

Fairy Pitta – Broome, Western Australia

Submitted by Bruce Greatwich, Grant Morton, Clare Morton and George Swann

Species: Fairy Pitta (*Pitta nympha*)

Location: Broome, Western Australia (-17.962068°S, 122.240629°E)

Date: The Fairy Pitta was first recorded on 7th February 2019 and survived until the 9th February when it was discovered deceased.

Summary

This submission relates to the sighting of a Fairy Pitta at Matso's Brewery, Broome, Western Australia. The Fairy Pitta was initially discovered by Matso's Brewery bar staff on Thursday 7th February after flying in to a window and temporarily stunning itself. Photos were posted on Facebook enquiring as to species identification where Bruce Greatwich saw the Facebook post and advised as a Fairy Pitta. The Fairy Pitta was observed the following day (8th February) and the day after (9th February) but was found deceased in the afternoon of the 9th February. The specimen has been lodged with the Western Australian Museum (specimen ID WAMA41184), it was identified as an immature female by Ron Johnstone. A detailed description of the specimen and circumstances is being prepared for submission as a note in the WA Naturalist journal.

Previous BARC Submissions

If accepted, this record would represent the second accepted mainland Australian record, and third overall, with the first accepted record from Derby, WA in 2007 (BARC Case 748) and an additional accepted record from Christmas Island from 2012 (BARC case 769).

Circumstances and Description of Sighting

On the 7th February, at approximately 1900 Bruce Greatwich (BG) saw a post on a Broome community Facebook page by staff at Matso's Broome Brewery asking for identification of a bird. BG immediately recognised it as a Pitta species, and after consultation of the Australian Bird Guide, identified it as a Fairy Pitta. Whilst there was just a single photo of the bird on Facebook, the photo showed clear blue upper tail coverts and diagnostic facial pattern of a Fairy Pitta (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Photo of Fairy Pitta posted on Facebook by Matso's Brewery staff

BG immediately contacted the bar staff manager (Dimas Rezki Adiputra) who had posted the photo for further details. Dimas advised the bird had flown in to a window in the afternoon and patrons had alerted staff, whom collected the Fairy Pitta and put it in a box. After a period of approximately an hour, the bird had recovered and Dimas released the Fairy Pitta in to the garden at Matso's. At approximately 2030 BG went to Matso's to meet with Dimas and discuss further. Dimas showed BG where he had released the Fairy Pitta, BG spotlighted the general area but didn't locate the bird. BG alerted other Broome birders, George Swann (GS), Clare Morton (CM) and Grant Morton (GM) of the Fairy Pitta and circumstances and all agreed to search in the morning.

The following morning, Friday 8th February BG, GS, CM and GM searched for the Fairy Pitta from 0515. At approximately 0615 the Fairy Pitta was located under Sobrane's Art Gallery which is directly adjacent to Matso's Brewery. Sobrane's Art Gallery consists of an elevated building on support stumps resulting in approximately 50 cm of open ground under the building. The Fairy Pitta was observed for approximately 45 minutes, before all observers departed the scene. Only a small number of photographs were able to be taken due to the poor lighting under the building and cryptic nature of the Fairy Pitta. During observations, the Fairy Pitta appeared to show no ill-effects from its impact with the window on the previous day, and its behaviour appeared natural. Under the building consisted of a dense leaf litter cover and small areas of surface water courtesy of air conditioning condensation. During the morning, the Fairy Pitta did not venture out from under the building.

The Fairy Pitta was next sighted on the afternoon of Friday 8th February by numerous local Broome bird watchers (Figure 3). Once again, the bird remained under the building for the majority of time, but was seen venturing in to a small adjacent densely vegetated garden, and in to a small open courtyard adjacent to Sobrane's Art Gallery giving excellent, unobstructed views for about two minutes. A short video of the bird was obtained in the courtyard.



Figure 2: Photos of Fairy Pitta when first relocated morning of Friday 8th February 2019. Photos BG



**Figure 3: Broome bird watchers observing the Fairy Pitta under Sobrane’s Art Gallery afternoon of 8th February 2019.
Photo BG**

The Fairy Pitta was next observed the following day (Saturday 9th February) by BG at 1000 for a period of approximately 20 minutes. During this time the Fairy Pitta was exhibiting similar behaviour to the previous day. This was the last sighting of the bird alive. Damian Baxter (DB) and Richard Baxter (RB) arrived in Broome and were positioned at the Fairy Pitta site by approximately 1330. By approximately 1700, the Fairy Pitta had not yet been seen, which was inconsistent with the time frames of sightings over the previous two days. GS, CM and GM were also present and it was decided to investigate closer to where the bird had been observed. Upon closer inspection, the Fairy Pitta was found dead in the garden by CM and GM adjacent to Sobrane’s Art Studio. The presence of blood on the bird suggests it was predated, but was in otherwise good condition. The specimen was collected, transported and submitted to the Western Australian Museum, specimen ID number WAMA41184. The specimen resulted in a reasonable skin. Puncture holes in the head and neck, and circumstances of the death suggest a cat was the likely cause of death.

Curiously, the bar staff at Matso’s Brewery said this was the second time this type of bird had died on premises. It was said the same type of bird had flown in to a ceiling fan at Matso’s in December 2018, approximately 6 weeks prior to the current sighting. The bar manager buried the bird in the garden at Matso’s, an attempt to dig up the bird to confirm identification was made but no skeletal remains or feathers were found.



Figure 4: The deceased Fairy Pitta, discovered in the afternoon of 9th February 2019. Photo DB (top) and GB (bottom)

Physical description of the bird

The specimen was assessed by Ron Johnstone from the WA Museum. It weighed 48 grams which is well down on typical weight range of this species. It had a bony keel, no subcutaneous or body fat and was positively emaciated.

Facial features

A chestnut crown with narrow black stripe on top of the head, only visible from above. The chestnut crown was fringed by a narrow off-white supercilium on both sides of the head which extends from the lore to the nape, but not connecting on the nape. A broader black eye stripe extended to the nape. Below the black eye stripe was another off-white line, slightly broader than the above supercilium, which extended behind towards the nape of the bird but did again not connect. The chin was also an off-white colour.

Under parts

The upper breast and sides of the belly were a pale off-white colour. Not shown in any of the photos above, the bird had a relatively narrow red stripe along the belly extending to the vent.

Upper parts

The back, mantle and scapulars were lime green in colour. The upper tail coverts and wing coverts were brilliantly iridescent blue. The primary and secondary flight feathers were mostly black except for a small white spot on the primaries and some blue tinges in the secondaries.

Bare parts

The bill was black and chunky. Gape was dark and eye colour was black. Legs were pale in colour.

Age and sex

Determining the sex of Fairy Pitta is not possible based on plumage characteristics. However in this case, detailed investigation was able to be made on the specimen and was identified as an immature female by Ron Johnstone.

Elimination of potential confusion species

Rainbow Pitta: Resident in the north Kimberley. Has extensive black on the face, underparts and wings compared to Fairy Pitta.

Blue-winged Pitta: A vagrant to Australia, but the most likely confusion species based on plumage similarities and previous records in WA. Shows a larger white wing panel and more blue in the wing than Fairy Pitta, broader and buffer supercilium, buffer breast and belly.

The diagnostic features observed on the Fairy Pitta plus the outcome of a specimen leave no doubt of the identification.

Habitat

The Fairy Pitta was located, and observed at Matso's Broome Brewery and Sobrane's Art Gallery, within the township of Broome. It was observed underneath Sobrane's Art Gallery for lengthy periods of time, and was observed just once in the open in an adjacent courtyard. Underneath the Art Gallery was abundant leaf litter and water from dripping air conditioners. Superficially, this would have represented rainforest conditions, with dark light, high humidity and moisture and plentiful leaf litter.

Lead submitter contact details

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