

## Submission to Bird Australia Rarities Committee, Case 1074

**Species:** Malayan Night *Gorsachius melanolophus*  
**Location:** West Island, Cocos (Keeling) Islands, Indian Ocean  
**Observation Dates:** 13 January through March 2019  
**Submission Date** 2 July 2019  
**Submitted by:** Geof Christie & David J. James

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### Circumstances

A juvenile Malayan Night Heron was present on West Island of the Cocos (Keeling) Islands during January to March 2019. It was initially found by GC along the unnamed dirt road between Sydney Rd and the southern end of the lake, Betchat Besar, on 13 January. During February and March it was occasionally seen nearby in a wet boggy area between the 'Bechat Besar Rd' and the 'Banana Farm'.

GC watched its behaviour along the 'Bechat Besar Rd' in January. The dirt road gets graded so the road sides have piled up loose soils and lots of boggy pot holes. The bird would sneak along very slowly with every step carefully placed, pausing for long moments of concentrated listening before walking a metre or two and pulling out a worm. It was oblivious to the presence of the stopped vehicle but flushed if GC left the vehicle.

A Malayan Night Heron that was flushed from within the grounds at Oceania House on Home I. CKI in December 2018 may well have been the same bird, but there is no way to be sure of that.

### Identification

The subject bird is shown in Plate 1.

A dumpy, medium-sized heron with a thick neck, heavy legs, a short and heavy bill, and finely patterned plumage has to be a *Gorsachius* night-heron, of which there are three species. White-eared Night Heron *G. magnificus* is eliminated because all plumages show a bold black and white head pattern. The speckled face, and the heavily vermiculated neck and upperparts plumage with small white spots or splotches are indicative of 'juvenile' or first cycle plumages in *Gorsachius* night herons. The black nuchal 'crest' (lying over the hind-neck) with distinct white spots, is diagnostic of first cycle Malayan and rules out the similar Japanese Night Heron *G. goisagi*. The barred flanks are diagnostic of Malayan and rule out Japanese, which has streaked flanks (Wells 1999; Robson 2000; Brazil 2009; Rasmussen & Anderton 2014; Eaton *et al.* 2016; Menkhorst *et al.* 2017).

The brown tips to the undertail coverts, forming narrow and widely spaced barring, also appear to be diagnostic of Malayan (Japanese has brown speckling on the undertail coverts but no barring).

### Moult and Ageing

There is no sign of moult in the single photograph. The bird is in full juvenile plumage, like most other records of Malayan Night Heron from the Indian Ocean Territories have been.

This bird is more towards the rufous end of the variation scale rather than the grey end.

### Status

There have been three previous Australian records accepted by BARC, all from Christmas Island (BARC cases 345, 735, 872). There are also three historical sight records from Christmas Island (Stokes *et al.* 1987) that have been widely accepted as genuine and a further six unconfirmed records from Christmas Island (James & McAllan 2014).

This BARC submission is the second for Malayan Night Heron from CKI, following our concurrent submission of another juvenile from 2015 (BARC case 1073). There is also an unconfirmed report of an adult photographed on the West I. air strip on 1 May 2011 (R. Baxter in lit.).



**Plate 1.** This juvenile Malayan Night Heron at West Island, CKI was adept at catching earthworms along the road verge (photo by G Christie, 13 January 2019).

### Permissions

BARC has the permission of the authors to publish on-line this submission and/or the photographs accompanying this submission.

### Contributions

The observations, photographs and identification were made by GC. The submission was prepared by DJJ.

### References

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