

Arafura Fantails *Rhipidura dryas semicollaris* seen on West Island, Ashmore Reef in 2010, 2011, 2013 & 2016

**BIRD 1, BARC Case 1036 (2010); BIRD 2, Case 1037 (2011); BIRD 3, Case 1038 (2013);
Bird 4, Case 1039 (2016)**

By MIKE CARTER¹, GEORGE SWANN² & ROHAN CLARKE³ 13th October 2018

Introduction

Between 1996 and 2017 Kimberley Birdwatching ran 20 birdwatching tours to Ashmore Reef where participants landed under permit on West Island to search for and survey land birds. Additionally, during the period 2010 to 2014, Monash University undertook 10 survey visits to Ashmore Reef with five surveys in the month of April and five surveys in the month of November. On Kimberley Birdwatching trips in springs of 2010, 2013 & 2016 and a Monash survey trip in November 2011, single Arafura Fantails *Rhipidura dryas* of the Indonesian subspecies *semicollaris* were seen. This taxon is so distinctive that it was raised to specific level in Eaton *et al.* (2016) and given the common English name 'Supertramp Fantail'. Because the authors Eaton *et al.* and their publishers 'Lynx' are closely associated with BirdLife International there is some potential that the BirdLife International Checklist will eventually adopt that split. Other authorities have not yet responded to this potential split but as BARC follows BirdLife we should assess occurrences with such a potential split in mind. In any case identification to subspecific level is important as it tells us the origin of these vagrants to Ashmore; that is, the Lesser Sundas islands of Flores, Alor, Wetar, Sawu, Timor and Roti, with the last two islands (Timor and Roti) being the closest major landfalls to Ashmore Reef.

This is a submission to BirdLife Australia Rarities Committee (BARC) seeking acceptance of the four claims of this taxon. Whilst the records occurred on the same small island in the Timor Sea the minimum time between each record spanned 12 months (with confirmed absences between each detection) and so these sightings are each presented separately below, designated as Birds 1, 2, 3 & 4. In each case the main substance of the claim is contained in the photograph(s) presented here (Figs 1-10), but notes made by MC during or immediately after the tours have also been used in the preparation of these submissions. A 'Summary' providing the basic details of each of the tours including a list of participants is provided in an appendix. Birds 2, 3 & 4 are given more cursory treatment than the first occurrence, as all four birds appeared virtually identical. The text discussing identification covers all four cases.

There are no previous reports of this taxon within Australian territory.

Ashmore Reef

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. These birds were seen on the largest and most heavily vegetated island, West Island (12°14'S 122°58'E) and this is also the most northerly, lying ~145 km south of the Indonesian island of Roti. It is a low coral island with a gritty, sandy substrate and occasional beach rock outcrops covering an area of ~14 hectares. Encircling the island, adjacent to 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*. Each bird frequented these shrubs with Bird 1 favouring an area where a huge clam shell, partly shaded from the sun, retained rain water. Surface water is a rare commodity on the island.

Observations historically and particularly this century, show that this is a 'migrant trap', a convenient resting place for migrants and a refuge for vagrant land birds.

Bird 1: 16th to 21st October 2010.

This bird was studied by the Kimberley Birdwatching's annual spring monitoring group from 18th to 21st October. It was discovered by a Peregrine Bird Tour group led by Chris Doughty and Simon Mustoe who had arrived two days previously. That group's final visit to West Island was on 18th October. Immediately prior to its occurrence, a strong easterly 'monsoonal' air stream with heavy rain dominated the weather.

The following five photos by Rohan Clarke (Figures 1 to 5) are of this bird and show all critical features.





Note the bold, clean white throat, the narrow neat black band across the upper breast, absence of black spotting on breast below the band, the rufous forehead and grey crown. Also the prominent white semi-circle below the eye.



Figures 1-5: Arafura Fantail *semicollaris*, West Island, Ashmore Reef, 16-21 October 2010
Photos by Rohan Clarke

Bird 2: 15th & 16th November 2011.



Figure 6: Arafura Fantail *semicollaris*, West Island, Ashmore Reef, 16 November 2011
Photo by Rohan Clarke

Bird 3: 22nd to 25th October 2013.

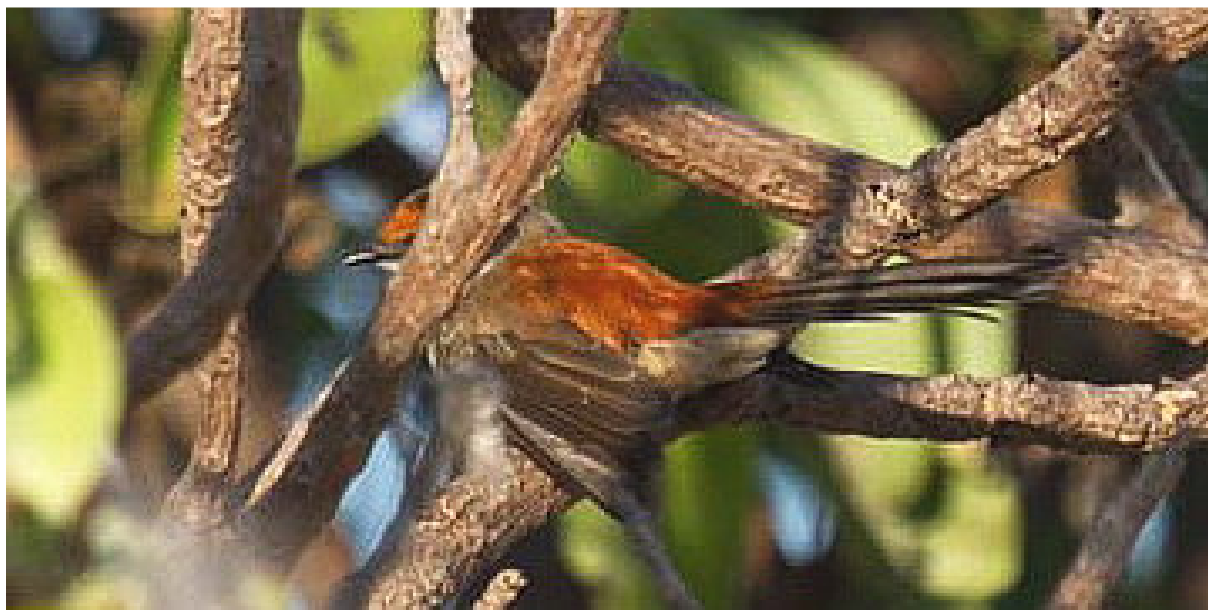


Figure 7: Arafura Fantail *semicollaris*, West Island, Ashmore Reef, 07 November 2013
Photo by Alex Ferguson

Bird 4: 7th November 2016.



Figure 8: Arafura Fantail *semicollaris*, West Island, Ashmore Reef, 07 November 2016
Photo by Colin Rogers



Figure 9: Arafura Fantail *semicollaris*, West Island, Ashmore Reef, 07 November 2016
Photo by Mike Carter



Figure 10: Arafura Fantail *semicollaris*, West Island, Ashmore Reef, 07 November 2016
Photo by John Young

Identification and Discussion

Comparison with images on the web, descriptions and illustrations in some texts leave no doubt that the subject birds are entirely consistent for Arafura Fantail *Rhipidura dryas semicollaris*. See for instance the photograph below taken from HBW Alive. Note in particular the following:

- extensive white tips to the rectrices (Schodde & Mason 1999);
- the rufous on the upperparts extends from the rump well up the back but extension on to the tail area is limited to the uppertail coverts at extreme base of the tail;
- broad, bold white chin & throat;
- the white throat is bordered below by a neat black patch or bib on the upper breast;
- absence of spotting or streaking on the breast;
- well-defined black upper cheeks;
- the forehead is rufous but crown and nape are grey.

We believe that the combination of these characters is diagnostic of Arafura Fantail *R. dryas semicollaris* also known as Supertramp Fantail (Eaton *et al.* 2016)

Arafura Fantail *Rhipidura dryas semicollaris*



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| Photographer : | © Nikolay Loginov |
| Location : | Roti Island, Lesser Sundas, Indonesia |
| Date : | 6 May 2016 |
| English synonyms: | Rufous Fantail, Rufous-fronted Fantail, Wood Fantail, Supertramp Fantail, Elegant Fantail (<i>elegantula</i> , <i>hamadryas</i> , <i>reichenowi</i>) |
| Bird Family : | Rhipiduridae - Fantails |
| Bird Group : | PASSERIFORMES |
| Red Data Status : | Least Concern |
| Remarks : | |
| Taxonomic Notes : | Split from Rufous Fantail <i>Rhipidura rufifrons</i> following Schodde & Mason (1999) <i>Directory of Australian Birds. Passerines: i-x.</i> - CSIRO Publishing, Canberra. |
| Select an image: 1. Arafura Fantail ▼ | |

Nominate race Arafura Fantails, the taxon that occurs in coastal areas of the Kimberley, Top End and western Queensland, differ from the subject birds in having more extensive black across the lower throat and black scaling below that extends to the breast (Menkhorst *et al.* 2017).

Superficially similar 'rufous-type fantails' with white throats bordered below by black that occur in Indonesia or New Guinea and might therefore be considered potential vagrants to Ashmore are Rufous-tailed Fantail *R. phoenicura*, Rusty-bellied Fantail *R. teysmanni* and Streaky-breasted Fantail *R. dedemi*. These are easily eliminated by various features in particular the absence of white tips to rectrices.

Rufous Fantails of the *rufifrons* group are usually best distinguished by having grey not white tips to the rectrices (Schodde & Mason 1998).

This taxon is included as occurring on East Timor in Trainor, Coates & Bishop (2007). The entry therein is largely taken from Coates & Bishop (1997), which is now outdated with regard to taxonomy. While the illustration therein gives a recognisable impression of this taxon it is inaccurate as the back should be rufous not brown, the cheeks should be black not brown and the white area shown as extending onto upper breast should be confined to the throat. Reference to images on the Oriental Bird Club's web site show that the Ashmore birds are a good match for this subspecies with no obvious contra-indications.

Global distribution

Arafura Fantail *semicollaris* is resident on Flores, Alor, Wetar, Sawu, Roti & Timor in the Lesser Sundas. Other races which, among other differences have black spotting on the breast, occur elsewhere in Indonesia

Acknowledgements

We greatly appreciate the photographers who made their pictures available for inclusion herein. We thank those that accompanied us on these tours for their assistance in the field and their companionship.

References

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Appendix 1: Taxonomy according to Handbook Birds of the World Alive (Accessed 07-09-2018)

Family Fantails (Rhipiduridae)

Least Concern

Arafura Fantail (*Rhipidura dryas*)

| | |
|-------------------|-------------------------|
| Taxonomy | Breeding |
| Descriptive notes | Movements |
| Voice | Status and conservation |
| Habitat | Bibliography |
| Food and feeding | |



Taxonomy

French: Rhipidure dryade **German:** Arafurafächerschwanz **Spanish:** Abanico de Arafura

Taxonomy: *Rhipidura dryas* Gould, 1843, Port Essington, north coast of Australia. Often considered conspecific with *R. rufifrons* and *R. semirubra*, but differs in morphology (longer, more strongly graduated tail) and plumage (narrower rufous patches at tail base, extensive white tips on outer rectrices), although comprehensive assessment of molecular, acoustic and ecological evidence may produce new species limits; Australian nominate form already regarded as a separate species by some recent authors ; “leap-frog” position of *R. rufifrons torrida* particularly baffling. Present species here treated as comprising “*squamata* group” in S Moluccas and West Papuan Is, “*elegantula* group” in E Lesser Sundas, and “*dryas* group” in S New Guinea, C Lesser Sundas and Australia; but all available recordings suggest uniformity of voice except in the form *semicollaris* , which gives a fast series of three-note phrases (second and third notes each a pitch higher), and subspecies groups proposed herein should be regarded as tentative, while detailed vocal and genetic study is needed. Race *henrici* sometimes merged with *squamata*. Eleven subspecies recognized.

Subspecies and Distribution

- *R. d. celebensis* Büttikofer, 1892 – Tanahjampea and Kalao, in Bonerate Is.
- *R. d. mimosae* Meise, 1929 – Kalaotoa (E of Kalao).
- *R. d. semicollaris* S. Müller, 1843 – Lesser Sundas (Flores, Alor, Wetar, Sawu, Roti, Timor).
- *R. d. sumbensis* E. J. O. Hartert, 1896 – Sumba, in S Lesser Sundas.
- *R. d. streptophora* Ogilvie-Grant, 1911 – Mimika R and Gulf of Papua, in W & SE New Guinea.
- *R. d. dryas* Gould, 1843 – ARAFURA FANTAIL – N Australia from Collier Bay E, including Melville I, Truant I and Groote Eylandt, to E coast of Gulf of Carpentaria.
- *R. d. squamata* S. Müller, 1843 – SCALY-BREASTED FANTAIL – West Papuan Is (Waigeo, Salawati, Schildpad, Misool) and Banda Is.
- *R. d. henrici* E. J. O. Hartert, 1918 – S Moluccas (Seram Laut, Manggur Group, Kur, Taam), Kai Is (Kai Kecil) and Aru Is (Babi).
- *R. d. elegantula* Sharpe, 1879 – ELEGANT FANTAIL – E Lesser Sundas (Romang, Damar, Leti, Moa).
- *R. d. reichenowi* Finsch, 1901 – Babar, in extreme E Lesser Sundas.
- *R. d. hamadryas* P. L. Sclater, 1883 – Tanimbar Archipelago.

What do coloured bullet points mean?

Descriptive notes

16–17 cm; 7.2–10 g. **Nominate race** has forehead dull mid-rufous, crown and mantle mid grey-brown, remainder of upperparts rufous; upperwing grey-brown; tail slate-grey, narrow rufous band at base (not extending to outermost feather pair), outer rectrices extensively tipped white (36% of feather); chin and throat white, breastband black with moderate white scaling on posterior edge, belly creamy white, flanks and undertail-coverts light cinnamon; iris dark brown; bill black, underside of lower mandible pale pink; legs dark greyish-brown to black. Sexes alike. Juvenile is duller than adult, with markings less distinct. Races form three groups, differing in plumage colours and pattern: *streptophora* is like nominate, but crown and back washed brighter rufous, flanks darker, undertail-coverts richer, white tips of rectrices narrower; *semicollaris* has rufous at tail base much reduced, tips of outer rectrices longer and whiter; *sumbensis* is similar to previous but larger, breastband broader with scallier posterior margin; *celebensis* has breastband without scaly edges; *mimosae* is warmer brown, less greyish, on crown and nape, with black breastband narrower; *elegantula* has forehead feathers black basally, bordered by rusty-rufous patch, with creamy or whitish apical half (paler tips sometimes absent, producing rufous frons), crown and back rufous, white to rufous supraloral line; *reichenowi* is like last, but forehead rufous; *hamadryas* has forehead pale or rufous, rest of head plain rufous; *squamata* has forehead and face black, white supraloral line, black breastband very broad and heavily scaled posteriorly; *henrici* resembles last, but edges of secondaries more cinnamon.

ssp *dryas*

ARAFURA FANTAIL



Appendix 2: Summaries of the 2010, 2013 & 2016 KBW trips for which photographic record of Supertramp Fantails are presented here.

BIRD 1: Ashmore Expedition 2010, 16-23 October; Summary

By Mike Carter & Rohan Clarke 30 October 2010.

Trip Details.

In 2010, the annual Kimberley Birdwatching's eight-day Broome-Ashmore-Lacepedes-Broome expedition ran from 16-23 October. Logistics and permits were organised by George Swann. Personnel were Jim Allen, Xenia Dennett, Jan England, Dougald Frederick, Greg Harewood, Geoffrey Jones, Geoffrey Lane, Bill Ramsay, Joy Tansey, Tom Wheller, Barb Williams, Albert Wright, Eleanor Wright, Rohan Clarke, George Swann & Mike Carter. Our boat was the air-conditioned 21 m MV Flying Fish V skippered by George Greaves. Jacqui fed and nurtured us and Maurice O'Connor assisted in numerous ways. All three skippered dinghies when required.

We sailed from the beach near Gantheaume Point in Broome on 16 October (Day 1) at 07.35 and spent the next two days and nights travelling at sea. We maintained a NW course throughout Day 1 but at night changed our heading to NNE. By dawn on Day 2 we were in 500m deep water and cruised along the continental slope in waters of similar depth throughout the morning and then veered to pass just to the west of Scott Reef in the afternoon. During the morning of Day 3 we adopted a more NE course heading directly to Ashmore Reef entering the lagoon at ~11.30 where we joined the Australian Customs Vessel 'Ashmore Guardian', with its complement of federal government wardens (erstwhile DEWHA), at the inner mooring.

Our berth for the next three nights (Days 3, 4 & 5) was at the inner mooring (12°14.33'S 122°58.95'E) just off West Island. All members of the party went ashore daily on West Island each afternoon and early morning of our stay, ferried there by three dinghies that were also used to make landings on Middle Island, East Island and a sand bar (a high-tide wader roost) near East Island. A

warden escorted us ashore on Middle and East Islands. Neap tides limited the time we could spend ashore on all but West Island, water depth within the lagoon being inadequate for navigation except at high tide. On our first afternoon ashore, 18 Oct., we met Chris Doughty, Simon Mustoe and other members of their group, who were enjoying their last visit ashore after a three-day stay.

After a last visit ashore on West Island, we released our mooring at Ashmore at 09.00 on Day 6 (21 October) and sailed on a SSE heading through waters of depths between 500-770 m. By dawn on Day 7, we were approaching the shelf break on a direct course just east of south for the Lacepedes and for most of that day we were over shelf waters of less than 100 m deep. We anchored off West Island, Lacepedes (16°50.44'S 122°06.35'E) around 19.15 that day. Next morning, Day 8 (23 October), we were ashore on West Island, Lacepedes, from 04.50 to 08.15. Back aboard and tenders stowed, we sailed for Broome, berthing at the wharf (18°00.09'S 122°12.96'E) at 16.45.

Cloudless skies subjected us to relentless sunshine but temperatures were moderated by cooling breezes so it was never unbearably hot and unusually for this season, not humid. When we boarded on Day 1, there was a 35-knot SE wind, much stronger than previously experienced on these trips, but this had moderated by noon and by evening was only 8 Kts. For much of the rest of the trip winds fluctuated between 8 & 15 Kts. Luckily, nearly calm conditions prevailed on our arrival at the Lacepedes and the next morning so smooth conditions facilitated an easy landing.

Sea states were rougher than usual with wave heights often 0.3-0.5 m and up to 1.5 m at times with foaming crests. The sea was always at least rippled and the usual glassy to flat seas not experienced. One or two were a little queasy at times but none was sick.

Observations

93 species of bird identified (with another 'warbler' awaiting determination) indicate exceptional diversity. These included 34 seabirds, 28 shorebirds, 6 waterbirds and 22 landbirds.

Whilst at sea a continuous log of position and faunal observations was recorded manually and on computer.

At-sea highlights included:

Abbott's Booby: 1 on 17 Oct. is our 3rd record and believed to be the 6th for mainland Australian waters. Like birds last year, it circled our boat inquisitively for several minutes.

Jouanin's Petrel: 1 seen well on 17 Oct.

Swinhoe's Storm-Petrel: Single birds on 16 & 17 Oct.

On-land seabird highlights:

Lesser Noddy: 3 on Middle Island, one photographed with Black & Common Noddies. These are the first seen on land on these trips but probably previously overlooked. In April this year the species was found breeding on both Middle and East Islands.

Roseate Tern: 30,000 roosting in the lagoon at the Lacepedes!

Shorebird highlights:

Long-toed Stint: 1 on West Is. on 18 Oct. Not previously reported at Ashmore.

Wood Sandpiper: 1 on 19 & 20 Oct. on West Is. Not previously reported at Ashmore.

Asian Dowitcher: 4 on a sandbar on 20 Oct.

Landbird highlights on West Island, Ashmore (all photographed), were:

Grey-streaked Flycatcher: **NEW FOR AUSTRALIA.** 1-2 adults daily, possibly also a juv.

Dark-sided Flycatcher: **3rd for Australia if accepted.** 1 juv. daily, initially reported as a Grey-streaked Flycatcher.

Arafura Fantail *R. dryas semicollaris*: **NEW SUBSPECIES** for AUSTRALIA of this taxon from the nearby islands of Roti and Timor. 1 daily.

Tiger Shrike: 1 or 2 juveniles daily. This is the 4th or 5th record for Australia and the 2nd for Ashmore following one seen here in April.

Middendorff's Warbler: We saw from 1-3 birds daily and obtained excellent photos. There are four previous spring records and in April this year, three birds were singing.

Warbler spp.: The identity of a bird photographed on 18 Oct. to be determined.

Island Monarch: 1 juvenile known to be present when we arrived was joined by an adult. These are the 5th & 6th Australian records, all at this site.

Arctic Warbler: 1 or 2 daily. 8th record for Ashmore.

Oriental Reed Warbler: 1 daily.

Grey Wagtail: 1 daily.

Collared Kingfisher: 1 daily of the nominate race and therefore of Indonesian origin, not recognised as having occurred in Australia but we saw one here in 2009.

Oriental Cuckoo: 4-6 daily.

Australian Koel: 1 male on 18 Oct.

Eastern Yellow Wagtail: Daily to a max. of 8 on West Island and 1 on Middle Island, Ashmore and 1 on West Island, Lacedepes.

Barn Swallow: Daily to a max. of 3 on West Island and 1 on Middle Island.

Yellow White-eye: 2 daily often associating with the Fantail. Both surprisingly brilliant yellow and vocalisation sounded different but when Yellow White-eye calls were played, they reacted immediately and uttered similar notes.

(Horsfield's Bronze-Cuckoos were notable by their absence!)

The usual local tropical seabirds, Masked, Red-footed & Brown Boobies, Great & Lesser Frigatebirds, Common & Black Noddies, Bridled, Sooty, Crested, Lesser Crested, Roseate and Little Terns were seen. The first ten of these had or were nesting on Middle or/ East Islands. Many species, including Lesser Crested Terns, were also nesting on the Lacedepes. On West Island, Ashmore, there were 5 Red-tailed Tropicbird nests. Two pairs of White-tailed Tropicbird were seen over West Island and one over Middle Island.

Other migrant Seabirds of note included: Tahiti Petrels 9, Bulwer's Petrels 15, Streaked Shearwater 92, Hutton's Shearwater 587, Wilson's Storm-Petrel 27, Pomarine Jaeger 1, Arctic Jaeger 4 and Long-tailed Jaeger 1. The first ever **Flesh-footed Shearwaters** on an Ashmore trip were seen at sea; 5 birds just north of the Lacedepes. This follows the first ever reports of this species off northern WA south of Browse Island in April.

Disturbed seas meant that Cetaceans were difficult to detect so were apparently less numerous and diverse than recent trips with only three species of dolphin identified and two unidentified whales.

Reptiles included Green (abundant on the Lacedepes) and Australian Flatback Turtles and various sea snakes.

BIRD 2: Ashmore Expedition 2013, 20-27 October; Summary

By Mike Carter, Rohan Clarke & George Swann (3 November 2013)

Trip Details.

The 2013 annual spring eight-day Broome-Ashmore-Lacedepes-Broome expedition organised by George Swann of Kimberley Birdwatching (KBW) ran from 20-27 October. The birding personnel were Graeme Barwell, Joan Broadberry, Ron Broomham, Alex Ferguson, Dougald Frederick, Gina Hopkins, Glen Pacey, Carol Page, Geoff Smith, Lynn Smith, Bob Sothman, Alastair Stevenson, John Weigel, Tom Wheller, Rohan Clarke, George Swann & Mike Carter. Two American World Travel Destination Collectors were also aboard. Having added Ashmore Reef to his list, Don Parrish joined another to share equal top place as the world's most travelled person and his compatriot Bob Bonifas, moved into third place!

Our boat was the air-conditioned 21 m MV Flying Fish V. The skipper was Anthony and the deckhand Paul (Chook). The previous owner George Greaves attended in an advisory role and assisted generally. His partner Jackie fed and nurtured us.

We sailed from the beach near Gantheaume Point in Broome on 20 October (Day 1) at 08.40 and spent the next two days and nights travelling at sea. We maintained a NW course throughout Day 1 but at night changed our heading to NNE. By dawn on Day 2 we were in waters reaching depths of mostly 400 m or greater and cruised along the continental slope throughout the morning. Before sunset, we had passed west of and close to Scott Reef having traversed water depths of over 1,150 m. Early on Day 3 we encountered numerous Storm-Petrels in water with a depth of ~800 m so paused to observe this spectacle. Then we continued in a northerly direction across deeper water. At ~10.00 we turned to the east heading directly to Ashmore Reef. By 12.00

we were moored in the lagoon having passed the Australian Customs Vessel 'Ashmore Guardian' with its complement of customs staff anchored at the entrance.

For the next three nights (Days 3, 4 & 5), we were secure at the inner mooring (12°14.35'S 122°58.84'E) just off West Island. Most members of the party went ashore on West Island each morning and afternoon of those days. On Day 4, we circumnavigated Middle Island ferried there by three dinghies but did not land. We also spent some time at the adjacent 'Horseshoe' sand bar viewing loafing shorebirds on the high tide. Next day we were ashore on East Island for ~1.5 hours and at high tide, spent an hour on Splittgerber Cay enthralled by massed shorebirds.

After a last visit ashore on West Island, we released our mooring at Ashmore at 08.50 on Day 6 (25 October) and sailed throughout the day on a SSE heading through waters of depths between ~300-500 m. By dawn on Day 7, we were already over the shelf break on a direct course for the Lacepedes and during daylight hours were over shelf waters decreasing in depth from 110 m to 30 m. We anchored off West Island, Lacepedes (16°50'S 122°07'E) at 18.30. Next morning, Day 8 (27 October), we were ashore on West Island, Lacepedes, from 04.40 to 08.30. Back aboard and tenders stowed, we sailed for Broome, berthing at the wharf there (18°00.09'S 122°12.96'E) at 17.15.

Weather was mostly very hot and humid with cloudless skies, nearly constant sunshine and little if any breeze. An hour-long squall with heavy rain hit us on Day 6. Light winds and slight seas prevailed for most of the trip except on Day 8 when inshore coastal breeze and choppy sea made the voyage less comfortable.

Observations

82 species of bird were identified: 35 seabirds, 25 shorebirds, 7 waterbirds and 15 landbirds. In addition, 3-4 skulking passerines not identified to species were likely extreme rarities. One of these was photographed but images examined so far are insufficiently revealing. Nevertheless, a **GRAY'S GRASSHOPPER WARBLER** was identified in the field on 22 Oct. and is well documented with photos so should become the 1st Australian record.

For most of the time, whilst at sea a continuous log of position and faunal observations was recorded on 'Palm pilots' as well as manually.

At-sea highlights included 79 **Swinhoe's Storm-Petrels** (twice as many as recorded on any of the 14 previous KBW trips), 5 of which were only 65 km from Broome and 16 **Matsudaira's Storm-Petrel**. Others were Tahiti Petrel (6), Streaked Shearwater (98), Bulwer's Petrel (24), and all three Jaeger species.

On-land seabird highlights included **Lesser Noddy** (2) on East Island and over 30,000 **Roseate Terns** roosting in the lagoon at the Lacepedes

Shorebird highlights included the incongruous sight of a Long-toed Stint standing on the sandy shore of Middle Island, Ashmore, 8 Asian Dowitchers together at a high tide roost on Ashmore and Common Redshank, (2) at the Lacepede Islands.

In addition to the Gray's Grasshopper Warbler, Landbird highlights on West Island, Ashmore, included **Asian Brown Flycatcher** (2) (different birds on 22 & 25 Oct.), **Black-eared Cuckoo**, (first Ashmore record, an immature on 24 & 25 Oct.), **Collared Kingfisher**, 1 of the nominate Indonesian race), **Arafura Fantail** (Timorese race, 1 daily), **Canary White-eye** (1 on 23 Oct.), Oriental Reed Warbler, (1 on 23 and 24 Oct.), Oriental Cuckoo (up to 6 daily), and Eastern Yellow Wagtail (seen daily with at least 11 together at once, mostly *tshutschensis* but at least one of the Green-headed subspecies *taivana*).

The usual local tropical seabirds, Masked, Red-footed & Brown Boobies, Great & Lesser Frigatebirds, Common & Black Noddies, Bridled, Sooty, Great Crested, as well as White-winged Black, Common and Little Terns were seen. The first ten of these had bred or were nesting on Middle or/ East Islands, Ashmore. Many were also nesting on the Lacepedes where Lesser Crested Terns were also present. On West Island, Ashmore, there were 5 Red-tailed Tropicbird nests and White-tailed Tropicbirds were prospecting at Middle & East Islands.

Cetaceans were scarcer than usual but we did have some wonderful displays from Humpback Whales and we saw Dwarf Spinner Dolphins and both larger offshore and smaller inshore, Bottle-nosed Dolphins. Reptiles included Green, Loggerhead, Hawksbill and Australian Flatback Turtles and various sea snakes. Fish and Rays of various species of were also welcome sights.

BIRD 3: Ashmore Expedition 2016, 02-10 November; Summary

By Mike Carter, Rohan Clarke & George Swann (version dated 19 November 2016)

Trip Details

Kimberley Birdwatching's annual spring expedition to Ashmore Reef ex Broome in 2016 ran from 2 to 10 November. This nine day trip differed from previous expeditions in that we spent four, not three, days in the lagoon at Ashmore, and were ashore on West Island eight times. Our return journey to Broome incorporated a visit to Browse Island where we spent part of a morning but we didn't visit Adele Island or the Lacepedes. George Swann of Kimberley Birdwatching (KBW) was responsible for logistics and organisation and secured permission to land on all the islands. The birding personnel were Rae Clark, Michael Hancock, Nigel Jackett, Judy Leitch, Noel Luff, Martyn Moffat, Colin Rogers, Cathy Saywell, Sue Taylor, Jack Winterbottom and John Young with George Swann and Rohan Clarke acting as leaders assisted by Mike Carter. Our boat was 'Kimberley Expeditions' 38m long air-conditioned catamaran MV 'Reef Prince' equipped with two tenders.

We sailed from Broome on 2 November at 08.35 and spent the next two days and nights travelling at sea. On Day 1 we maintained a NW course traversing shelf waters in depths less than 100 m during daylight hours but in the night changed to a NNE heading. Soon after dawn on Day 2 we crossed the shelf break and continued on a northerly heading into deeper waters than we normally traverse. By noon we were in 1,300 m deep water and at sunset in 2,140 m deep water. At sunrise on Day 3 we were in waters over 1,000 m deep heading direct to Ashmore on a NNE course. Having received clearance from the Australian Customs Vessel guarding the Reef we entered the lagoon and were tied up at the inner mooring (12°13.2'S 123°00.3'E) just off West Island by around 12.30. This was our berth for the next three days.

That afternoon and in the late afternoons of the following three days and each morning of the next four days, most of the party went ashore on West Island ferried there by dinghy. Late morning and early afternoon of Day 4, we were taken by dinghy to East Island to observe the seabirds nesting there. We also landed on the adjacent Splittgerber Cay to view the thousands of shorebirds, terns and herons loafing there at high tide. Next day we landed on Middle Island and the adjacent sandbar known as the 'Horseshoe', another high-tide roost for shorebirds and terns.

After a last visit ashore on West Island, we released our mooring at 08.40 on Day 7 (8 November) and when clear of the Reef, sailed directly for Browse Island on a heading of 150°. We arrived after dark and anchored in sheltered waters just beyond the encircling reef.

Commencing at dawn on Day 8 (9 November), we were ferried to the beach on Browse Island and birded there for over 3 hours. Having returned to our mothership, we up-anchored and sailed for Broome at 09.08. We spent that night at sea and were in Broome by mid-afternoon on 10 November.

The weather throughout was hot and humid. Whilst at sea this was not unpleasant but when ashore walking on bare sand under a cloudless sky, it was extremely hot. We had no rain and generally skies were cloudless. Seas were mainly slight to moderate verging on rough at times on days 1, 8 & 9 and were never completely smooth.

Observations

For most of the time whilst at sea, a continuous log of position and faunal observations was recorded on 'Palm pilots' as well as manually. Each evening, observations at sea and on land were collated at a 'Bird Call'. These results are tabulated and are presented in separate documents.

73 species of bird were identified: 29 seabirds, 24 shorebirds, 6 waterbirds, 2 raptors and 12 landbirds. The more significant observations are as follows.

The three islands within the lagoon at Ashmore that provide nesting habitat for seabirds are severely drought affected (desert-like), being the driest we have seen them in two decades of visits. Much of the vegetation has died. Only one Palm tree remains alive, the one at the grave site on West Island. This has resulted in a major change to the distribution and perhaps abundance of the seabird population. Many species have now colonised West Island for the first time at least in recent decades. Some individuals may be new to Ashmore whilst others may have switched to there from East and Middle Islands. The following are in our experience, new as breeding species to West Island, having eggs or preparing to lay. Red-footed Booby, Brown (Common) Noddy, Lesser Noddy (up to 30 birds seen), Black Noddy, Bridled Tern (fledged young) and most dramatically, Sooty Tern (> 25,000 birds most with eggs). In addition Great Crested Terns were nesting and we have only one previous record of eggs being laid on that island. Species we saw breeding on Middle and East Islands that have not yet colonised West are Great Frigatebird, Lesser Frigatebird, Masked Booby and Brown Booby.

The lens of fresh water below the surface on West Island remains a viable water source as revealed when the refurbished pump is activated.

Vagrants and migrant land birds observed at West Island were **Rose-crowned Fruit-Dove of the race *Ptilinopus regina xanthogaster***. This is one of the distinct group of subspecies termed 'Grey-capped Fruit-Dove by BirdLife International, which due to their lack of a rose-coloured crown are potentially full species that include a very similar taxon *roseipileum*. An **Edible-nest Swiftlet** gave observers and photographers excellent close views for an extended period on 7 November. An individual of the nominate race of **Supertramp Fantail *Rhipidura semicollaris*** regarded as a full species in Eaton *et al.*'s newly published *Birds of the Indonesian Archipelago* was present for the whole of the same day. It has been split from Australia's Arafura Fantail. The two previous reports of this new species for Australia were also from Ashmore. An **Island Monarch** was present each day and we had a **Black Bittern** one day. **Eastern Yellow Wagtails** were seen occasionally but **Oriental Cuckoo** once only. Single Barn Swallows were seen on West Island and Browse.

The highlight on Browse Island was **2 Chinese Sparrowhawks, a new species for Western Australia**. Seeing Magpie-larks on remote waterless islands is always an intriguing sight and the three seen on Browse this trip were no different.

At-sea highlights included an **Abbott's Booby**, 36 **Bulwer's Petrels**, 18 **Swinhoe's Storm-Petrels**, 13 Tahiti Petrels, 48 Streaked Shearwaters, 24 Hutton's Shearwaters and 36 Roseate Terns.

The usual *tropical seabirds* that breed locally, Red-tailed Tropicbird, White-tailed Tropicbird, Masked, Red-footed & Brown Boobies, Great & Lesser Frigatebirds, Common & Black Noddies, Bridled, Sooty, Great Crested and Lesser Crested Terns were seen at sea as well as ashore. Ten migrant **Asian Gull-billed Terns (*affinis*)**, now generally considered to be a distinct species, were seen on Splittgerber Cay. Little, Common, Whiskered and White-winged Terns were seen either at sea or at the Reef.

Shorebirds (24 spp.) were numerous and afforded excellent viewing. 3 Oriental Plovers and a Little Curlew were seen on West Island and 7 Asian Dowitchers were together at the high tide roost at Splittgerber Cay.

Because seas were never smooth, always disturbed or even rough, it was difficult to see marine creatures while sailing. Nevertheless, 7 species of Cetacean, including False Killer Whales, Pan-tropical Spotted Dolphins (a pod of 50 around the boat), Indo-Pacific Humpback Dolphins and Australian Snubfin Dolphins were seen. Reptiles included Green (several were laying eggs at Ashmore) and Australian Flatback Turtles and two species of sea snake were seen. Corals and colourful Fish of many species were observed by those who went snorkelling in the lagoon while hundreds of Flying Fish fleeing our approaching boat kept those watching for birds from the bow on their toes and a huge breaching **Marlin** provided excitement for some diligent observers.