Yellow-browed Warbler *Phylloscopus inornatus* on West Island, Ashmore Reef 29 March 2014

By MIKE CARTER[1], JOHN WEIGEL[2], ADRIAN BOYLE[3] & GEORGE SWANN[4]

Summary

A Yellow-browed Warbler *Phylloscopus inornatus* was present on West Island, Ashmore Reef on 29 March 2014. This is a submission to Birds Australia Rarities Committee (BARC) seeking endorsement of this report.

Introduction

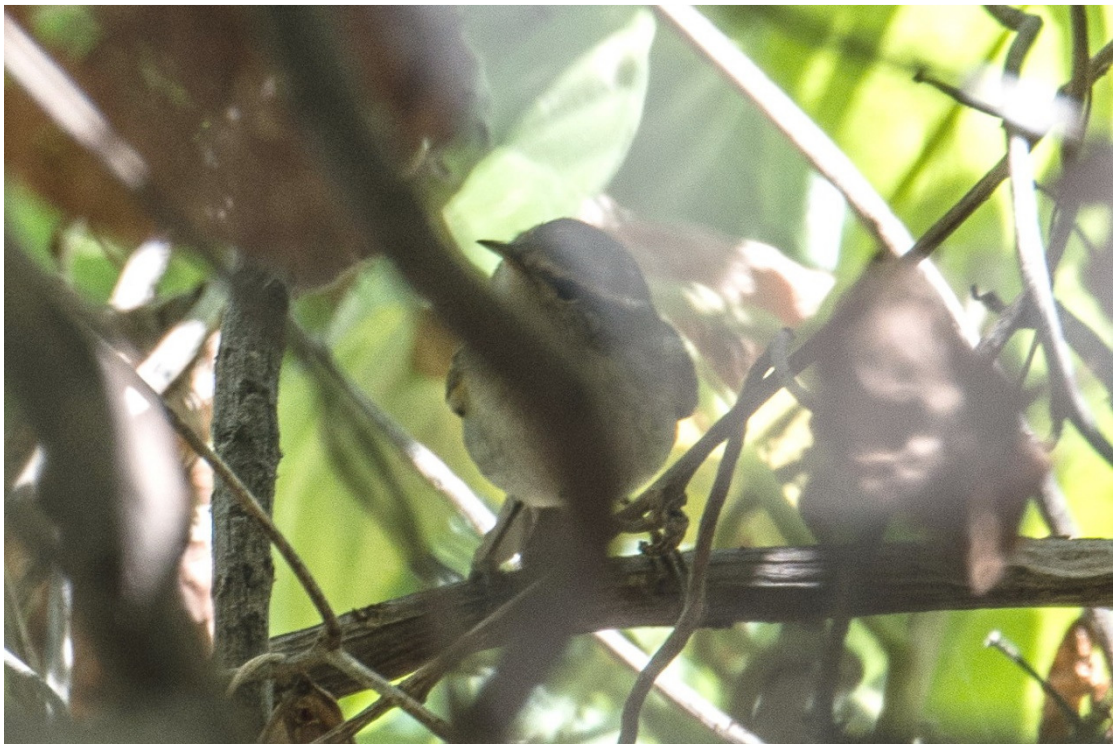

Fig. 1. Yellow-browed Warbler, Ashmore, 29 March 2014. Frontal view. Note that this is undoubtedly a Phylloscopus warbler with a medium build, rather delicate bill typical of an insectivorous leaf-gleaning bird, a conspicuous, long, narrow, pale supercilium of constant width on a greenish head with no central crown stripe.

During Kimberley Birdwatching's (KBW) 2014 inaugural autumn eight-day (26 March to 2 April) expedition to Ashmore Reef ex-Broome, a Yellow-browed Warbler *Phylloscopus inornatus* was seen and photographed on West Island, Ashmore Reef. John Weigel (JW), who with Darryel Binns (DB), had stayed on West Island while the other 18 birdwatchers in the group were visiting Middle Island, found it late morning of 29 March. It had not been discovered earlier that morning when the whole party had spent two hours reconnoitring the island, but was seen by most of the others, Alan Benson,

Rob Benson, Karen Blake, Neil Brown, Rae Clark, Lisa Cockram, Peter Cockram, Chris Hamilton, Rob Hamilton, Ian Halliday, Dick Holroyde, Judy Leitch, Chris Melrose, Sue Taylor and trip leaders Adrian Boyle, George Swann and Mike Carter that afternoon. Although the island was searched thoroughly twice next day and early morning on 31 March, it was not seen again. No vocalisations were heard.

There are no accepted records of Yellow-browed Warbler from Australian Territory but Rohan Clarke, George Swann, Jarrod Hodgson and Mike Carter saw one on this island on 4 & 5 April 2011, thus pre-dating this occurrence. Subsequent to the second report, the subject of this submission, a third was seen by Rohan Clarke, Amanda Lilleyman, Rowan Mott, Ashley Herrod, Jarrod Hodgson and George Swann on this same island on 25 April 2014. The first and third reports were discovered during Monash University research expeditions and submissions regarding them are forthcoming.

Ashmore Reef is an External Australian Territory located in Commonwealth waters within the Australian Economic Exclusion Zone. It lies at the confluence of the Indian Ocean and Timor Sea off northern Western Australia. Within the reef are four small islands, West, Middle and East Islands and Splittgerber Cay. The largest and most heavily vegetated is West Island (12º14'S 122º58'E) and this is also the most northerly, lying ~145 km south of the Indonesian island of Roti. Observations historically and particularly over the last sixteen years, show that this is a 'migrant trap', a convenient resting place for migrants and a refuge for vagrant land birds (see for example the attached Ashmore Checklist and table showing 'bird numbers seen on a sample of the more recent KBW visits).

Habitat

West Island is a low coral island with a gritty, sandy substrate and occasional beach rock outcrops covering an area of ~14 hectares (Pike & Leach 1997). Encircling the island adjacent the shoreline and surrounding the sparsely vegetated flat central area is a narrow strip of vegetated low sand dunes dominated by Octopus Bush *Heliotropium foertherianum* draped in creepers, notably convolvulus. On this occasion, the vegetation was flourishing apparently the result of a good wet season.

The initial observation and behaviour

This Warbler frequented a short stretch of the coastal vegetation along the north-eastern shore, favouring and secreting itself within the densest patch, thus making observation and photography difficult. Only occasionally and briefly did it leave that patch to investigate adjacent shrubs flying at heights of less than 1.7 metres between them, returning quickly to its most favoured shrubs.

It was found by JW when he peered into the shrub in search of such a quarry. Initially, the bird was on the ground quite close to him but rapidly moved to the far side of the shrub where he watched it for several minutes moving around and foraging in a confined area not exceeding 1 cubic metre at

heights of between 0.6 m and 1.5 m above the ground. It appeared to be nervous and whilst sitting on a perch was prone to suddenly reverse its position alternately facing towards and away from him, opening its wings on several occasions. Eventually it moved into more exposed positions where he was able to obtain some photographs a selection of which are presented here, Figures 1 to 8. DB also saw the bird at that time. Having secured an adequate set of images, JW and DB departed the scene leaving the bird in peace and quiet to await the return of the remainder of the group. Later that afternoon, the whole group assembled at the location and obtained views of the bird, some satisfactorily, others poorly.

The photographic record

John Weigel took all the accompanying photographs. Apart from some short flights of up to 15 m between shrubs, the Warbler avoided exposed locations instead always resorting to dense cover deep within a shrub. Thus all photos have some obstructing foliage and colours and detail are distorted by shadows, penetrating rays of light, reflections and therefore variations in image exposure.

Fig. 2. Head and face
Shows supercilium of constant width and extending to rear of crown

Fig. 3. Crown
Shows plain uniformly greenish crown with no suggestion of central stripe

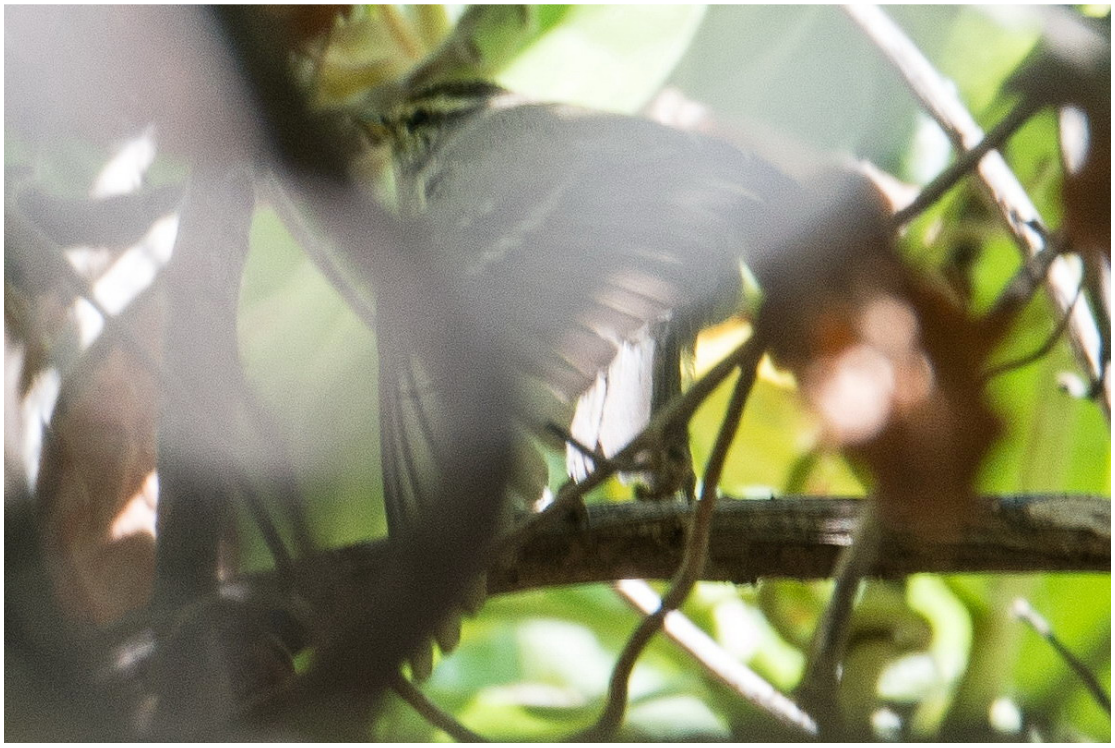

Fig. 4. Dorso-lateral view showing side of head and open wing
Note double wing bars, dark eye-line, pale supercilium and the breadth and prominence of these features. The appearance of a black cap is photographic artefact.

Fig. 5. Dorso-lateral view showing closed wing pattern especially tertials
Note dark tertials with broad pale outer edges and tips and black based secondaries emphasising greater covert wing bar and pale edges to remaining length of secondaries forming pale panel in the wing.

Fig. 6. Frontal view showing lower mandible was pale with a dark tip.
Note pale supercilia here appeared joined across base of bill but this appearance is not consistent in all shots.

Fig. 7. Ventral view showing yellow base to lower mandible similar in colour to inside of mouth.

Fig. 8. Rear dorsal view showing rump and crown.

Incorrect focus and exposure has resulted in lack of clarity and precise colour rendition in this photo. Nevertheless, it proves that the photographer saw these areas of plumage. Other observers also saw the rump, and no one saw other than a plain rump and crown. Moreover, we consider that if the bird had possessed a bright yellow rump, it would be visible here.

Description

This is compiled from a combination of field observations and study of JW's photographs.

Size: The only other species of small bird on the island at this time were Shining Bronze Cuckoo *Chrysococcyx lucidus* and Eurasian Tree Sparrow *Passer montanus* but neither was seen in close proximity to the Warbler. Thus without direct comparison, we are unable to estimate actual length. Our estimation is that it was considerably smaller than both, perhaps three-quarters the size of a Tree Sparrow.

Structure: Best appreciated by reference to the photographs. A typical passerine of slightly tubby appearance with a rather domed head; wings extended to base of tail.

Bill: Small, pointed and slightly decurved, typical of an insectivorous leaf-gleaning bird. Upper mandible dark; lower mandible almost wholly yellow with a small dark area at the tip.

Legs: Appeared dark rather than pale but colour not satisfactorily determined as they were always in shadow.

Eyes: Appeared dark.

Plumage: A study of the accompanying photographs and their captions will give a reasonable appreciation of the markings (so will not be repeated here), but clarification of colouration follows. For the most part, the upperparts had a greenish cast (not noticeably bright) and the underparts appeared off-white with perhaps a greenish wash. DB reported the presence of yellow in the supercilium. During several observations of the bird in flight the rump was seen well. It was concolorous with surrounding upperparts so was not yellow.

Identification and Discussion

Identified generically as a *Phylloscopus* warbler by characters defined by van Duivendijk, N. (2011) (p. 276),

- supercilium very conspicuous
- eye-line conspicuous
- two obvious wing-bars
- upperparts unpatterned
- tail-tip slightly notched
- pale ear-coverts
- very lively and difficult to observe.

In the above we assume that the word 'upperparts' is not used intuitively, i.e. the self-explanatory sense of the word, but means the dorsal surface of the bird excluding head, neck, wings and tail (as defined in Marchant & Higgins, 1990).

When Baker published his *Warblers of Europe, Asia and North Africa* in 1997, 37 species of *Phylloscopus* warblers were included within the scope of that book. Other than Arctic Warbler *P. borealis* that occurred only as a vagrant, none were known from Australia. Discoveries and taxonomic changes since then have increased that number by about three. As this bird had prominent markings on the tertials, using the list in Rasmussen & Anderton (2012, p. 314) but modifying it in accordance with the 'IOC World Bird List, Version 4.2 updated 15 April 2014', we need only consider 8 species. The following 5 of these are so restricted in range and are resident or very short distance migrants that their occurrence on Ashmore is inconceivable so they can be ignored. Plumage features also eliminate them but we consider analysis of them here is unwarranted. These are Brooks's Leaf Warbler *P. subviridis*, Buff-barred (Orange-barred) Leaf Warbler *P. pulcher*, Ashy –throated (Grey-faced) Leaf Warbler *P. maculipennis*, Chinese Leaf Warbler *P. yunannanensis* and Yellow-vented Warbler *P. cantator*. This leaves Yellow-browed Warbler, Hume's Leaf Warbler *P. humei* and Pallas's (Lemon-rumped) Leaf Warbler *P. chloronotus* as realistic contenders.

The plumage features that identify this bird as a **Yellow-browed Warbler** numbered in the order of their significance as listed by van Duivendijk, N. (2011) (p. 279) are as follows.

1. Very conspicuous pale yellowish supercilium extending to hind neck.
2. Two broad wing-bars concolorous with supercilium; broad dark 'shadow' (dark base of secondaries) under greater coverts.
3. Contrastingly patterned tertials with dark centres and broad whitish fringes.
6. Upperparts and crown rather dark greenish.

The 4th in his list of characters '*usually* faint paler middle of crown (never as pale and well defined as in Pallas's Leaf Warbler)' was not detected in our bird. We thought the legs were more likely dark rather than pale but we are not certain of this. If so, this would be contra the 5th feature listed, 'legs *usually* pale' whereas 'in *most* Hume's Leaf Warbler rather dark'. The italics in both the above quotes are ours used to emphasise that these distinctions are general but not exclusive so are not diagnostic.

As it is the most complete, we have used van Duivendijk (2011) as the definitive authority. We have however, also referred to the following texts and have found no significant conflict: Cramp & Brooks (1992); Baker (1997); Grimmett *et al*. (1998); Beaman & Madge (1998); Robson (2008); Brazil (2009); Svensson *et al*. (2009); Rasmussen & Anderton (2012); Menkhorst et al. (2017).

Plumage features characteristic of **Pallas's Leaf Warbler** numbered in the order of their significance as listed by van Duivendijk (2011) (p. 279) are as follows. Their absence in our bird eliminates this species.

1. Distinct central crown stripe.
2. Yellowish rump patch'.
3. 'Broad and long dark eye-stripe, more distinct than in all congeners'.

4. ‘Almost completely dark bill’, only base of lower mandible pale whereas in most Yellow-browed, the pale area is larger.
In our bird, almost the whole of the lower mandible was pale.

Plumage features characteristic of **Hume’s Leaf Warbler** as compared with Yellow-browed Warbler numbered in the order of their significance as listed by van Duivendijk (2011) (p. 279) are as follows. These eliminate this species.

1. Dark ‘shadow’ below greater coverts caused by dark bases to secondaries is narrower and less distinct. *Prominent in our bird*.
2. Rather broad whitish wingbar on greater coverts but that on median coverts less distinct and sometimes absent. *Both prominent in our bird*.
3. ‘Supercilium *extends into sharp point at rear of head* fainter between eye and bill …”. ‘In Yellow-browed supercilium is rather even in distinctness and depth over whole length’, (*as in our bird*).
4. ‘Legs dark, sometimes paler grey-brown’. *Leg colour not accurately determined in subject bird but could be dark as described here for Hume’s. Thus potentially a contra-indication.*
5. ‘Usually rather fainter loral stripe’. *Insufficient experience to comment on this feature.*
6. ‘Dark bill often with pale base and cutting edges. Variable, paler billed individuals overlapping with Yellow-browed’. *In the subject bird, almost the whole of the lower mandible was pale so it was at the extreme large end of the range of pale-billed birds so definitely outside overlap range so fits Yellow-browed.*
7. ‘Centre of median coverts, greater coverts and tertials slightly paler, dark grey instead of black’. *In subject bird they appear black but judgement of shades are unreliable*.

Age

The strength of the supercilium and the two wing bars suggest that the bird was an adult (van Duivendijk 2011).

Normal distribution

This is an abundant species that for the most part breeds across the whole of northern Asia between 40º and 65º N from Europe east to the Pacific Ocean (Cramp & Brooks 1992). It is a long distance migrant being a common winter visitor to SE Asia (Robson 2008) but is not listed as having occurred in Wallacia (Coates & Bishop 1997). It is one of the more frequent vagrants to the UK (Svensson *et al*. 2009).

Previous reports of Phylloscopus warblers from Ashmore Reef

In addition to the three reports of Yellow-browed Warbler referred to herein, Phylloscopus warblers of four other taxa are claimed from Ashmore Reef.

Des Pike (1993), who was a ranger for the Australian Nature Conservancy (ANCA) at Ashmore Reef for many years stated in the cited article about the Reef (p. 13), that 'Arctic Warblers also appear to be regular visitors from the north …'. In a list titled 'Bird Species of Ashmore Reef' which he maintained until 1996 when MC took over management of the list (where only first sightings are mentioned), he gives the 'Date First Recorded' of 'Arctic Warbler' *Phylloscopus borealis* as Dec 1990 and lists himself as the observer. October 2000 was the first time that KBW was allowed full access to West Island. Between then and 2011, 'Arctic Warbler' as then defined was recorded by KBW tour groups or research visits by KBW contracted by ANCA as follows: in 2001 (3 birds), 2002 (1), 2004 (2), 2005 (5), 2007 (2), 2008 (2) and 2010 (2). The 'species' (*senso lato*) was also recorded by Monash University Research Teams in spring and autumn 2010 and in autumn 2011.

In 2011, Alstrom *et al*. (2011) split Arctic Warbler as previously recognised into three taxa, Arctic Warbler *P. borealis*, Kamchatka Leaf Warbler *P. examinandus* and Japanese Leaf Warbler *P. xanthodryas* and the IOC World Bird List Version 4.2 (accessed on the web on 14 July 2014) recognised this new taxonomic arrangement. The distinguishing features or these taxa are detailed in Alstrom *et al*. (2011) and whilst the last of these is a resident and is a distinct bright green species for which there is no evidence or probability of occurrence in Australia, we consider that evidence from observations since 2011 show that both of the first two of those 'new' species has occurred at Ashmore in at least 2012 and 2013. Therefore older records of 'Arctic Warbler' are likely to have included both migratory taxa so there acceptance needs to be re-assessed (e.g. BARC cases 438 and 480) and the status of the species on the Australian list should be placed in abeyance pending decisions on those.

The other two are Eastern Crowned Warbler *P. coronatus* which was present 23-24 April 2012 and Willow Warbler *P. trochilus* which was present 17-18 November 2013.

Thus in addition to the two other Yellow-browed Warblers, BARC can anticipate submissions regarding observations of each of these four species for the years 2012 and 2013 and perhaps a few of the numerous Arctic Warblers (*senso stricto*) for which there is sufficient information especially regarding calls. Thus at this time, Dusky Warbler *P. fuscatus* is the only member of the genus *Phylloscopus* for which there is now an acceptable Australian record despite previously accepted Arctic Warblers from Ashmore and elsewhere. This is an attempt to extend that list.

Acknowledgements

We greatly appreciate the assistance given by Danny Rogers, Jeff Davies, Rohan Clarke and all members of the KBW 2014 autumn expedition.

References

Alström, P., Saitoh, T., Williams, D., Nishiumi, I., Shigeta, Y., Ueda, K., Irestedt, M., Björklund, M. & Olsson, U. (2011), 'The Arctic Warbler *Phylloscopus borealis* – three anciently separated cryptic species revealed', *Ibis* 153: 395–410.

Baker, K. (1997), *Warblers of Europe, Asia and North Africa*, Christopher Helm, London.

Beaman, M. & Madge, S. (1998), *The Handbook of Bird Identification for Europe and the Western Palearctic*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey.

Brazil, M. (2009), *Field Guide to the Birds of East Asia*, Christopher Helm, London.

Carter, M. (2003), 'Pechora Pipit *Anthus gustavi* in Australia', *Australian Field Ornithology*, **20**, 59-65.

Christidis, L. & Boles, W. E. (2008), *Systematics and Taxonomy of Australian Birds,* CSIRO, Melbourne.

Clements, J.F. (2007), The *Clements Checklist of Birds of the World*, Cornell University Press, New York.

Coates, B.J. & Bishop, K.D. (1997), *A Guide to the Birds of Wallacea*, Dove, Alderley, Queensland.

Cramp, S. & Brooks, DJ. (Eds.) (1992), *The Birds of the Western Palearctic,* Vol. VI, *Warblers*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Grimmett, R., Inskipp, C. & Inskipp, T. (1998), *Birds of the Indian Subcontinent*, Christopher Helm, London.

Higgins, P.J., Peter, J.M. & Cowling, S.J. (Eds) (2006), *Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds, Volume 7: Part B, Dunnock to Starlings*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne.

Iozawa, H., Yamagata, N. & Yoshino, T. (2000), *Japanese Bird 550: Landbirds*, Bunichi General Publisher, Tokyo (in Japanese).

Kanouchi, T., Abe, N. & Ueda, H. (1998), *Wild Birds of Japan*, Yama-Kei, Tokyo (in Japanese).

Leader, P.J. (1990), 'Hume's Yellow-browed Warbler a new subspecies for Hong Kong', *The Hong Kong Bird Report 1989*, The Hong Kong Bird Watching Society, Hong Kong.

Lekagul, B. & Round, P.D. (1991) *A guide to the Birds of Thailand*, Saha Karn Bhaet, Bangkok.

Lewington, I., Alstrom, P. & Colston, P. (1991), *A Field Guide to the Rare Birds of Britain and Europe*, HarperCollins, London.

Marchant, S. & Higgins, P.J. (Eds) (1990), *Handbook of Australian, New Zealand & Antarctic Birds. Vol. 1, Ratites to Ducks,* Oxford University Press, Melbourne.

Menkhorst, P., Rogers, D., Clarke, R., Davies, J., Marsack, P. & Franklin, K. (2017), *The Australian Bird Guide*, CSIRO, Victoria, Australia.

Pike, D. (1993), 'Birds of Ashmore Reef', *Wingspan*, 11, September 1993; 12-14.

Pike, G.D. & Leach, G.J. (1997), *Handbook of the Vascular Plants of Ashmore Reef and Cartier Islands*, Parks Australia, Canberra.

Rasmussen, P.C. & Anderton, J.C. (2012), *Birds of South Asia. The Ripley Guide. Vols. 1 & 2, 2nd Edition*. Lynx, Washington, D.C.

Robson, C. (2008), *A Field Guide to the Birds of South-East Asia*, New Holland, London.

Shimba, T. (2007), *A Photographic Guide to the Birds of Japan and North-East Asia*, Christopher Helm, London.

Svensson, L., Mullarney, K. & Zetterstrom, D. (2009), *Collins Bird Guide 2nd Edition*, HarperCollins, London.

van Duivendijk, N. (2011) *Advanced Bird ID Handbook: The Western Palearctic*. New Holland, London.