

Australasian Figbird

Sphecotheres vieilloti

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Hunter Bird
Observers Club

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An adult male Australasian Figbird – note the bird's red eye ring, black crown, white underparts and white outer tail feathers (photo: Rebecca Citroni)

An adult male Australasian Figbird is unmistakable – an olive-green bird with a dark head and a prominent red patch of bare skin around the eye. The throat and upper breast are greyish, and the underparts are white. In flight, the broad white tips and outer feathers of the tail are easily seen.

Females and juveniles lack the red skin patch and dark head of male birds and they have heavily streaked breasts. Thus they potentially could be confused with the similarly-sized Olive-backed Oriole. However, they are much stockier birds (fuller-chested and with a larger head) and their bill is much sturdier (shorter and heavier than for an Oriole). Juvenile birds resemble females but they have a yellow wash on their flanks and belly, and yellow tertiaries. Females and juveniles have a blue-grey patch of bare skin around their eye, instead of the bright-red of males.

Both sexes incubate, and Figbirds often breed in small to medium-sized colonies although there are also many instances of single nests. The call of a Figbird is distinctive and they usually are gregarious – both of these are further clues for differentiating them from an Oriole.



A female Australasian Figbird – note the heavily streaked breast, blue-grey eye ring and robust bill (photo: Alwyn Simple)

Regional Status

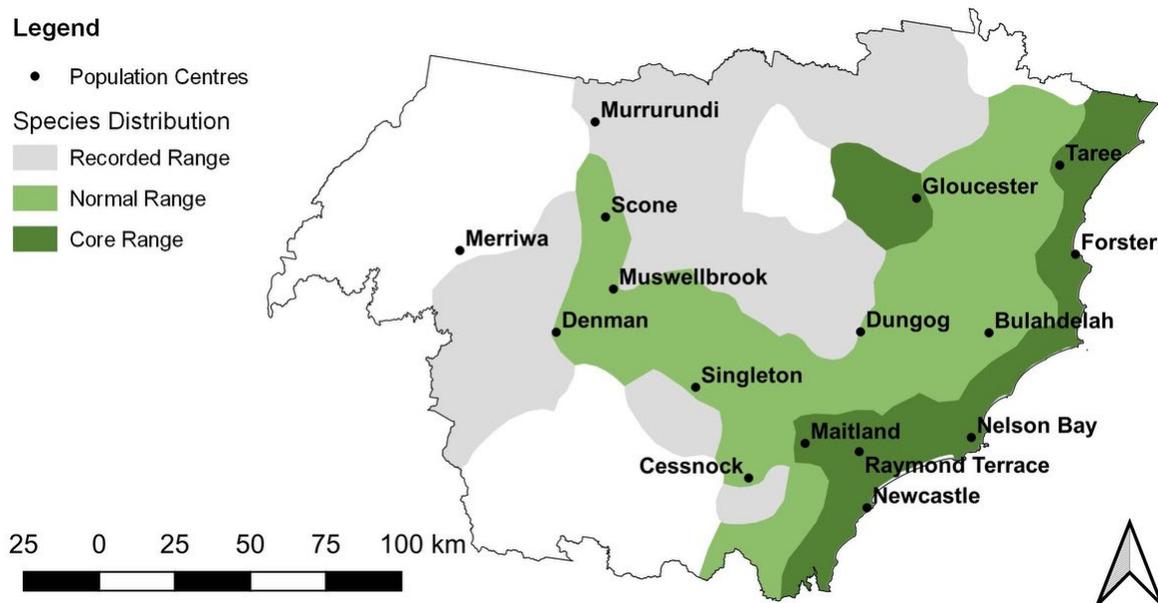
The Australasian Figbird is described as being resident in the Hunter Region, with an increasing population (source: 2019 ABR). The core range is the eastern seaboard, but birds are regularly found in inland towns where there are abundant fruit-bearing trees, particularly Figs.

Legend

- Population Centres

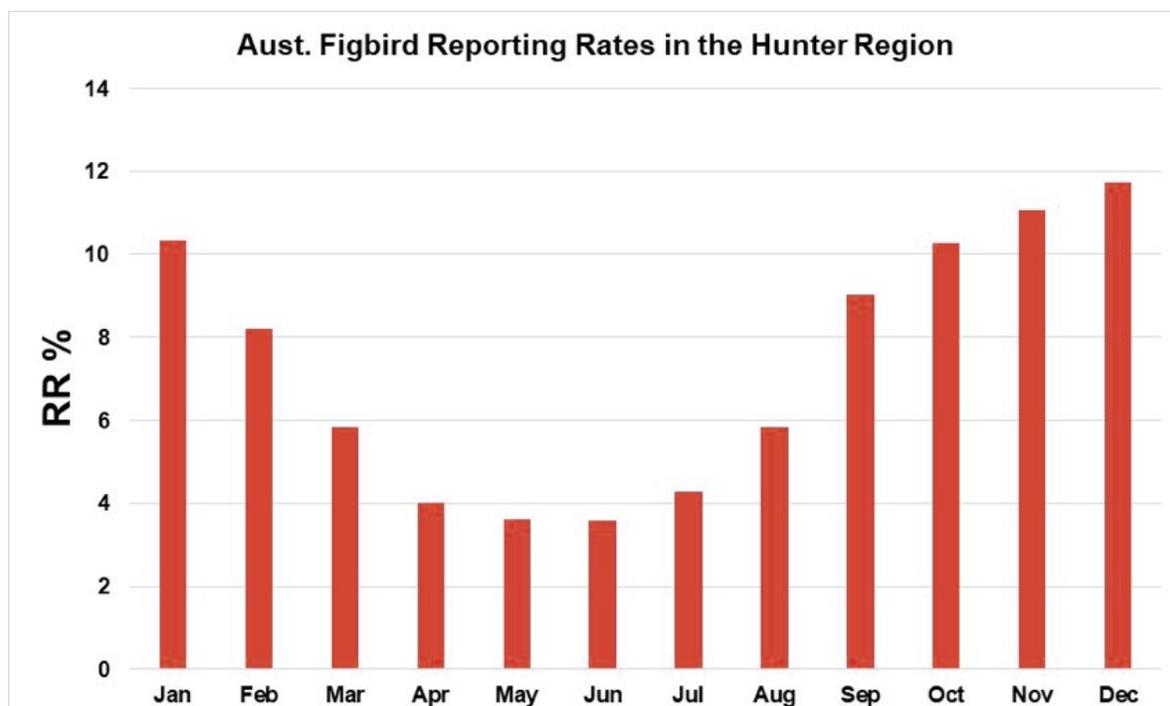
Species Distribution

- Recorded Range
- Normal Range
- Core Range



Distribution map for Australasian Figbird in the Hunter Region (map prepared by Dan Williams)

However, the status of the species as “resident” in our region probably is an over-simplification. The Reporting Rates (RR) in Birddata dip steeply in the April-July period (see graph). The June RR of 3.57% is less than one-third of the December RR (11.72%). Although birds are less vocal in the cooler months, and thus would be less-readily detected, it seems likely that some Figbirds depart the region in autumn/winter. That fits the distribution pattern which is seen in the southern parts of NSW ie an influx of birds in the warmer months.



There have been many reports for the Hunter Region of colonial breeding by Australasian Figbirds, although no recent ones. In the 1990's until mid-2000's, there was a regular breeding colony in Booti Booti National Park (peak count 17 colonial nests in 1995). Other colonies have been at Myall Lakes National Park (peak 12 pairs 2006) and Swansea (peak 14 nests 2005). There have not been any reports of colonial breeding in our region since 2013 – it is unclear if that is the result of a change in Figbird behaviour or in observer behaviour.



A juvenile male Australasian Figbird, on Ash Island – note the red eye ring and yellow flanks and breast (photo: Rob Palazzi)

Range expansion

Until the early 20th Century, Australasian Figbirds were rarely found in NSW south of the Bellinger River. A specimen was collected by John Gould on Kooragang Island in 1839 but there were no more records in the Hunter for about 100 years. However, in the 1930s, Figbirds began to expand their range. They arrived into Port Macquarie around about then, and into the Manning Valley a few years later. The first Sydney record was in 1944, and they began to breed in Sydney in 1946. The first Illawarra records were in the 1950s. Now, there are regular records from all down the east coast into the eastern parts of Victoria. However, birds in southern NSW and Victoria appear to be summer visitors, not resident. The range is also extending westwards,

with birds now regularly recorded around Tamworth for example.

About the name

Australasian Figbird

“Australasian” is descriptive. There are three species: Green Figbird *S. viridis*, found on the Indonesian Lesser Sundas islands of Roti and Timor; Wetar Figbird *S. hypoleucos* found on the Indonesian Lesser Sundas island of Wetar, and our bird, Australasian Figbird *S. vieilloti*, which is found in New Guinea and eastern parts of Australia.

The term “Figbird” seems to have emerged from the vernacular, based upon the early European settlers noting that its favourite diet was figs (and other fruit). Gould named it as the *Sphecotheres*, which thankfully didn’t gain wide acceptance.

Sphecotheres vieilloti

The species name recognises Louis Jean Pierre Vieillot (1748-1831), a Haiti-born ornithologist who became a prodigious describer of avian genera. He was the first to describe the genus *Sphecotheres* although he got one aspect very wrong! The genus name means “wasp-hunter”, from the Greek words *sphēx*, wasp and *thēras*, hunter. It’s an unusual choice of name for a frugivore! (although insects do form a minor part of its diet). Perhaps early observers thought it was taking the wasps buzzing around ripe fruit on fig trees?



A female Australasian Figbird (photo: Telesha Ferguson)

Design Rob Kyte at Conservation Matters 0420 821 460 **Text** by Alan Stuart based on information mainly sourced from • HBOC's Hunter Region annual bird report series • Volumes 1-7 of HANZAB (the Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds) • Bird in the Hand (ABSA information sheet series) • Menkhorst et al. (2017). The Australian Bird Guide • Ian Fraser & Jeannie Gray (2013). Australian Bird Names • A Complete Guide Richard Schodde and Ian Mason (1999). A Directory of Australian Birds (Passerines) • Richard Cooper, Ian McAllan and Brian Curtis (2020). Atlas of the Birds of NSW and the ACT, Vol 3.

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