

Threatened species of the Northern Territory

Plains-wanderer

Pedionomus torquatus

Conservation status

Australia: Critically Endangered

Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999

Northern Territory: Critically Endangered

Territory Parks and Wildlife Conservation Act 1976

Description

The Plains-wanderer is a small (15–19cm long), quail-like terrestrial bird. The sexes differ in plumage: The female has a conspicuous black-and-white collar and a broad rufous patch on the upper breast that are absent in males. The upperparts are densely patterned with fine black and brown barring, while the underparts are mostly buff and white with blackish markings.

Plains-wanderers can be distinguished from superficially similar co-occurring button-quails (*Turnix* spp.) and quails (*Coturnix* spp.) by its longer neck, finer bill, longer and bright yellow legs, conspicuous black markings on the underparts, and an absence of pale streaking on the upperparts. Additionally, Plains-wanderers rarely flush when approached and do not fly as fast, or land abruptly, like button-quails and quails.

Distribution

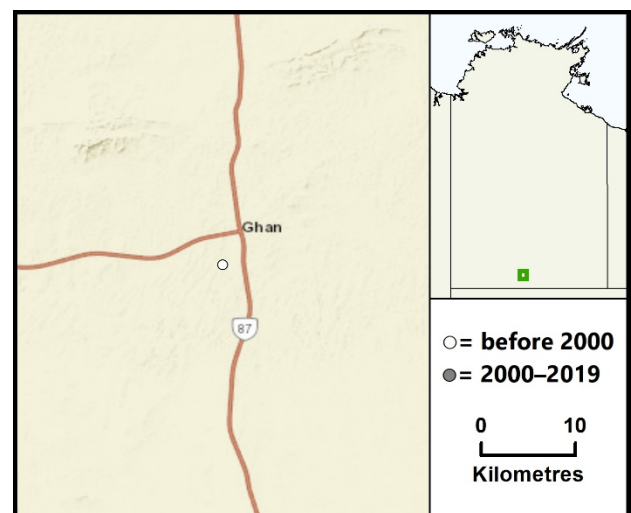
The Plains-wanderer is distributed across north-central Victoria, south-western New South Wales (around the Riverina region), eastern South Australia and west-central Queensland.



Caption: B. Mullins

Although there are no confirmed records from the Northern Territory (NT), probable sightings have been reported south of Alice Springs from Erldunda Station in the 1970s¹ and Andado Station in 2016.

NT conservation reserves where reported: None.



Caption: Known localities of the Plains-wanderer in the NT (nrmmaps.nt.gov.au)

Ecology and life-history

The Plains-wanderer is a cryptic, ground-dwelling species that prefers grasslands with a mix of bare ground, low grasses and forbs, and scattered taller plants. Individual home ranges average 12 hectares in size. Plains-wanderers are sedentary when their habitat remains suitable. Its diet comprises seeds, insects and spiders, which are mostly gleaned from the ground during the day and at dusk. It is usually observed walking alone, in pairs or family parties, and often stops to stand upright with a craned neck. When alarmed, they either flatten themselves and rely on camouflage for protection, or run away quickly; they rarely take flight¹. The nest is a scrape on the ground lined with grass, which is placed amongst native grasses and forbs. Clutches usually comprise four eggs. Breeding has been recorded in most months of the year; though no breeding may occur during drought years. The male Plains-wanderer takes the primary role in incubating and caring for the young, during which time the female sometimes lays a clutch for a second male. Generation length is estimated to be 7.3 years².

Threatening processes

The main threat to the Plains-wanderer is the clearance, modification and fragmentation of native grasslands for agriculture²⁻³. Overgrazing, particularly during droughts, reduces habitat quality⁴ and may increase the vulnerability of the species to predation (especially by foxes)⁵. Chemicals used to control plague locusts may kill Plains-wanderers directly or indirectly².

Conservation objectives and management

The National Recovery Plan for the Plains-wanderer⁶ recommends a series of conservation strategies including: management of grazing and burning regimes; better understanding of threats and their mitigation; better definition of abundance and distribution; and a captive-breeding program.

In the NT, the highest research and management priority is for a systematic assessment of its

distribution and status, including habitat requirements and threats. However, given its occurrence within the NT is unconfirmed or probably marginal, developing and implementing conservation actions for this species are not considered a high priority in the NT.

References

- ¹ Bennett, S., 1983. A review of the distribution, status and biology of the plains-wanderer *Pedionomus torquatus*, Gould. *Emu* 83, 1–11.
- ² Garnett, S.T., Szabo, J.K., Dutson, G., 2011. The Action Plan for Australian Birds 2010. CSIRO Publishing, Canberra.
- ³ Department of the Environment, 2015. Conservation Advice *Pedionomus torquatus* Plains-wanderer. Department of the Environment, Canberra.
- ⁴ Baker-Gabb, D., Antos, M., Brown, G., 2018. Recent decline of the critically endangered Plains-wanderer (*Pedionomus torquatus*), and the application of a simple method for assessing its cause: major changes in grassland structure. *Ecol. Manag. Restor.* 17, 1–8.
- ⁵ Baker-Gabb, D.J., Benshemesh, J.S., Maher, P.N., 1990. A revision of the distribution, status and management of the plains-wanderer *Pedionomus torquatus*. *Emu* 90, 161–168.
- ⁶ Commonwealth of Australia, 2016. National Recovery Plan for the Plains-wanderer (*Pedionomus torquatus*). Department of the Environment, Canberra.