

Speckled Warbler

Pyrrholaemus sagittatus

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A male Speckled Warbler (photo by Allen Friis)

This is a small ground-dwelling bird of dry woodlands, usually found foraging on the ground and within low shrubbery. Birds are mainly found as pairs, occasionally as small family parties. It often is first detected by its calls – it has a sweet undulating song and also a distinctive rattly chattering call when it has been disturbed. Birds are heavily streaked on their front – they have dark black streaks on white-yellow underparts. They also have streaked brown upperparts, a distinctive pale face pattern and a brownish cap with a white supercilium. Males and females are similar, but males have a black lateral crown stripe whereas in females the crown stripe is chestnut. Only the females incubate. There are no recognised sub-species.

Juvenile Speckled Warblers are paler and their frontal streaking is muted. Also, they lack a crown stripe; however, from the age of around one month, the crown stripe begins to appear. Soon after that the young birds can be sexed as males or females. Full adult plumage is attained at around 12 months.

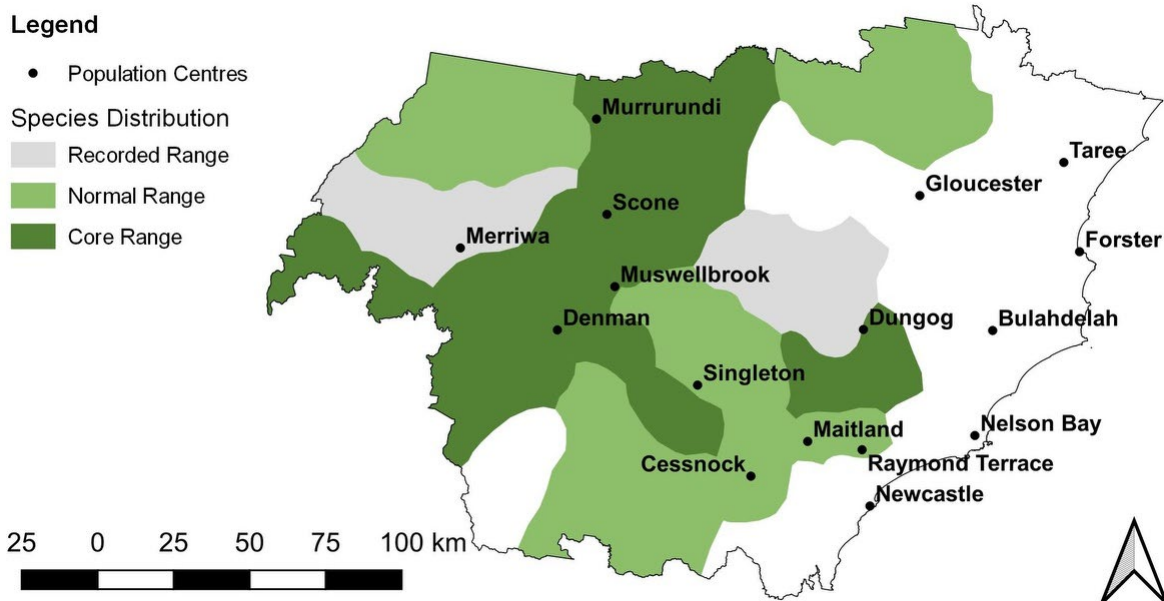
In flight, the bird's outer tail has white tips and there is a dark sub-terminal band (ie a band near the end of the bird's tail). The sub-terminal band is not obvious because the overall impression of birds in flight is of a dark bird.



A female Speckled Warbler (photo by Dick Jenkin)

Regional Status

Speckled Warblers are relatively common in dry woodlands of the central and western parts of our region, when there is good understorey present. Within NSW, Speckled Warblers are classified as Vulnerable – some of their many threats include habitat loss and fragmentation, and predation by introduced foxes and cats. Within conservation areas in the western parts of the Hunter Region they perhaps are holding on, but elsewhere in our region they are in decline – mainly for the above reasons.



Distribution map for Speckled Warbler (map prepared by Dan Williams)

A regular host for Black-eared Cuckoo

The Speckled Warbler is one of the main hosts for Black-eared Cuckoo chicks. A study found that about 50% of the cuckoo's hosts were Speckled Warblers, with the closely-related Redthroat of inland Australia accounting for another 25%. Both those species lay chocolate-coloured eggs within a domed nest – the Black-eared Cuckoo strongly prefers those two conditions. The cuckoo's egg initially is pale blue but it receives a thin chocolate-coloured coating as it passes through the female's oviduct.



A pair of Speckled Warblers (photo by Rob Palazzi)

About the name

Speckled Warbler

Early European settlers used the term “warbler” for many species with songs which somewhat resembled those of the Old World warblers with which they were familiar. Many of those names were subsequently Australianised (e.g. the gerygones) but this particular name has stuck. Some early ornithologists named it as a Fieldlark or Fieldwren, because of its similarities in plumage to birds of those guilds. Gould gave it the dreadful name of Little Chthonicola, thankfully that name didn’t gain wide acceptance.

“Speckled” is descriptive although strictly speaking the bold frontal markings are streaks rather than speckles. A curiosity from the past is to understand the derivations of the two early names Blood Tit and Chocolate Bird – both of those names refer to the chocolate-red eggs that Speckled Warblers lay.

Pyrrholaemus sagittatus

The species name derives from the Latin word *sagitta*, meaning “arrow”, and which alludes to the heavy streaking on the bird’s breast and belly. With a lot of imagination – something that Latham in 1802 apparently possessed – the streaks resemble arrow heads. The genus name is from the Greek words *purrhos*, flame-coloured or red, and *laimos*, throat. As our bird does not

possess a red throat, this might seem to be a strange choice of name. The genus assignment is relatively new – for a long time our bird was placed into the genus *Chthonicola* (“ground-dwelling”). However, in the current taxonomy it is grouped with the Redthroat (*Pyrrholaemus brunneus*), and hence the genus name makes a little more sense.



A female Speckled Warbler (photo by Rob Palazzi)

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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