

Watercock *Gallicrex cinerea*: First Australian mainland record

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Abstract. A young Watercock *Gallicrex cinerea* was observed at Coral Bay, in the Shire of Carnarvon, Western Australia, on 24 January 2021. This record has been accepted by the BirdLife Australia Rarities Committee (Case no. 1253), and constitutes the first mainland Australian record for this species.

Introduction

The observation of a Watercock *Gallicrex cinerea* at Coral Bay, Western Australia, on 24 January 2021 represents the first mainland Australian record of this species [accepted by the BirdLife Australia Rarities Committee (BARC), Case no. 1253]. There have been seven previous records accepted by BARC of Watercock from Australia's external territories, including three from Christmas Island in 1999, 2002 and 2011 (Case nos. 283, 346 and 695, respectively), three from the Cocos (Keeling) Islands in 2005, 2010 and 2012 (Case nos. 566, 681 and 740, respectively), and one from Ashmore Reef dating to 2012 (Case no. 773). There are two non-accepted records, both from the Cocos (Keeling) Islands in 2010 (Case no. 681) and 2011 (Case no. 728). There have been several other non-reported records from Christmas Island, including 'a number' reported by local residents from 1972 to 1983 (van Tets 1983) and a single individual in 1982 (Stokes 1988), in addition to claimed records since 2012 from the Cocos (Keeling) Islands that have not yet been submitted to BARC.

The Watercock has a wide range in the oriental region of southern and south-eastern Asia. In Pakistan, India, and Sri Lanka, it is a breeding resident, though its distribution expands and contracts with monsoonal flooding (Ripley 1977). Further east, it is more migratory. In north-eastern China, Korea, and the Ryukyu Islands of Japan, it is mainly a summer migrant, breeding from May to September and occasionally venturing further north. It can be found all year in southern China, the Philippines and much of south-eastern Asia, and has been recorded breeding in Sumatra in December (Taylor & Kirwan 2020). However, it is believed to be mainly a non-breeding visitor to the southern and eastern islands of Indonesia (in the northern winter), including the Lesser Sundas, where it has been recorded from December to May (Coates *et al.* 1997). Vagrants have been recorded in the Australian territories as mentioned above, as well as Kosrae in the Pacific (Buden & McKinlay 2010).

All accepted Australian records to date, bar BARC Case no. 346 (which was from March 2002) have been in November–January.

Observation

On 24 January 2021, at c. 1000 h, CJW observed an unusual bird associating with Little Crows *Corvus*

bennetti at Ningaloo Coral Bay Bayview caravan park (~23°08'33.5"S, 113°46'25.9"E; 1000 km north of Perth). The bird repeatedly thrust its head into the ground of the grassed bank, extracting food in the form of either insects or worms. Twelve images of the bird were taken using a digital camera (Figure 1), and two processed images were uploaded to the iNaturalist website (<https://www.inaturalist.org>) later that day. An identification of Watercock was subsequently suggested by several other users, with CJW concurring.

Ningaloo Coral Bay Bayview caravan park is bordered on all sides by roads, and is ~5 hectares in size. The bird was sighted on a grassed bank near double-storey units, and opposite tennis courts, on the western side of the caravan park. Because of the distance from Perth, and uncertainty regarding how long the bird would stay, the sighting was not followed up by other birders.

Description of the bird and identification

Based on the available images, it was immediately apparent that the bird was a member of the family Rallidae. Structurally, it had a relatively long, slim neck; long tarsi, tibiae, and toes; a robust bill; and a small triangular frontal shield. Its head and neck were largely buffy brown, with a diffuse dark-brown cap continuing down the centre of the nape and hindneck to the mantle. Its bill and frontal shield were a paler yellow. The upperparts were darker brown, with some slaty-grey wing-coverts; the brown wing-coverts were fringed buffy brown. The bird's breast was also buffy brown, with horizontal darker brown bars. The underparts were generally pale; the undertail was more heavily barred. The tarsi, tibiae, and digits were all pale green. The iris was dark brown. Considered in combination, these features confirm an identification of Watercock, which has been accepted by BARC.

Plumage features suggest that the bird was juvenile, and beginning to acquire first-summer (first-alternate) plumage. The undertail-coverts were cinnamon-buff with some barring. Menzie (2014) suggested that undertail-coverts washed with cinnamon-buff and with weak or no barring indicate immaturity, immatures being less barred than adults (Ripley 1977). The presence of partially blue-grey wing-coverts further supports this. According to Taylor & van Perlo (1998) and Rasmussen & Anderton (2005), juveniles tend to be a richer 'fulvous-buff' or 'rufous buff'



Figure 1. The Watercock at Coral Bay, Western Australia, 24 January 2021. Photos: Christine J. Williams

than adults, particularly around the head, where the pale-grey throat and faint supercilium are generally absent. The worn and tatty feathers additionally contribute to determining this bird's age, as these are likely juvenile feathers, which grow quickly on younger birds and tend not to be as strong as adult feathers, and are thus more prone to wear. As the breast feathers are a newer generation than the scapulars, it appears that this bird was moulting from formative (juvenile) to first-alternate plumage, with extensively retained juvenile wing-feathers (David James pers. comm.).

This bird was sexed as male, as the presence of slaty-grey feathers (including some of the wing-coverts and on the rear flanks) rules out the possibility of this bird being female. The broadening frontal shield was also more extensive than would be expected for a female (David James pers. comm.).

Discussion

During the austral summer, Watercocks appear to be regular non-breeding visitors to southern and eastern Indonesia, including the Greater and Lesser Sundas (eBird 2023). All accepted Australian records have also been from the months of November through March; thus the timing of the Coral Bay sighting from January 2021 is not unexpected. Coral Bay is ~1600 km south of the Greater Sundas, a significant but not unreasonable distance compared with the overall length of this species' potential 5000-km migration. Many species of Asian birds have been recorded recently as vagrants on islands off the north-western coast of Australia (including Ashmore Reef, Christmas Island and the Cocos-Keeling Islands: e.g. Stokes 1988; James & McAllan 2014; Clarke *et al.* 2015) and some have also been found on the mainland coast of north-western Western Australia (e.g. Onton *et al.* 2012; Jackett 2024): the Watercock can now be added to that list.

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