

Bird Note

Tawny Grassbirds in the Far North East of South Australia

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INTRODUCTION

The Tawny Grassbird, *Megalurus timoriensis*, has a tropical Australasian distribution extending north to Wallacea and the Philippines (Higgins, Peter and Cowling 2006). Within Australia there is one subspecies recognised, *M. timoriensis alisteri*, that has a typical Torresian distribution apart from a few extra-limital records in Bass Strait (Blakers, Davies and Reilly 1984) and in the arid south west of Queensland (McFarland 1992; Jaensch *et al.* 2013); generally, the species has a near coastal distribution from the Kimberley, Western Australia, across northern Australia, and south to the Illawarra region, New South Wales.

Taxonomically the species' generic status and knowledge of its closest relatives are in flux, following a genetic reappraisal of the family Locustellidae by Alström *et al.* (2011) and of the superfamily Sylvioidea by Alström, Olsson and Lei (2013). Formerly, the two Australian grassbirds were placed in the family Sylviidae by Higgins, Peter and Cowling (2006), and then in Megaluridae by Christidis and Boles (2008) along with the songlarks, *Cinclorhamphus*, and Spinifexbird, *Eremiornis*. This clade was retained (largely) as a monophyletic group by Alström *et al.* (2011: Figures 2 and 3), sister to African members of the genera *Schoenicola* and

Bradypterus (but north Asian *Megalurus pryeri* was grouped with Asian-Palaearctic members of *Locustella*). However, the five Australian species, all placed in the family Locustellidae with the genera mentioned above, are now referable to the genus *Megalurus* according to Alström *et al.* (2011), based on analyses of five independent sections of DNA, since the old genera do not reflect closest (sister) relationships within the group. Considering the Australian species, Little Grassbird, *M. gramineus* and Spinifexbird are each other's closest relatives in one sub-clade, while in a second sub-clade Tawny Grassbird and Rufous Songlark (formerly *C. mathewsi*) share closest affinities and Brown Songlark, *M. cruralis*, is sister to them.

With that shake-up sorted, I describe recent observations of the Tawny Grassbird from the Cooper and Diamantina drainages in the Far North East of South Australia, the first in this State.

OBSERVATIONS

At ca 1400 on 13 June 2013, on the southern bank of Cullyamurra Waterhole (27°42.09'S, 140°50.29'E), Cooper Creek, 11 km ENE Innamincka township, I heard a Tawny Grassbird calling next to me in a large clump of Lignum, *Muehlenbeckia florulenta*. I was familiar with the species' skulking habits and contact calls from observations made in Diamantina National Park, western Queensland, two months earlier. Only brief, partly obscured, glimpses could be obtained of the individual at a distance of ca 3 m with binoculars, but the rufous-brown cap, pale unstreaked front, and mottled 'sparrow-like' back pattern typical of both Australian species of grassbird were noted. The bird was noticeably

larger than a Little Grassbird which I had seen a week earlier in an urban Canberra wetland, and was closer in size to the locally abundant White-plumed Honeyeater, *Ptilotula penicillata*, and much larger than fairy-wrens, *Malurus* spp., I had seen nearby that afternoon. The large broad tail of the bird was half-cocked in the Lignum.

A second bird at this locality then called from the channel margins in a dense fringing bed of Pale Knotweed, *Persicaria lapathifolia*. Dense beds of Pale Knotweed that extend over the channel's surface was the preferred habitat of up to 10 birds seen in Diamantina National Park on 13-15 April 2013. The second individual also made a few contact calls – single clucking notes different to the harsher churring notes of the Little Grassbird's contact call – and this bird was briefly glimpsed twice without seeing any plumage details.

Habitat here comprised large shrubs of Lignum a few metres above the water's edge along the steep banks, semi-continuous beds of knotweed on the water's margins, and tall overtopping River Red Gums, *Eucalyptus camaldulensis*

(Figure 1). No further time was available to conduct a more extensive search at Cullyamurra Waterhole.

Approaching dusk the same evening I investigated similar habitat along the southern bank of Cooper Creek near the Innamincka Causeway (27°44.60'S, 140°44.06'E), and heard two birds calling in tall dense Lignum beds *ca* 50 m back from the water's edge.

On 14 June 2013 between 0645 and 0745, I returned to this location between 100 and 200 m downstream of the causeway, hoping to hear the birds sing at dawn. No songs were heard but four to five birds were heard giving a few contact calls and two were briefly glimpsed, one in Lignum 20 m from the water's edge and one in Pale Knotweed along the water's edge. Two birds were in the knotweed beds, and two or three were in Lignum clumps 5-50 m back from the water.

The habitat here was similar to that described above but more open, there being additional minor channels immediately to the south of the



Figure 1. Habitat, showing Pale Knotweed and Lignum under River Red Gum at Cullyamurra Waterhole, April 2012. Water level 1-2 m higher than in June 2013.

Image Henry Mancini



Figure 2. Floodplain 300 m E Burts Waterhole, Goyder Lagoon, 14 May 2015 Image Suzi Bond

main channel. River Couch, *Cynodon dactylon*, provided the dominant ground cover between the several runnels of Lignum, and there were scattered clumps of native grasses (including *Pseudoraphis spinescens*), Spiny Sedge, *Cyperus gymnocaulos*, Giant Sedge, *C. exaltatus*, and various herbs (e.g. *Wahlenbergia* sp., *Sesbania cannibina*), the introduced *Solanum nigrum* and a few sub-shrubs (*Enchylaena tomentosa* and *Einadia nutans*). At both localities Coolibahs, *E. coolabah*, grew closely adjacent. Lack of time precluded further survey, but judging by the species' presence at both localities searched, Tawny Grassbirds may have been widespread along this stretch of Cooper Creek.

While surveying birds along the Diamantina-Warburton river system on 14 May 2015, I encountered two or more Tawny Grassbirds in the vicinity of Burts Waterhole (26°35'S, 139°9'E), on the north western margins of Goyder Lagoon. Again, I had no clear sightings of the birds, but flushed one from fairly open, low floodplain herbage dominated by the daisy *Centipeda cunninghamii* (Erect or Tall Sneezeweed, Figure 2).

The bird's grassbird appearance and distinctive call, larger size and longer, broader tail than that of the Little Grassbird were noted; the mottled back pattern, smaller size and lack of a chestnut rump distinguished it from a Rufous Songlark. The bird flew into adjacent dense Lignum cover surrounding a small shallow patch of water



Figure 3. Lignum and River Cooba around small waterhole 300 m E Burts Waterhole, Goyder Lagoon, 14 May 2015 Image Suzi Bond

(minor distributary channel feeding the Lagoon, Figure 3), but I could not follow it immediately as I was conducting transect counts of birds.

Later that day, I returned to the small waterhole and sat quietly next to some dense Lignum clumps while a presumed Tawny Grassbird sang sweetly in subsong for *ca* five minutes, only 1-2 m from me. The song of this species, when given in full force, is a spirited, rapid reeling trill (Higgins, Peter and Cowling 2006), quite unlike the sombre two (or three) note, clear whistle of the Little Grassbird. The only time I have heard the full song of the Tawny Grassbird was at Diamantina National Park in April 2013, and by comparison the subsong I heard near Burts Waterhole was more melodious, varied and much quieter and less shrill (subsong not described by Higgins, Peter and Cowling 2006).

I could not see the singing bird apart from an occasional glimpse of shadowy movement in the Lignum's interior, but since the phrases of subsong included at times, and were occasionally interspersed with, the species' short contact notes I was confident about the identity of the species. I have never been able to approach this close to a Rufous Songlark, which in my experience behave very differently from these birds. While I observed Brown Songlark in the green areas of Lignum floodplain east of Burts Waterhole, I did not record Rufous Songlark.

Another one or two Tawny Grassbirds were heard giving the contact call ('cluck') the afternoon before, from dense Lignum beside a tiny waterhole, *ca* 1 km E Burts Waterhole. At the time of this survey, a very small summer flood along the Diamantina River had 'greened up' a small area of floodplain adjacent to Burts Waterhole, perhaps *ca* 10 km² in extent, but flow had ceased. Most of the extensive Goyder Lagoon floodplain had not been inundated.

DISCUSSION

The above observations appear to be the first of this species from South Australia. Given that the Tawny Grassbird is generally confined to within one or two hundred kilometres of the north and east Australian coast (Schodde and Mason 1999), with only occasional reports west of the Great Dividing Range (Blakers, Davies and Reilly 1984; Higgins, Peter and Cowling 2006), these observations merit some discussion.

A Tawny Grassbird specimen was collected in far south west Queensland in 1975 at Nappa Merrie (McFarland 1992) close to the South Australian border. Also in this region Jaensch *et al.* (2013) observed several Tawny Grassbirds in October 2012, around Yetally Waterhole, Cooper Creek, *ca* 100 km ESE Innamincka. Nappa Merrie Homestead is *ca* 40 km NE Innamincka and 80 km NW Yetally Waterhole, while Innamincka is about 1200 km from the Queensland coast. Jaensch and colleagues raised the possibility that the species might colonise Channel Country rivers intermittently, during series of big flood years such as occurred in the mid 1970s and over the period 2009-11. That the species is capable of long-distance dispersive movements is evidenced by an exceptional record from King Island in May 1981, Bass Strait (Blakers, Davies and Reilly 1984).

There were observations of Tawny Grassbird at three localities in the Alice Springs district, southern Northern Territory, in 2011, (records in the online bird data base, 'Eremaea': [http://](http://www.eremaea.com/)

www.eremaea.com/). One observation was made by Chris Watson, an experienced observer, who confirmed (personal communications, May 2013) that he had identified this species and submitted his observation to Eremaea. Alice Springs is *ca* 900 km from the coast at the Northern Territory-Queensland border. Jaensch *et al.* (2013) stated that it remains to be seen whether the Tawny Grassbird sustains populations in arid Australia beyond this immediate period following the 'big wet' of 2009-2012. My observations on Goyder Lagoon of the Diamantina River in 2015 show that the species has persisted a little longer, despite three years of exceptionally dry conditions and small flows along the Channel Country rivers.

Although I only spent one to two hours searching for Tawny Grassbirds in the Innamincka and Goyder Lagoon districts, the behaviour of all individuals encountered was cryptic in the extreme. In no instance did a bird call in a sustained fashion, no songs were heard, and no birds were seen in clear view. If I had not known the contact call I probably would have not detected the species' presence. For instance, I conducted surveys of riparian birds at Cullyamurra and Minkie (27°44.60'S, 140°44.06'E; 10 km WSW Innamincka) waterholes in April 2012 without detecting the species, but it is likely that I may have overlooked the species if it had been present. Likewise, I did not encounter the species at 14 other sites along the Diamantina and Warburton rivers in May 2015, although there was only suitable habitat (greened-up floodplain and Lignum) at two other sites (around Kooncheri and Tepamimi Waterholes).

The species' cryptic behaviour outside of the breeding season could make it difficult to determine how long Tawny Grassbirds persist in Far North East and Channel Country regions, if indeed the populations are only temporary. It also raises the question whether past occurrences in the Far North East might have gone undetected. Extreme droughts periodically occur in arid Australia and during these

events virtually all ephemeral and herbaceous vegetation disappears from the landscape – under such conditions it seems improbable that the Tawny Grassbird could survive given its preference for habitats dominated by rank grass, sedges and other dense undergrowth (Higgins, Peter and Cowling 2006). However, with the establishment of permanent wetlands containing suitable habitat in arid Australia, such as sewage treatment works in Alice Springs and Artesian Basin-fed wetlands at Birdsville, there may be scope for this and other species to have a more regular presence in arid regions.

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