

## Island Monarch *Monarcha cinerascens* on Ashmore Reef: First Records for Australian Territory

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### Summary

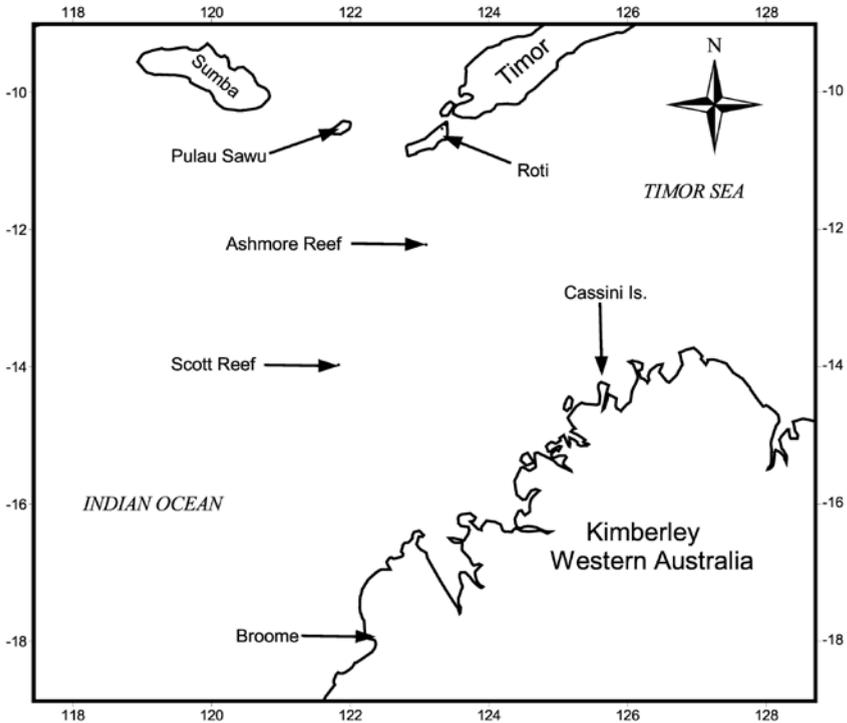
Island Monarchs *Monarcha cinerascens* were observed at Ashmore Reef during the months of October and/or November in 2004, 2007, 2008, 2009 and 2010. In 2010 up to four were present together, and we consider that more than six individuals visited the Reef that year. Only single birds were observed on previous occasions. Thus the total number of Island Monarchs that has been detected on the Reef is at least eight and probably greater than ten. Reports of the 2004, 2007, 2008 and 2009 observations were assessed and accepted by the Birds Australia Rarities Committee (Case nos 467, 544, 581 and 701, respectively), with the 2004 observation being the first record for Australian territory. This paper documents all known occurrences on Ashmore Reef.

We postulate that these occurrences are examples of dispersal of birds seeking suitable habitat beyond their usual range in the islands of the Indonesian archipelago just to the north.

### Introduction

Ashmore Reef is an External Australian Territory located in Commonwealth waters within the Australian Economic Exclusion Zone. In 1983 it was declared a National Nature Reserve by the Australian Nature Conservation Agency, and continues to be administered by the Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population & Communities as a National Nature Reserve. It lies at the confluence of the Indian Ocean and Timor Sea off northern Western Australia (Figure 1). Because it is a significant breeding site for 16 species of tropical seabirds (Clarke *et al.* 2011) and wintering site for shorebirds that breed in the Northern Hemisphere (Rogers *et al.* 2011), in 2009 it was designated by Birds Australia and BirdLife International as one of Australia's Important Bird Areas (Dutson *et al.* 2009). It is also a refuge for migrant and vagrant land birds (Pike 1993; Carter 2003, 2009; Clarke 2005; Milton 2005; Clarke *et al.* 2009; Carter *et al.* 2010).

Within the reef are three small islands: West, Middle and East Islands. West Island (12°14'S, 122°58'E), lying ~145 km south of the Indonesian island of Roti, is the largest and most heavily vegetated. This is where most of the migrant land birds occur, and is where a total of at least eight and probably more than ten Island Monarchs *Monarcha cinerascens* was observed in five of the last seven years, in spring in 2004, 2007, 2008, 2009 and 2010. This species had not been recorded previously on Ashmore Reef (Des Pike unpubl. data; MC, RHC & GS pers. obs.) nor indeed anywhere in Australian territory (Christidis & Boles 1994). Following acceptance by the Birds Australia Rarities Committee (BARC) of the 2004 report (Case no. 467; Palliser 2008), Christidis & Boles (2008) added the species to the list of Australian birds.



**Figure 1.** Ashmore Reef location map

**Habitat and behaviour**

West Island is a low-lying coral cay with coarse sandy substrate and occasional beach rock outcrops; its total land area is 28.1 ha (Clarke *et al.* 2011). There is no permanent fresh water available at the surface. It is rimmed by low dunes dominated by Octopus Bush *Argusia argentea*, some of which are draped with convolvulus creeper *Ipomoea* spp. (Pike & Leach 1997). The central plain consists mainly of herfields and grasses. The shrubs are typically 2.5–4 m tall, and these were the favoured habitat of the Island Monarchs, which foraged mainly in the outer foliage from mid-height to the crown, gleaning insects such as moths and grubs from the leaves, stems and branches, and tending to avoid the lower, denser, darker parts of bushes. The Monarchs worked methodically through a bush before flying to search another. Although tending to conceal themselves within the bushes, they were generally neither particularly cryptic nor wary. Their movements were deliberate and unhurried.

Many, perhaps most, individuals were not heard to call and none were voluble, but occasional calls heard included a harsh *tsh tsh tsh*, and a short, abrupt, single-syllable, downslurred whistle (similar in tone and pitch to the typical territorial call of the Black-faced Monarch *M. melanopsis*, though the call of that species is usually twice as long and disyllabic).

On one occasion when two monarchs came into close proximity, several short chases were observed, and one bird departed from the vicinity.

## Observations

Kimberley Birdwatching conducted a spring monitoring expedition from Broome to Ashmore Reef annually from 1999 to 2010, with the exception of 2002. In 2001 there were two trips. In 1999 our group was ashore on West Island for <2 h on just one day, with access restricted to the northern shoreline and along a path to a well where fresh water was available to visitors. From 2000 onwards, access was permitted to all of West Island in daylight hours; that year a total of 5.5 h on consecutive days was spent exploring the island. On the first trip in 2001, a total of ~6 h was spent ashore on consecutive days, and on the second trip ~8 h were spent ashore. In 2003, a total of ~11 h was spent ashore on consecutive days. In 2004, observers were ashore on five occasions over a 3-day period, for a total of ~13 h. In each subsequent year, observers were ashore on at least six occasions, totalling >24 h per trip. In addition, in early November 2010 a survey team that included the authors was ashore on West Island for some period each day from 4 to 11 November.

The first Island Monarch reported for any Australian territory was found in 2004 on West Island. The species was not seen here in 2005 or 2006, but thereafter was seen in each year from 2007 to 2010. The first four sightings involved single birds, but in 2010 it is considered that at least six individuals were seen, four being present simultaneously. Thus it is believed that an accumulated total of at least ten individuals has visited Ashmore Reef. Most have been photographed, and a selection of these photographs is presented here [Plates 31 (front cover)–35].

Although it is obvious that the occurrence of Island Monarchs in spring appears to have escalated in recent years, this increase also correlates with increased time spent ashore by observers. It is also interesting to note that surveys of many days' duration in other seasons—summer counts in January/February 2002 (GS), 2003 (GS) and 2005 (GS & MC), and autumn counts in April 2010 and 2011 (MC, RHC & GS)—did not record the species.

A summary of our observations follows.

### 2004

Between 27 and 29 October the birds of West Island were surveyed thoroughly during five visits ashore; in addition to MC and GS, participants were Peter Barrand, Richard Baxter, Simon Mustoe, Rory O'Brien and Mark Taylor. On the morning of 28 October, GS found a monarch flycatcher (Plate 35), strongly reminiscent of two eastern Australian species, the Black-faced Monarch and Black-winged Monarch *Monarcha frater*. Comparisons with these species are drawn mainly from the photographs in Readers Digest (1977), Boles (1988), Coates (1990) and Coates & Peckover (2001), and the illustrations in Pizzey & Knight (1997), Slater *et al.* (2003), Morcombe (2004), Simpson & Day (2004) and Higgins *et al.* (2006). We point out, however, that the illustration of the Black-faced Monarch in Higgins *et al.* (2006) is not a good representation of this colourful species as it is far too drab. Monarchs of any species are exceedingly rare in nearby Western Australia (Johnstone & Storr 2004), so the other members of our party quickly gathered at the scene. The bird was closely studied at distances down to 5 m in sunny calm conditions for well over an hour, field descriptions were compiled, Mustoe produced a sketch, and MC obtained five digital photographs. MC recalled that he had seen the species previously on the Papuan island of Batanta: it was an Island Monarch. The bird, an immature, had not been seen on two thorough searches of the island the previous day, and was not seen subsequently despite searches that afternoon and the next morning. Thus its visit was apparently transitory.

A report by MC and GS of this occurrence was submitted to BARC as the first record for Australian territory. Following acceptance (Case no. 467: Palliser 2008), the Island Monarch was included in the next comprehensive checklist of Australian birds (Christidis & Boles 2008).

### 2007

During the 2007 expedition we were ashore on West Island for most of each afternoon on 24–26 October and morning on 25–27 October. There were 14 participants including the authors. Just before sunset on 26 October, Sandra Dungleison discovered an adult Island Monarch in circumstances suggesting that the bird had just arrived rather than having been overlooked previously. It was in precisely the same area next morning. A subsequent submission to BARC by MC, Dungleison and RHC was accepted (Case no. 544: Palliser 2009) as the second record for Australian territory.

### 2008

Sixteen participants including the authors were ashore on West Island for several hours each day of our stay at the Reef, 22–25 October, and saw an adult Island Monarch on each occasion. A submission to BARC by Simon Mustoe, who was the first to find the bird, was accepted (Case no. 581: Palliser 2011) as the third record for Australian territory.

### 2009

Sixteen participants, including the authors, were ashore on West Island for several hours each day of our stay at the Reef, 29 October – 1 November, and, as in the previous year, observed an adult Island Monarch on each occasion. Many photographs of the bird were obtained, and a submission to BARC (Case no. 701) has been accepted (Tony Palliser, BARC Chairman, pers. comm. 29 October 2011).

### 2010

The 2010 Kimberley Birdwatching spring monitoring expedition, with 16 participants including the authors, went ashore on West Island for several hours daily on 18–21 October. A birdwatching group travelling with Peregrine Bird Tours had been ashore on West Island each day on 16–18 October, and a Monash University survey team (including the authors) visited West Island on 4–11 November.

Single Island Monarchs were seen on 17–19 October, and two were present on 20–21 October. The Monash team recorded one or two on most days, with a maximum count of four on 7 November, but none on their last visit on 11 November. Both immature and adult birds were seen. Given the presence of both immatures and adults, the former with distinctive pale markings at the base of the bill that allowed individual recognition, the number of individuals visiting the Island over this period was considered to be at least six. Extensive photographic evidence was obtained.

## Description

The birds were typical of the genus *Monarcha* (del Hoyo *et al.* 2006; Higgins *et al.* 2006), their striking plumage making them extremely distinctive. Selection of the photographs presented here (Plates 31–35) has been governed not only by



**Island Monarch, adult on Ashmore Reef, 30 October 2009**

Plate 32

Photos: Rohan H. Clarke



**Island Monarch, adult on Ashmore Reef, 27 October 2007: dorso-lateral view**

Plate 33

Photo: Rohan H. Clarke



**Island Monarch, adult on Ashmore Reef, 27 October 2007: latero-ventral view**

Plate 34

Photo: Rohan H. Clarke



**Island Monarch, immature on Ashmore Reef, 28 October 2004: the first record for Australian territory. Frontal view, showing yellow at base of bill.**

Plate 35

Photo: Mike Carter



**Black-faced Monarch, immature. Note absence of black fringe encircling base of bill, pale crescent anterior to eye, and extent of grey on breast.**

Plate 36

Photo: Rohan H. Clarke

quality but also to present as many aspects as possible of this little-known species. Other than bare-part coloration of immatures, all birds appeared very similar, and the degree of consistency was remarkable.

They were smaller than the Sacred Kingfisher *Todiramphus sanctus* and larger and more robust than Horsfield's Bronze-Cuckoo *Chalcites basalis*, the two species most frequently present nearby. They were very similar in size, structure and general appearance to the Black-faced Monarch (Readers Digest 1977; Boles 1988; Coates 1990; Pizzey & Knight 1997; Coates & Peckover 2001; Slater *et al.* 2003; Morcombe 2004; Simpson & Day 2004; Higgins *et al.* 2006).

Adult birds are described first, and the features that differed in birds considered to be immature are given later.

The upperparts from the head to the uppertail-coverts, as well as the scapulars, tertials and wing-coverts (other than the primary coverts) and the upper breast were uniformly pale blue-grey. Although the birds lacked the large area of black on the face of adult Black-faced and Black-winged Monarchs (Readers Digest 1977; Boles 1988; Coates 1990; Pizzey & Knight 1997; Coates & Peckover 2001; Slater *et al.* 2003; Morcombe 2004; Simpson & Day 2004), there was a narrow black border encircling the base of the bill. This appeared more prominent than it might otherwise do because of the presence of at least 12 black rictal bristles on each side of the bill extending from the rear of the gape to the nostrils. The longest of these was equal to about half the length of the bill.

The primary coverts and remiges viewed dorsally gave the general appearance of being dark grey, contrasting markedly with the paler head and upperparts. Close views and photographs reveal that these feathers were actually blackish but with a narrow bluish-grey leading edge. The closed wing was thus substantially paler than the spread wing, with a pattern of fine, evenly spaced stripes running the length of the remiges. Although the remiges were not black, they were darker than those of the Black-faced Monarch, and presented a pattern resembling a pale version of the Black-winged Monarch.

The underparts posterior to the upper breast through to the tips of the undertail-coverts were wholly and uniformly rich orange-rufous, with a tinge of chestnut. Photographs of birds in flight reveal that most of the underwing was similar in colour to the adjacent sides of the breast but with a trace of grey intermingled, and the marginal and lesser underwing-coverts were grey. In some postures, the blue-grey of the uppertail-coverts projected slightly onto the upper flanks at the base of the tail.

The tail was quite dark: bluish black above and paler below, and with the basal portion of the shafts of the outer rectrices being white.

The dark eyes were the only prominent feature of the face, there being no markings on the lores or around the eyes. A narrow dark fleshy eye-ring was easily overlooked under field conditions.

The bill was silvery blue, darkest at the base, paling towards the tip. Legs and toes were bluish grey or slaty grey.

Immatures differed subtly from the adults. The bill was yellow on the tomia adjacent to the gape, and the upper mandible was lighter blue at its base. The black around the base of the bill was less prominent. In some immatures, the legs may have been a little darker. The grey of the upperparts was less uniform, and

the coloration of the underparts less brilliant, although these distinctions were obscure in the absence of adult birds or comparative photographs. The plumage of adults was usually immaculate, whereas some immatures possessed worn areas; for instance, the retained juvenile tail of the 2004 bird clearly showed signs of wear.

### Diagnosis

These were very distinctive birds of the genus *Monarcha* (del Hoyo *et al.* 2006; Higgins *et al.* 2006). The combination of grey breast and upperparts with rufous belly is shared by only three species of monarch worldwide: Black-faced, Black-winged and Island Monarchs (del Hoyo *et al.* 2006). Black-winged and Black-faced Monarchs in adult plumage are eliminated because, at that age, both have much black on the face, and the former has black (not blue-grey-edged) remiges (Higgins *et al.* 2006). Moreover, taking into account its distribution and habitat preference (rainforest) (Coates 1990), the occurrence of one Black-winged Monarch on Ashmore Reef would be extremely improbable and of ten so inconceivable that that species cannot be regarded as a serious contender. Black-winged Monarchs breeding in New Guinea are presumed to be sedentary (Coates 1990), and those breeding in Australia are thought to be short-distance migrants, some moving into southern New Guinea after breeding on the eastern coast of northern Cape York Peninsula (Higgins *et al.* 2006). Thus, confusion is possible only with immature Black-faced Monarchs. Juvenile-plumaged Black-faced Monarchs can be discounted because birds of that age have a dark bill (Higgins *et al.* 2006), contrary to all the monarchs seen on Ashmore Reef.

The four features that we consider distinguish the Ashmore Reef birds from immature Black-faced Monarchs, and thus identify them as Island Monarchs, are given below. The taxonomy of the Island Monarch is contentious and the number of subspecies unsettled, but del Hoyo *et al.* (2006) recognised 11 subspecies. The nominate subspecies is said to be resident in the Talaud Archipelago, Sulawesi, the Moluccas, and the Lesser Sundas (del Hoyo *et al.* 2006), so we consider that to be the form occurring on Ashmore Reef.

1. The lack of a pale spot or comma-shaped mark anterior to the eye (Beehler *et al.* 1986; Coates 1990; Coates & Bishop 1997; Doughty *et al.* 1999; Coates & Peckover 2001; Mayr & Diamond 2001; del Hoyo *et al.* 2006). The presence of this mark in the Black-faced Monarch is mentioned and/or illustrated by Pizzey & Knight (1997), Slater *et al.* (2003), Morcombe (2004), Simpson & Day (2004) and Higgins *et al.* (2006), but is better shown in photographs such as in Boles (1988: p. 289) and images held by us (e.g. Plate 36). Contrary to the other references, the illustration in del Hoyo *et al.* (2006: p. 302) shows the Island Monarch (two subspecies, including nominate) as having a pale area on the lores extending as a narrow supercilium to posterior to the eye. As we can find no other evidence of this extension beyond the eye, we believe this to be an error. No such mark is apparent in any photograph that we have seen of the Island Monarch of any subspecies, including these birds of the nominate subspecies: one in the hand caught on Redong Island near Wetar, Lesser Sundas, by Colin Trainor; one considered to be a singing male on Talaud Island by James Eaton; and both members of a mating pair on Peleng Island off Sulawesi by Philippe Verbelen (unpublished photographs).
2. A narrow fringe of black feathering surrounding the base of the bill. Although more conspicuous in the adults, this was also present in all immature Ashmore Reef birds (Plates 31–35). It is shown in the illustration of del Hoyo *et al.* (2006), and there is a hint of it at the base of the upper mandible in the illustration of

Coates & Bishop (1997). There is no mention or illustration of such a plumage character in juvenile or immature Black-faced Monarchs by Boles (1988), Pizzey & Knight (1997), Slater *et al.* (2003), Morcombe (2004), Simpson & Day (2004) or Higgins *et al.* (2006), nor any hint of it in any photographs of young Black-faced Monarchs in various stages of development viewed by us (Plate 36). Therefore, we regard this character as diagnostic of the Island Monarch.

3. The appearance of the remiges. They are darker, and contrast more markedly with the remainder of the upperparts (Coates *et al.* 1997), than in the Black-faced Monarch: compare Plates 32–34 with Plate 36 and with the photographs or illustrations of the Black-faced Monarch in Boles (1988), Pizzey & Knight (1997), Slater *et al.* (2003), Morcombe (2004), Simpson & Day (2004) and Higgins *et al.* (2006).
4. The extent of grey on the breast. In the Ashmore Reef birds, this was more extensive than in Black-faced Monarchs of any age. The junction with the orange-rufous of the remainder of the underparts was level with the tips of the median coverts, which accords with the illustrations of the Island Monarch in Beehler *et al.* (1986), Coates & Bishop (1997), Mayr & Diamond (2001) and del Hoyo *et al.* (2006) and the photographs in Coates (1990) (where it is very evident) and Coates & Peckover (2001) and Hadden (2004). In the Black-faced Monarch, this junction occurs at about the level of the bend of the wing (see Plate 36), near the carpal joint, perhaps as much as 1 cm anterior to that junction in the Island Monarch. This is confirmed by study of the photographs of the Black-faced Monarch in Reader's Digest (1977), Boles (1988), Coates (1990) and Coates & Peckover (2001).

#### *Other plumage characters of interest*

According to del Hoyo *et al.* (2006), the sexes of the Island Monarch are alike, and we can see no differences between the members of the pair observed mating photographed by Philippe Verbelen referred to on p. 157. Thus we have been unable to determine the sex of any of the individuals seen on West Island.

Contrary to the illustration in Coates & Bishop (1997), which shows bold dark streaks on all the greater coverts visible in the closed wing, these coverts of the Ashmore Reef birds were unmarked, uniformly blue-grey, and concolorous with the rest of the upperparts. Where visible, the greater coverts of the adults in the unpublished photographs taken elsewhere (see point 1, p. 157) are also unstreaked when the lie of the feathers is undisturbed. However, in the bird in the hand photographed by Colin Trainor, dark streaks appeared when the feathers were disarranged because the dark inner webs of the coverts became exposed, a likely scenario for illustrators working from skins.

Juvenile Island Monarch plumage is distinctive, so we are confident that no juvenile Island Monarchs have been reported on Ashmore Reef. Characters that distinguish juvenile birds have been provided by John Darnell from a study of two skins in the Western Australian Museum. They are both females collected on Timor on 7 May 1991, suggesting that breeding is at the end of the wet season. Their bills are blackish brown rather than blue, with the gape and base of the lower mandible yellowish. Compared with adults, the upperpart contour feathers are a darker neutral grey, rather than blue-grey; the wing-coverts and tertials are more distinctly patterned, with dusky areas in the lesser coverts, dark streaks in the greater coverts, and warm-brown edges to the tertials and secondaries; the

tail is dusky blackish; there is a pale supercilium extending from posterior to each eye over the ear-coverts, much as illustrated for adults in del Hoyo *et al.* (2006); the grey area of the lower throat to the breast (but not the sides of the neck) is extensively washed with orange-rufous, the tips of the feathers being more purely of this colour; and, in addition, the orange-rufous of the remainder of the underparts is not uniform, with the area adjacent to the 'grey' breast being of a much deeper/darker shade, virtually rufous-chestnut.

Evidence from photographs of the Black-faced Monarch available to us suggests that the transition in bill colour from blackish brown in the juvenile to blue in the adult occurs while the bird is otherwise still in immature plumage. This may also occur in the Island Monarch, as Coates (1990, p. 149) described 'immatures' as having 'bill black, becoming pale horn at base', and Coates & Bishop (1997, p. 193) stated that immatures have a 'mostly black bill'.

Although Higgins *et al.* (2006, p. 51) stated that juvenile and immature Black-winged Monarchs are undescribed, and that it is not known how they might be distinguished from Black-faced Monarchs of similar age, del Hoyo *et al.* (2006, p. 304) implied that there is a slight difference: whereas the juvenile Black-faced Monarch is stated to be similar to the adult but lacks black on the 'otherwise grey head and face', the equivalent statement for the Black-winged Monarch was black on 'otherwise *very* pale grey head and face' (our italics). This suggests that the paler, more pearl-grey tone of adult plumage of Black-winged Monarchs is also a character of juveniles.

## Discussion

Island Monarchs range throughout Wallacea around the north of New Guinea east to the Solomon Islands (White & Bruce 1986; Coates 1990; Coates & Bishop 1997; Mayr & Diamond 2001; del Hoyo *et al.* 2006). Mayr & Diamond (2001, p. 176) stated that they 'are confined to small, remote, or recently defaunated volcanic islands'. This suggests that the species is prone to wander in search of suitable unoccupied habitats and quick to recolonise islands decimated by volcanic eruption. Our experience of the species at Ashmore Reef supports the notion that this species is an island tramp. Although it might be denoted better as Islet Monarch because it is commoner in those habitats, it is not confined to either small or remote islands. For instance, it is present on Batanta, a large island off north-western Papua (MC pers. obs.). Within Wallacea, it is 'Likely to occur on any small island, including coastal islets, where it is usually common' (Coates & Bishop 1997, p. 449). Its status on East Timor is described as 'not' a 'common resident' (Trainor *et al.* 2007, captions for Plate 37). Colin Trainor (*in litt.* 23 July 2011) advised that it is rarely seen on Timor, although some specimens have been collected there (Mayr 1944). Its occurrence on Roti was first reported in 2005 (Trainor 2005), when it was found to be 'frequent and widespread' in forest and villages in the north-east of the island (p. 130). Historically, it was not listed for Roti (Mees 1975; Verheijen 1976) nor found in earlier surveys by Johnstone & Jepson (1996) in southern and central Roti. Therefore, documented occurrences of the species in northern Roti are ~200 km north-north-east of the Australian territory records on Ashmore Reef. The Western Australian Museum has two specimens from south-western Timor (220 km north-north-east of West Island, Ashmore Reef) (John Darnell *in litt.* 20 October 2006). As Island Monarchs are not considered to be even short-distance migrants, based on their proximity to both Roti and Timor, these islands are the likely origins of the Ashmore Reef birds. Other taxa normally considered resident and sedentary that occur

on these islands and that have been reported from Ashmore Reef but not the Kimberley include the Lesser Coucal *Centropus bengalensis* (Carter *et al.* 2010), nominate subspecies of Collared Kingfisher *Todiramphus chloris* (MC, RHC & GS pers. obs.), subspecies *semicollaris* of Arafura Fantail *Rhipidura dryas* (MC, RHC & GS pers. obs.), Spectacled Monarch *Symposiarchus trivirgatus* (Chris Doughty & Simon Mustoe pers. comm.), Pale White-eye *Zosterops citrinella* (MC, RHC & GS pers. obs.), Nutmeg Mannikin *Lonchura punctulata* (GS pers. obs.), and Pale-headed Munia *Lonchura pallida* (Palliser 2002).

Until the record of two Island Monarchs on Cassini Island off the Kimberley coast on 15 October 2010 (Ekins 2011), there was only one previous report of a monarch *Monarcha* sp. in Western Australia: an immature male Black-faced Monarch collected by Ron Johnstone in the Kimberley (Johnstone 1991; Johnstone & Storr 2004). Although an Island Monarch would be an unusual occurrence on any large landmass such as the Kimberley, given that: (1) otherwise the nearest known record of the Black-faced Monarch is in New Guinea ~1500 km to the north-east (del Hoyo *et al.* 2006; Higgins *et al.* 2006), (2) the published evidence regarding the identification of that specimen was brief (Johnstone 1991), and (3) there has been a recent spate of Island Monarch records just north of the Kimberley (this study), we suggested that a review of that specimen's identification might be warranted. John Darnell re-examined the Western Australian Museum specimen and confirmed its identity as a Black-faced Monarch.

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