
BIRD IN THE HAND

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GREY BUTCHERBIRD *Cracticus torquatus*

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Ageing

Four plumage stages can be recognized in the Grey Butcherbird: Juvenile, Adult and, between these, two immature stages. The primary problems of separation occur between Juvenile and First Immature and between Second Immature and Adult plumage. The first two give the appearance of brown and buff birds, the latter two of grey, black and white ones. Abrasion of feathers, which is commonplace in this species and often pronounced, can complicate separation of age classes; grey feathers tend to take on a brownish cast as they are abraded. The following is based in the tentative remarks by Hall (*In* Hall 1974) and confirmed by examination of specimens. It is based primarily on birds from southeastern and eastern Australia.

Age codes have not been confirmed with banded, known aged birds. The codes are based on the assumption of a short juvenile stage and a single annual moult each year.

JUVENILE (Age = J)

Bill: Dark brown. While the bird is growing, the bill may be shorter than in adults and will lack a hook until nearly full sized.

Crown: Dark brown with faint streaking caused by paler centre shafts to feathers.

Ear coverts: Dark brown with buff streaks.

Nape and sides of neck: Dark brown with buff streaks, streaks heaviest at sides of neck, merging with light buff and dark brown mottling.

Back: Dark brown with narrow buff streaks along centre shafts of feathers.

Uppertail coverts: Mottled dark brown and buff.

Underparts: Off-white, mottled with buff and dark brown.

Wing: Dark brown with buff edging to coverts and secondaries.

Tail: Dark brown with buff tips to feathers. Ends of feathers pointed.

Replacement of this plumage may begin before the bird is fully grown.

Diagnosis: Recognizable by fluffy texture of contour feathers, particularly of underparts, and often by shorter bill if bird has not reached adult size.

FIRST IMMATURE (Age = 1 to 2 years)

This plumage is acquired by a complete post-juvenile body moult; rectrices, remiges and most wing coverts are retained until the subsequent moult.

Bill: Two tone, black outer half, light brown basal half.

Crown: Dark olive-brown with narrow buff streaking.

Ear coverts: Dark brown with buff streaks.

Nape and sides of neck: Dark brown with buff streaks. Streaks heaviest at sides of neck, merging with light buff and dark brown mottling.

Back: Olive-brown, centre of feathers darker. Back overall lighter than crown, but not sharply contrasting.

Uppertail coverts: Buff, often with darker mottling.

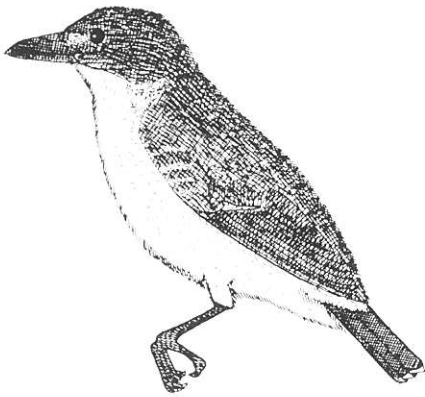
Underparts: Light buff-olive with regular light grey mottling giving barred appearance, reduced with wear.

Wing: Dark brown with buff edging to coverts and secondaries. With wear, edging becomes off-white or is worn off.

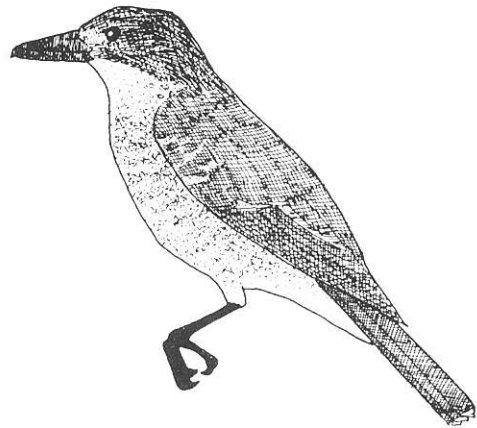
Tail: dark brown with buff tips to feathers. With wear, tips become off-white or are worn off. Tips of feathers pointed until worn off.

During moult, acquisition of Second Immature plumage is obvious from contrast between worn brown tail feathers and new black feathers with white tips, and between new and old wing feathers. Emerging black feathers in crown and grey feathers on the back are also noticeable.

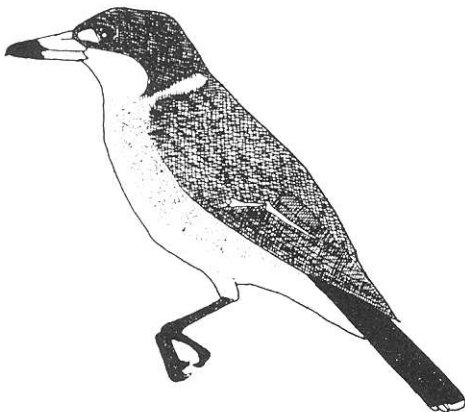
Diagnosis: Separated from juvenile by texture of plumage, greater amount of mottling on underparts and reduction or absence of pale streaking on back. Plumage is often very worn.



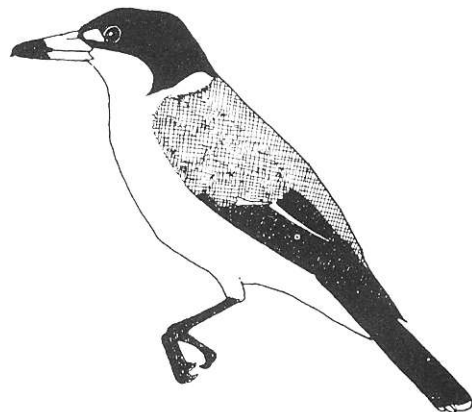
JUVENILE



FIRST IMMATURE



SECOND IMMATURE



ADULT

SECOND IMMATURE (Age = 2 to 3 years)

This plumage is acquired by a complete moult (body, wings, tail) from the First Immature.

Bill: Two tone, black outer half, light brown basal half.

Crown: Dark sooty-grey

Ear coverts: Dark sooty-grey with some white streaking.

Nape and sides of neck: No streaking on nape. Sides of neck mottled black and white. A noticeable but not pronounced separation between crown and back.

Back: Dark olive-grey, centres of feathers darker.

Uppertail coverts: White, occasionally with grey edging to some feathers.

Underparts: Dirty white with greyish mottling and faint barring on breast.

Wing: Dark grey-brown with white edging to coverts and secondaries.

Tail: Black, with white tips to feathers.

Wear to back, wings and tail changes colour from grey to brown and care must be taken not to confuse this plumage with the more obvious brown of the First Immature. Females may breed while in this plumage.

Diagnosis: Separated from First Immature by absence of streaking on nape, white uppertail coverts, white mottling on side of neck, greyer upperparts and darker wings, and tail with tips and edging white.

ADULT (Age = 3+ years)

This plumage is acquired by a complete moult from the Second Immature.

Bill: Two tone, black outer half, light grey basal half.

Crown: Black

Ear coverts: Black

Nape and sides of neck: Nape black. Sides of neck white. Pronounced break between black crown and grey back.

Back: Grey with narrow black centre shafts to feathers.

Uppertail coverts: White

Underparts: White, sometimes with faint grey barring/mottling at sides of upper breast which may disappear with wear.

Wing: Grey-brown with white edging to coverts and secondaries.

Tail: Black with white tips.

Wear to grey upperparts may impart a brownish tinge like that of Second Immature but abrasion of feathers should be apparent. Wings and tail become browner with wear.

Diagnosis: Separated from Second Immature by absence of streaking on ear coverts, colours of and contrast between nape and back, absence of mottling on side of neck and pale base to bill. Wings and tail apparently not separable from those of Second Immature and all birds in this plumage should be scored as 3+ years.

The adult plumage of Tasmanian birds is duskier than those of mainland populations and exhibits less sharply defined differences from the Second Immature.

Northern Australian birds are paler grey on the back, whiter on the underparts and have black, not dark grey-brown wings. The plumage sequence appears to be the same.

Measurements of adult birds suggests that males may average larger than females but the degree of overlap is too high to allow separation on these characters. Hall (1974) thought that females were duller than males until they obtain the adult plumage after which they are indistinguishable.

REFERENCES

- Hall, B. P. (1974). Cracticidae *In* Results of the Harold Hall Australian Expeditions 1962-70. Ed. by Hall, B. Brit. Mus. (nat. Hist.), London.