

A Grey-headed Lapwing *Vanellus cinereus* at Burren Junction, New South Wales: The First Record for Australia

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Summary

A Grey-headed Lapwing *Vanellus cinereus* was observed within the township of Burren Junction, northern New South Wales, on 19 June 2006. Six days later it was relocated at the same site and then observed almost daily by a steady stream of visitors until it was last seen on 7 October 2006. This sighting constitutes the first record of this distinctive species for Australia (Birds Australia Rarities Committee Case no. 442).

Introduction

Burren Junction (30°05'S, 148°58'E) is a small country town situated ~90 km west of Narrabri in northern New South Wales. The region supports relatively intense agricultural production dominated by grazing and cropping activities. As a consequence, the area surrounding Burren Junction supports a mix of croplands, pastures and remnant native vegetation such as saltbush plains and eucalypt woodlands. Water is generally freely available, with numerous farm dams and a network of open irrigation channels in the immediate vicinity. This paper documents the first sighting in Australia of a Grey-headed Lapwing *Vanellus cinereus*, at Burren Junction.

Sightings and description

At 1145 h on 19 June 2006 whilst driving through the township of Burren Junction KD sighted a species of lapwing with which she was not familiar. The bird was standing ~30 m off the roadside in rough grass. After stopping the car she and BD observed the bird carefully. Field notes were taken whilst watching it, and BD was able to obtain several photographs that showed the key field marks well. The lapwing appeared to be agitated by their presence, and when BD left the car to try to obtain a closer photograph, it flew across the road and landed nearby. Further approaches were unsuccessful, and so after ~20 minutes of observation KD and BD left the bird and continued on their way. Upon returning to their home in coastal New South Wales several days later, and still unable to identify the species with certainty but with growing confidence that this was a particularly novel sighting, BD sought the assistance of Brian Everingham. From the photographs provided, BE was able to identify the bird as a Grey-headed Lapwing.

The existence of photographs and the ability to distribute electronic material via the internet meant that news of the sighting spread rapidly on 24 June, and by 0900 h on 25 June several observers including RC had arrived in Burren Junction in the hope of relocating the bird. At ~1245 h, after a considerable search effort, RC along with three others relocated the lapwing on a rough grass strip adjacent to the main road within Burren Junction. This was 6 days after the initial discovery



Grey-headed Lapwing with Masked Lapwing in the foreground within the township of Burren Junction, NSW, 25 June 2006

Plate 27

Photo: Rohan H. Clarke

by KD and BD. The bird remained reasonably site-faithful in the following weeks, and by the time it was last seen on 7 October 2006 it had been observed by more than 300 birders (R. Clarke in prep.).

The bird was a large lapwing similar in size and structure to the Masked Lapwing *Vanellus miles* with which it often associated, but perhaps marginally longer-legged and slighter-bodied, with a consequently more upright stance (Plate 27). A large fleshy growth was present on the right foot, and this was most visible when the bird took flight as the right leg often hung down. This was a striking individual with distinctive and well-defined plumage features. The head and neck were steel-grey, merging to a grey-brown on the mantle and upper breast that extended over much of the dorsum and down to the lower breast. The bird had a white rump and tail, with the exception of a broad black subterminal tail-band. The grey-brown of the breast was bordered on its lower edge by a black band. This band was broadest at the lowest point on the breast and tapered to terminal points adjacent to the leading edges of the closed wings, so formed a crescent across the lower breast from

the carpal joint of one closed wing to the other. The remaining ventral surfaces were clean white with the exception of a small patch of red-brown feathering at the centre of the belly, which was sometimes present and was probably attributable to the similarly coloured local soil. In flight, the spread wing showed a striking bold black-and-white pattern. On the spread upperwing a black triangle was formed by the primaries and the primary coverts, and the secondaries and the outermost secondary coverts formed a white triangle; the remaining secondary upperwing-coverts and tertials were grey-brown, forming a third triangle contiguous with the same coloration on the back. The underwing was white except for the visible black primaries. The bird appeared to be in fresh plumage with no obvious signs of moult. Coloration of bare parts contributed much to its distinctive appearance. The bill was bright orange-yellow on the proximal two-thirds, and the distal third was black. The irides were red-orange and each was bordered by a narrow fleshy orange-yellow eye-ring. Legs were duller orange-yellow, being slightly brighter towards the feet.

Throughout the period that the Grey-headed Lapwing was present it was mostly reported foraging on dry grasslands, but also frequented shallow flooded areas of paddocks, the damp margins of drainage lines and the edge of a large freshwater dam. It was most commonly observed either alone or in the company of Masked Lapwings, but on several occasions it also loosely associated with Banded Lapwings *Vanellus tricolor* and Black-fronted Dotterels *Elsayornis melanops*. The call, given when disturbed or flushed, was surprisingly similar to that of a Masked Lapwing though higher-pitched and with each note given with more urgency.

Identification and additional comments

This description and photographs [Plates 23 (front cover) and 27] clearly identify the bird as a Grey-headed Lapwing: a large lapwing with a uniform-grey head, neck and upper breast, a black breast-band and contrasting black-and-white pattern on the wings. Identification is straightforward, as no other lapwing (or indeed wader) displays similar plumage. From the well-defined black breast-band and the bright orange-yellow bare parts, this bird can be aged as an adult in breeding (alternate) plumage.

The Grey-headed Lapwing is a common migrant within the East Asian Flyway. It breeds in the boreal spring and summer (April to July) in north-eastern China, Korea and Japan (Hayman *et al.* 1986; Takahashi & Ohkawara 2007). The mainland populations are considered wholly migratory, with individuals routinely wintering across a large area of Indochina, from Vietnam in the east to as far west as the Kathmandu Valley in Nepal, north-eastern India and Bangladesh (Hayman *et al.* 1986; Grimmitt *et al.* 1998; Robson 2000). Those in Japan appear to be less mobile, with at least some individuals remaining to winter in southern Honshu (Hayman *et al.* 1986). The species routinely ranges as far south as southern Thailand, with vagrant individuals extending to the Philippines, Peninsular Malaysia, Borneo and Sulawesi (Hayman *et al.* 1986; MacKinnon & Phillipps 1993; Coates *et al.* 1997). The Sulawesi record is the nearest documented occurrence to Australia and relates to a single individual that was collected near Gorontalo, northern Sulawesi in 1869 (Coates *et al.* 1997), just north of the Equator and ~4400 km to the north-west of Burren Junction.

Pfeifer *et al.* (2007) reviewed the occurrence of avian vagrants in central Europe and demonstrated that migratory restlessness and the distance over which a species migrates were determining factors in the likelihood that examples of a

species would occur as vagrants. Their findings added further weight to the reverse migration hypothesis first proposed by Rabøl (1969, 1976), and critically discussed by Gilroy & Lees (2003). The occurrence of a Grey-headed Lapwing at Burren Junction may represent an example of reverse migration whereby the individual has flown south-east rather than north-east to the breeding grounds. Certainly the distances over which this species migrates, the plumage stage of the bird (breeding), and the timing of the occurrence are all consistent with this hypothesis.

Following the unanimous acceptance of this record by the Birds Australia Rarities Committee (Case no. 442, T. Palliser *in litt.*, 12 January 2007), this is the first record for Australia and perhaps the Southern Hemisphere of the Grey-headed Lapwing.

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