

Rufous Scrub-bird Surveys – Barrington/Gloucester Tops IBA - 15 to 17 September 2010

Interim Summary Report

22 Rufous Scrub-bird territories sites involving calling birds were located during duplicate surveys of 19 km of transects on tracks at 5 locations at the Gloucester Tops. Rufous Scrub-birds were heard at all five locations and three birds were seen fleetingly.

Many of the sites at which scrub-birds were calling were well separated and a number of sites were confirmed on consecutive days. In other instances the sites were clustered, resulting in potential ambiguity (i.e. assigning two sites to the same bird). The estimate of 22 calling sites is conservative, involving the elimination of all instances of potential over-estimation (i.e. double counting). This process decreased the number of possible sites from a maximum of 27.

Two other species forming the basis of the Barrington/Gloucester Tops IBA nomination, the Flame Robin and Pale Yellow Robin were also recorded, but with a more limited distribution across the transects than the Rufous Scrub-bird. Each transect was approximately one kilometer long and 38 atlas (500 metre area surveys) were completed. 41 species were recorded during the transect surveys, including the Olive Whistler and Crescent Honeyeater, which have very limited distributions in the Hunter Region.

Before commencing the surveys all participants were familiarized with taped calls of the Rufous Scrub-bird provided by David Stewart. They were also taken to a known site to hear a calling scrub-bird.

The calls of Rufous Scrub-birds were easily identified by all observers during the surveys. Many of the birds called persistently and were recorded on several occasions at the same site.

Wind conditions were variable ranging from light through to strong on the ridges. Humidity was judged to be moderate. Under these conditions the detectability of scrub-birds would be expected to be in the range 65 to 76%, based on studies by Simon Ferrier along the same transects in 1981.

The locations from which scrub-birds called were invariably in eucalypt woodland often near beech forest. Active sites were characterized by an understorey typically one metre high, with dense cover from 2 to 50 centimetres above the ground, consistent with Ferrier's earlier studies.

The density of scrub-bird calling sites is almost identical and potentially exceeds the density of Rufous Scrub-bird territories found by Ferrier in 1981. However, some of the sites identified during this year's surveys may be temporary calling locations and need to be confirmed during subsequent surveys later in the breeding season, before they can be claimed to be breeding territories. Further surveys will take place in October to confirm these findings.

Ideally some additional surveys should be conducted at altitudes between 600 and 1100 metres, where there is anecdotal evidence that scrub-bird numbers have declined since surveys coordinated by Peter Ekert about 10 years ago. The message from our September surveys is that above 1100m the Rufous Scrub-bird is alive and well, and 1981 baseline levels appear to have been sustained.

Mike Newman 25/09/2010

