

Further early records of the Galah in Central Australia support evidence of its distributional expansion into new territory

ANDREW CROUCH

INTRODUCTION

Black *et al.* (2018) reviewed the pre-European distribution of the Galah *Eolophus roseicapilla*, noting that the species was not established in South Australia, except in the far north-east, or in any but the northern and north-eastern fringes of Central Australia before 1900.

An earlier prevailing view of the modern distribution of the Galah was that it was a bird of the inland that had expanded coastwards in response to the provision of new permanent water and crop seed sources by Europeans (Rowley 1990; Johnstone and Storr 1998; Higgins 1999). However, Aboriginal language groups in Central Australia and most of South Australia did not have their own names for the Galah, strong evidence against its presence in their country. This accords with early European failure to find Galahs in colonial South Australia, or in Central Australia before Europeans became firmly established there. Thus, a more complex, but still incomplete picture has emerged through the combining of several sources of information, including reference to subspecies (Schodde and Mason 1997) and genetic haplotype distribution (Engelhard *et al.* 2015; Black *et al.* 2018).

Australia's 19th Century explorers provide a valuable primary source of early information about the country's flora and fauna, their records being particularly helpful in allowing comparisons to be made between distributions and populations then and now.

Central Australia is nominally the Northern Territory from the South Australian border up to about Barrow Creek (21° 30' S). Well to the

north, on Stuart's successful 1862 crossing of the continent, Frederick Waterhouse (1863) had first recorded Galahs at Howell Ponds, latitude 17° 04' S. Later, in 1879, Winnecke (1882) recorded them east of Tennant Creek, latitude 19° 03' S. The earliest reported sighting at the fringes of Central Australia was by surveyor Barclay (1878) near the Jervois Range about 260 km north-east of Alice Springs in 1878.

This note provides information on two additional historic records from north of Alice Springs in Central Australia.

NEW RECORDS

1. Thomas Smith – Stirling River, July 1871

Thomas Smith had arrived in Adelaide from England as a young man in 1860. He worked in a range of jobs and later travelled north to Central Australia as a member of the construction party for the Overland Telegraph Line from 1870-1872. He was a keen observer of the new flora and fauna and kept a detailed diary throughout his two years working on the Line. By the time the construction work had advanced to the Stirling River (or Creek) 200 km north of Alice Springs, Smith was nearly a year into his journey. He recorded (Smith n.d.):

Thursday, 27th July [1871] Saw plenty of wild turkeys, kangaroo and a new kind of cockatoo, slate coloured with red breast and crest. They look pretty flying in the sun. They are busy building. They have nests in hollow trees, and live upon seeds. They are call (*sic*) Gallars.

Thus, until this point, at around 21° 45' S, 133° 45' E, Smith had not seen any Galahs, in travelling north from Adelaide through the length of South Australia and 470 kilometres further north into the Northern Territory.

The significance of the sighting is that it corroborates evidence that Galahs were absent further south but were beginning to extend into and breed in areas where they had been unknown to its Aranda-speaking inhabitants before European settlement (Black *et al.* 2018).

2. John McDouall Stuart – 250 km N Alice Springs, May 1860

Another example supporting this southward expansion has emerged from a close review of Stuart's 1860 inland expedition. The record was ambiguously referenced by Gammage (2009) and evidently overlooked by Black *et al.* (2018). On this, the first of his three expeditions to penetrate north of the South Australian border, Stuart (1865: 114) referred in his journal to an observation on 13 May 1860 about 55 km north-west of Central Mount Stuart and 250 km north of Alice Springs, at around 21° 39' S, 133° 11' E:

In this small flat we shot a new macaw, which I shall carry with me, and preserve the skin, if we get to water tonight. The front part of the neck and underneath the wings are a beautiful crimson hue, the back is of a light lead colour, the tail square, the beak smaller than a cockatoo's, and the crest the same as a macaw's. After leaving this flat, we passed through some scrub, and came upon another of the same description.

Stuart's description leaves no doubt that this was a Galah. He had seen Major Mitchell's Cockatoos *Lophochroa leadbeateri* twelve days earlier but called them the 'rose-coloured cockatoo', ironically a name for Galah at the time and a pervasive cause of confusion over early records (Black *et al.* 2018). Apart from the colouration, the use of the general description 'a new macaw'

suggests something more like a parrot than a cockatoo, and the 'crest the same as a macaw's' suggests that the crest is understated, so these were not Major Mitchells. His choice of 'crimson' and 'rose' to describe the hues that we would now offer as shades of pink reminds us that the descriptive names for colours have varied over time.

This appears to have been the first time Stuart had seen a Galah in his extensive travels, during which he had covered much of northern South Australia, although he had been on the 1844-45 Expedition with Sturt, who encountered Galahs at Depot Glen in New South Wales and on the Cooper Creek and Diamantina River (Sturt 1849).

On his sixth and last expedition Stuart appears to have seen no Galah until 500 km farther north, at Howell Ponds on 28 April 1862, this time referring to it as a cockatoo. That locality was where Waterhouse (1863) saw his first Galahs and he might have advised Stuart that the use of the term macaw was not entirely accurate.

CONCLUSION

Both records support the evidence that Galahs were beginning to appear irregularly in Central Australia between 1860 and 1900, chiefly at the periphery (Black *et al.* 2018). Other inland travellers painted a similar picture but it was only at the end of that period that the name Galah, from the Ngiyampaa language group of central New South Wales (Gammage 2009), was formally adopted, hence the widely varied spelling to be found in individual reports.

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Andrew Crouch
PO Box 673
Hove, SA 5048
andrew@crouchfam.com