

# Yellow-rumped Thornbill

*Acanthiza chrysorrhoa*

#1 JANUARY 2021



Hunter Bird  
Observers Club

Affiliated with BirdLife Australia



Adult Yellow-rumped Thornbill, displaying its bright yellow rump with contrasting black tail, and pale iris. (Photo: Rob Palazzi)

## Description

Although amongst the smallest of the birds in the Hunter Region, the Yellow-rumped Thornbill is the largest of Australia's thornbills. It is instantly recognisable: ground-dwelling, present in medium to large flocks, boldly white-spotted black crown, white supercilium (eye-stripe) and throat, pale iris and bright yellow rump, which is very obvious when the bird is flying (and which is further highlighted by the contrasting mostly-black tail). A commonly-used unofficial name is Butter-bum, which sums up the main identification process for many birdwatchers i.e. a view of the bird's very obvious rump.

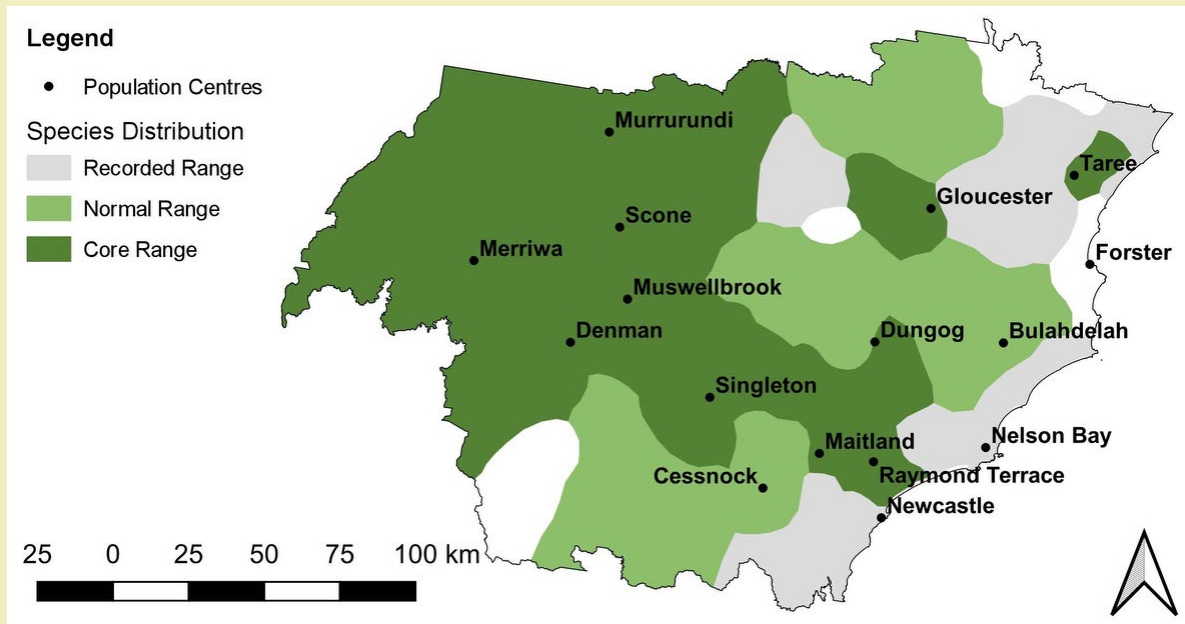
The twittering call of Yellow-rumped Thornbills is another important identification feature. It is a delightful and readily-recognised tinkling melodious call, one that is uttered frequently, especially by birds in a foraging party on the ground.

Yellow-rumped Thornbills live in small groups, foraging in open habitats such as grasslands, paddocks and lightly-timbered woodlands. Male and female

adults are similar, but juvenile birds have a dull crown, and there are buff to brown tinges to their wing coverts and the white spots on their crown.

## Regional status

The Yellow-rumped Thornbill is a breeding resident of our region, with a widespread distribution. Birds are absent from well-forested areas and built-up areas, but they are common just about everywhere else, including in highly modified habitats e.g. farmlands.



Distribution map for Yellow-rumped Thornbill (map prepared by Dan Williams)

## Sub-species

There are four recognised subspecies, but only one of those, *leighi*, is present in the Hunter Region. This subspecies, which occurs throughout NSW, Victoria and most of South Australia, has the brightest-yellow rump of any of the four subspecies.



Adult Yellow-rumped Thornbill, showing its white-spotted dark crown. (Photo: Dick Jenkin)

### Breeding and False Nests

Breeding is mostly done as simple pairs, but cooperative breeding sometimes occurs, in which the breeding pair is assisted by one or two auxiliaries (thought to be offspring from previous broods).

The main nest is a domed chamber with a side entrance. However, it is common for a false nest also to be built. Usually the false nest is placed on top of the real nest, but occasionally to the side and, sometimes, it is built completely separately. It can be cup-shaped or partially or completely domed. There are many theories for the purpose of the false nest: to deceive predators; to deceive cuckoos; a night-roosting site for the male; a roosting or loafing site for newly fledged young; a nest-building apprenticeship by younger birds; an actual second nest. It is rare though for eggs to be laid in the false nest, and cuckoos don't seem to be deceived for long.



Juvenile Yellow-rumped Thornbill – note the paler crown and buff wing covers.  
(photo: Mick Roderick)

## About the name

### Yellow-rumped Thornbill

Yellow-rumped is descriptive; about the easiest identification feature for our bird is its bright yellow rump. The derivation of thornbill is less clear. The word did not even appear in the Australian ornithological literature until the 20th Century. Before then, our thornbills were called Tits, after the slightly similar-looking but completely unrelated Northern Hemisphere birds. It seems that Alfred North, the early 20th Century curator of birds at the Australian Museum, was one of the first to call them thornbills, defying the other then-expert Australian ornithologists who were proposing the name Tit-Warbler. Thankfully, North's proposal eventually won through.

### *Acanthiza chrysorrhoa*

The genus name means “thorn-bush dweller”; it derives from the Greek words *acanthēōn* (thorn-bush) and *zaō* (to live on or live off something). Thus, it describes birds which love thistles and thorny plants. The species name is from the Greek words *khrusos* (gold/golden) and *orrhos* (rump). The overall name translates to golden-rumped thorn-bush dweller.



Yellow-rumped Thornbill (Photo: Rob Palazzi)

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