Does the Black-headed Pardalote *Pardalotus striatus melanocephalus* occur in the Hunter Region?

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Recent observations of Striated Pardalote *Pardalotus striatus* in the north of the Hunter Region have revealed the birds to be intergrades between Black-headed Pardalote *P. s. melanocephalus* and another subspecies. This supports previous taxonomic conclusions and calls into question earlier reports of Black-headed Pardalotes from Taree and elsewhere in the Manning Valley.

INTRODUCTION

The Striated Pardalote *Pardalotus striatus* is widely distributed in Australia. Six subspecies are recognised, which intergrade where they abut (Higgins *et al.* 2002):

- *striatus*, the nominate subspecies, breeding in Tasmania and the Bass Strait islands and migrating to the mainland in the non-breeding period;
- *ornatus*, found in coastal and sub-coastal eastern and south-eastern Australia;
- *substriatus*, widely distributed in central and Western Australia;
- *melanocephalus* (often called the Black-headed Pardalote), occurring mainly in Queensland and northern NSW;
- *uropygialis*, found in much of northern Australia; and
- *melvillensis*, present on the Tiwi Islands.

In the field it can be a challenge to identify a Striated Pardalote to subspecific level. Birds are small and often high in the foliage, making it difficult to discern all the features needed for identification. The recent growth in use of digital cameras by many birdwatchers has made the task easier.

Hunter Region records of the Striated Pardalote

The Striated Pardalote is considered a common bird of the Hunter Region (Stuart 2017). Two subspecies are considered to be resident – *ornatus* and *substriatus*, favouring the eastern and western parts of the Region respectively. There are many sites where they meet (for example, in the Cessnock woodlands and areas around Singleton). There have been several records of them interbreeding (e.g. M. Roderick pers. comm.; P. Alexander pers. comm.) and possibly that is a relatively common occurrence.

The migratory subspecies *striatus* also occurs in the Region. All confirmed records to date have been for the period May to July (e.g. M. Roderick pers. comm.; A. Richardson pers. comm.; Hobbs & Kavaney 1962). Its distribution seems widespread: birds have been recorded in areas around Morisset, Cessnock and Singleton. There are several instances of them associating with one or other of the two resident subspecies.

Black-headed Pardalote

Recently, the distribution of *melanocephalus* was described as 'south to Laurieton' (Cooper *et al.* 2016). Laurieton is ~20km to the north of the Hunter Region boundary. However, in the past, this subspecies has been reported as occurring in the Hunter Region. A well-known early 20th century reference book described the distribution as being 'to the Hunter River' (Cayley 1931, and subsequent editions). In a review of the birds of New South Wales, it was stated that the distribution of *melanocephalus* in NSW was 'south to the Wollomba River' (Morris *et al.* 1981). This is assumed to mean the Wallamba River near Forster as there is no 'Wollomba River' in NSW.

The basis for such descriptions of the distribution is unclear. Just one Hunter Region record containing any detail has been located. A pair was reported nesting near Taree in August 1959 (Hobbs & Kavaney 1962; McGill 1966). The nest was found by A.R. McGill, who showed it to the other two. All three observers apparently were convinced of the identity of the occupants. McGill later noted that the record involved pairs each of *ornatus* and *melanocephalus* birds competing for a

nest hollow, with the latter pair emerging victorious (McGill 1966).

McGill stated he had recorded *melanocephalus* sometimes in the Manning Valley but gave no details other than that they were uncommon in that area (McGill 1966).

Recent Observations

In 2017, birds initially identified as *melanocephalus* were found at two locations in the north of the Hunter Region. One bird was near Old Bar, seen by AS on 1 November 2017. The other bird was at Tea Gardens, seen intermittently for two months from late September (A. Rogers pers. comm.; L. Wooding pers. comm.).

In both cases, four important features of *melanocephalus* (unstreaked black cap, orange eyebrow, red wing spot, broad white wing bar) were clearly discerned in the field, leading to an initial tentative identification as that subspecies. However, close inspection of photographs revealed that both were intergrade birds. In both cases, the dark line below the bird's eye was faintly flecked with white feathers. This feature (flecking) was not obvious in the field. For a true *melanocephalus* subspecies bird the line should be all dark (Higgins *et al.* 2002; R. Cooper pers. comm.; R. Noske pers. comm.; M. Roderick pers. comm.).

Both the 2017 records were accepted by the Hunter Bird Observers Club (HBOC) Records Appraisal Committee as *melanocephalus* intergrade birds (RAC Case No. 502).

DISCUSSION

Given the coastal locations of the two sightings, both birds are suspected to have been intergrades between *ornatus* and *melanocephalus* subspecies. The regional distribution of *substriatus* is unclear; however, there are no confirmed records in the HBOC database from east of Cessnock. Also, a distribution map of Striated Pardalote subspecies, based mainly on museum specimens, shows *ornatus* as the only one occurring on the south-eastern seaboard (Schodde & Mason 1999).

That same map also indicates that *melanocephalus* does not occur at all in NSW or indeed south approximately of Brisbane (Schodde & Mason 1999). The coastal area from Brisbane to about Port Macquarie is indicated on the map as comprising intergrades of *ornatus* X *melanocephalus* and/or *substriatus* X *melanocephalus*.

The 1959 report of a pair of *melanocephalus* near Taree (Hobbs & Kavaney 1962; McGill 1966) therefore seems questionable. The pair was nesting, which should have offered opportunities for close-up views. However, because the observers apparently were limited to using binoculars (no mention was made of photographs being taken), they probably would not have been able to notice features such as the faint flecking below the eye which from photographs revealed the two 2017 birds to be intergrades. Similar comments apply to McGill's report of sightings of *melanocephalus* in the Manning Valley (McGill 1966).

CONCLUSIONS

Previous studies have indicated that the Black-headed Pardalote *P. s. melanocephalus* does not occur in the Hunter Region, but that intergrades with other Striated Pardalote subspecies may be present. Recent observations support this conclusion. Reports from the 1950s and 1960s of *melanocephalus* birds at Taree and elsewhere in the Manning Valley should be considered unconfirmed.

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