

Rockwarbler

Origma solitaria

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Hunter Bird
Observers Club

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Rockwarbler (Photo Doug Howarth).

Description

Every encounter with this bird is a bird lover's highlight, and particularly if one is able to have confiding views while it forages around and over outcrops of sandstone or other rocks. If undisturbed, it sometimes will approach quite closely to the observer as it concentrates on its foraging activities. It flies infrequently, and it never flies very far.

Adult birds have dark grey upper parts and reddish-brown under parts, with a mottled white chin and throat and a dark tail. Males and females look identical and are similarly sized. There are no subspecies. Immature birds have paler reddish-brown under parts and their throat/chin is mottled white – in combination this results in the throat plumage not standing out as much as for adults. Also the base of the lower mandible in immature birds is paler than for adults (but: an adult's lower mandible is paler than its upper one).

Young birds acquire adult plumage at one year of age and presumably can

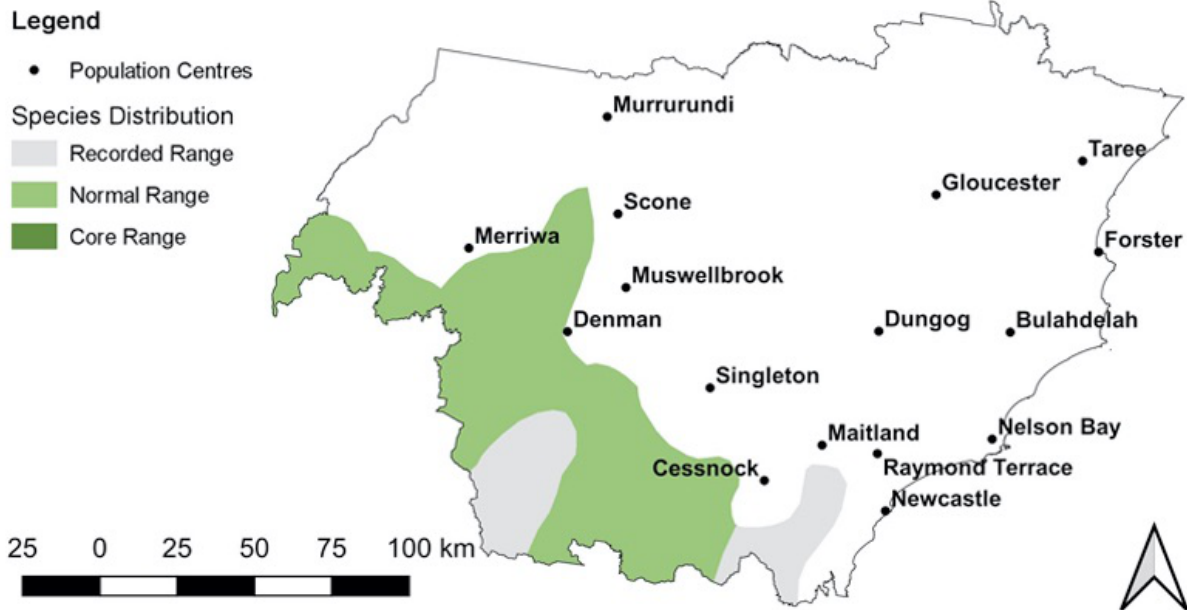
start breeding from then. It is not known whether both sexes brood on the nest or take care of the nestlings; indeed much about the breeding biology of this species is still unknown. The unusual nature of the bird's nesting location (see below) militates against such studies.



Rockwarbler (Photo: Alwyn Simple).

Regional Status

The Rockwarbler is endemic to NSW and is only found in the sandstone belt, from south of the Hunter River extending down to around Bega. That distribution pattern is reflected in the Hunter Region, with birds recorded only from the south and south-western parts of the region. It is a breeding resident and the local population seems to be stable. In 1994, a disused nest was found near Wingen, which would be near to the northern extremity of range. There was also a record from that general area in 2001. However, there also are records (from 1994 and 1995) of some birds in the access-limited Manobalai Nature Reserve which lies c 15 km to the north of the Goulburn River, and perhaps there is a permanent population there.



Distribution map for Rockwarbler in the Hunter Region (map prepared by Dan Williams).

The hanging nest

Rockwarblers suspend their nest from the roof of a cave or rock shelf, favouring sites which are dimly lit. The nest is ovate shaped – tapering at both ends and widest in the middle, where the entrance into the nest is located. The nest is constructed from plant materials and spider webs, and is attached to a small section of the roof by spider webs. This led to a common early name for them – Hanging Dick. The nest can swing freely from its single anchor point. Birds often use the same nest for many years.



A Rockwarbler nest hanging from the roof of a cave (Photo: Rob Kyte).

About the name

Rockwarbler

Early European settlers named many Australian birds based upon a superficial resemblance to birds occurring in Europe (the UK in particular). Hence Australian checklists from those times featured many “wrens” and “warblers”. As scientific understandings grew, such names eventually were phased out or were modified in some way (e.g. “heathwren”, “scrubwren”). Our bird originally was named (by Lewin in 1808) as the Solitary Warbler, but later Rock Warbler received preferred use. Because it isn’t actually a warbler, there briefly was an attempt to call it the *Origma* (from the same logic that brought us *gerygones*). That name proved quite unpopular although you’ll find it was used in the first Hunter Region annual bird report, in 1993. The first modern Australian checklist, produced by Christidis and Boles in 1994, offered the compromise one-word Rockwarbler and that ended all the controversy.

Origma solitaria

The genus name derives from the Greek word *orugma*, meaning excavation, trench or tunnel, and it reflects the bird’s habit of choosing caves or the underside of rock ledges to build its nest. Initially *Origma* was a monospecific

genus but it now includes two New Guinea mouse-warblers (both of which build conventional domed nests in trees or shrubs).

The specific name is from the Latin *solitarius*, meaning lonely or solitary. Given that Rockwarblers are often seen with a mate or in a small family party, the choice of name seems anomalous (but in line with Lewin's 1808 naming for the bird).



Rockwarbler (Photo: Mick Roderick).

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).
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