

SUBMISSION TO BIRDLIFE AUSTRALIA RARITIES COMMITTEE

WATERCOCK – CORAL BAY, WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Submission authored by Drew Davison on behalf of Christine Williams (the observer)

Summary

This submission regards the observation of a vagrant *Rallidae* species on 24 January 2021 at the Bayview Caravan Park in Coral Bay in the Gascoyne region of Western Australian. Supporting photographs and other evidence indicate that the subject individual is a Watercock (*Gallicrex cinerea*). Plumage characteristics indicate that the subject individual is also a juvenile bird. If accepted by the BirdLife Australia Rarities Committee, this record would represent the first documented record of a Watercock on mainland Australia.



SUBMISSION

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| Species | Watercock (<i>Gallicrex cinerea</i>) |
| Location | Bayview Caravan Park, Coral Bay, Western Australia |
| GPS Co-ordinates | -23.142°S, 113.773°E (approximate) |
| Date and Time | 24 January 2021; 10h00 |

Circumstances of sighting The period from October 2020 to March 2021 characterised by a number of significant sightings of vagrant species in Western Australia, many of those typically occurring in Asia. These included Brown-streaked Flycatcher *Muscicapa williamsoni* (October 2020, near Broome), Eurasian Curlew *Numenius arquata* (November, near Broome and; February to March, Busselton), Nordmann's Greenshank *Tringa guttifer* (November to December, near Broome), Buff-breasted Sandpiper *Calidris subruficollis* (November, near Broome), Dark-sided Flycatcher *Muscicapa sibirica* (November, Rowley Shoals, near Broome), Eyebrowed Thrush *Turdus obscurus* (December, Broome), Von Shrenck's Bittern *Ixobrychus eurythmus* (December, deceased in Broome) and Blue-and-white Flycatcher *Cyanoptila cyanomelana* (December, deceased in southern Murchison region). The number of vagrant species observed in WA over this period indicates favourable conditions for vagrant species to occur, including the passage of several tropical lows.

On 24 January 2021, whilst walking through the Bayview Caravan Park, the observer Christine Williams noticed a 'different' bird associating with a number of Little Crows *Corvus bennetti* on a grassed bank near the double-story units and opposite the tennis court(s). The bird was thrusting its head into the ground and extracting insects or worms, and reportedly appeared to be healthy and content. The grassed area is watered on a regular basis according to Williams. Williams took twelve photographs of the bird at 10h01, and later processed the images and attempted to determine the identification of the subject bird. Williams came across the iNaturalist web site (<https://www.inaturalist.org>) and uploaded the images to allow others to identify the bird, with a tentative identification of Weka *Gallirallus australis*. Other iNaturalist users including Robyn Pickering (iNaturalist: ladyrobyn) suggested an alternative identification of Watercock which Williams the concurred with.

The observation was never followed up by other birders, due to the location (distance from Perth) and uncertainty regarding the status of the bird (how long the bird had been in Coral Bay, how long it was likely to stay, etc.).

Christine Williams reports that the last sighting of the subject individual was in February, when a Coral Bay local resident observed it flying but is unsure of the precise date. No further details were available with regards to the last sighting.

Description Refer also to the images accompanying this submission. The subject bird is clearly a member of the family *Rallidae*, as characterised by its general structure, including the bill, tarsi and tibiae morphology.

The subject bird has very buff-hued plumage, grey wing coverts and a barred undertail and flanks. Tarsi, tibiae, and toes green in colouration and the toes are very long, as shown in images two, three, and seven. The bill is buff in colour and structurally similar to that of a White-breasted Waterhen *Amaurornis phoenicurus*.

The author considers that the subject bird is unequivocally a Watercock, and it is suspected to be a first-year bird (as per John Darnell, WA Museum). This may be supported by the strong tawny plumage colouration, including the proximal ventral neck and facial areas.

Possible confusion species The good quality photographs accompanying this submission should be sufficient to eliminate potential confusion species. Other Rallidae species can readily be ruled out. Australasian Swamphe *Porphyrio melanotus* is readily ruled out by features such as plumage colour and bill shape; Dusky Moorhen *Gallinula tenebrosa* is too readily ruled out by features such as plumage colour and tarsi, tibiae and toe colour and size, whilst Common Gallinule *Gallinula galeata* is ruled out by much the same features.

Current status of the species in Australia There have been nine prior submissions of Watercock to the BirdLife Australia Rarities Committee (BARC), seven of which have been accepted. If accepted, this submission will be the first documented Watercock record from mainland Australia. Prior submissions have concerned individuals from the Cocos (Keeling) Islands (five submissions), Christmas Island (three submissions) and Ashmore Reef (one submission).

Acknowledgements DD would like to thank John Graff for his comments and review of the submission, as well as John Darnell from the Western Australian Museum for his thoughts on the age of the bird.

References

Menkhorst, P., Rogers, D., Clarke, R., Davies., K., Marsack, P. & Franklin, K. 2017. *The Australian Bird Guide*. CSIRO Publishing.

Menzie, S. 2014. Some notes on ageing and sexing Watercocks *Gallicrex cinerea* with specific reference to a vagrant bird in Oman. *Sandgrouse* **36** (2014), pp. 176-180.

APPENDIX A – PHOTOGRAPHS RELATING TO THE SUBMISSION

All photographs contained therein are the property of the observer, Christine Williams, and are reproduced in this submission with the kind permission of the observer.









APPENDIX B – WEB-BASED HYPERLINKS RELATING TO THE SUBMISSION

<https://www.inaturalist.org/observations/68532163>

Description Initial iNaturalist observation uploaded by the observer, Christine Williams, on 24 January 2021 at AWST 13h57.