

## A Note on the White-bellied Cuckoo-shrike *Coracina papuensis* in the Geelong Area, Victoria

The White-bellied Cuckoo-shrike *Coracina papuensis* is infrequently recorded in the Geelong area. In this note I set out some recent records of the White-bellied Cuckoo-shrike, the frequency of which suggests that the species was a more regular visitor over the last decade than in the previous century. However, field experience in other parts of Victoria with casual and inexperienced bird observers makes it clear that failure to recognise the White-bellied Cuckoo-shrike's distinctive vocalisations has often led to the species being overlooked, or confused with the Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike *C. novaehollandiae* (Conole pers. obs.).

In his regional benchmark publication, Pescott (1983) comments on the White-bellied Cuckoo-shrike:

. . . Mr. Cliff Tingate was responsible for first proving the identity of this species in the Geelong area . . . a bird found at Mt. Duneed in 1946; since then, and particularly in the last 20 years or so, there have been a number of individual records and several sightings of small flocks. It is, of course, only a rare visitor, mainly to the northern parts of the district; in March 1960, a flock was seen near Mt. Rothwell feeding on some large caterpillars that were on the dying box trees, and in July 1972 . . . seven or eight at the Werribee Sewerage Farm . . . There are other isolated observations of solitary birds at the You Yangs and Lara, and from the Inverleigh Common.

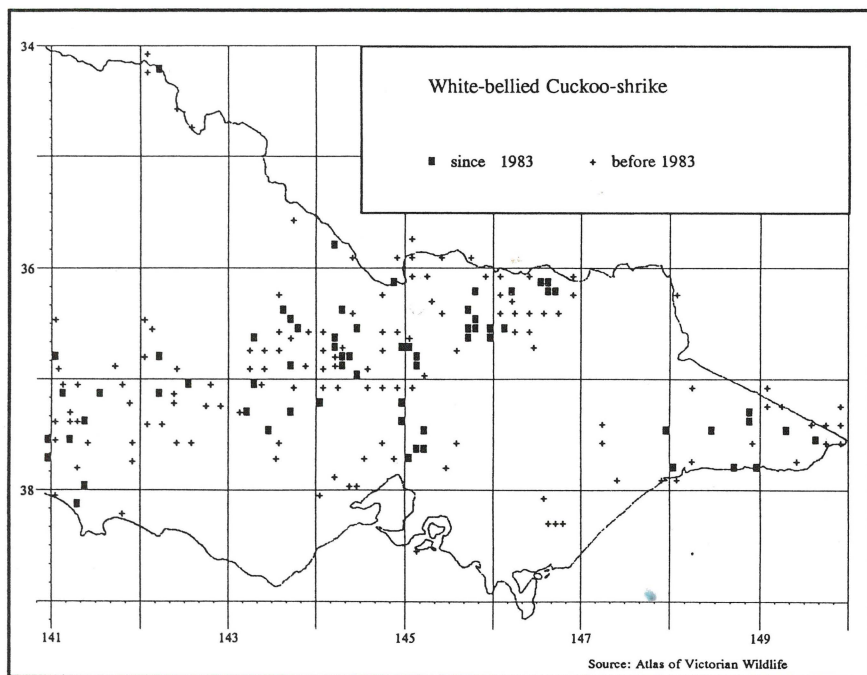
In the period from when records were first kept in the late nineteenth century until 1983, Pescott (1983) listed only six local records of the White-bellied Cuckoo-shrike, although the (unreferenced) record from Werribee in 1972 (Buckingham & Buckingham 1973) was a misidentification of the Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike, which would bring the total back to five. Additional data from the Atlas of Victorian Wildlife (AVW) add a further four records, making nine pre-1983, and these have been added to the AVW since the publication of Emison et al. (1987) which shows no records for the Geelong area. Thomas & Wheeler (1983) considered the White-bellied Cuckoo-shrike to be rather rare but possibly resident just north of Ballarat, about 90-100 kilometres north-north-west of Geelong. From 1983 to 1993 there have been a further nine records, including two breeding episodes (one successful). These records are summarised in Table 1, and the currently recognised distribution of the species in Victoria from the AVW is shown in Figure 1.

Table 1

### Summary of records of the White-bellied Cuckoo-shrike in the Geelong area since 1983.

Date	Location	Lat./Long.	Source
20.5.1986	Batesford	38°06'S 144°17'E	C. Morley pers. comm.
13.12.1986-4.1.1987	Durdidwarrah	37°50'S 144°11'E	L.E. Conole
14.8.1988	Durdidwarrah	37°50'S 144°11'E	L.E. Conole
3.9.1988	Bamganie State Forest	37°53'S 144°00'E	L.E. Conole
17.9.1988	Bamganie State Forest	37°53'S 144°00'E	L.E. Conole
14.1.1989	Durdidwarrah	37°50'S 144°11'E	L.E. Conole
6.9.1992	Queenscliff	38°16'S 144°39'E	Mitchell (1993)
18.1.1993	'Bannockburn Bush'	38°02'S 144°08'E	L.E. Conole
16.5.1993	Mount Duneed	38°15'S 144°21'E	L.E. Conole

These records do not appear in the distribution map (Fig. 1) from the AVW.



**Figure 1.** The distribution of the White-bellied Cuckoo-shrike in Victoria, from the Atlas of Victorian Wildlife. (As at June 1993, and excluding records presented for the first time in this note. Atlas of Victorian Wildlife, Wildlife Section, Department of Conservation & Natural Resources).

In woodland of Swamp Gum *Eucalyptus ovata* on Manna Gum Track, Durdidwarrah, Brisbane Ranges National Park, on 13 December 1986 I made my first local observation of a breeding pair of White-bellied Cuckoo-shrikes. The pair consisted of a normally plumaged bird with black on the face confined to the lores, the 'eastern form' of Slater et al. (1986), and a partly hooded bird. The hooded bird was not as comprehensively black-headed as the illustration in Slater et al. (1986: 211), but had a grey crown and only light barring on the upper belly. The birds' nest was blown down in a storm in late December and I was not able to confirm a successful breeding episode. The birds continued to reside at the site for some time, and my last record was made on 4 January 1987. Observations by Craig Morley (pers. comm.) extend the duration of the birds' stay by about a week before and after my own.

On 14 August 1988, I recorded two White-bellied Cuckoo-shrikes again at the Manna Gum Track site, Durdidwarrah, and both were of the 'eastern form'.

On 3 September and 17 September 1988, I observed solitary White-bellied Cuckoo-shrikes of the 'eastern form' at Bamganie State Forest in Swamp Gum/Messmate Stringybark *E. obliqua* woodland on the southern edge of the state forest. Unlike the birds at Durdidwarrah in 1986/87, I could not be certain that I observed the same individual on the two occasions.

On 14 January 1989, I observed a solitary White-bellied Cuckoo-shrike of the 'eastern form' at the Manna Gum Track site, Durdidwarrah.

On 18 January 1993, I observed a pair of White-bellied Cuckoo-shrikes with a large flying young bird in Yellow Gum *E. leucoxylon* woodland at the 'Bannockburn Bush'. An adult of the 'eastern form' was feeding large green caterpillars (c. 30-40 mm in length) to the young bird, which seemed likely to mature into an 'eastern form' bird judging by its appearance (albeit still in juvenile plumage). The second adult was a hooded bird, although incompletely hooded rather like the Durdidwarrah bird of 1986/87. The hooded bird was not seen to feed the juvenile, but was accompanying it the next day (Grant Baverstock pers. comm.).

On 16 May 1993 I observed a solitary White-bellied Cuckoo-shrike of the 'eastern form' at Stewart's Road Reserve, Mount Duneed. The location is a small grassy woodland streamside reserve of approximately 5 hectares, mostly River Red Gum *E. camaldulensis*, surrounded by farmland.

Other records from the Geelong area include one 'eastern' form bird at the Lilydale House Sanctuary, Batesford, on 20 April 1986 (Craig Morley pers. comm.), and one bird (form not noted) at Queenscliff on 6 September 1992 (Mitchell 1993). Records from the AVW include observations from near Teesdale, Durdidwarrah and the You Yangs before 1978.

Birds identified at Werribee in 1972 as White-bellied Cuckoo-shrikes by Buckingham & Buckingham (1973) were almost certainly immature Black-faced Cuckoo-shrikes; the features '. . . with a black area extending from the bill around and beyond the eye. The upper breast . . . faintly . . . cross-barred . . .' are diagnostic of an immature Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike.

The White-bellied Cuckoo-shrike is an uncommon but regular visitor to the drier woodlands and open forests in the Geelong area, mostly during spring and summer. Records exist for almost all of the major dry forest and woodland blocks to the immediate north of Geelong, but there are few or no records south of Geelong or in wetter habitats respectively. Successful breeding has occurred at least once in the area. On the basis of these recent observations I conclude that it can no longer be considered a rare visitor, just uncommon. Records published here for the first time revise the distribution map for the species, and show it to have an intermittent coastal distribution in south-central Victoria as well as in south-western Victoria and East Gippsland.

I urge observers birding in the Geelong region to scrutinise cuckoo-shrikes carefully and report observations of the White-bellied Cuckoo-shrike, as the species is probably under-reported in this area. Of the field guides currently available, Slater et al. (1986) gives the most accurate and helpful assistance in cuckoo-shrike identification. The vocalisations of the White-bellied Cuckoo-shrike are distinctive, particularly the loud kissing-type sound of the *kisseek* call, and the call is almost always the first indication of the birds' presence. They can then usually be found noisily flapping about in the canopy, feeding largely on larval and adult insects.

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*By* LAWRENCE E. CONOLE, 2/45 Virginia Street, Newtown, Victoria, 3220

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