

Bird Note

Olive-backed Oriole in the Far North East of South Australia

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The Olive-backed Oriole, *Oriolus sagittatus*, is an uncommon visitor to South Australia, being generally confined to south eastern regions (River Murray, Mount Lofty Ranges and the South East), as described by Crouch (1970) and indicated in the Field List (SAOA 2008). The species is of regular occurrence in woodlands and forests of eastern and northern Australia and is a partial to regular migrant in south eastern Australia (Higgins, Peter and Cowling 2006), moving north in autumn after breeding and returning south in spring.

On 11 May 2015 the senior author (SB) was conducting a butterfly survey on Pandie Pandie Station. At approximately 1030, while walking slowly along the banks of the Diamantina River near the colloquially named 'Double Bluff Waterhole' (26°16'S, 139°24'E; ca 15 km S of Pandie Pandie Homestead), her attention was attracted to a very vocal group of White-plumed Honeyeaters, *Ptilotula penicillatus*, above the observer in a mature Coolibah, *Eucalyptus coolabah*. The focus of the White-plumed Honeyeaters, delivering the mobbing alarm call described in Higgins, Peter and Steele (2001: 888), was a perched Olive-backed Oriole.

SB had a clear view of the bird through Leica 10 x 32 binoculars, and from the throat down the breast to under the tail it possessed dark

streaks on white underparts. The bird was a bit larger and longer in the body than a Grey Shrike-thrush, *Colluricincla harmonica*, also present in the area. The back of the bird was an olive-grey colour, it had a dagger-like, dark-coloured bill and a dark eye, which indicated an immature bird.

After discussing these features of the bird with an experienced bird bander (Mark Clayton, pers. com. May 2015) it was determined that the bird must have been less than three years of age. The bird did not call but flew off along the riparian vegetation, moving from tree to tree with an entourage of White-plumed Honeyeaters following it.

The vegetation along the river at this site was dominated by Coolibahs to 9 m tall, with Queensland Beantree, *Bauhinia gilva*, and Broughton Willow, *Acacia salicina*, as sub-dominant low trees. Other perennial shrubs present were Lignum, *Muehlenbeckia florulenta*, River Cooba, *A. stenophylla*, Creek Wilga, *Eremophila bignoniiflora*, Whitewood, *Atalaya hemiglauca*, and Ruby Saltbush, *Enchylaena tomentosa*. Modest amounts of the mistletoe *Amyema preissii* were growing on some Broughton Willows, and fruits of this species and Ruby Saltbush were the only fleshy fruits noted. These species are typical components of riparian environments in the Channel Country sections of the major rivers in the Lake Eyre Basin including the upper reaches of the Diamantina River and Cooper Creek in South Australia. Nomenclature follows Barker *et al.* (2005).

The Olive-backed Oriole eats a wide range of invertebrates and fruit, and has been recorded (Higgins, Peter and Cowling 2006) eating fruits

of mistletoe and native cherry, *Exocarpos* sp, the latter being in the same family (Santalaceae) as the Plumbush, *Santalum lanceolatum*. Although Plumbush was not recorded as fruiting around Double Bluff Waterhole, it was fruiting along other parts of the Diamantina River visited during the survey, and would be a likely food source for migrating orioles in this region.

The observer is very familiar with Olive-backed Orioles as the species is a regular breeding summer migrant in the Australian Capital Territory and is frequently seen in and around Canberra where she lives. An oriole, presumably the same bird, was also seen in close proximity at about the same time (but independently) by Dr Jake Gillen, who is also familiar with the species from Canberra.

We are aware of one previous documented record of this species from the north of South Australia, that of a bird seen in riparian Coolibah woodland at Tirrawarra Waterhole, Cooper Creek, in September 1982 (Pedler 1984).

The species is known from western New South Wales and south western Queensland (Pedler 1984; Higgins, Peter and Cowling 2006), but occurrence in the Far North East and adjacent arid regions in these two eastern States would appear to be by vagrants (e.g. SAOA 2008), judging by the few records in the online Atlas of Australian Birds (noting the possibility of misidentifications and other errors in this and other atlas schemes, e.g. Robertson, Cumming and Erasmus 2010). There are two records west of Windorah and south of Boulia in south west Queensland and two records in the Bulloo Overflow region of western New South Wales; there are also two Atlas records in the Marree-lower Strzelecki Track region. However, one of the South Australian Atlas observations appears to be attributable to a date, locality and observer: 20 August 2000, MacDonnell Creek crossing of Strzelecki Track, K. and L. Fisher (Eremaea eBird).

Given the species' migratory status it is tempting to speculate that orioles in arid Australia may be passage migrants, and attribute Pedler's September and the Fishers' late August observation to southward bound individuals and the current observation to a bird moving north. The major rivers of the Lake Eyre Basin and those in north western parts of the Murray Darling Basin seem to offer the only habitat suitable for the species in the arid zone, and migrating birds may use these corridors to forage in and move along through otherwise inhospitable terrain. The same considerations would apply to a wide range of mobile landbird species that typically inhabit woodlands and forests in more mesic parts of Australia (see also Reid, Badman and Parker 1990; Woinarski *et al.* 2000).

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