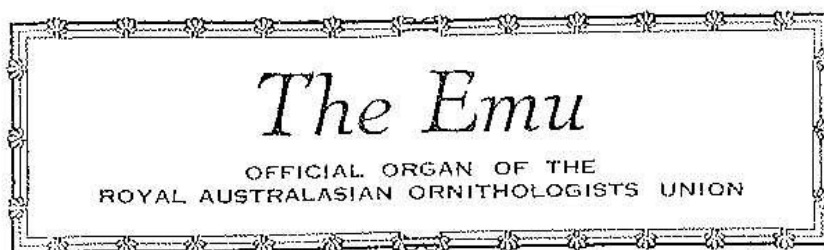


White-breasted Whistler  
*Pachycephala lanioides*

Upper: Male; Lower: Female

Neville W. Cayley, pinx.



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## The White-breasted Whistler

(*Pachycephala lanioides* Gould).

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An inhabitant of the mangrove swamps of the north-western and northern coasts of the continent, ranging from Carnarvon to the Gulf of Carpentaria, it is little wonder that first-hand information regarding this species is not plentiful. It was described by Gould (*P.Z.S.*, Lond., 7, p. 142, 1839) from a single specimen collected in north-western Australia (= Derby). About forty years elapsed before the species was again heard of; then Saville-Kent, on board the H.M.S. "Myrmidon", collected a female at Cambridge Gulf, North-west Australia. In recording this specimen, along with three others, said to have been previously collected at Kimberley, Gulf of Carpentaria, De Vis (*P.R.S.*, *Queensland*, 6, p. 237, 1889) referred them to a new species (*P. fretorum*), and gave the habitat as the "southern shores of Torres Strait". This queer piece of geographical gymnastics, by which Cambridge Gulf, in North-western Australia, and the southern part of the Gulf of Carpentaria, are referred to as the "southern shores of Torres Strait", is, to say the least, misleading. It is even possible that De Vis's specimens came from the Kimberley district of North-western Australia, although there is, or was, a locality named Kimberley, in Queensland, on the Gulf of Carpentaria, near the mouth of the Norman River. Apart from the birds dealt with by De Vis, the most easterly record of the species is Roper River, Northern Territory, where W. McLennan collected specimens for H. L. White.

In the field capable collectors like F. Lawson Whitlock and the late Tom Carter considered this species a typical representative of the genus *Pachycephala*, although Carter has remarked that in its habit of feeding on crustaceans on the sea-shore it is like *Colluricincla*. Apparently the song and the nest, and certainly the eggs and the colour pattern

of the bird, are typical of the genus, and an examination of cabinet material only reveals a difference in size, the present species being larger, the bill noticeably so. Because of this larger bill, and the fact that the nestling is not entirely red, as in the type of the genus (*P. pectoralis*), Mathews has erected the genus *Alisterornis* to contain this single species. With the present state of our knowledge, such separation is unwarranted. The same author (*Birds of Aust.*, 8, p. 258), in quoting the statement by De Vis that the latter's new species (*P. fretorum*) was inferior in size to typical *lanioides*, remarked: "His [De Vis's] measurements did not bear out his statement that it was inferior in size, save as to culmen." Notwithstanding that, Mathews concludes as follows: "The four named subspecies can be maintained." One of the four is *P.l. fretorum* De Vis.

Of the two forms named by Mathews *P.l. buehanani* is given as differing from the typical race in having "the black band on the breast much narrower, and a decidedly smaller bill and wing"; but no specimens are available, however, from Buchanan Island, the type locality of *P.l. buehanani*. *P.l. carnarvoni*, in comparison with *lanioides*, is stated to have a "much thinner bill"; the remainder of the "description" is given over to a statement of the colour of an immature male, which is much darker above, and has the under surface more buff, etc. Surely the variation in colour of the immature of a species, about which little is known, has no bearing on subspecific separation.

A common complaint of overseas ornithologists is that in *The Official Checklist of the Birds of Australia* (2nd Edition, 1926) no attempt is made to state an opinion as to the worth of the many subspecies named. In answer it must be pointed out that workers whose interest lies in that direction are few, but, above all, the necessary collections are wanting. Having the "H. L. White" collection, the National Museum, Melbourne, is possibly better supplied than any other in the Commonwealth; nevertheless, whilst the quality of the collection is excellent, in many instances the number of specimens available will not permit a sufficiently comprehensive survey, so necessary with almost every species on the Australian list. Although hundreds of subspecific names have been proposed by Mathews, at no time did he state the number of specimens examined or give measurements, range, etc., and without that information and a reasonable description, they remain simply names.

The White-breasted Whistler is represented in the "H. L. White" collection by eighteen specimens from the following localities: Carnarvon, Port Hedland, Condon and Cosack, Western Australia, and Roper River, Northern Territory. All skins from Western Australia are similar in size and colouration, including those from Carnarvon. Six

examples from Roper River, however, are decidedly smaller in all dimensions, and there is a difference in colour of plumage, particularly in the females. It would here be easy to propose another name for these six specimens, but that would only add to the confusion. They may be referable to *P.l. fretorum* De Vis (if that name should prove acceptable) or *P.l. buchanani* Mathews. On the evidence available it is probable that there are two valid subspecies of this Whistler—typical *lanioides* on the west coast from Carnarvon, northwards, and a smaller and darker form on the north coast as far east as the Gulf of Carpentaria.

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