

Submission to Bird Australia Rarities Committee

Species: Eyebrowed Thrush *Trudus obscurus*
Location: Horsburgh Island, Cocos (Keeling) Islands, Indian Ocean
Observation Date: 28 December 2014
Submission Date: 20 August 2018
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Circumstances

On 28 December 2014 an Eyebrowed Thrush *Turdus obscurus* was photographed by a remote camera on Horsburgh Island (Pulu Luar), Cocos (Keeling) Islands, Indian Ocean (CKI). The camera was stationed to monitor the re-introduction of the Cocos Buff-banded Rail *Gallirallus philippensis andrewsi* on Horsburgh I. Two images were captured shortly after dawn, about 50 seconds apart. Horsburgh I. is uninhabited and to our knowledge no one saw this bird in life.

Interestingly, the encounter followed the passing of Cyclone Kate that originated near Sumatra on 21 December 2014 and passed by CKI on 23 December 2014 (see Box 1). It is not known for certain if the cyclone brought the bird to the CKI, but it is a possibility.

Description

The two photographs (Plates 1 and 3) were taken under low-level lighting, limiting the detail that can be seen. They show a fairly small passerine, with longish orange-yellow tarsi and long but slender toes (i.e. a ground-foraging bird). The head was grey-brown or dingy-brown with a distinctive face pattern made up of a white supercilium, a dark loreal stripe, a white subloral – subocular stripe, and more obscure pale submoustacial and dark malar stripes (Plate 1). The throat was pale (buffy?). The upperparts were dingy-brown similar to the head, perhaps a fraction browner. Narrow pale tips to the greater secondary coverts are just discernible (Plate 4). The flanks were orange-buff (“apricot”) without streaking. The vent and central belly were whitish and there was a brown-sully across the upper breast (Plate 1). The dark bill had a bold orange or yellow base.



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Plate 1. Eyebrowed Thrush at Horsburgh Island, CKI, 28 December 2014
(Image, courtesy of Parks Australia).

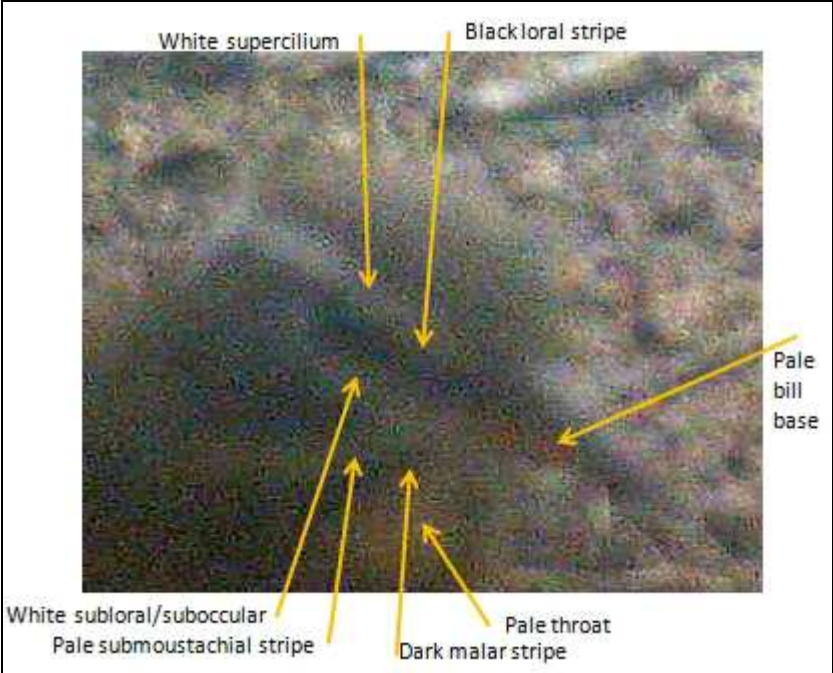


Plate 2. Eyebrowed Thrush at Horsburgh Island (facial pattern detail)



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Plate 3. Eyebrowed Thrush at Horsburgh Island, CKI, 28 December 2014
(Image, courtesy of Parks Australia)



Plate 4. Eyebrowed Thrush at Horsburgh Island (upperparts detail)

Identification

To an experienced observer the subject bird is obviously a thrush (Turdidae). Among thrushes, the combination of the complex facial pattern and the orange-buff, unstreaked flanks is diagnostic (Cramp 1989; MacKinnon & Phillips 1993; Beaman & Madge 1998; Dunn *et al.* 1999; Mullarney *et al.* 1999; Robson 2000; Rasmussen & Anderton 2005; Wells 2007; Brazil 2009; Menkhorst *et al.* 2017). The subloral – subocular Stripe is particularly distinctive.

Within Australia the only vaguely similar species recorded is the Island Thrush *Turdus poliocephalus*, of which ssp. *natalis* occurs on the relatively close (~980 km distant) Christmas Island. *T. p. natalis* was even introduced to the CKI shortly before 1900, and though now extinct there, there was an estimated population of about 500 birds on Horsburgh in 1941 (Woinarski *et al.* 2014). Island Thrush has similar body plumage to Eyebrowed Thrush, but lacks the complex facial pattern and bicoloured bill.

Farther afield, Redwing *T. iliacus* has a vaguely similar head pattern but has heavily streaked underparts in all plumages. Grey-backed Thrush *T. hortulorum* has similar body plumage but lacks the complex facial pattern. American Robin *T. migratorius* has a darker head (hooded appearance) and a different pattern of white in the face. Everett's Thrush *Zoothera everetti* is darker with a streaked facial pattern and an all-dark bill. Grey-sided Thrush *T. feae* has a similar head pattern but lacks the buff flanks. The closely related Pale Thrush *T. pallidus* and Brown-headed (Red-bellied) Thrush *T. chrysolaus* lack the complex head pattern.

The extensive pale throat and the vague submoustacial and malar stipes, and the low contrast between the top of the head and the mantle suggest either a female or immature (first winter bird). The pale tips to the greater secondary coverts indicate a first cycle bird with retained juvenile wing feathers. It appears to be a first cycle female, but the photographic resolution may be too low to confirm the sex.

T. obscurus is monotypic with no significant geographical variation (Cramp 1989; Birdlife International 2018; Gill & Donsker 2018).

Status

BARC has accepted one record of Eyebrowed Thrush from Malanda Qld in February 2011 following Cyclone Yasi (BARC Case 719), which was the first report for Australia. Menkhorst *et al.* (2017) list several more records:

- Multiple from CKI in December 2011.
- Adult male from Port Headland WA in December 2014 (contemporaneous with this occurrence).
- Multiple from CKI in December 2015.

The CKI record from December 2015 is being submitted separately but concurrently with this submission.

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Acknowledgments

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Box 1. Details of Cyclone Kate, December 2014 (Source: Wikipedia)

Category 4 severe tropical cyclone (Australian scale)	
Category 3 tropical cyclone (SSHWS)	
	
Duration	21 December – 30 December (Exited basin)
Peak intensity	165 km/h (105 mph) (10-min) 955 hPa (mbar)

Severe Tropical Cyclone Kate [\[edit\]](#)

This section **needs expansion**.
You can help by [adding to it](#). (March 2017)

On 21 December TCWC Perth reported that Tropical Low 04U had developed within the monsoon trough to the southeast of [Sumatra, Indonesia](#).^{[20][21]} Over the next few days, the system gradually developed further as it moved south-eastwards before it started to move towards the southwest and the [Cocos \(Keeling\) Islands](#) during 23 December.^[20] Early the next day, it intensified into a Category 1 tropical cyclone, as BOM named the system *Kate*. The next day, Kate continued to intensify as an [eye](#) developed and reached peak intensity as a Category 4 severe tropical cyclone as. On 27 December, it underwent an eyewall replacement cycle. On 30 December, TCWC Perth reported that Kate had moved out of the Australian region and into the South-west Indian Ocean basin.^[22]