

Eye-browed Thrush *Turdus obscurus* on Home Island, Cocos (Keeling) Islands, 6th to 9th December 2016

Submission to BirdLife Australia Rarities Committee (BARC) Case #

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Figs. 1 to 4. Eye-browed Thrush, Home Island, Cocos (Keeling) Islands, 9th December 2016
Photos by Robert Shore

Introduction

The Birding Tours Australia trip report written by Richard Baxter that covered all three of that companies summer tours to the Cocos (Keeling) Islands in 2016/17, described the Eye-browed Thrush *Turdus obscurus* that frequented the garden of Oceania House on Home Island, Cocos, from

6th to 9th December 2016 as 'elusive' and unlike others of its kin seen on its previous tours, was 'shy, frustrating and uncooperative'. The four of us that found this bird whilst staying for two nights at Oceania House on Home Island, Glen Pacey, James Mustafa, Sue Taylor and Mike Carter (MC), can attest to the accuracy of that statement. Others in that tour group that saw the bird were Richard Baxter himself (leader), Damian Baxter, Hedley Earl, Irena Earl, David Koffel, Warwick Remington and Robert Shore. In addition, Tim & Liz Faulkner who were holidaying on the atoll are also believed to have seen it. Views of the bird and the photographic record were only marginally satisfactory and as in MC's opinion the bird was atypical, initially he was a little anxious that it may have been misidentified. The worrying possibility was that it could have been a Dusky Thrush *T. eunomus* or similar. The plumage of that species is very variable as is that of others in this genus. This individual was atypical in that its underparts lacked the orange-rufous on the breast and flanks that are usually striking features of Eye-browed Thrush. There is no longer any concern regarding the identification so this is a submission to Birds Australia Rarities Committee seeking endorsement of the claim.

The Eye-browed Thrush tended to forage mostly on the ground among deep leaf litter but when approached would retire into the lower branches of the large overhanging trees where it was difficult to see.

The weather throughout the period was fine, warm, humid, and predominantly sunny with a variable NW wind. There had not been any significant rain on Cocos for several days prior to the discovery of the bird.

Description

That the bird was a Thrush somewhat similar in size, shape and posture to the familiar Island Thrush *T. poliocephalus* of Christmas Island was readily apparent. Underpart plumage is quite well shown in the accompanying photographs but the upperparts are not well depicted. The text below is not intended to be a fully detailed description. Its purpose is to emphasise the salient characters.

Bare-part colouration: Bill dull yellow. Legs and feet, bright yellowish pink. Eyes dark.

Plumage: The facial pattern comprised a bold white supercilium that extended from midway between the bill and the eye to the rear of the ear-coverts. The lores and ear-coverts were dark brown with no obvious grey tones as might be expected. There was a small crescent of white below the eye. The chin-and-throat were white (sparsely and finely speckled or streaked with black), its prominence accentuated by dark malar-cum-moustachial stripes (darker than the ear-coverts). The remainder of the underparts was white with a sparse speckling of dark spots washed with brown on the breast. Only on the lower breast and not extending to the flanks did this wash have a hint of the rufous-orange normally expected in this area. The flank below the folded wing was white with a dark brown patch above the thigh. Thus, there was little evidence of the extensive bright orange/rufous/buff wash as described or illustrated in the literature (Clement & Hathway 2000, Robson 2008, Brazil 2009, van Duivendijk 2011, Rasmussen & Anderton 2012, Eaton *et al.* 2016 and Menkhorst *et al.* 2017). So far as we are able to determine the whole of the upperparts from the forehead and crown to tip of the tail were dark brown. Fine white spots on the tips of the greater wing coverts formed a clear but narrow and broken wing-bar.



Eye-browed Thrush, Cocos (Keeling) Islands on 9th December 2016

Photo by Glen Pacey

Identification and discussion

Texts used to determine identification as an Eye-browed Thrush include Wells (1999), Clement & Hathway (2000), Higgins *et al.* (2006), Robson (2008), Brazil (2009), van Duivendijk (2011), Rasmussen & Anderton (2012), Eaton *et al.* (2016) and Menkhorst *et al.* (2017).

Dusky Thrush in all plumages always shows some black spotting on the underparts (van Duivendijk 2011) so the possibility of it being that species is immediately discounted.

Eye-browed Thrush is generally regarded as a distinctive species due to the combination of a strong white supercilium, bold markings at the side of the throat and the bright rufous-orange breast & flanks. The subject bird meets two of these identification characters but for the most part it lacked the bright underpart colouration which should be present at all ages of fully grown birds (van Duivendijk 2011). This caused some angst. However a closer reading of the literature revealed that Robson (2000) states 'Individuals which lack obvious orange-rufous on flanks recall Grey-sided Thrush but lack clear grey on underparts and usually show defined white submoustachial stripe'. So birds with plumage like ours are known. Our bird had no grey on the underparts so it was not a Grey-sided Thrush *T. feae* but unfortunately did not show the *usual* defined white moustachial stripe of that species. It did however show some white that region. Also, van Duivendijk (2011) notes that the normally bright underpart colouration can be faint in 1st W birds. Among other characters such as the spotting on the breast, the white wing bar at the tips of greater coverts show that our bird was indeed in its first winter. We also suspect that it was a female.

Distribution

Eye-browed Thrush breeds in central and eastern Siberia and is a regular winter migrant to southern Asia including the Malay Peninsula (Wells 2007) and the Indonesian Archipelago (Eaton *et al.* 2016). To date, BARC has accepted four records for Australia and we believe there is possibly a similar number of unverified reports mostly from Cocos.

Acknowledgements

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