

Little Grassbird

Poodytes gramineus

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Hunter Bird
Observers Club

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An adult Little Grassbird - note the heavy streaking on its back and its long broad tail.
(photo: Allan Richardson)

Description

This is a smallish skulking bird of dense wetland vegetation. Its plaintive, piping 2-3 note whistles are very distinctive but it's a bird which is heard more often than it is seen. The potential confusion species are Australian Reed-warbler, Tawny Grassbird and Golden-headed Cisticola – all four species can be found in the grassy habitats favoured by the Little Grassbird. All four species have different songs, but there are useful plumage differences too.

Adult Little Grassbirds are heavily streaked on their backs, breasts, flanks and crowns – of the fore-mentioned species this combination is unique to them. Australian Reed-warblers and Tawny Grassbirds both are larger birds, and they are unstreaked on their breasts, flanks and crowns. The Tawny Grassbird has some streaking on its back but its unstreaked rufous crown and rufous tail

are additional differentiators of it from a Little Grassbird. The Golden-headed Cisticola is a smaller bird than the Little Grassbird. Female and non-breeding male cisticolas have streaked backs and crowns, but no streaking on the breast or flanks (and neither is there any streaking on the crown, for males in breeding plumage). The legs of cisticolas are yellow rather than dark grey.

Immature Little Grassbirds lack streaking on their breast, flanks and crown. However, the crown is dull brown (which eliminates Tawny Grassbird), the back is heavily streaked (which eliminates Australian Reed-warbler) and the legs are dark grey (which eliminates Golden-headed Cisticola).



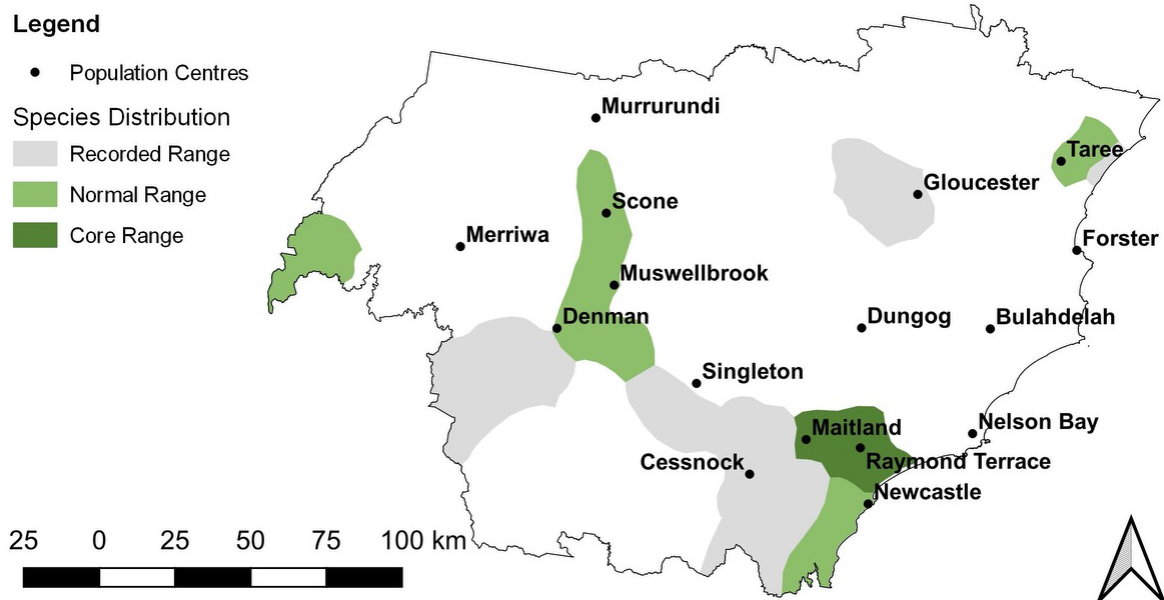
An immature Little Grassbird with minimal frontal streaking (photo: James Bennett)

Regional Status

The distribution of Little Grassbird in our region is uncannily similar to that for last month's Featured Bird, the Australasian Shoveler. The reasons for that are simple – both prefer habitat associated with substantial freshwater wetlands – the Australasian Shoveler mainly using the areas of open water and the Little Grassbird mainly using the adjacent grassy vegetation. There are far more grassbirds though – they typically exist in groups of up to eight

birds (which predominantly are males) and one study (of the Tasmanian subspecies) found four groups living within a 3-ha marsh.

Little Grassbirds probably are breeding residents of the Hunter Region. There are few breeding records, but it's a hard bird to study, and there are few winter records but it probably is present and silent, rather than absent. Plenty of knowledge gaps!



Distribution map for Little Grassbird (map prepared by Dan Williams)

Sub-species

There are four sub-species of Little Grassbird – three occurring in Australia and one in Papua New Guinea. The nominate subspecies *gramineus* is found in Tasmania and some Bass Strait islands, and there is a subspecies *thomasi* in south-western Australia (and sometimes a bit further north). Our subspecies is *goulburni* (Eastern Little Grassbird), which exists in eastern and northern mainland Australia (extending to around the Ord River in WA). The differences between the various subspecies are subtle and are to do with the intensity of the streaking on their fronts and the “brown-ness” of their backs.



A Little Grassbird singing from within a patch of reeds at Walka Water Works (photo: Lorna Mee)

About the name

Little Grassbird

The term “grassbird” was coined by John Gould in the mid-19th Century for a guild of birds with a strong association with long grass habitats. Prior to that he had named our bird the *Grass-loving Spheuoæacus* (a genus name which only briefly existed). At the time, many types of grassbird had been recognised: all three subspecies of Little Grassbird had been assigned full species status plus there were many versions of the Tawny Grassbird – some were being treated as subspecies and some as full species (Notes: these two grassbird species are now assigned into different genera, *Poodytes* and *Megalurus*, and only one Tawny Grassbird subspecies occurs in Australia).

In some earlier taxonomies, the Little Grassbird was treated as another species of the genus *Megalurus*; it is smaller than the Tawny Grassbird, and was named accordingly.

Poodytes gramineus

The genus name is from the Greek words *poa*, grass and *duōs*, a diver (derived from *duō*, to plunge). Thus, it is a bird which quickly disappears into long grass. The Spinifexbird is the only other Australian member of the *Poodytes* genus (the New Zealand Fernbird is another member).



A Little Grassbird foraging down low (photo: Dick Jenkin)

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 • James Jobling (2010). Helm Dictionary of Scientific Bird Names • Richard Schodde and Ian Mason (1999). A Directory of Australian Birds (Passerines).

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