tactics of this bird also help explain why Plains-wanderers are rarely seen in daylight, for on the approach of an intruder they are liable to squat under vegetation or rely on their cryptic plumage coloration as camouflage and may only be seen if they are nearly trodden upon.

REFERENCES

BOM. 2010. <http://www.bom.gov.au/jsp/awap/rain/archive.jsp?colour=blkwht&map=totals&year=2010&month=9&period=3month&area=sa>

Parker, D., Antos, M., Baker-Gabb, D. and Kirkwood, J. 2015. Haunting the fields: securing a future for the Plains-wanderer. *Australian Birdlife* 4(3): 24-29.

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