

Threatened species of the Northern Territory

Crested shrike-tit (northern)

Falcunculus frontatus whitei

Conservation status

Australia: Vulnerable

Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999

Northern Territory: Near Threatened

Territory Parks and Wildlife Conservation Act 1976



Credit: M. Gardner

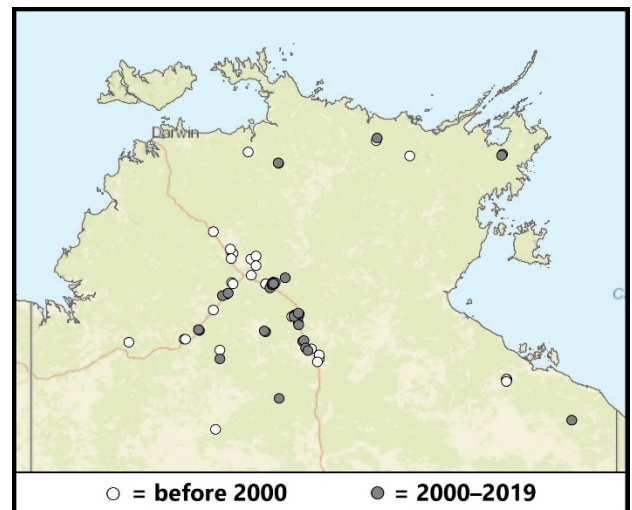
Description

The Crested Shrike-tit is an unmistakable bird. It has a bold black and white head, short black crest, green back and wings, and yellow breast and belly. The chin and throat of males are black, while those of females are green. The bill is deep and hooked. Three subspecies of the Crested Shrike-tit are recognised. The brighter yellow underparts, large white markings on the head and proportionately short tail distinguish the Crested Shrike-tit (northern) from the other two subspecies. The taxonomy of this species is unresolved; some authors regard the three taxa as species.

Distribution

The Crested Shrike-tit has a disjunct distribution in Australia: *Falcunculus frontatus frontatus* occurs in south-eastern Australia and northern Queensland; *F. f. leucogaster* occurs in south-western Western Australia; and *F. f. whitei* occurs in the Kimberley region and Top End.

In the Northern Territory (NT), the Crested Shrike-tit (northern) has been recorded from widely scattered localities from near Timber Creek to the east Gulf Country, north to Kakadu National Park and in north-eastern Arnhem Land¹. Although most records have been collected from within 100 km of both Katherine and Mataranka, this likely reflects biases in surveys for this subspecies. Large areas of the distribution remain poorly surveyed.



Caption: Known localities of the Crested Shrike-tit (northern) in the NT (nrmmaps.nt.gov.au)

NT conservation reserves where reported:
Kakadu National Park and Nitmiluk National Park.

Ecology and life-history

The Crested Shrike-tit (northern) typically occurs in open woodlands dominated by *Eucalyptus* and/or *Corymbia* species, though it has also been recorded in woodlands dominated by *Melaleuca* sp. or *Terminalia arostrata*¹. Its distribution extends from relatively wet, though still strongly seasonal, areas to semi-arid regions. However, the subspecies is very patchily distributed throughout this range and occurs at low densities (e.g. 1.25 adults/km² in suitable habitat at Jawoyn lands south of Katherine²).

Crested Shrike-tits (northern) forage unobtrusively in the canopy of trees, feeding on a variety of invertebrates, including cicadas, katydids, tree crickets, spiders and beetle larvae. The massive strong bill is used to chisel and tear bark, branches and foliage to access invertebrate prey (especially larvae); though prey are also gleaned from leaves and branches.

The subspecies is monogamous, resident and territorial. Breeding occurs over the wet season, with nest building commencing in September or October³. Females lay one or more clutches of 2–3 eggs anytime between October and March. Breeding success is low and re-nesting after nest failure is irregular.

Threatening processes

The Crested Shrike-tit (northern) is thinly and patchily distributed over a large but it is unclear what factors influence habitat suitability. It is likely that different threats occur in different parts of its distribution.

The low density of the Crested Shrike-tit (northern) and its patchy distribution render the subspecies especially vulnerable to habitat loss, degradation and fragmentation.

Habitat quality may be negatively impacted by fire and/or grazing regimes, which can reduce the density of large trees, limit tree recruitment and affect the abundance of prey. Nonetheless, at least in the short-term, the subspecies can

evidently persist in some areas that are grazed or burned annually. Invasive plants pose a threat due to the impacts they have on the fire regime, particularly through promoting more intense and widespread fires.

Conservation objectives and management

Research priorities for the Crested Shrike-tit (northern) are to: provide a more precise estimate of total population size and trends; investigate the ecology of the species, with particular attention to characteristics associated with habitat suitability; and assess the impacts of a range of fire regimes. An appropriate survey protocol has been developed for this subspecies⁵.

References

- ¹ Robinson, D., Woinarski, J.C.Z., 1992. A review of records of the Northern Shrike-tit *Falcunculus frontatus whitei* in northwestern Australia. *South Aust. Ornith.* 31, 111–117.
- ² Ward, S.J., 2008. Habitat-use, foraging and breeding ecology of the northern shrike-tit *Falcunculus frontatus whitei*. Report to NHT, Department of Natural Resources, Environment, The Arts & Sport, Darwin.
- ³ Ward, S.J., Berghout, M., Baker, B., 2009. Notes on the form and habitat of nests of the Northern Shrike-tit. *North. Territ. Nat.* 21, 54–60.
- ⁴ Threatened Species Scientific Committee, 2016. Conservation Advice *Falcunculus frontatus whitei* Crested Shrike-tit (northern). Department of the Environment, Canberra.
- ⁵ Ward, S., 2019. Survey protocol for the Northern Shrike-tit (*Falcunculus frontatus whitei*). Flora and Fauna Division, Department of Environment and Natural Resources, Darwin.