

THREATENED SPECIES OF THE NORTHERN TERRITORY



NORTHERN SCRUB-ROBIN

Drymodes superciliaris colcloughi

Conservation status

Australia: Extinct.

Northern Territory: Data Deficient.

Description

The northern scrub-robin is a thrush-sized bird that forages mostly on the ground. It is rufous-brown above and paler below, with a distinct dark vertical stripe from above the eye to the side of the throat. The wings are black with broad white tips forming a prominent double wingbar.



Northern Scrub-robin
(Photo © Graeme Chapman)

Distribution

The northern scrub-robin occurs in northern Cape York Peninsula, parts of New Guinea and the Aru Islands. Its supposed presence in the Northern Territory is based solely on a set of two specimens from the Roper River area, collected by M.J. Colclough in 1910. (Bennett 1983). This small set formed the type and only occurrences of the subspecies *D. s. colcloughi*.

Conservation reserves where reported:
None.

Ecology

The northern scrub-robin feeds mainly on invertebrates, collected by actively digging in dense leaf litter. It moves mostly by hopping. Its preferred habitat is dense vegetation, typically including rainforest.

Conservation assessment

The occurrence of this species in the Northern Territory, and indeed the existence of this subspecies, is now considered to be doubtful. Although some authorities have credited the provenance of the specimens (Parker 1970; Bennett 1983), the evidence more strongly suggests that the locality of the specimens was misattributed, and that both the putative Northern Territory specimens in fact came from Cape York Peninsula (Storr 1967; Schodde and Mason 1999): "Because doubt attaches its provenance, *colcloughi* should be struck from the Australian avian inventory until the unlikely event of its rediscovery ... (Colclough's specimens) from the Roper are probably either a case of mistaken identity or a hoax" (Schodde and Mason 1999). In their assessment of the conservation status of all Australian bird taxa, Garnett and Crowley (2000) omitted this taxon, implicitly accepting its non-existence.

It is now almost impossible to prove or disprove the locality of Colclough's specimens, which renders the assessment of status difficult. The misattribution of locality is by far the more likely possibility, in which case it should be removed from the Northern Territory fauna listing. However, in the less likely case of the provenance being correctly attributed, the taxon should be considered either *extinct* or



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endangered, given the highly localised putative range, and the lack of any records since 1910, despite specific searches (Bennett 1983).

Given this uncertainty, **Data Deficient** seems the most parsimonious choice.

Threatening processes

Bennett (1983) listed the degradation of its presumed habitat (riparian gallery forest, monsoon rainforest, and possibly lancewood *Acacia shirleyi* thickets) by cattle grazing and especially by changed fire regimes, as probably the major threatening processes.

Conservation objectives and management

Research priorities are to:

(i) attempt to establish its ongoing existence, through specific searches in the lower Roper River catchment and adjacent areas.

However, given its probable non-existence, such searching should be a low priority against that of other threatened taxa.

Compiled by

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References

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