

Corncrake *Crex crex* on Christmas Island, 16th December 2016

Submission to BirdLife Australia Rarities Committee, 15 April 2020

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This is a submission to BARC on the occurrence of a Corncrake *Crex crex* on Christmas Island, the Australian External Territory in the Indian Ocean (10.4475° S 105.6904° E) on 16th December 2016.

Hopefully, acceptance of this report will gain this species a permanent place on the Australian list. The two previous reports from Australia are a specimen from Randwick, NSW on 14th June 1893 and a specimen found aboard a ship off Jurien Bay, WA on 9th December 1944 (Marchant & Higgins 1993). Although accepted by some as a bona fide Australian bird, e.g. Condon (1975), scepticism regarding these occurrences led to its removal from the Australian list. Marchant & Higgins (1993) included the species in square brackets indicating its status as unconfirmed and Christidis & Boles (1994) relegated it to the Supplementary List. Those authors obviously had second thoughts as in their 2008 checklist they included it as a legitimate Australian species. The 7th edition of the *Simpson & Day Field Guide to the Birds of Australia* published in 2004 included Corncrake but stated (p. 70) there are no reliable records for Australia and that the species would be removed from subsequent editions! The species didn't even rate a mention in either the 2017 or 2019 editions of Menkhorst *et al.*, *The Australian Bird Guide*.



Fig. 1. Corncrake on Christmas Island 16th December 2016 Photo by Robert Shore

This photo gives some appreciation of the habitat at the site

Details of the occurrence, behaviour and habitat

On the morning of 16th December 2016 a Birding Tours Australia group that were birding on Christmas Island went to an area known as LB3 to see what they could find. This is located at 10°29'56" S 105°39'11" E. It is near the junction of the North-south Baseline Road and the East-west Baseline Road around the turn-off to the Blow Holes. This is a gently undulating but relatively flat area previously used for temporary storage of mined phosphate. The traffic of heavy earth moving machinery over the area has resulted in a more compacted ground surface that is less porous than surrounding areas. It therefore retains rain water that forms pools in the lower spots and produces luxuriant growth of grasses and weeds in the damp areas. There are no substantial trees but low shrubs such as Japanese cherry thrives. The area attracts herons, egrets, shorebirds and wagtails.

The group consisted of our leaders Richard & Damian Baxter along with Hedley Earl, Irena Earl, David Koffel, James Mustafa, Glen Pacey, Warwick Remington, Robert Shore, Sue Taylor and Mike Carter.

Mike Carter had stopped to study 3 Asian Little Egrets whilst the rest of the group pressed on. Within the first one hundred metres they flushed a Corncrake! It was immediately called as that species by Richard Baxter so MC was summoned to the spot. The bird had flown about 150 m and its landing spot carefully noted. Robert Shore had fired off a burst of exposures the metadata on his camera revealing that they were taken within a period of less than three seconds. Although we searched diligently for the next couple of hours and again next day, the bird was not seen again.

Status

Breeding in Europe and western Asia and wintering mainly in east Africa, Corncrakes were once common. Its numbers have been decimated on its breeding grounds by mechanical mowers and silage harvesters. It has a history of vagrancy that includes not only Australia but also New Zealand, the Seychelles, India, Pakistan, Tibet, Sri Lanka and SE Asia as well as North America (Taylor & van Perlo 1998).

The Photographic Record with Descriptive Notes



Figs. 2 to 5, left to right, top to bottom.

Photos by Robert Shore

Corncrake on Christmas Island 16th December 2016

Description

Whilst the rich brown plumage suggested the possibility of Watercock all experienced observers MC consulted at the time were confident that it was much too small to be that species. It was noted as being very much smaller than a White-breasted Waterhen, a species present on the island. Some thought it was not dissimilar in size to Buff-banded Rail but probably smaller than that species. Size is most accurately determined by comparison with the leaves in the background of some photos, e.g. Figure 2. Lisa Preston a resident naturalist on the island tells me that this a species of *macaranga* possibly *grandifolia* or *tanarius*, also known as the parasol tree. The photo Figure 8, enables a judgement of size.

Field impressions were brief so details regarding structure and plumage herein have been abstracted from the photos. The sharpest and most revealing of these are attached: see Figures 1 to 5. Figures 6 & 7 are close-up crops from these to highlight some features to better show some markings, in particular those on the flanks as these are said to be diagnostic in van Duivendijk (2011).



Figs. 6 & 7. Close crops of figures 4 & 5 to better show flank markings. By Rob Shore



Fig. 8. *Macaranga grandifolia* photo by GardinoNursery

Identification

Given the photographic evidence that show well its size, shape and plumage there is only one possible conclusion regarding the subjects identity. The bird is a Corncrake *Crex crex*.

Regarding size, according to Taylor & van Perlo (1998), Corncrakes are 27-30 cm long. The subject is evidently about that size.

The diagnostic plumage feature is the bright rusty-red on the wings, brightest on the inner wing where it appears as a rufous area that embraces almost the whole of the arm. That is all of the secondary and some primary coverts; the lesser, median and greater coverts (Cramp 1980; Taylor & van Perlo 1998; Jonsson 2003; Robson 2008; Svensson et al. 2009; van Duivendijk 2011; del Hoyo & Collar 2014). All other characters including the plain face, the bold black streaking on the back, and the barring on the flanks are consistent with that conclusion.

However, further explanation regarding the lack of dangling legs or trailing feet may be required. None are obvious in any photo but in the photo below one can just make out some 'toe-nails' extending a few mm beyond the tip of the tail.



Fig. 9. Corncrake on Christmas Island 16th December 2016 Photo by Robert Shore
This shows that the toes (claws) extended beyond the tip of the tail by just a few mm.

This is nothing like the extent of trailing feet the literature suggests should be seen. However, when we compare the subject bird with photos of flying birds available on the web, this is typical of the species. To illustrate this point we give below two examples.





Figs. 10 & 11. Photos of Corncrakes in flight showing that the actual extent of trailing feet in this species is minimal

Photos taken off the web. Fig. 10 (on p. 5) by John Knifton (no other details known).
Fig. 11 by Hanne & Jens Eriksen in Oman on 1st September 2015.



Fig. 12. Painting of Corncrake in flight; an example of the misconception regarding the extent of the trailing feet in this species.

The above was taken off a Bird Guides web site. Similar errors where the text or/and illustrations erroneously indicate that the Corncrake has such long-legs that they dangle or trail behind the tail in flight are Cramp (1980) (Plate 65), Taylor & van Perlo (1998) (Plate 69), Svensson (1999) (p.57), Jonsson (2003) (p.183), Morcombe (2004) (p. 106) and Robson (2008) (Fig.5b Plate 28). It would seem that authors perpetuate the error by copying from previous works.

Acknowledgements

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