

Brown Thornbill

Acanthiza pusilla

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Hunter Bird
Observers Club

Affiliated with BirdLife Australia



An adult Brown Thornbill, with scalloped rufous crown, dark red iris, streaked throat and upper breast, rufous rump and black subterminal tail band (photo: Alwyn Simple)

General Comments

Males and females are indistinguishable – they are small birds having a rufous crown with white scalloping, dark red iris, dark-streaked throat and upper breast, and dark brown upperparts. In flight the rump is rufous or rufous-tinged and there is a black subterminal band on the tail. The main confusion species locally are the Striated Thornbill and the range-restricted (in the Hunter Region, that is) Inland Thornbill. Inland Thornbills have at times been lumped with Brown Thornbills into the same species i.e. they are closely related. However, Inland Thornbills have a grey crown and a more strongly rufous rump, and paler flanks. Striated Thornbills are heavily streaked on their crown and face, as well as their throat and upper breast. Also, although the habitat preferences are not definitive, Striated Thornbills are far more likely to be in the upper foliage whereas Brown Thornbills usually prefer lower shrubbery.

The calls are quite different too.

With juvenile birds, the dark bill has a noticeably paler base to it, the throat/breast streaking is faint, the iris is brown and the crown is paler and minimally scalloped.

Brown Thornbills are sedentary, with pairs defending small territories year-round. However, they sometimes join mixed-flock foraging groups when such groups are moving through the thornbills' territory. Only the female builds the nest and only she incubates. Larger assemblies of Brown Thornbills involve family groups. The young birds eventually disperse, often travelling distances of several kilometres.



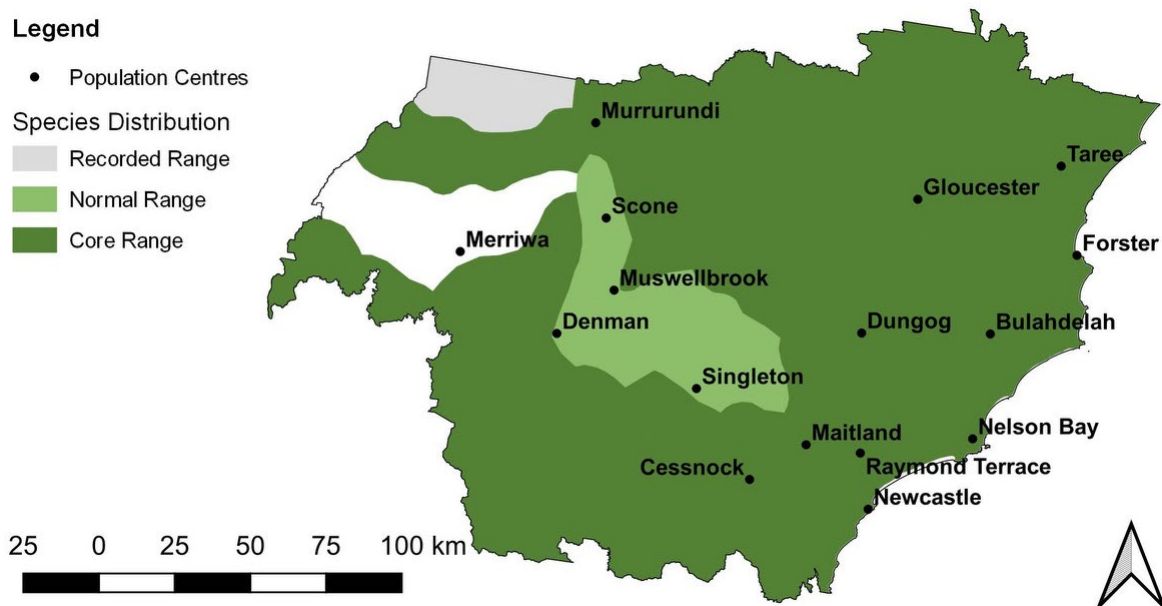
A juvenile Brown Thornbill – note the yellow base to its bill, the lack of scalloping on the crown, and the subdued streaking on the throat and breast (photo: Rob Palazzi).

Regional Status

The Brown Thornbill is a common breeding resident in the Hunter Region. It occurs as pairs and small family groups wherever there is a dense shrub layer available – in woodland, rainforest, wet gullies, heath. In locations such as the Gloucester Tops the overall numbers are high – in many places there are new pairs every few hundred metres. In the north-eastern corner of the region it overlaps with its close relative, the Inland Thornbill.

Legend

- Population Centres
- Species Distribution
- Recorded Range
 - Normal Range
 - Core Range



Distribution of the Brown Thornbill in the Hunter Region (map by Dan Williams).

Sub-species

There are six recognised sub-species – many of those have relatively restricted ranges (e.g. found only on King Island or on Kangaroo Island). The plumage and size differences of the six sub-species are subtle. Our bird, which is the nominate sub-species (i.e. *pusilla*), is known as the South-eastern Brown Thornbill. Its distribution is coastal and the dividing range (including western slopes), from about Adelaide up to the Queensland border, where it is replaced by the Northern Brown Thornbill, sub-species *dawsonensis*. (there is an intergrade zone for the two sub-species).

Longevity

For such a small bird (typically weighing only 6-8g), Brown Thornbills can live for a long time. The journal Corella's Recovery Roundup reports have included several records of birds aged 8-12 years. HANZAB reported a bird that was retrapped at the original banding site 17 years and five months after it was first banded.

About the name

Brown Thornbill

This was one of the first Australian species to be described scientifically; for its melodic song and because its plumage was considered unremarkable it was named as the Brown Warbler *Motacilla pusilla* (that's actually a Wagtail genus). The term "thornbill" did not appear in Australian bird lists until well into

the 20th century. Prior to that such birds were known as Tits, which later became Tit-warblers, from their superficial similarities to a guild of small birds in the northern hemisphere. The prominent ornithologist A.J. North was an advocate of the name change to thornbill, which eventually was adopted in the 1926 Australian checklist.

Acanthiza pusilla

The genus name means “thornbush-dweller” from the Greek words *acanthiōn* (thornbush) and *zaō*, to live off something. The fundamental origin of the genus name is that there was a bird called *akanthis* in Greek, which is thought to have probably been a finch of some sort. The species name is from the Latin word *pusillus*, meaning very small or insignificant. In other words, it is a small bird (although it’s not the smallest of the thornbill types).



For comparison, a Striated Thornbill – note its streaked face and crown (photo: Mick Roderick)