

Threatened Species of the Northern Territory

THICK-BILLED GRASSWREN (MacDonnell Ranges subspecies)

Amytornis modestus modestus

Conservation status

Australia: Vulnerable (as *A. textilis modestus*)

Northern Territory: Extinct



Photo*: G. Chapman

Description

The thick-billed grass-wren is a small ground bird (length 15-20 cm) with a long tail. The upperparts are dull brown in colour with the underparts being paler fawn. Feathers are streaked with white. The female has a chestnut patch on either side of the breast. The eyes are dark brown, the bill and feet are dark grey. It is distinguished from other subspecies by the particulars of its tail, and from the closely-related western grass-wren by its lighter body colour and heavier bill.

*There is no known photo of this taxon. The photo above is of another living sub-species of *A. modestus*.

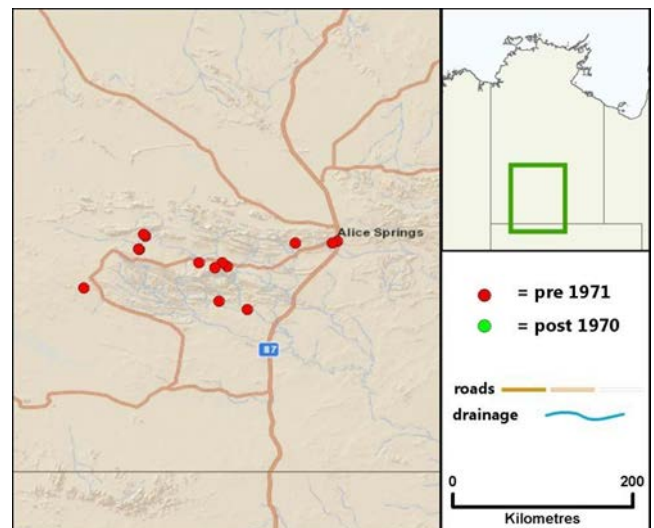
Distribution

A recent taxonomic review separates

A. modestus and *A. textilis* as distinct species (Black *et al.* 2010). The thick-billed grasswren

A. modestus occurred as three subspecies in arid and semi-arid regions of southern Australia (Higgins *et al.* 2000), two of which have been recorded in the Northern Territory (NT).

The MacDonnell Ranges subspecies of the thick-billed grasswren *A. m. modestus* was formerly present in the Finke River drainage



Previous locations of the MacDonnell Ranges thick-billed grass-wren

basin from Mereenie Bluff and the upper Hugh River south to Lauries Creek, McMinns Creek and the lower Finke (Storr 1977).

A small isolated population of the north-western subspecies *A. m. indulkanna* was located just south of Charlotte Waters in 1994 and that subspecies is now listed as Critically Endangered in the NT.

The western grasswren *A. textilis* comprises two subspecies, one in southern Western Australian and the other in the Gawler Ranges and upper Eyre Peninsula in South Australia.

Conservation reserves where reported: Previously from Finke National Park and West MacDonnell Ranges National Park.

Ecology

The MacDonnell Ranges subspecies of the thick-billed grasswren was confined to riverine shrubland in the MacDonnell Ranges, preferring areas with canegrass, saltbush and/or flood debris. Storr (1977) considered it 'formerly moderately common'.

Breeding occurred in August and other aspects of its ecology were probably similar to those of the north-western subspecies *A. m. indulkanna*.

Conservation assessment

The subspecies was moderately common at one time but has not been recorded since 1936. It is considered Extinct.

Threatening processes

No clear threatening process has been associated with the disappearance of the MacDonnell Ranges subspecies of the

thick-billed grasswren from the Finke drainage. Habitat degradation resulting from high stocking rates of livestock, and severe drought, has been implicated (Storr 1977; Garnet and Crowley 2000). However, other subspecies of thick-billed grasswren and the closely-related western grasswren (*A. textilis*) occur on pastoral leases elsewhere and are known to survive in areas of sparse cover degraded by sheep, rabbits and drought (Garnett and Crowley 2000).

Conservation objectives and management

The subspecies is presumed extinct. No conservation management plan can offer further help. However, a small population of

the north-western subspecies persists in the NT and requires management.

Compiled by

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References

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