

Asian Brown Flycatchers *Muscicapa dauurica* on Ashmore Reef: First Records for Australia

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Summary

Single Asian Brown Flycatchers *Muscicapa dauurica* were observed and photographed on West Island, Ashmore Reef, in the Timor Sea, in each October of three successive years: 2005, 2006 and 2007. The Birds Australia Rarities Committee has accepted all three occurrences (Case nos 509, 542 and 586). To date, West Island remains the only location where this species has been detected in Australian territory.

Introduction

West Island, Ashmore Reef (16 ha) is situated 145 km south of Roti Island, Indonesia. The nearest landfall on the Australian mainland is on the Kimberley coast of Western Australia, ~380 km to the south-east. Despite its proximity to Indonesia, Ashmore Reef is an Australian External Territory situated in Commonwealth waters within the Australian Economic Exclusion Zone near the edge of the Australian Continental Shelf. Of the three low-lying coral cays within the reef, West Island (12°14'S, 122°58'E) is the most vegetated. A narrow fringing strip of Octopus Bush *Argusia argentea* encircles the island above the high-tide mark. With the exception of several small thickets of Octopus Bush and two coconut palms, grasses, herbs and terrestrial creepers (mostly *Ipomea* spp.) characterise the vegetation in the centre of the island.

Bird observers landed on West Island on each annual expedition to Ashmore Reef arranged by Kimberley Birdwatching during the austral spring between 1999 and 2008 (except 2002 when there was no expedition). Single Asian Brown Flycatchers *Muscicapa dauurica* were seen there in 2005, 2006 and 2007. The Birds Australia Rarities Committee (BARC) has accepted all three occurrences, Case nos 509 (Palliser 2008), 542 (Palliser *in litt.* 21 July 2007) and 586 (Palliser *in litt.* 19 May 2009). These constitute the only Australian records of this species. Here we discuss the circumstances surrounding these sightings and the identification of the birds. The initial occurrence is dealt with in detail, and summaries of the two subsequent sightings are also provided.

The 2005 sighting and description

On 29 October 2005 whilst birding on West Island, RHC located a muscicapid flycatcher after it flushed from a dense stand of Octopus Bush and perched nearby. The bird was immediately recognised as significant. All eight observers present obtained excellent views of the perched bird. It was initially quite approachable, but became slightly more wary during the 1-hour observation period, in which time it moved between three clumps of Octopus Bush scattered over an area of several hectares. Observations were made through a range of high-quality optics

including binoculars carried by each observer and several spotting scopes. Notes taken by GS at the time of the sighting were a composite of his observations and dictated description given by both MC and RHC while the perched bird was being scrutinised through a spotting scope. Several photographs were also obtained (Plates 22, 23a). This bird was not found again in the next two days, nor had it been detected on the morning of 29 October or on the previous day, despite thorough searches of the island.

Size and structure

This was a small passerine with an upright stance. Few small birds were present, though there was an Arctic Warbler *Phylloscopus borealis* in one clump of bushes that the bird frequented, allowing size comparisons to be made. The flycatcher was clearly larger than the warbler, perhaps by one-third. It was smaller than a Horsfield's Bronze-Cuckoo *Chalcites basalis* seen just before the sighting. Relative to other species, it was thought that the bird closely approximated the size of a Jacky Winter *Microeca fascians*, but was perhaps fractionally larger.

Plates 22 and 23a show well the structure, and the upright stance when perched. The bill was neither noticeably long nor short, appearing proportionate for a passerine of this size. It was relatively narrow in the vertical plane but, as is typical of this group, was broad at its base in the horizontal plane. Length of the bill (bill tip to forehead) was approximately equal to the distance between the anterior edge of the eye and the point where the forehead met the upper mandible (Plate 22). Small dark rictal bristles were noted in the field. At rest, the wings reached to beyond the base of the tail. The primary projection (tip of longest tertial to tip of longest primary) was shorter than the tertial projection (tip of longest greater covert to tip of longest tertial). From the photographs, the primary projection was estimated to be two-thirds of the tertial projection; measurements obtained from the best image revealing proportional structure result in a value of 72% (Plate 22) (see also Alström & Hirschfeld 1991). The tail was moderate in length, with a slight cleft in the tip (Plate 22).

Plumage

This was an essentially grey-and-white bird. Dorsally from the crown to the rump and uppertail-coverts the bird was uniformly grey, with a dull olive-brown wash. Greater coverts were slightly darker centred and paler fringed than the mantle, with evidence of even paler tips to some greater coverts. Remiges were dark grey-brown. Tertials were narrowly, yet prominently, fringed off-white on the leading edges. In contrast, primaries were dark and unmarked. Rectrices viewed from above were dark grey-brown (though a little paler than the remiges), with indistinct paler fringes. Ventrally the bird was pale grey to white. It showed pale-cream lores, each commencing as a narrow wedge at the base of the upper mandible and broadening to about two-thirds of the width of the eye immediately adjacent to the eye. Although the lower half of each cream lorel wedge was dusky, it was not distinctly two-toned. Another prominent feature was a broad cream eye-ring. Although considered fairly uniform in width when viewed in the field, the photographs show that the eye-ring was slightly broader posterior to the eye. Feathering on the lower jaw (a submoustachial streak) was pale grey, bordered above by a dark moustachial streak and below by a grey malar stripe (for terminology see Mullarney *et al.* 1999: inside cover & p. 313).



Dorsal view of Asian Brown Flycatcher perched in Octopus Bush, West Island, Ashmore Reef, 29 October 2005: the first record for Australian territory. This image was taken when the bird was lightly shaded by overhanging foliage.

Plate 22

Photo: Rohan H. Clarke

The chin and throat were off-white. An off-white crescent bounding the lower throat projected into the grey on the sides of the neck. Below this pale crescent the upper breast was diffusely speckled grey, merging into broader and more uniform grey patches on the sides of the breast. This grey plumage extended onto the flanks, but the centre of the lower breast, belly and vent were white to off-white. The undertail-coverts were white and unmarked.

Lighting had a significant effect on the bird's appearance. When bathed in bright sunlight, several features, particularly markings on the breast and throat, appeared bold and contrasted strongly with adjacent feathers. However, in low-light conditions, as when perched under the canopy of a thick stand of Octopus Bush, the bird was substantially more uniform in appearance. This variation was so striking that at the time there was some debate as to whether two individuals were involved. Subsequent scrutiny of the photographs, however, indicates that the same bird was involved throughout the observation period.

Bare parts

Legs and feet were dark grey, except for the posterior of each leg, which was almost flesh-coloured and distinctly paler. The eyes were dark, either black or very dark brown. The bill was black-grey with the exception of the proximal third of the lower mandible, which was noted as pale yellowish-orange in the field (Plate 22). This pale base to the lower mandible extended anteriorly beyond a point level with the nostril.



Asian Brown Flycatchers, West Island, Ashmore Reef. (a) 29 October 2005: first record for Australian territory; image taken in dappled, low light. (b) October 2006: second record; note mottling on breast. (c) October 2007: third record; note faint collar on foreneck.

Behaviour

Generally the bird perched motionless in the upper third of various large shrubs. Flight between each clump of Octopus Bush (50–60 m) was rather rapid, purposeful and direct, with only slight undulations. Few other features were noted in flight, mostly because this was a small grey-brown-and-white bird observed against a clear sky in rather glary conditions. The bird was not heard to call.

Identification and additional comments

The bird was clearly one of the grey-brown-and-white muscicapid flycatchers. Considering that it was a vagrant seen in the boreal autumn, it is most likely that it was one of the migrant flycatchers that breed predominantly in north-eastern Asia and winter in south-eastern Asia. The possibility that it was a form resident on Sumba is considered separately on p. 128. On size, structure and general plumage, the identification was readily narrowed to one of the following: Asian Brown, Grey-streaked *Muscicapa griseisticta* or Dark-sided (also known as Sooty or Siberian) Flycatcher *M. sibirica*. All three winter regularly in the Greater Sundas (MacKinnon & Phillipps 1993), the first two also in Wallacea (White & Bruce 1986; Coates & Bishop 1997) and the Grey-streaked also in New Guinea (Coates 1990). Although typical individuals of each species are relatively straightforward to identify, individual variation means that dark and well-marked Asian Brown Flycatchers can appear superficially similar to less well-marked Dark-sided and Grey-streaked Flycatchers. Although the bird on Ashmore Reef did appear at times to be well marked, we concluded that it was an Asian Brown Flycatcher for the following reasons.

1. Asian Brown Flycatchers have a proportionally longer bill than either the Dark-sided or Grey-streaked Flycatcher (Svensson 1992). Photographs in Alström & Hirschfeld (1991) demonstrate that the exposed bill length is significantly less than the distance between the base of the exposed bill and the eye for both the Dark-sided and Grey-streaked Flycatcher, whereas for the Asian Brown Flycatcher it is similar. Estimates taken from these images are ~110% for Asian Brown Flycatcher, ~60% for Dark-sided Flycatcher and ~65% for Grey-streaked Flycatcher (Plates 5, 1 & 7, respectively, in Alström & Hirschfeld 1991). Comparison of photographs of these three species in Kanouchi *et al.* (1998), Iozawa *et al.* (2000) and Hong Kong Bird Watching Society (2004) attest to this distinction. Measurements taken from photographs of the Ashmore Reef bird show that the exposed bill length is equal to the distance between the base of the bill and the anterior edge of the eye (Plate 22).
2. Each of these three species of flycatcher can have a pale base to the lower mandible, but only in the Asian Brown Flycatcher is this as extensive and as pale as in the Ashmore Reef bird (Alström & Hirschfeld 1991; Svensson 1992). Only in this species does the pale base of the lower mandible reach anteriorly beyond a point level with the nares (Alström & Hirschfeld 1991; Svensson 1992). This was noted in the field and is well illustrated in Plate 22.
3. The lores in the Asian Brown Flycatcher are conspicuously pale and unmarked, whereas both Dark-sided and Grey-streaked Flycatchers display less prominent lores that are often washed with brown and are frequently dark along the lower edge, such that a small dark wedge is present between each eye and the bill (Alström & Hirschfeld 1991). This feature on the Ashmore Reef bird is shown well in Plate 22.

4. Asian Brown Flycatchers have a distinctly shorter primary projection than either Dark-sided or Grey-streaked Flycatchers. In the Asian Brown Flycatcher the primary projection is less than the tertial projection, whereas in the other two species, the tertial projection is equal to or greater than the primary projection. Alström & Hirschfeld (1991) estimated that in the Asian Brown Flycatcher the primary projection was usually 80–90% of exposed tertials, whereas the other two species have a primary projection equal to or distinctly greater than that of the tertial projection, typically ~15–20% longer. In this individual, relative proportions taken from images provide a value of 72% for primary projection compared with tertial projection.
5. According to Alström & Hirschfeld (1991), Asian Brown and Grey-streaked Flycatchers have unmarked, white undertail-coverts whereas Dark-sided Flycatchers have dark centres to the undertail-coverts. Photographs of the Ashmore Reef individual show that the undertail-coverts were white and unmarked, thus apparently confirming its identity as an Asian Brown Flycatcher. However, Bradshaw *et al.* (1991) stated that the undertail-coverts of Grey-streaked and Asian Brown Flycatchers are ‘white’ whereas those of Dark-sided Flycatchers are ‘white, occasionally with dark crescents’, and this is supported by reference to available photographs (e.g. Iozawa *et al.* 2000, but *contra* Alström & Hirschfeld 1991). Thus it would seem that although the presence of dark streaks on the undertail-coverts is diagnostic of the Dark-sided Flycatcher, their absence has no significance.
6. The Grey-streaked Flycatcher has longer wings than Dark-sided or Asian Brown Flycatchers (Hong Kong Bird Watching Society 2007). According to Bradshaw *et al.* (1991: p. 534), the wing of the Grey-streaked Flycatcher extends almost to the tip of the tail and in the Dark-sided Flycatcher extends ‘at least three-quarters of the way along the tail, and sometimes reaches the tip—whereas on Brown the wing does not extend more than halfway along the tail’. Photographs in Bradshaw *et al.* (1991) and elsewhere show that in the Grey-streaked Flycatcher the wings extend well beyond the tips of the undertail-coverts, but in the Ashmore Reef bird they clearly fall well short.
7. Asian Brown and Grey-streaked Flycatchers show pale fringes to the tertials and greater coverts that are ‘cold’ off-white to pale cream whereas these fringes are typically a ‘warm’ buff tone in Dark-sided Flycatchers (Alström & Hirschfeld 1991). In the Ashmore Reef bird they were whitish, thus eliminating the latter species.

Slightly worn greater coverts with some evidence of abraded pale tips, and prominent pale fringes to the tertials, identify this bird as a first-winter individual, since Asian Brown Flycatchers undergo a partial post-juvenile moult on the breeding grounds before the southward migration (Cramp & Perrins 1993). First-winter birds are thus similar in appearance to adults except that juvenile greater coverts and tertials are retained (Alström & Hirschfeld 1991; Harvey 1992). Occasional juvenile scapular and uppertail-coverts are also retained into first-winter plumage, but these were not noted on this individual.

Subspecific identification and the Sumba Brown Flycatcher

The Sumba Brown Flycatcher *Muscicapa (daurica) segregata* represents an isolated resident population of the Asian Brown Flycatcher that has been afforded full species status by some authors (e.g. Howard & Moore 2003; Clements 2007). This form is restricted to the Lesser Sunda island of Sumba, which is ~375 km

from West Island, Ashmore Reef. It is distinguished from other Brown Flycatchers by having a longer bill (16.4 vs 14.7 mm), shorter wings (63–67 vs 67–74 mm) and a different wing-formula (White & Bruce 1986; Coates *et al.* 1997).

Based on careful scrutiny of museum specimens by John Darnell, the nominate form has a noticeably longer wing-tip, with the exposed primary being about two-thirds of the length of the visible tertials compared with about half in *segregata*. Conversely, the bill in *segregata* is longer than that of the nominate form, though it does not appear heavier or deeper in profile. Whereas the length of the exposed bill of the nominate form is generally less than the distance between the forehead and the eye, in *segregata* the exposed length of bill is equal to or greater than the distance between the forehead and the eye. This detail has been seen on skins where the quality of mounting may vary, however, and may not be reliable for identification purposes. The size difference of the bill is real: superimposing the equivalent of an extra 2 mm on to photographs of the nominate form suggests that the longer bill of *segregata* may be a useful field character (J. Darnell *in litt.* 9 August 2006).

A study of photographs (e.g. Alström & Hirschfeld 1991; Kanouchi *et al.* 1998; Iozawa *et al.* 2000; Hong Kong Bird Watching Society 2004) shows that the Sumba Brown Flycatcher can be excluded as the Ashmore Reef bird meets the criteria for the migrant form of Asian Brown Flycatcher. Its bill size and other proportions are a very close match [e.g. exposed bill length/bill base to eye ratio was 110% for a bird photographed in Japan (Alström & Hirschfeld 1991: Plate 5) c.f. ~100% for the Ashmore Reef bird].

Subsequent Australian records of the Asian Brown Flycatcher

Following the 2005 record documented here, single Asian Brown Flycatchers were again seen and photographed on West Island, Ashmore Reef, in 2006 and 2007.

In 2006, one was present on West Island on each of the 4 days that observers went ashore (25–28 October). Usually it was readily observed perched motionless ~1.5–4.0 m above ground-level, from where it sallied for insects, taking them from foliage as well as in the air. Flight between perches was rather rapid, purposeful and direct with only slight undulations. The bird was not heard to call. The structure of this individual was as for the bird already described, and the plumage was strikingly similar except that the lores were darker and thus less prominent. Given the apparent absence of retained juvenile plumage, this individual was considered to be an adult (Plate 23b).

In 2007, one was present from 25–27 October. It was not found on the first landing on 24 October, but was seen on each visit thereafter. It frequented the interior of one large, rather dense, dome-shaped clump of Octopus Bush, only occasionally visiting adjacent smaller stands. Otherwise its habits and behaviour were similar to those of the 2006 bird.

In general, this bird resembled birds from previous sightings in the rather pale grey-brown upperparts, length of the bill, extent of yellow on the base of the lower mandible and the prominent pale lores (Plate 23c). All these characters are diagnostic of Asian Brown Flycatcher. However, it differed from those individuals in several respects, making it harder to eliminate Dark-sided Flycatcher. These differences, all potentially contra-indicative, are now detailed.

1. The wings appeared longer, reaching beyond the tips of the uppertail- and undertail-coverts in spite of the fact that the tip of the primary on the left wing was shortened by damage.
2. Primary projection was fractionally *longer* than tertial projection (1–2%) whereas according to Alström & Hirschfeld (1991) it should be at least 10% *shorter*, as in the 2005 and 2006 birds.
3. The bill appeared excessively broad at its base so that, when viewed from below, bill shape approached that of an equilateral triangle more exaggerated than the two previous birds. According to Svensson (1992), the Dark-sided Flycatcher has a wider bill than the Asian Brown Flycatcher does (8.5–9.5 mm compared with 6.5–7.5 mm). However, the sides of the bill were convex as in the Asian Brown Flycatcher, not concave as in the Dark-sided Flycatcher.
4. A streaky grey wash extended to most of the underparts (Plate 23c), as occurs in the Dark-sided Flycatcher, rather than being restricted to the sides of the breast and upper flanks as is typical of the Asian Brown Flycatcher.
5. The fringes to the greater coverts and tertials were not stark white; rather, they exhibited warm tones.
6. The two previous birds displayed a wing-bar formed by pale tips to the greater coverts; the 2007 bird did not.
7. The white collar on the foreneck (Plate 23c) was more extensive and conspicuous than previous records (Plates 22, 23a–b).
8. The pattern on the throat (i.e. submoustachial and malar stripes) was more obscure and less conspicuous than in the two previous birds.
9. The undertail-coverts were smudged grey rather than pure white.
10. The bird was moulting its primary feathers, whereas the previous birds did not show active moult. This would seem to be atypical for both Asian Brown and Dark-sided Flycatchers. According to Svensson (1992), the Asian Brown Flycatcher completes its moult in the boreal summer before migrating, whereas the Dark-sided Flycatcher undergoes its complete moult in the boreal winter.

Distribution and occurrence of three muscicapid flycatchers

Asian Brown Flycatchers are a seasonally fairly common and widespread migrant in the Greater Sundas east to Bali (MacKinnon & Phillipps 1993; Strange 2001), but are rare in the Lesser Sundas, with just one documented record (White 1977; White & Bruce 1986; Coates & Bishop 1997). Before the records presented here, there were no previous claims of the Asian Brown Flycatcher from Australia. At the time of writing, however, there are two claims of Dark-sided Flycatcher before BARC. The first was observed at Shay Gap, WA (20°30'S, 120°10'E), on 15 October 1983 (Johnstone & Storr 2004; BARC Case no. 589). The second was observed at Home Island, Cocos (Keeling) Islands in November 2008 (N. Pamment *in litt.* 9 November 2008; BARC Case no. 593). Given the status of the Dark-sided Flycatcher in the Greater Sundas, the occurrence of this species within Australia as an overshooting migrant should not be surprising. Observers of vagrant grey-brown-and-white *Muscicapa* flycatchers in Australia should, therefore, be aware that a sighting might relate to any one of a number of species. Given the similarities between species, careful attention to the identification features discussed here will be crucial to the identification process.

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