

THE REDISCOVERY OF THE BLACK GRASS WREN *AMYTORNIS HOUSEI* WITH ADDITIONAL NOTES ON THIS SPECIES

D. J. FREEMAN

Accepted 2 June 1970

Results of the Harold Hall Australian Expedition No. 27. The previous number in this series appeared in Emu 69: 161-168.

SUMMARY

FREEMAN, D. J. 1970. The rediscovery of the Black Grass Wren *Amytornis housei* with additional notes on the species. Emu 70: 193-195.

The rediscovery of the Black Grass Wren in 1968 by members of the Harold Hall Australian Expedition is described with notes on the locality, habitat and field behaviour of the birds. A juvenile specimen is also described.

In 1901 when F. S. Brockman led a surveying party through the little-known Kimberley District of Western Australia his accompanying Naturalist, Dr F. M. House, prepared 43 bird skins, representing 29 species, one of which was new to science. Milligan (in Brockman 1902), reporting on this collection, said that: 'The new bird belongs to the strictly Australian genus *Amytis* [sic] vernacularly known as the "Grass Wrens" and has the distinctive charm of being the most beautiful form of the genus yet described'. He named the bird *Amytis housei*, the Black Grass Wren. Unfortunately the notes left by Dr House are not detailed enough to allow conclusions regarding numbers and distribution of the bird at that time.

The Black Grass Wren was not recorded again before the fifth phase of the Harold Hall Australian Expedition in 1968. Brockman's official report (1902) was invaluable in our plans to rediscover the species because it includes a map showing the position of his camps. Each is distinguished by the initials FB followed by a serial number. Nowhere does Dr House make any direct reference to the camp(s) from which he collected his three specimens of *Amytornis*, though he does say the bird was 'first found near camp F.B. 25'. This camp has been presumed (see Campbell 1927; Keast 1961) to be somewhere along the Charnley River which flows north-westwards from Rocky Mountain (Fig. 1) through rough broken gorge-country; on Brockman's map it is clearly marked as being further south and on the Isdell River which flows south-eastwards from Rocky Mountain. Our intention was to reach the site of FB 25 and search the surrounding sandstone country. If unsuccessful we would continue further along Brockman's route (camps FB 26-33); for, it was probably along the Charnley River gorge that *A. housei* was again encountered. With the realization

that FB 25 was further south than supposed came the hope that *A. housei* would be found in easier country south-east of Rocky Mountain, and thus save us a difficult journey to the north-west.

On 1 July 1968 Major Brian Booth (Expedition leader), Harry Butler (WA Naturalist with the Expedition) and I set out on foot from a base camp about six km north of the confluence of Barnett River and Manning Creek, leaving the three remaining Expedition members, R. A. Whistler, A. Hiller and C. B. Frith, to collect locally during our absence. We followed Manning Creek north for about 25 km before spending the night some seven km east of the site of Brockman's camp. It was here on 2 July that we found two parties of *Amytornis housei* on a small outcrop that rose out of savanna woodland (ca. 1,660 m) some 300 m east of the creek. We were able to collect four specimens, and decided to abandon our goal of FB 25 because our limited time would now be more profitably spent in studying *A. housei* here. In the following two days we met several parties of up to about six birds and managed to collect three more specimens, including a juvenile. I suspected then, and now do so more strongly, that Camp FB 25 may have been on Manning Creek rather than on either of the two other rivers. The Australian Geographical series 1:1,000,000 map (1963) shows that the source of the Isdell is not as far north as was supposed by Brockman, and that Manning Creek rises further north-west nearer Rocky Mountain. Brockman's mistake could have come about because the local name of 'Upper Isdell' is applied to part of the waterway which in the rainy season probably continues the Manning above its normal source (R. Blythe pers. comm.).

When we returned to the base camp on 4 July we learned that the others had collected four specimens

of *A. housei* within 300 m of the camp, thus inadvertently bringing our total number of specimens to eleven.

The number of sightings during the four days suggests that *Amytornis housei* may be fairly common over a large area of little-known country. In late July we tried, by means of an old beef track, to reach the sandstone area north of Rocky Mountain. Unfortunately, heavy rains prevented us from driving more than 40 km west of Mt Elizabeth towards Walcott Inlet, and no grass wrens were seen.

The stomach and gizzard contents of six specimens have been examined and preserved for further study. They were found to contain mostly insects with small amounts of grass and sedge seeds.

The following notes are based on the behaviour of one party of birds observed at the camp east of FB 25. Observations were made (D.J.F., B.B.) within about 30 m of the birds in a gully in the outcrop. Tumbled rock, spinifex and trees predominated, and the area was well shaded. Four birds appeared from behind the rocks ahead of us. From their plumage (lower breast black in males, in females light chestnut) there were one male, two females, and a juvenile in uniformly dark plumage showing faint white striations. They remained close together while moving steadily towards more open ground. We did not hear them call until they were

alerted. They would chase each other, mostly running, sometimes hopping, round ledges or down little crevices, reappearing close by and always moving ahead. When they came to a dip in the rocky structure, one at a time they glided down about three m and along for some eight m on their small rounded wings. Then the male bird became aware of our presence. He hopped to a vantage point and began calling in an agitated way—loud ticking notes interspersed with grating sounds. Each tick was accompanied by a single flick of the tail and a bobbing movement. At this, the party scattered over a large area, each individual becoming more active. They ran, heads and tails lowered, to disappear into small cracks in the rocks and to scuttle like mice along ledges sheltered by clumps of spinifex. Call notes were similar to those of the blue wrens *Malurus* spp., but harsher and more continuous. The juvenile quickly disappeared from sight, but the adults continued to call excitedly as they scurried through the rocks and spinifex. When we collected an adult female the remaining pair made off across the rocks. They made no attempt at concealment, and both called loudly. The young bird was still hiding nearby, and the adult birds were presumably trying to draw us away from the area. They were unsuccessful and after a short while went to ground. One hour and forty minutes later we heard the juvenile calling, a

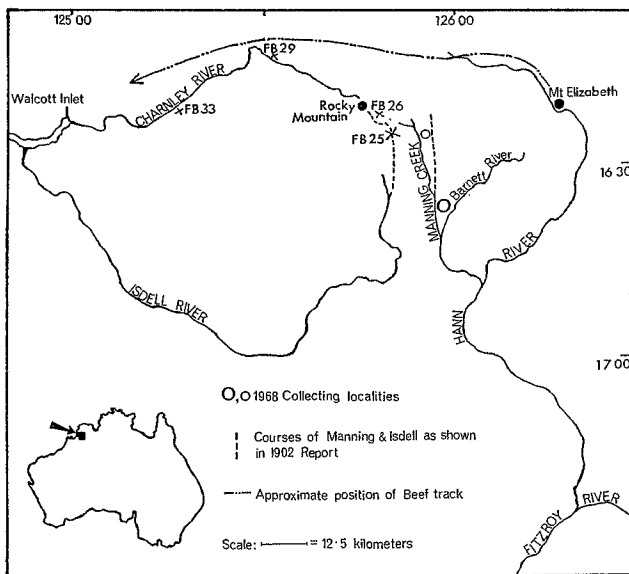


Figure 1. Map of area in which the Black Grass Wren was found.

faint 'peep-peep' followed by a short grating note, about 25 m away at the foot of a rocky incline within the gully. When flushed it ran uphill calling loudly and hiding under anything that afforded protection. In this way it reached the top of the incline from where it broke cover and fluttered unsteadily downhill. At the bottom it ceased calling and hid exhausted under a large sandstone slab where we were able to collect it. In the presence of danger the juvenile had called loudly and continuously but no adult bird responded by making any visible attempt to act as a decoy. On dissection later the stomach and gizzard of the juvenile were empty.

DESCRIPTION OF JUVENILE

Field No. DF 104, Brit. Mus. Reg. No. 1964.4.386. Female, collected 3 July 1968, height 1,700 metres, 8 km, 193°G, from Joint Hill (16° 27'S 125° 56'E), Kimberley Division, Western Australia.

Iris: dark-brown. Legs: dark-grey. Bill: upper mandible, dark-horn (grey); lower mandible, light-horn (grey). Inside of mouth and tongue: yellow. Bare skin of gape flange: light-yellow. Ovary small (2 x 2 mm) with oocytes undeveloped. Cranium of skull showing very little pneumatization.

Tail quills and wings not fully grown. The cream

striations about the head and upper parts are less sharply defined and more suffused with chestnut on the head and hind neck than on throat and sides of face. The chestnut areas, especially the underparts, are duller with the black basal parts of the feathers mainly visible.

A more detailed report on this species will appear in the Report of the Harold Hall Australian Expedition (in prep.) which is being compiled by members of the Bird Room Staff (BMNH).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Special thanks must go not only to those people who took part in the venture, but also to Rachel and Richard Blythe of Mt House Station who showed kindness by supplying food and by sheltering us from violent thunderstorms. Dr R. Melville from the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, London, kindly identified the stomach contents of preserved specimens.

REFERENCES

- BROCKMAN, F. S. 1902. Report on Exploration of N.W. Kimberleys, 1901. Perth, WA.
CAMPBELL, A. G. 1927. The genus *Amytornis*, a review. *Emu* 27: 23-35.
KEAST, A. 1961. Bird speciation in Australia. *Bull. Mus. comp. Zool. Harv.* 123: 306-495.

D. J. FREEMAN, *British Museum (Natural History), Cromwell Rd, London SW 7.*