

## **ELEGANT PITTAS IN AUSTRALIA IN 2018**

### **Two submissions to Birds Australia Rarities Committee (BARC)**

By MIKE CARTER<sup>1</sup> & PETER LANSLEY<sup>2</sup>

**(Final Draft: 5th September 2021)**

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#### **Introduction**

In 2018, two separate incidents involved Pittas found aboard ships that were in port at Barrow Island, Western Australia. These reports are submitted below for assessment by Birds Australia Rarities Committee (BARC). Both are considered to be Elegant Pittas a species not previously recorded in Australia but of different taxa now considered species by some authorities (Yue *et al.*, 2020). The IOC and eBird have already adopted these splits and we expect that BirdLife International will do so quite soon. Therefore we ask that these reports be assessed 1, to specific level and 2, to subspecific level.

Information on these occurrences was provided by personnel on Barrow Island, notably Patrick Cullen and Brad Daw reserves officers on the island. The reserve is managed by the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions (DBCA), an agency of the Western Australian government.

The first occurrence, referred to here as BIRD A, was a mutilated corpse found on 7<sup>th</sup> January 2018 aboard the Pan Asia which had arrived to collect a load of liquefied natural gas (LNG). Quarantine officers on the Island were notified of the find, the specimen confiscated and incinerated. Most of the information on that bird is contained in a series of photographs taken by Brad Daw presented below as Figures 1 to 5.

The bird that constitutes the second occurrence, BIRD B, was found alive on a ship docked at Barrow Island on 8<sup>th</sup> December 2018. The ship sailed the next day with the bird still aboard never having left the ship. Photographs of this bird provided by Patrick Cullen are presented here as Figures 8 to 12.

Other authorities in Western Australia were notified, notably Ron Johnstone and John Darnell of The Western Australian Museum. Ron made the initial identifications and included the species in the Handbook of the Birds of WA. BARC was notified and Mike Carter volunteered to prepare a submission for assessment by that body and because of his knowledge of South-East Asian birds and the literature thereof, enlisted the assistance of Peter Lansley.

John Darnell played a major role in bringing this record to attention, collecting and forwarding the data.

#### **The relevance of these occurrences to Australian Ornithology**

These occurrences are as relevant to Australian Ornithology as is the birdlife in the seas surrounding Australia and on those outliers of land at the extremities of Australia's jurisdiction such as in the Coral Sea, in the far north of Torres Strait, on Ashmore Reef, the Cocos (Keeling) Islands and Heard Island. The fact that they are evidently ship assisted doesn't invalidate that. In the references below we cite papers which deal with on ship occurrences in the North Atlantic (Durand 1963, Durand 1972, Elkins 1979, Lees & Gilroy 2009). Durand (1972) stressed the need to document at sea occurrences.

### The first occurrence BIRD A



**Figures 1 & 2. BIRD A. Elegant Pitta *Pitta elegans* corpse found on a ship docked at Barrow Island on 7<sup>th</sup> January 2018** Photos by Brad Daw





**Figures 3 & 4. BIRD A. Elegant Pitta *Pitta elegans* corpse found on a ship docked at Barrow Island on 7<sup>th</sup> January 2018**      Photos by Brad Daw



**Figures 5. BIRD A. Elegant Pitta *Pitta elegans* corpse where found in the drainage bund on a ship docked at Barrow Island on 7<sup>th</sup> January 2018**

Photo by Quarantine Officials

The corpse was incomplete, devoid of flesh, dry and mangled, with the appearance of having been there a long time. It was destroyed by quarantine authorities on the island so is not available for further scrutiny and nothing remains for DNA analysis. As it was wedged in a drain-hole we suspect that its mangled condition was caused by the abrasive action of high-pressure hoses washing over the deceased bird.

Using BirdLife's taxonomy, Ron Johnstone considered this to be an Elegant Pitta *Pitta elegans*. Nigel Jackett advises that it is included as that species in the WA Museum's *Checklist of the Birds of Western Australia* (2018), with the note 'Mutilated bird found aboard a vessel at Barrow Island, January 2018'. The authors agree with that identification. It can be seen that the bird had black cheeks and a dark (blackish) chin. The underparts were buff. A black crown is just perceivable, an important identification feature for Elegant Pittas of all subspecies. Because the chin was dark,



not white, it was not the subspecies *P. e. vigorsii*. Close scrutiny of figure 2 suggests that the supercilium is buff for most of its length. We believe this to be indicative but perhaps not diagnostic of the nominate subspecies contra *virginalis*, *concinna* and *maria*. In those races, the anterior portion of the supercilium is normally a deep rich +chestnut fading to pale buff or pale bluish posteriorly. However, the extent of the black on the chin and throat may favour *virginalis* but the literature is not clear on this nor how immatures may differ from adults in this respect. The upperparts (wings) were green with pale blue coverts. The tail was black and the upper tail coverts light blue. Its legs and stubby bill were pale. The lack of white on the chin, throat and side of neck also eliminate Indian *P. brachyura*, Blue-winged *P. moluccensis*, Mangrove *P. megarhyncha* & Fairy Pittas *P. nympha* and the *vigorsii* race of Elegant Pitta. Lack of a broad pale tip to the tail also eliminates Blue-winged Pitta. Figure 3 shows at least two small white spots in the primaries. Coates & Bishop (1997) page 153 states that Elegant Pitta might or might not have a white patch in the primaries visible in flight. Information in Yue *et al.* (2020), Table 3 (p.9) suggests that the race *maria* doesn't have white patches in the wing so that taxon can be discounted as a contender. References for the above include Lambert & Woodcock (1996), Coates & Bishop (1997), Robson (2008), del Hoyo & Collar (2014), Eaton *et al.* (2016) and Myers (2016). John Darnell advises that it is a good match for specimens of Elegant Pitta of the nominate race held in the WA museum but that does not exclude the possibility that other taxa might also match. Using current BirdLife taxonomy we are happy to call this an Elegant Pitta but are not able to determine its subspecific identity with confidence.

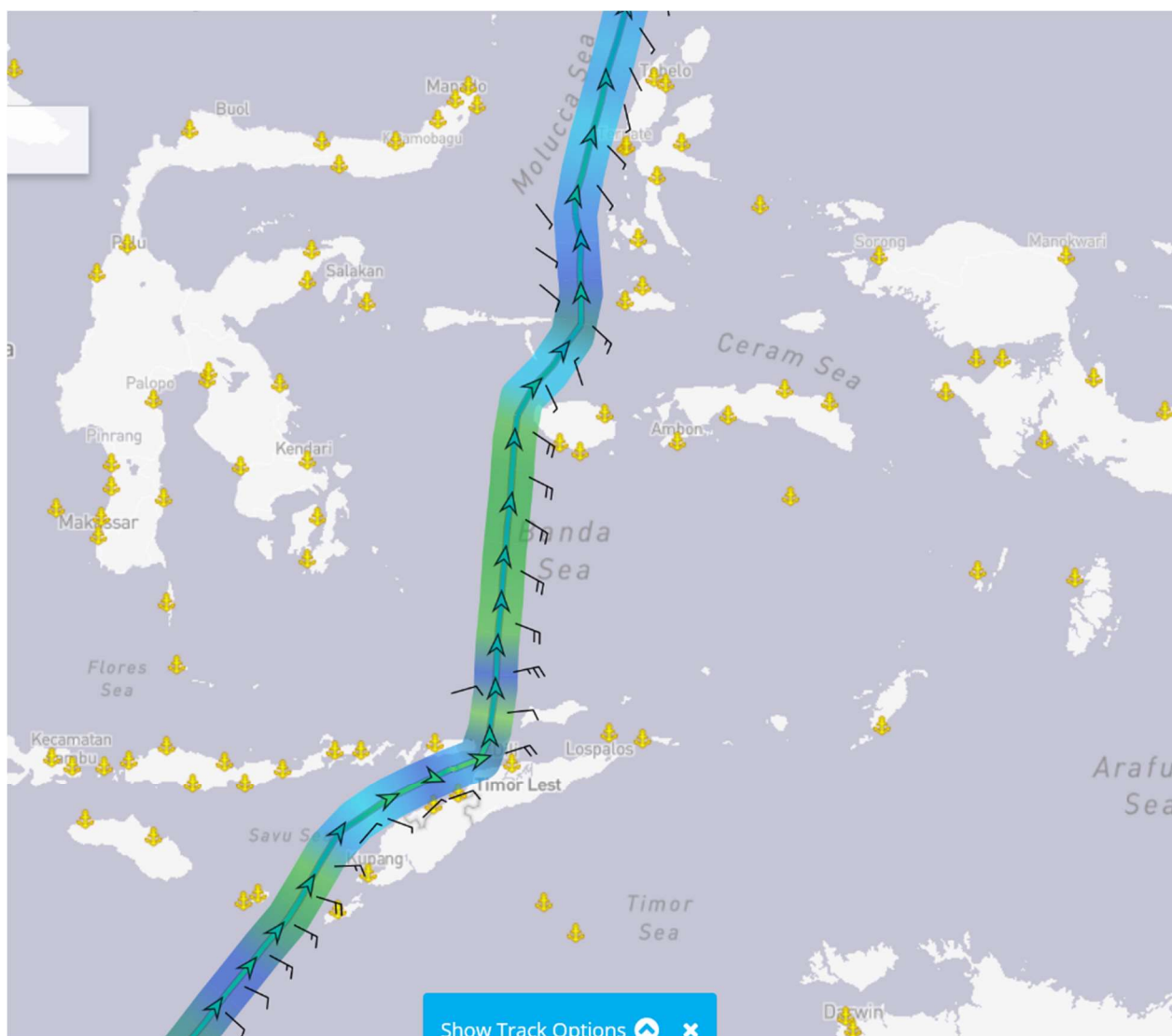
This taxon is a common migrant that breeds on Timor and surrounding small islands during the wet season; i.e. from November to March/April. They are only present during that period Trainor (2005) and are then 'quite frequent' on Roti Island in those months. Roti is the closest part of Indonesia to Australia, is 1300 km north-east of Barrow Island and only 145 km from Australia's Ashmore Reef.

Timor and its close neighbours have a relatively dry climate (Trainor *in litt.*). During the wet season, nominate race Elegant Pittas are common to abundant in suitable habitat on Roti, Semau and West Timor, with the population possibly numbering in the tens-of-thousands. It can even be found in the limestone river gorges of Timor's main city Kupang (Trainor *in litt.*). In the dry season it is virtually absent. Then it occurs as a visitor throughout the Moluccas and the Sulawesi region (Eaton *et al.* 2016) so its presence in the Banda Sea where it might easily have encountered this ship is likely. The record of the route taken by an LNG Tanker may not be retained for much longer than a month so the route the subject vessel actually took before arriving at Barrow Island is unknown. However, because ships usually follow a favoured route it is likely to be that shown in Figure 6 but in the reverse direction. Assuming that to have been the case, it is possible/probable that the subject bird boarded the ship whilst it was heading south sometime before it passed between Wetar to the east and Alor to the west and prior to encountering Timor's north coast.

Based to a large extent on vocalisations, Yue *et al.* (2020) recommended that all subspecies of this taxon should be raised to species level and proposed that this form be called Temminck's Elegant Pitta. The IOC dispensed with the adjective 'Temminck's' instead opting to call it simply Elegant Pitta. For further discussion on taxonomy see Bird B in the submission that follows.

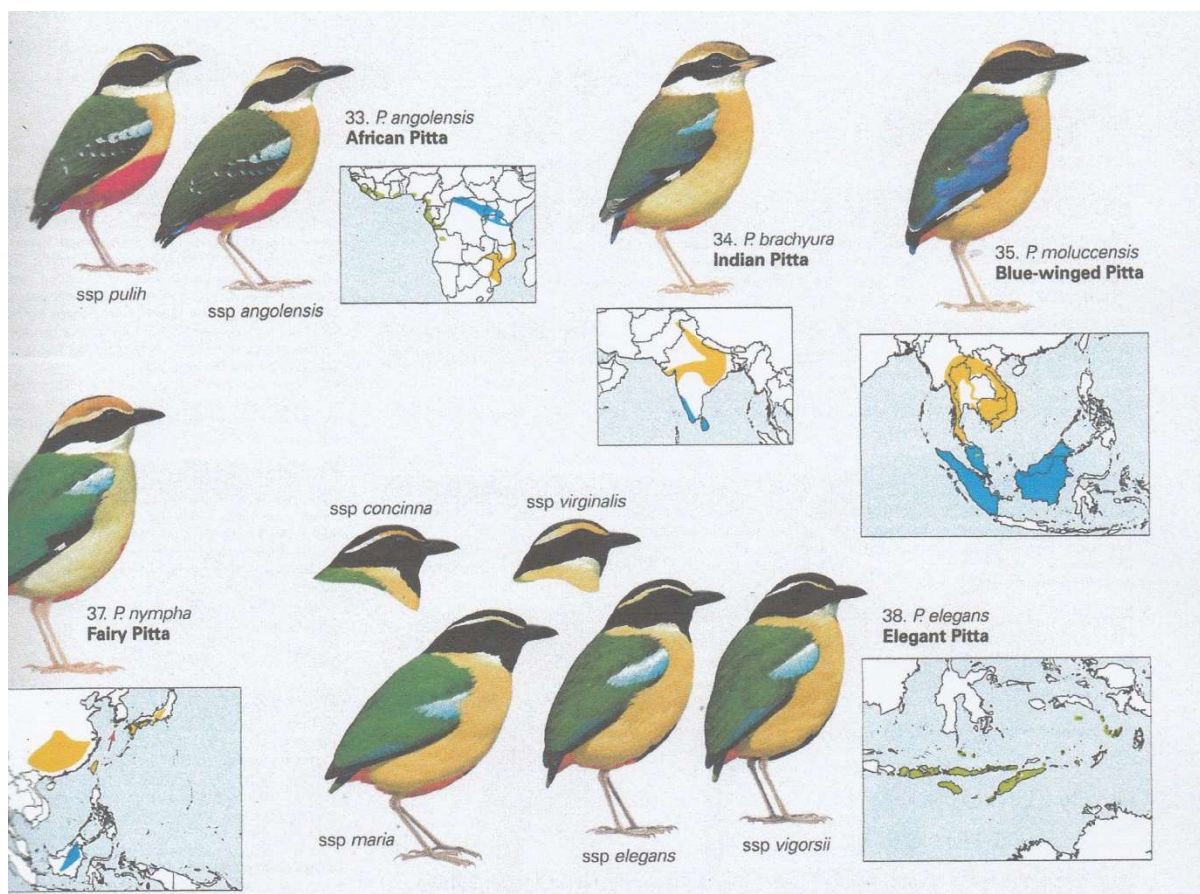
As the bird was found dead on a ship that had sailed to Barrow Island from Japan there is no way of knowing precisely how and when the bird arrived on the

ship and whether or not it was ever alive whilst on the ship. However we think it highly likely that it came aboard as a live bird and because the record is published in the Handbook of WA it should be assessed by BARC.



**Figure 6. Route taken through the Lesser Sundas by the 'Asia Excellence' in August 2021 on a voyage from Onslow to Japan.**

Onslow, which also has an LNG loading facility, is located on the coast of WA 85 km south of Barrow Island. Map above provided by the DBCA.



**Figure 7. Elegant Pitta *Pitta elegans* copied from del Hoyo & Collar (2014)**  
This illustrates all five races of the species together with three similar species and shows their range

**BIRD B, the second occurrence is an Elegant Pitta of the race *vigorsii* *Pitta elegans vigorsii* as initially identified by Ron Johnstone.**

The photos below, Figures 8 to 12, of what is considered to be an Elegant Pitta *Pitta elegans vigorsii*, were taken aboard a ship docked at Barrow Island WA on 9<sup>th</sup> December 2018 by Patrick Cullen, reserves officer. There are as yet no accepted records of any race of this species for Australia.

The ship, from Japan, had arrived before 15.00 the previous day and the bird found by Quarantine Inspectors that day. DBCA officers boarded the vessel at 07.00 next day. The bird was alive but weak. The photographer Patrick Cullen, was able to gently extend its wings and manipulate it in order to display critical plumage and other morphological features. A 15 cm transparent ruler placed adjacent the bird in order to provide a scale for judgement of size is visible in two of the images. The ship sailed later that day with the bird still aboard never having left the ship. The pilot confirmed that it was still aboard when he exited port limits.

These ships are very fast and can be expected to reach Barrow Island within three days of first reaching Indonesia; i.e. one day at sea to pass through the archipelago and two more to reach Barrow Island.



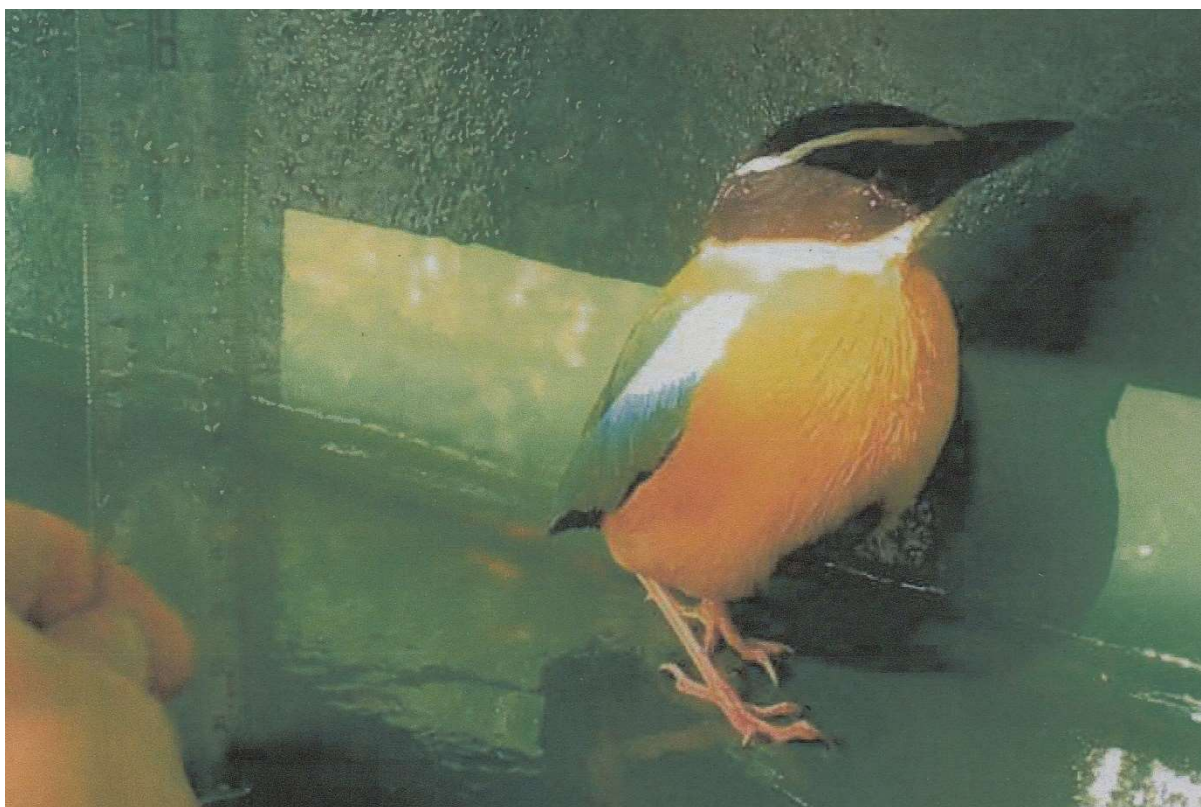


**Figure 8. BIRD B. Elegant Pitta *Pitta elegans vigorsii* on a ship docked at Barrow Island on 8<sup>th</sup> December 2018. Photo by Patrick Cullen**





**Figure 9. BIRD B. As above**



**Figure 10. BIRD B. As above**



**Figures 11 & 12. BIRD B. As above**

### **Taxonomy**

The taxonomy followed here is that of BirdLife International as used by Birds Australia Rarities Committee. However, we also refer to more recent publications as we anticipate there will be changes which will affect the outcome of this case.

Based on vocalisations and morphometrics, Yue *et al.* (2020) recommended this taxon should be considered a full species to be called Banda Pitta *Pitta vigorsii*. The IOC was quick to adopt this split calling it Banda Sea Pitta. We notice that as of 22<sup>nd</sup> August 2021, that eBird has also adopted these splits.

### **Identification**

It is evident that this was a very small Pitta with an overall length of about 15 cm. Lambert & Woodcock (1996) state that Elegant Pitta is a small species giving its length as being 15.5 - 18 cm, so the subject bird would seem to be at the lower end of the size range of Elegant Pitta. It is too small for most other species and probably too small for any other taxon of that species

This species has five subspecies all but one of which (*P. e. vigorsii*) have black throats. The subject bird has a white throat, evident in several of the photos particularly Figures 6 & 8, so it is *vigorsii*. Otherwise similar species, Indian, *Pitta brachyura*, Blue-winged, *Pitta moluccensis*, Mangrove, *Pitta megarhyncha* and Fairy Pitta *Pitta nympha* are eliminated because they do not have black crowns. All have crowns that are paler being various shades of brown. Moreover Blue-winged & Mangrove Pittas do not have the very pale blue wing covert patch shown by this bird and have much larger white patches in their primaries. Also, Mangrove Pitta has a longer and heavier bill and Fairy Pitta has paler underparts. References for the above include Lambert & Woodcock (1996), Robson (2008), del Hoyo & Collar (2014) and Eaton *et al.* (2016). One character of the subject bird that appears inconsistent with some illustrations are its apparently almost completely white

supercilia with just a trace of yellow. However we consider this to be artefact. Note that the white strip on the side of the neck below the black face mask apparent in Figures 8 & 9 is absent or obscure in Figures 10 & 11 In our opinion, Figure 12 has the most accurate colour rendition. See del Hoyo & Collar (2014) and Eaton *et al.* (2016).

Photos of all taxa can be found on the web, notably eBird, Geoff Jones's website Barra imaging and the web site of the Oriental Bird Club. To assist BARC we present a small selection in Appendix 2.

### Provenance and Status

Pertinent to this discussion is that three of the five races of Elegant Pitta, *concinna*, *maria* and *virginalis*, are considered to be non-migratory resident species whilst the other two, *vigorsii* and nominate *elegans* are migratory (White & Bruce 1986) and therefore more prone to vagrancy. There is some suggestion that *virginalis* may be partly migratory (Eaton *et al.* 2016). *Vigorsii* is stated as being "common at Banda (Sep- Oct), Tanimbar (undated) and Damar (Nov-Dec) and has been recorded at Babar. A female obtained at Kaledupa in Jan may have been a migrant" (White & Bruce 1986). Kaledupa is in the Tukangbesi Islands just to the south-east of Sulawesi. Thus, the likely route of the ship on which this bird was found as shown in Figure 6 traverses the distribution of the this taxon and a passing migrant might well have sought refuge aboard it. If so the bird would have been aboard for over two days before its discovery.

To date there no records of Elegant Pitta in Australia but as the taxa *vigorsii* and the nominate race *elegans* are well known to be seasonal in occurrence and since they are resident or regular migrants to islands close to Australia, they are deemed likely to occur in Australia with or without assisted passage on a ship. As discussed below, there is already an accepted record of Hooded Pitta *Pitta sordida* for Australia, and that too was an occurrence at Barrow Island. As a result of that case, the species was added to the Australian list. Most records appraisal committees regard ship assistance as no bar to the acceptance of a record. Ships are a natural part of the environment so birds utilising them are natural occurrences. Neil Cheshire, master mariner with experience in most of the world's oceans says (pers comm.), 'that as for birds coming aboard ship I have lost count of how many species I have seen , but they include Eleonora's Falcon, Jouanin's Petrel, Snowy Owl, Nicobar Pigeon and about 15 species of American Warbler'. Birds utilising other man-made facilities such as buildings, reservoirs, canals and sewage farms are regarded as natural occurrences so why not those occurring on ships? If the bird was taken aboard, as a pet for instance, that would of course disqualify the occurrence as being acceptable.

Patrick Cullen advises that DBCA has encountered several incidents of birds stowing-away or hitch-hiking on ships. In their experience, by far the most common are Taiwanese racing pigeons but include wild birds from Asia such as Pittas, Tree Sparrows (half-a-dozen), House Sparrows, a Starling *spp.* and an unknown raptor. An Asian Koel was found ashore on Barrow Island and might or might not have been ship assisted. Several Australian species including a Songlark are known to have hitched rides. Depending on weather and time of year these ships can be havens for birds with pooled fresh water and millions of flying insects covering the decks in an otherwise hot and inhospitable environment.



## Discussion

Determination of provenance in cases like these can be problematic. It comes down to a matter of likelihood. Here we have a precedent. The acceptance of an occurrence very similar to that of BIRD B presented here. It is BARC Case 796, a Hooded Pitta found freshly dead on Barrow Island on 23<sup>rd</sup> January 2010. It is a similar species (same genus), found at the same time of the year, in the same location and in even poorer health. The Hooded Pitta had already died whilst the subject bird was evidently near death. BARC's decision on that case is provided below as Appendix 1. A copy of the published record, Johnstone & Darnell (2013) is attached to this submission.

## Acknowledgements

John Darnell and Ron Johnstone were essential to the preparation of this submission. Patrick Cullen, Brad Daw and Brett Fitzgerald, DBCA officers on Barrow Island were very helpful in forwarding data regarding these occurrences. Neil Cheshire assisted in our appreciation of shipping routes and other maritime matters. Alan Stringer read and commented on an earlier draft and David James provided four papers relating to vagrancy and ship assistance. We are grateful to Colin Trainor for sharing his knowledge of this region and its avifauna.

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## Appendix 1; The BARC Summary to Case 796

**Memorandum to:** The Director of Birds Australia

**From:** BirdLife Australia Rarities Committee (BARC)

**Date:** 21st March 2013

**Voting Members:**

Andrew Silcocks	Rohan Clarke
David James	Jeff Davies
Mike Carter	David Bishop
Tony Palliser	Danny Rogers

**Submission No 796: Hooded Pitta *Pitta sordida* Barrow Island, WA 23<sup>rd</sup> January 2010. Submitted by John Darnell following publication (Johnstone & Darnell 2013).**

**Verdict: Accepted**

This submission concerns a recovery of a fresh dead pitta found by workers within the mining camp on Barrow Island WA on the 23<sup>rd</sup> January 2010. Several photographs were taken and the specimen was frozen and then sent to the Western Australian Museum. The specimen was prepared into a study skin (registered number A37111) and its identification confirmed as a Hooded Pitta *Pitta sordida*.

A copy of the published account was forwarded to the committee for review. Members voted unanimously in favour of acceptance, treating the case as more of a formality as the photographs leave no doubt as to the identity. Based on colouration and size this specimen was identified as belonging to the race *P. s. cucullata* (Johnstone & Darnell 2013)

Some of the northern population of this species and particularly *P. s. cucullata* undergo long-distance migration south to the Malaysian Peninsula and Sumatra and is therefore the most likely to occur in Australia. This is the first record for Australia.

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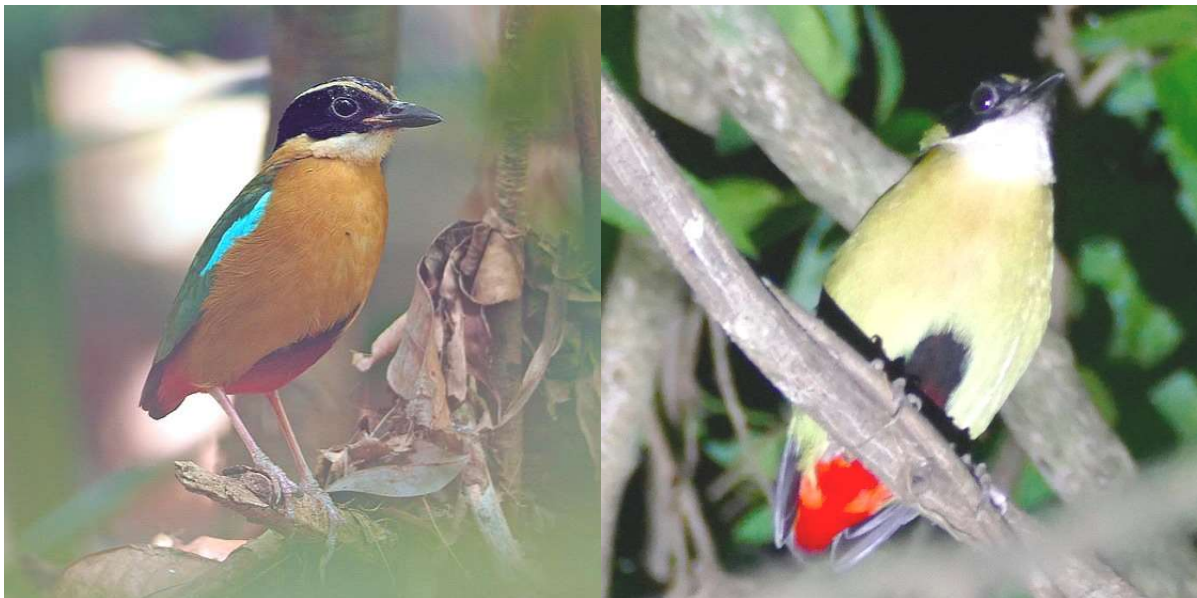
Tony Palliser  
 Chairman, Birds Australia Rarities Committee

**Appendix 2: Sample of Photos of Pittas relevant to these two cases**



**Figures 13 & 14. Elegant Pitta race *vigorsii* at Yamdena, Tanimbar on 8<sup>th</sup> September 2016**

Photos by Peter Lansley



**Figures 15 & 16. Elegant Pittas race *vigorsii* at Yamdena, Tanimbar.**  
Photos from eBird, by James Eaton on 25<sup>th</sup> October 2018 at left and by Peter Kaestner on 20<sup>th</sup> August 2019 on right





Figure 17. Elegant Pitta race *elegans* at Sulawesi Photo by Geoff Jones



Figure 18. Elegant Pitta race *maria* at Sumba Photo by Lars Petersson from eBird



**Figure 19. Elegant Pitta race *virginalis* at Tanahjampea Island**  
Photo by James Eaton from eBird



**Figures 20 & 21. Elegant Pitta race *concinna***  
Photos by Pam Rasmussen from Oriental Bird Club