

## The Little Grassbird in the Furneaux Group, Tasmania.

By J. S. WHINRAY, Flinders Island, Tasmania.

On the Tasmanian mainland the Little Grassbird *Megalurus gramineus* occurs in "marshes, water-filled ditches and reedy channels" (Sharland, 1958). On King Island, in western Bass Strait, it has been recorded recently in swampy areas (Green and McGarvie, 1971). The recent records for Flinders Island, in the Furneaux Group in south-eastern Bass Strait, were made in the "thickly growing reeds of two lagoons" (Green, 1969).

However the Little Grassbird has been recorded for three small Furneaux Group islands but no comment has yet been made on the difference between this habitat and the usual Tasmanian habitat (White, 1909; Cashion, 1958; Green, 1969; Newman, 1974). Recently I have found Little Grassbirds on seven more small Furneaux Group islands. Here are brief descriptions of these ten islands and notes on the occurrence of the species. Except for Samphire Island, the descriptions are drawn from my unpublished field notes.

Cat Island, about 30 Ha. in area, has a main vegetation of tussock grass which is mainly *Poa poiformis* but includes a broken coastal belt of *Stipa teretifolia*. There is one tiny patch of sand dune shrubs including *Myoporum insulare* and *Olearia axillaris* (both to 2.2m high). There are also two tiny patches of shrubby *Atriplex cinerea* (to 1.2 m). It is a waterless island.

In December 1908 Little Grassbirds "were flushed now and again from the tall grass" (White, 1909) and Cashion recorded them "frequently" between mid January and mid March, 1957 (Cashion, 1958).

Samphire Island, about 2 Ha., is covered by shrubby (to about 1 m) salt-tolerant *Arthrocnemum arbusculum* (D.G.F. Smith, *pers. comm.*). This islet is so low that its soil is probably inundated completely by the sea during gales.

Milledge recorded 12+ Little Grassbirds in March, 1973 (Newman, 1974).

Tin Kettle Island, about 170 Ha., had a main vegetation of tussock grass in 1966. A *Poa* was the main species and there was a broken coastal belt of *Stipa teretifolia*. About one third of the island was covered by shrubs (usually to 2.5 m), that were mainly sand dune species, including *Olearia axillaris* and *Leucopogon parviflorus*. There are two small permanent coastal springs and several tiny seasonal ponds but no reed beds.

The two Little Grassbird specimens that Green (1969) recorded were probably collected in 1968.

Goose Island, about 98 Ha., has a main vegetation of tussock grass. This is mainly a *Poa* species but includes a broken coastal belt of *Stipa teretifolia*. There is a patch of about 8 Ha. of *Lycium ferocissimum* bushes (to about 4 m). As well odd bushes and clumps of it occur elsewhere on the island. The largest of the few other tiny patches of scrub has *Lavatera arborea* (to 2 m)

and *Lavatera plebeia* var. *tomentosa* (to 1 m). The largest of the few small seasonal ponds is about 0.1 Ha. None has rushes or reeds at its margin.

In August 1972 I noticed a few Little Grassbirds in the *Lycium* scrub and in tall herbs at an old garden site. They were plentiful in the *Poa* tussocks.

Little Chalky Island, about 4 Ha., has a main vegetation of shrubby *Atriplex cinerea* (0.2-1.2 m) that covers about three fourths of it. Tussock grass of a *Poa* species covers much of the rest of the island. This island is waterless.

In May 1975 and February 1976 I recorded Little Grassbirds in the shrubby parts where they seemed plentiful because they could be heard calling all the time, and seen occasionally.

Mile Island, about 3 Ha., has a main vegetation of tussock grass of a *Poa* species. About one fourth of the island is covered by shrubby *Atriplex cinerea* (to 1.2 m). The one tiny coastal soak has a cover of low herbs.

In September 1973 and May 1975 I recorded Little Grassbirds in the shrubby parts and estimated that at least ten were present.

Big Chalky Island, about 30 Ha., is about half-covered by tussock grass. This is mainly a *Poa* species but includes a broken coastal belt of *Stipa teretifolia*. Much of the rest of the island has shrubs (0.6-3 m) of mainly sand dune species including *Olearia axillaris* and *Leptospermum laevigatum*. The island is waterless.

In October and November 1972 I recorded Little Grassbirds in the shrubby northern part of the island and estimated that at least thirty were present.

Middle Pasco Island, about 8 Ha., is about half-covered by shrubs. *Correa alba* (to 1 m) covers small areas on the eastern side of the island. In part of the Muttonbird rookery there is *Lavatera plebeia* var. *tomentosa* (to 1 m) over *Rhagodia baccata* (to 0.4 m) but by autumn the die-back of the *Lavatera* gives a lower cover with both shrubs at the same height (0.4 m). Small patches of shrubby *Atriplex cinerea* (to 1.2 m) cover parts of the island. There is a broken coastal belt of *Stipa teretifolia* and in several parts of the island a *Poa* species forms dominant tussocks. This island is waterless.

In April 1976 I saw a few Little Grassbirds in the *Correa* and in the *Lavatera* rookery.

Inner (north) Pasco Island, about 30 Ha., is covered mainly by low shrubs that are usually dominant over a *Poa* species, except in a recently fired section where the shrubs and *Poa* tussocks are co-dominant. The main shrub is *Correa alba* (to 1 m) while *Olearia axillaris* (to 1.3 m) is almost confined to the sandy bay area. There are some small coastal patches of shrubby *Atriplex cinerea* (to 1.2 m). *Stipa teretifolia* tussocks form a broken coastal belt. This island also is waterless.

In April 1976 I saw a few Little Grassbirds in the shrubby area behind the bay.



Roden Island, about 32 Ha., has a main vegetation of *Lycium ferocissimum* bushes (to 6 m) rising above clumps of *Rhagodia baccata* (to 1 m). There is some native scrub on the hill, including *Correa alba*, *Leucopogon parviflorus* and *Leptospermum laevigatum*. The coastal belt of *Stipa teretifolia* tussocks is broken. On the western and southern coasts there are some small patches of shrubby *Atriplex cinerea* (to 1.2 m). The island's one spring flows below high water level on the main sand beach.

In April 1976 I found a few Little Grassbirds in the *Atriplex* scrub on the western coast but the species was not in the *Lycium* area on the northern slope where I worked for eight days during the visit.

Because of all these occurrences the Little Grassbird might be expected to occur on all the small local islands with habitat similar to that described above. Yet it does not, and here are details of two islands from which it is absent. These descriptions are also from my unpublished field notes.

Big Green Island, about 119 Ha., has a main vegetation of pasture of many exotic and native herbs. There is a broken coastal belt of *Stipa teretifolia* tussocks — not *Poa poiformis* as claimed by Norman (1966). The tussock belt covers about 25 Ha. Bushes and clumps of *Lycium ferocissimum* occur in many parts of the island and this shrub also covered about three fourths of the north-eastern point in 1968. There are some tiny seasonal ponds.

Norman (1970) spent almost three months on this island from 1965 to 1968 without recording the Little Grassbird. Nor was it seen during my many visits up to June 1976.

Isabella Island, about 8 Ha., has a broken coastal belt of *Stipa teretifolia* tussocks. Shrubby *Atriplex cinerea* (to 1.2 m) grows in parts of this belt. The inner part of the island has a few small clumps of *Rhagodia baccata* (to 1 m), some patches of *Poa* tussocks and patches of *Scirpus nodosus*. Much of the rest is pasture, of mainly exotic herbs, which has *Urtica incisa* and a *Senecio* species as dominants in parts. The small seasonal pond has a main vegetation of the *Senecio* species while the small rush *Eleocharis acuta* grows around much of its margin.

In four visits between August 1975 and June 1976 I did not record the Little Grassbird.

On ten small Furneaux Group islands the Little Grassbird occupies habitat that ranges from entirely shrubby (Samphire Island) to almost entirely tussock grassy (Cat Island). Most of my records were in shrubby areas but I did not examine all the tussock grass areas. As the records range virtually right through the year, the presence is likely to be constant rather than seasonal or temporary. This habitat is very different from the usual Tasmanian habitat. The absence of the species from Big Green and Isabella Islands is difficult to account for unless the *Rattus rattus* population of the former, and the severe periodic burning that takes place on both islands, make them unsuitable.

I expect the Little Grassbird to be found on many more of the

small local islands, especially on ones that have suffered relatively little interference. As further islands are checked, it might be possible to understand why the species is absent from some of them. Finally I note that the Little Grassbird has not been found on three islands of Hunters Group in south-western Bass Strait (Pinner & Bird, 1974).

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**Multiple feeding by Dusky Moorhens.** Like all rail species, the Dusky Moorhen, *Gallinula tenebrosa* is a shy and secretive bird, and its behaviour is hard to observe. However in public parks with suitable habitat, it loses its shyness and will come to be fed with ducks and Black Swans.

On January 24, 1976, we took a picnic lunch to the northwest corner of the Royal Melbourne Botanic Gardens. Some bread thrown into the water attracted a few Black Ducks and a family party of Dusky Moorhens, consisting of two adults, three or four immature birds and two downy chicks with red and yellow bills. When all the floating bread was gone, the adult male Moorhen climbed on the bank at our feet to pick up a few pieces which had fallen short. He was quite noticeably larger and bolder than the female, and we had ample opportunity to observe the brilliant colour of his legs and feet, bright red and yellow with a vivid green band on each joint. This colouring seems to be restricted to breeding birds as adult birds without young chicks had the legs much duller in colour.

The cock bird picked up a piece of bread but did not eat it. Instead he carried it to the water's edge and passed it to an immature bird which swam up to him. When a second immature bird ar-