

**Blue-and-White Flycatcher *Cyanoptila cyanomelana* on North Keeling Island, Cocos (Keeling) Islands
3rd December 2019**

Submission to BirdLife Australia Rarities Committee (BARC)

KARINA J. SORRELL & ROHAN H. CLARKE

School of Biological Sciences, Monash University, Clayton, Victoria 3800

Overview

An immature male Blue-and-White Flycatcher *Cyanoptila cyanomelana* was observed and photographed on North Keeling Island, Cocos (Keeling) Islands on the 3rd December 2019. It was seen by the two authors who were members of a Monash University team conducting seabird research on the island with Parks Australia employees. We camped ashore North Keeling Island for a period of nine days from the 28th November to 6th December 2019. The bird was sighted once at 1400 on the 3rd December. It spent most time in sheltered parts of the canopy of a dense patch of *Cordia subcordata* on the north-eastern part of the island, bordering the inner lagoon. The same area was checked briefly in the following days, but the bird was not re-sighted.



Blue-and-White Flycatcher perched, North Keeling Island, 3 December 2019

Figure 1

Photo by Karina Sorrell

As far as we are aware, there are nine previous reports of this species that have been assessed by BARC; two on the Australian mainland (BARC cases 242, 370) and a total of seven from the Australian External Territories of Christmas Island and Cocos (Keeling) Islands (BARC cases 408, 515, 516, 879, 880, 881, 882).

Details of the Observation

The bird was first sighted at 1400 on the 3rd December by Karina Sorrell (KS) where it was perched approximately 3 m away at a height of 3 m inside a large grove of *Cordia subcordata*. Rohan Clarke (RC) was notified of the bird's presence by UHF radio and within 15 minutes both observers had obtained excellent views and a series of photographs of the bird perched in various positions. KS lost sight of the bird for approximately 5 minutes whilst talking to RC on the UHF, but then the bird was found again when both observers were present. KS and RC observed the bird for a further 15 minutes as it moved around inside the tangled canopy at heights between 4-5 m. The bird was not always easy to locate in the vegetation as it moved around, despite being in a small, localised area. The bird did not seem to move more than 20 m from where it was first spotted. After spending approximately 30 minutes (in total) observing the bird, we moved away from the site to continue other work. No vocalisations were heard.

The site was visited sporadically over the following three days by KS and RC, but the bird was not resighted. Several other migrant passerine, an Arctic Leaf Warbler *Phylloscopus borealis*, a Tree Martin *Petrochelidon nigricans* and a small flock of Barn Swallows *Hirundo rustica*, were observed on North Keeling Island during our stay. It is possible that additional vagrant passerines were present on the island, however, due to the large size of the island and the extensive potential habitat the possibility for these to go undetected was high.

Description

Size: This bird was approximately 15 cm in length, although it is difficult to accurately estimate the size in the absence of direct comparisons with other passerines. Whilst it was more robust/thickset than a Barn Swallow (seen almost daily) we considered it to be about equal in length (noting that Barn Swallows have relatively long tails).



Blue-and-White Flycatcher lateral view, North Keeling Island, 3 December 2019
Figure 2 Photo by Karina Sorrell



Blue-and-White Flycatcher underside view, North Keeling Island, 3 December 2019

Figure 3

Photo by Karina Sorrell



Blue-and-White Flycatcher rear dorsal view, North Keeling Island, 3 December 2019

Figure 4a-b

Photo by Karina Sorrell

Plumage & bare parts

Most of these features are best appreciated by a study of the seven photographs (Figs 1-5). The structure of the perched bird was typical for a flycatcher.

The upperparts were brown and royal blue. The wing coverts were mostly royal blue but were fringed with darker brown to blackish grey. The edges of the flight feathers were dusky-grey in colour. The upper tail was royal blue. The head was brown which extended uniformly to the hind-neck and back. The underparts were white and brown; the chin and throat were brown with a few small *black* feathers at the centre of throat, brown extended onto the breast where it was streaky, becoming off-white on the belly and vent. The black feathers visible on the throat were specifically searched for, and noted in the field, and are depicted in some of the supporting images (Fig. 3 and Fig. 5). The under tail was dark sooty grey.

The bill appeared dark grey and the iris was black. There was a pale ring around the eye. The tarsi and toes were grey.



Blue-and-White Flycatcher close-up view of throat, North Keeling Island, 3 December 2019

Figure 5a-b

Photo by Karina Sorrell

Identification and discussion

The identification as an immature male Blue-and-White Flycatcher is straightforward given the clear views and photographic record obtained. Our ability to identify the species in the field at the time of the sighting was further enhanced by the fact that RC has previously observed multiple Blue-and-White Flycatcher in Australian territories. We were thus familiar with the diagnostic characters required to secure the identification. The most similar species, Zappey's Flycatcher *Cyanoptila cumatilis* can be eliminated by the presence of the few clearly black feathers on the throat (black restricted to the lores in Zappey's Flycatcher) (Menkhorst *et al.* 2017; Leader & Carey 2012). The royal blue tone visible on the wings and tail was also consistent with Blue and White Flycatcher and would appear to rule out Zappey's Flycatcher which generally shows a blue-green tone to these and other feather tracts.

This is the fifth record of Blue-and-White Flycatcher for Cocos (Keeling) Islands to be assessed by BARC, the first for North Keeling, and the tenth to be assessed by BARC for Australia including external territories. We haven't made a specific attempt to trace other, undocumented records for Australia but are aware of records from Ashmore Reef, Browse Island, WA and Cocos (Keeling) Islands that have not been submitted.

Acknowledgements

Permits to access North Keeling National Park were provided by Parks Australia. The seabird monitoring work that was being undertaken at the time of discovery was funded by Parks Australia.

References & Bibliography

- Leader, P.J. & Carey, G.J. (2012) Zappey's Flycatcher *Cyanoptila cumatilia*, a forgotten Chinese breeding Endemic. Forktail 28: 121-128.
- Menkhorst, P., Rogers, D., Clarke, R., Davies, J., Marsack, P. & Franklin, K. (2017), The Australian Bird Guide, CSIRO, Victoria, Australia.