

Notes on the Diet of the Noisy Pitta *Pitta versicolor* in New South Wales

The diet of the Noisy Pitta *Pitta versicolor* consists of ground-dwelling invertebrates caught in damp places. Such prey includes insects, slaters, worms, and maggots taken from carrion; large forest snails, whose shells it breaks on anvils, are particularly favoured. It also takes berries and small fruits (Trudgeon 1971, Blakers et al. 1984, Schodde & Tidemann 1986, Strahan 1994). Species identified as prey include snails such as *Helix*, *Hedleyella* and *Sphaerospira*, centipedes, diplurans (Diplura, Japygidae), beetles, grasshoppers, flies, ants, caterpillars and spiders (Barker & Vestjens 1990, Taylor & Taylor 1995, Totterman 1998). The diet of the similar Rainbow Pitta *P. iris* includes skinks and the larvae of wood-boring beetles (Barker & Vestjens 1990). This note presents additional dietary data for the Noisy Pitta in New South Wales, from collections of snail shells at anvils at two sites, and the examination of the stomach contents of three dead specimens.

The stomach contents were examined, microscopically if necessary, and identified by comparison with reference material. Snail shells were identified by the Malacology Department of the Australian Museum.

1. St Ives, north of Sydney (33°42'S, 151°11'E), 8 April 1976 (per ABR): caught by a dog in a backyard that adjoined a wet sclerophyll gully in Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park, and kept alive for three days before it died. Stomach empty, although fed earthworms while in care. Intestine contained the remains of earthworms (presumably reflecting the bird's diet while in captivity), spider (Araneae) and beetle (Coleoptera).
2. Wiangarie State Forest (28°23'S, 153°05'E, now Border Ranges National Park), 10 July 1977, found dead (W. Rohan-Jones): stomach contained the foot of an adult Eastern Yellow Robin *Eopsaltria australis*, many small black millipedes (Diplopoda), one small mollusc (Gastropoda), one spider, one weevil (Curculionidae), one other beetle, ants (Formicidae) and various insect larvae. In the intestine were skin and claws of a Yellow Robin, one millipede and pieces of mollusc shell.
3. Levers Plateau (28°19'S, 152°53'E, now within Border Ranges National Park), 19 July 1977, found dead (A. Jelinek): in the stomach were the remains of a few insects, including a weevil and ants.
4. Dorrigo National Park (30°21'S, 152°43'E), 2 October 1976: I heard a Pitta opening snails at its anvil (which was known to Park staff); upon investigation I saw the Pitta departing, and found pieces of shell belonging to the snails *Hedleyella falconeri* and *Annakelia novae-hollandiae*. *H. falconeri* were collected from rotting logs here; wood was found in the gut of these snails.
5. Near Bar Mountain, Border Ranges National Park (28°28'S, 153°08'E), 27 March 1984: I found the remains of many shells of large rainforest snails, mainly *Hedleyella falconeri* and *Thersites richmondiae*, and one *Pedinogyra rotabilis*, at an anvil. This record is assigned to the Noisy Pitta, as the anvil and shells were too large, and the shell 'midden' too large and concentrated, to be attributed to the Little Shrike-thrush *Colluricincla megarrhyncha* (cf. Totterman 1997, 1998).

Snail shells collected measured: *Hedleyella falconeri* 8 cm wide; *Thersites richmondiae* and *Pedinogyra rotabilis* 5 cm wide; *Annakelia novae-hollandiae* 3–3.5 cm wide. Furthermore, the Noisy Pitta is known to prey heavily on *P. rotabilis* (Shea 1978). The anvil at site 5 is more likely to have been used by the Pitta than the Little Shrike-thrush, or the ground-thrushes *Zoothera* which eat snails (Boles 1988) but have not been reported to use anvils.

The results of this study are consistent with previous information on the diet of the Noisy Pitta, and expand the list of known prey items, especially in terms of the species of snails taken. The results are also similar to those for the Rainbow

Pitta (cf. Barker & Vestjens 1990), including an apparent propensity to excavate rotting logs and to occasionally eat small vertebrates. However, the origin of the Yellow Robin in the Pitta's gut must remain speculative; it could have been carrion.

I thank the National Parks & Wildlife Service staff (named opposite) for the specimens, and Dr W. Ponder and Phil Colman of the Malacology Department of the Australian Museum for identifying the mollusc remains. Many thanks are due to Stephen and Susie Debus for assistance with this note, Bo Totterman for comments on a draft, and John Peter for editing.

References

- Barker, R.D. & Vestjens, W.J.M. (1990), *The Food of Australian Birds 2, Passerines*, CSIRO, Melbourne.
- Blakers, M., Davies, S.J.J.F. & Reilly, P.N. (1984), *The Atlas of Australian Birds*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne.
- Boles, W.E. (1988), *The Robins & Flycatchers of Australia*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney.
- Schodde, R. & Tidemann, S.C. (Eds) (1986), *Reader's Digest Complete Book of Australian Birds*, 2nd edn, Reader's Digest Services, Sydney.
- Shea, M. (1978), 'Land snails of north-eastern New South Wales', *Koolewong* 7(2), 13-17.
- Strahan, R. (Ed.) (1994), *Cuckoos, Nightbirds & Kingfishers of Australia*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney.
- Taylor, P. & Taylor, P. (1995), 'Observations on nesting Noisy Pittas *Pitta versicolor*', *Aust. Bird Watcher* 16, 39-41.
- Totterman, B.G. (1997), 'Little Shrike-thrush preying on snails', *Aust. Bird Watcher* 17, 214-215.
- (1998), 'Seasonal dispersion of Noisy Pittas in northern New South Wales', *Aust. Bird Watcher* 18, 19-25.
- Trudgeon, M. (1971), 'Buff-breasted Pitta notes', *Birds* 5(4), 35-36.

By A.B. ROSE, Associate, The Australian Museum, 6-8 College Street, Sydney, N.S.W. 2000 (present address: 61 Boundary Street, Forster, N.S.W. 2428)