



Bellbird

BIRDING, WILDLIFE & PHOTO TOURS

Bellbird Tours Pty Ltd
PO Box 2008
BERRI SA 5343
AUSTRALIA
Ph. 1800-BIRDING
Ph. +61409 763172
www.bellbirdtours.com
birds@bellbirdtours.com
ABN 40 159 352 002

Special 6 Grasswren 2020 tour report

Dates of tour: 17 – 24 October 2020

Leaders: Peter Waanders and Michael Greenshields



Grey Grasswrens

Tour overview

Due to Covid-19 and state border restrictions we had to juggle the usual tour itinerary around quite a bit to accommodate participants from various states. We ended up foregoing the usual Strzelecki track itinerary,

which traverses 4 states, instead birding the Birdsville track and splitting the group in two, with one group starting in Mount Isa, Qld and heading south to Adelaide, led by Peter Waanders, and the other group starting in Adelaide, SA and heading north, led by Michael Greenshields, meeting up with the first group on the Birdsville track in SA, and from there on we birded together on our way and eventually back to Adelaide.

A total of 155 outback species were seen by Michael's group including 5 Grasswren species, and 206 species were seen by Peter's group including 7 Grasswren species.

Daily account

Sat 17 Oct yesterday evening **Peter's group** had arrived in Mt Isa and this morning we headed out early in search of Carpentarian Grasswren. Arriving in the bird's habitat at sunrise, we first spent an hour observing all the various birds frequenting the trees and shrubs as it was a hive of activity here. Within no time we had Budgerigar, Cockatiel, Red-winged Parrot, Grey-fronted & Grey-headed Honeyeater, Pallid Cuckoo and the sought-after Black-tailed Treecreeper. We then started our search for the main target in earnest but were interrupted by a Spinifexbird showing extremely well! Not long thereafter we found a pair of Carpentarian Grasswren which put on a great show, singing from low perches and hopping around on the stony ground between the spinifex clumps. After a celebratory coffee we decided that while the going was good, to keep going, so we drove back to Mt Isa and headed straight to a scenic dry creek surrounded by huge boulders which were home to a couple of pairs of Kalkadoon Grasswrens. Bird activity was great here too and we kept getting distracted by such great bird as Black & Rufous-throated Honeyeaters, Painted Finch, Purple-backed and Red-backed Fairy-wrens and Hooded Robin. But once we started searching for the Kalkadoons in earnest it didn't take too long before a pair came hopping down the rocks to check us out and conveniently pose for photos! After a great morning we enjoyed a nice, relaxed picnic lunch on the shores of Lake Moondarra. After lunch we birded around the lake for a while, picking up more Painted Finches as well as another sought-after target, Pictorella Mannikins, of which we found a flock of around 20. As it was getting a bit warm, we had a break of a couple of hours mid-afternoon, before heading out to the local sewage ponds which are surrounded by irrigated horse paddocks with hedges, bushes and trees, which usually attract a variety of birds. And it didn't disappoint: in a couple of hours we added Varied Lorikeet, Spotted Bowerbird, Horsfield's Bronze-cuckoo, White-winged Triller, Rainbow Bee-eater, Red-kneed and Black-fronted Dotterel, Pink-eared Duck, and Australian Bustard to the list. Highlight of the afternoon though was a pair of Chestnut-breasted Munias showing well.

Sun 18 Oct. Today **Michaels group** started in Adelaide and headed north on the first day, visiting a few coastal spots where Slender-billed Thornbill performed on cue as well as Red-necked Avocets, Pied and Sooty Oystercatchers and other coastal birds. With lunch in Pt Augusta, we visited the Arid Lands Botanical Gardens, there were plenty of birds including Redthroat and Purple-backed Fairy-wrens. At the end of the day we arrived in Hawker for the night.

Meanwhile **Peters group** re-visited Lake Moondarra in the morning, where we added Paperbark Flycatcher, Spinifex Pigeon, Black-chinned Honeyeater, Double-barred Finch and also saw and photographed more Painted Finches. In terms of waterbirds, interesting species observed included Comb-crested Jacana, Marsh Sandpiper, Glossy Ibis and Green Pygmy Goose. It was warming up quickly so we packed our bags and started

heading south. After about an hours' drive we saw four Ground Cuckoo-shrikes flying alongside the car at some distance. We stopped at another site for Kalkadoon Grasswren and sure enough, 3 of these unique birds decided to show themselves to us in the middle of the day. After a picnic lunch in a small Aboriginal township we headed to Boulia, where we checked out the woodlands around the sewage ponds. Here, a Spotted Bowerbird was observed at its bower, as well as Grey-crowned Babblers, Cockatiels and Budgerigars, and a family of Brolgas. At the end of the day, on the grassy plains outside Boulia, we observed a pair of Horsfield's Bushlarks at close range.

Mon 19 Oct saw **Michael's group** head further north via the Flinders Ranges where Yellow-footed Rock-wallabies were observed fighting over a female, as well as Port Lincoln Ringnecks and mixed flocks of woodswallows. At the Farina campgrounds, a nice little spot that's usually quite birdy, recent rain had transformed the area into a haven for birds. The creek was full of water. Every single tree had a pair of budgerigars in it and the sky was filled with their buzzing calls. Heading further north we started coming across small flocks of Orange and Crimson Chats, more budgies, and our first Inland Dotterels. Lunch in Marree, then we headed onto the Birdsville track which was in good condition. Recent rain had resulted in an unusually green landscape and bird activity had increased compared with previous visits. We saw a couple of pairs of Brolgas, hundreds of budgies and thousands of Black-tailed Native-hens. We arrived at Mungerannie Roadhouse, halfway up the Birdsville track, in time for dinner and ready for an early start tomorrow.

Meanwhile **Peters group** left Boulia at sunrise in search of Flock Bronzewings. Taking a little-known dirt road south, we soon started seeing small numbers of Flock Bronzewings. The track traversed endless grassy plains, and with all the recent rain, the vegetation was becoming greener and some water was lying around, no doubt attracting the Flock Bronzewings, as it did many groups of Budgerigars, Cockatiels and Australian Pratincoles. A very nice Black-breasted Buzzard came circling right over our heads and we saw further Brolgas, Bustards and had our first flock of Inland Dotterels. At our lunch spot on the Eyre Creek crossing, we managed to flush an Eastern Barn Owl (unintended) from its roost! After checking out the amazing (rare, localised and very hardy) Waddi trees, we eventually arrived in Boulia, where we stayed in comfortable motel rooms associated with the iconic Birdsville Hotel. The publican gave us an interesting short tour of the historic building and after a short rest in the afternoon we birded the local lagoon. Here, a Red-browed Pardalote came to check us out at close range! And later in the afternoon, as the sun was on its way down again, we saw multiple small flocks of Flock Bronzewings flying over on their way to a drinking spot. A nesting pair of Australian Hobbies was located while the songs of White-winged Trillers and Rufous Songlarks along with the constant buzzing of Budgerigars filled the sky.

Tue 20 Oct A big day on the Birdsville track. Michaels group were driving north, going to meet up with Peter who was coming south from Birdsville with his group. We had different distances to cover (Michael about 130 km, Peter about 170 km) so an early start for both groups as we had agreed to meet at 7:15am at a specific location ready for the Grey grasswren search. Spotted Nightjars were seen separately, by both groups. Both groups arrived at the meeting point within a minute of each other! Rendez-vous on the gibber plains of the Birdsville track. After a quick coffee we headed off in search of Grey Grasswrens. The first birds were located within a half hour and better views were obtained an hour later. Great to have this rather difficult grasswren 'in the bag'. Small numbers of Flock Bronzewings flew overhead. High fives all around as both vehicles turned south and continued the trip together. At a waterhole with some nice shady trees we had a picnic lunch, with

Orange Chats, Little Grassbirds and Red-capped Plovers surrounding us, while a small flock of Plumed Whistling Ducks were loafing on the water. The weather was perfect: sunny, calm, and warm, so while the going was good, we decided to try for Thick-billed Grasswren in the afternoon. While searching for these we flushed two Stubble Quail, who landed and disappeared from view, but suddenly a Black Falcon appeared out of nowhere and crashed down in the location where one of the Stubble Quail had landed! Gobsmacked we watched this spectacle but unfortunately for the Black Falcon it flew off empty-clawed. Back to the job at hand, we resumed the Grasswren search. Australian Pratincoles, Orange Chats, a Rufous Fieldwren and White-winged Fairy-wrens tried to distract us but to no avail: after half an hour we found a pair of Thick-billed Grasswrens that gave good views as they perched atop of Bluebushes and hopped around on the ground below. As the afternoon was still young, we thought, let's see if we can find 3 species of Grasswren in a day? So we left the Bluebush plain with its Thick-bills at 2:50pm and started searching a nearby sand dune with Canegrass and wildflowers for Eyrean Grasswren. We found a pair at 3:30pm! These too gave excellent views as they were singing from atop Canegrass clumps and running around across the open sand below the bushes. We observed them for quite some time before a celebratory group photo was taken with high-fives and thumbs-up: 3 difficult outback species of grasswrens in 1 day was a new record on a Bellbird tour! On our way back to Mungerannie we saw more Inland Dotterels, a pair or two of Banded Whitefaces as well as the occasional Cinnamon Quail-thrush. Needless to say, the mood in Mungerannie over dinner was celebratory!

Wed 21 Oct A stroll around the local wetlands yielded Chirruping Wedgebill, Cinnamon Quail-thrush, Cockatiel and Budgerigars, and after a sumptuous late breakfast we packed up and headed south. For Michael's group, this meant re-tracing their steps, and for Peter's group, new terrain. Our first target was Gibberbird, which we found after some effort, but eventually a single bird gave excellent close-up views. We then checked our 'regular' Grey Falcon nest and sure enough the adult was sitting next to its nest which we suspect had young chicks in it. Michael was able to take a photo of the adult which showed a leg band, and after consulting with Grey Falcon researcher Jonny Schoenjahn it turned out that this photo makes this female the oldest known Grey Falcon. It was banded on 11/10/2015 as an adult, 2+ years old, at the same site, so her age today is 7+. This longevity record will be published in the scientific literature in due course. Here at Bellbird we are always happy to be able to contribute to scientific research wherever we can. We moved further south and visited Farina (again for Michael), and observed a few obliging Diamond Doves as well as many, many Budgerigars. Arriving at Lyndhurst, the skies started to darken, and we settled into our comfortable rooms for the night.

Thu 22 Oct An impressive rainbow arched above the stark outback landscape as we departed Lyndhurst to check a nearby lake for Blue-billed Ducks. Indeed, some 30 birds were present, as were a few Musk Ducks and various other waterbirds. Heading south the weather started deteriorating with strong wind and occasional rain drops. We had a quick look at a Casuarina-covered hill near Hawker (Rufous Whistler and White-fronted Honeyeater) before lunch and re-stocking in Port Augusta. The wind was not letting up and Grasswrens (and many other birds) don't like wind, but we still decided to try for Western Grasswren in the afternoon. Sure enough, within a minute of commencing the search, we had 2 Western Grasswrens perched in a bush and singing away at us! By this time we were reminding everyone that Grasswrens are actually difficult to find and that the experiences we'd had so far on this trip were rather unusual! We also saw some more Redthroats at this spot and a mixed flock of Southern Whitefaces and White-fronted Chats. We now headed onto dirt roads into the Gawler Ranges on our way to Mount Ive Station, our destination for the night. We broke the drive at

the halfway point where we had another known site for Western Grasswren and I kid you not, we had further views of a bird here! Also along the way we had Red-backed Kingfisher and Mulga Parrots. We got to Mt Ive late in the afternoon and the weather, while still windy, was dry, while heavy rain was forecast for tomorrow, so we decided to try for Short-tailed Grasswren straightaway. We ascended a nearby spinifex-covered hill and after about half an hour we heard, then saw, 2 birds. They were behaving a bit unusual and we soon found out why: this pair had a young that was almost the same size of them but not quite as experienced in hiding yet so we got great views and photo opportunities before leaving them in peace. Two more grasswren species in one day!

Fri 23 Oct We woke up to a very cold morning with dark skies and strong wind. We decided to pack up and head out of there, not wanting to get stuck once it rained and the authorities would close the unsealed roads to traffic. We headed south straight into the rain which came down in sheets at times and turned the narrow dirt road into a flowing river! Driving through huge amounts of water flowing in all directions over this road for almost 70 km's was a bit treacherous at times, but our 4WD vehicles and skilled drivers made sure we got out the other end safely and we even found an abandoned shelter under which we could have a picnic lunch while the rain continued unabated. We arrived in the small town of Kimba and as the afternoon was a wash-out people spent time in their rooms relaxing, downloading photos and catching up with the home front.

Sat 24 Oct The rain had stopped overnight and while grey skies awaited us at least it wasn't wet or too windy. We headed off into nearby "mallee" eucalypt bush where we found a nice pair of Copperback Quail-thrush (split from Chestnut ~5 years ago) which performed well. Exploring the stunted, gnarled old mallee trees we came across a pair of Rufous Treecreepers feeding young, and Western Yellow Robin weren't too hard to find either. We moved onto a different part of the reserve where Blue-breasted Fairy-wrens welcomed us as we jumped out of the vehicles! A Gilbert's Whistler was singing its head off and another pair of Copperbacks were also located here. Celebratory coffees were enjoyed and then we headed out of there, back towards Port Augusta. For good measure, we checked the Western Grasswren spot again where we first had this species a couple of days ago and this time it took a bit longer (15 mins) to find them but once again good views were had. Lunch in Port Augusta and then we commenced the long drive south to Adelaide. We stopped at Thompsons Beach to add a good variety of shorebirds to our list: Greenshank, Common, Sharp-tailed and Curlew Sandpiper, 3 species of Tern, Red-necked Stint, Spotted Harrier and our one and only Black-shouldered Kite for the entire trip! Upon arriving in Adelaide, we checked an area known for a population of the introduced Barbary Dove and found 2 birds. A final dinner was enjoyed at last, and everyone agreed what a fantastic trip it had been, and how great it was that we'd managed to pull off a tour working with various Covid restrictions. Final tally for Peter's group was 206 species and for Michael's 155.





Kalkadoon Grasswren, Carpentarian Grasswren © Peter Waanders



Western Grasswren, Copperback Quail-thrush © Peter Small



Short-tailed Grasswren (phone photo!) © Peter Waanders



Grey Falcon © Michael Greenshields; Gibberbird © Peter Waanders



Outback rainbow © Peter Waanders



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Emu
Plumed Wistling-duck
Musk Duck
Blue-billed Duck
Black Swan
Australian Wood Duck
Green Pygmy-goose
Pink-eared Duck
Grey Teal
Pacific Black Duck
Hardhead
Stubble Quail
Australasian Grebe
Hoary-headed Grebe
Great Crested Grebe
Glossy Ibis
Australian White Ibis
Straw-necked Ibis
Royal Spoonbill
Yellow-billed Spoonbill
Great Egret
Intermediate Egret
White-necked Heron
White-faced Heron
Little Egret
Nankeen Night-Heron
Australian Pelican
Little Pied Cormorant
Great Cormorant
Little Black Cormorant
Pied Cormorant
Australasian Darter
Black-shouldered Kite
Whistling Kite
Black Kite

Black-breasted Buzzard
Brown Goshawk
Spotted Harrier
Wedge-tailed Eagle
White-breasted Sea-eagle
Australian Bustard
Australian Swamphen
Australian (Spotted) Crake
Black-tailed Native-hen
Dusky Moorhen
Eurasian Coot
Brolga
Little Button-quail
Australian Pied
Oystercatcher
Pied Stilt
Red-necked Avocet
Red-capped Plover
Inland Dotterel
Black-fronted Dotterel
Red-kneed Dotterel
Masked Lapwing
Comb-crested Jacana
Common Sandpiper
Wood Sandpiper
Common Greenshank
Marsh Sandpiper
Red-necked Stint
Sharp-tailed Sandpiper
Curlew Sandpiper
Australian Pratincole
Greater Crested Tern
Caspian Tern
Whiskered Tern
Silver Gull

Pacific Gull
Rock Dove
Spotted Dove
Common Bronzewing
Flock Bronzewing
Spinifex Pigeon
Crested Pigeon
Barbary Dove
Diamond Dove
Bar-shouldered Dove
Peaceful Dove
Horsfield's Bronze-Cuckoo
Pallid Cuckoo
Eastern Barn Owl
Spotted Nightjar
Blue-winged Kookaburra
Red-backed Kingfisher
Sacred Kingfisher
Rainbow Bee-eater
Nankeen Kestrel
Brown Falcon
Australian Hobby
Grey Falcon
Black Falcon
Galah
Little Corella
Sulphur-crested Cockatoo
Cockatiel
Rainbow Lorikeet
Varied Lorikeet
Musk Lorikeet
Purple-crowned Lorikeet
Red-winged Parrot
Australian (Pt Lincoln)
Ringneck

Cloncurry Ringneck
Blue Bonnet (pale form)
Red-rumped Parrot
Mulga Parrot
Budgerigar
Spotted Bowerbird
Black-tailed Treecreeper
Rufous Treecreeper
Red-backed Fairywren
White-winged Fairy-wren
Purple-backed Fairy-wren
Blue-breasted Fairy-wren
Kalkadoon Grasswren
Carpentarian Grasswren
Short-tailed Grasswren
Thick-billed Grasswren
Western Grasswren
Eyrean Grasswren
Grey Grasswren
Pied Honeyeater
Singing Honeyeater
Grey-headed Honeyeater
Grey-fronted Honeyeater
White-eared Honeyeater
Yellow-plumed Honeyeater
White-plumed Honeyeater
White-fronted Honeyeater
Little Friarbird
Noisy Friarbird
Noisy Miner
Yellow-throated Miner
Spiny-cheeked Honeyeater
Red Wattlebird
Rufous-throated Honeyeater
Crimson Chat

Orange Chat
White-fronted Chat
Gibberbird
Black Honeyeater
Brown Honeyeater
Black-chinned Honeyeater
New Holland Honeyeater
Red-browed Pardalote
Striated Pardalote
Redthroat
Yellow-rumped Thornbill
Inland Thornbill
Southern Whiteface
Banded Whiteface
White-browed Babbler
Grey-crowned Babbler
Cinnamon Quail-thrush
Copperback Quail-thrush
Chirruping Wedgebill
Grey Butcherbird
Pied Butcherbird
Australian Magpie
Grey Currawong
White-breasted
Woodswallow
Masked Woodswallow
White-browed
Woodswallow
Black-faced Woodswallow
Little Woodswallow
Dusky Woodswallow
Ground Cuckoo-shrike
Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike
White-bellied Cuckooshrike
White-winged Triller

Gilbert's Whistler
Rufous Whistler
Grey Shrike-thrush
Crested Bellbird
Olive-backed Oriole
Willie Wagtail
Paperbark Flycatcher
Magpie-lark
Australian Raven
Little Raven
Little Crow
Apostlebird
Jacky Winter
Hooded Robin
Western Yellow Robin
Australian Bushlark
White-backed Swallow
Welcome Swallow
Fairy Martin
Tree Martin
Australian Reed-Warbler
Little Grassbird
Rufous Songlark
Brown Songlark
Spinifexbird
Common Starling
Common Blackbird
Mistletoebird
House Sparrow
Zebra Finch
Painted Finch
Double-barred Finch
Chestnut-breasted Mannikin
Pictorella Mannikin
Australasian Pipit