



FACT SHEET

THICK-BILLED GRASSWRENS

Grasswrens are cryptic birds that are occasionally seen running, hopping, or rarely flying, between bushes in parts of South Australia's rangelands. Despite declining across much of their former range, two species of Grasswrens are still found in the chenopod country of the rangelands. They are the Eastern Thick-billed Grasswren (*Amytornis modestus*) and the Gawler Ranges Thick-billed Grasswren (*Amytornis textilis myall*).

Most current bird books still refer to the two species as subspecies of the Thick-billed Grasswren *Amytornis textilis*, subspecies *myall* (Gawler Ranges subspecies) and *modestus* (eastern subspecies) but a recent study provides evidence that the two are separate species (Black 2004).



Eastern Thick-billed Grasswren perched on bluebush. Photograph by Lynn Pedler.

IDENTIFICATION

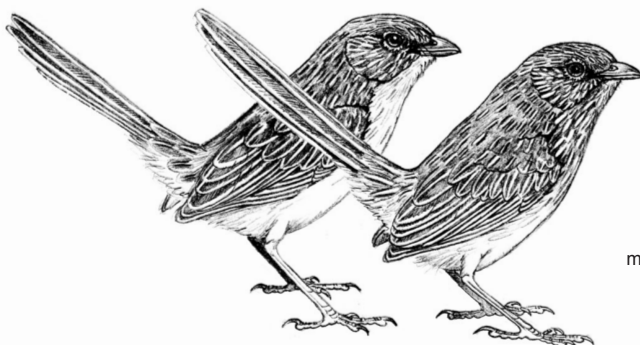
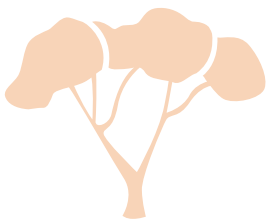
Grasswrens are shy, elusive birds that are adept at remaining undetected. Their soft, high-pitched calls are often inaudible to the untrained ear. Grasswrens will very occasionally perch on top of a bush, allowing a better view and the chance to use binoculars but they are mostly seen as they forage for seeds, berries and insects on the ground around bushes.



Gawler Ranges Thick-billed Grasswren. Photograph by Lynn Pedler.

The two Thick-billed Grasswren species are very similar in appearance, with dull greyish-brown plumage with fine, dark-edged whitish streaks and paler underparts. The Gawler Ranges Thick-billed Grasswren has darker colouring on its upper parts, throat and chest. It is more heavily streaked and has a longer, more upright tail than the Eastern Thick-billed Grasswren.

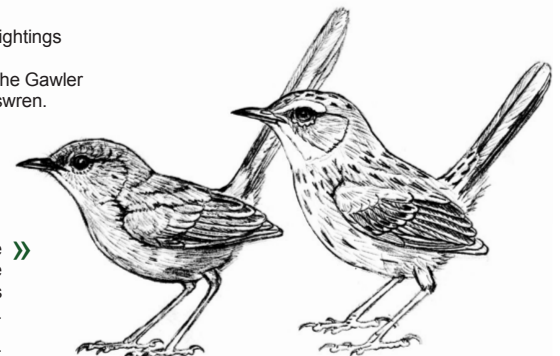
Birds that are most likely to be mistaken for Grasswrens are the Rufous Fieldwren or an "uncoloured" bird, of one of the three Fairy-wrens that occur where these two Grasswrens are found. The others include the White-winged, the Variegated and the Splendid Fairy-wrens. Fairywrens are smaller and slimmer than Grasswrens and most show at least some blue colouring in their tails. The Rufous Field-wren is only slightly smaller than a Grasswren, has a pale "eyebrow" and a pale tip to its shorter tail. It has a repetitive musical song that can be heard distinctly across the open plains and, when perched and singing, it flicks its tail back and forth, unlike Grasswrens whose tails remain steady.



« This study is focused on sightings of the Eastern Thick-billed Grasswrens (far left) and the Gawler Ranges Thick-billed Grasswren.

Birds that are most likely to be mistaken for Grasswrens include the Fairywrens and Rufous Fieldwren (far right).

Illustrations by Peter Langdon.



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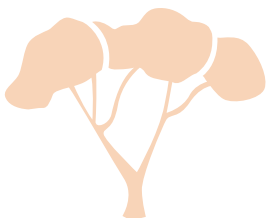


Australian Government

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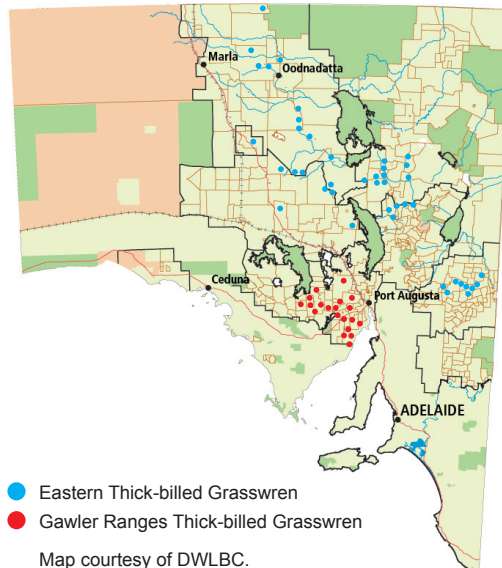
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HABITAT AND DISTRIBUTION

Grasswrens live only in the densest bushes of the chenopod shrublands, mostly in lower lying areas such as watercourses and drainage lines and in vegetation surrounding dams. The Gawler Ranges Thick-billed Grasswren is found in the Whyalla-Middleback-Gawler Ranges region. It has been most commonly observed in Blackbush, and the Australian Boxthorn. The Eastern Thick-billed Grasswren is present in the lower basins of Lakes Eyre, Torrens and Frome and appears to favour habitats dominated by Oodnadatta Saltbush.

GRASSWREN DISTRIBUTION IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA



- Eastern Thick-billed Grasswren
- Gawler Ranges Thick-billed Grasswren

Map courtesy of DWLBC.

POTENTIAL THREATS TO THICK-BILLED GRASSWRENS

Thick-billed Grasswrens have undergone dramatic decline across Australia. The Eastern Thick-billed Grasswren has totally disappeared from New South Wales and is declining in the Northern Territory (Garnett and Crowley, 2000). It is believed that this decline has been caused by a combination of predation by introduced cats and foxes, and from habitat modification caused by rabbits and stock grazing (Garnett and Crowley, 2000). However, the persistence of the two Thick-billed Grasswren species in South Australia suggests that the impacts of grazing may not have been as great here.

CURRENT RESEARCH

A project is currently under way investigating both birds, particularly their habitat needs. The project is being undertaken by three well known South Australian ornithologists with the support of landholders and the South Australian Arid Lands Natural Resources Management Board. Surveys covering the known range of the Gawler Ranges Thick-billed Grasswren were completed in 2006. Future surveys will focus on the Eastern Thick-billed Grasswren. An important part of this project is to find out if the two birds co-occur. For this reason reporting any possible sightings of either bird is important.

HOW CAN YOU HELP?

If you think you may have seen a Thick-billed Grasswren within the locations shown on the distribution map, we would like to hear from you. Please record the precise location and habitat the species was sighted in. We will follow up all possible sightings as part of this study.

To report observations or for further information about Grasswrens or this study, please contact the South Australian Arid Lands Natural Resources Management Board 8648 5977.

RESOURCES

Black, A. B. (2004). The Immarna Grasswrens of R.C.Chandler: locality, habitat, identity and taxonomic implications.
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The Action Plan for Australian Birds, 2000.
Environment Australia, Canberra.

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