

Threatened species of the Northern Territory

Horsfield's bushlark (Tiwi)

Mirafra javanica melvillensis

Conservation status

Australia: Vulnerable

Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999

Northern Territory: Vulnerable

Territory Parks and Wildlife Conservation Act 1976

Description

The Horsfield's Bushlark is a small stocky lark with a short robust bill and a rounded head. The top of the head and neck are blackish streaked with buff or rufous, and there is a conspicuous pale-buff eyebrow. The upperparts are mottled brownish-grey with rufous edging to the feathers. The underparts are pale cream-rufous with strong dark streaking on the breast. The legs are short. Birds can raise a short crest, but this is not usually visible. Unlike the Australian Pipit *Anthus australis* and songlarks, Horsfield's Bushlark has a diagnostic rufous panel in the wing and a noticeably short tail.

Distribution

Horsfield's Bushlarks are distributed in South East Asia and Australasia. In Australia, the species is widespread, occurring in all mainland Australian states and territories. Most records in the Northern Territory (NT) come from the savanna belt, including the Victoria River District and the Barkly Region, but there are also records from the Darwin-Daly Region, Arnhem Land, Alice Springs Region and the eastern Simpson Desert.

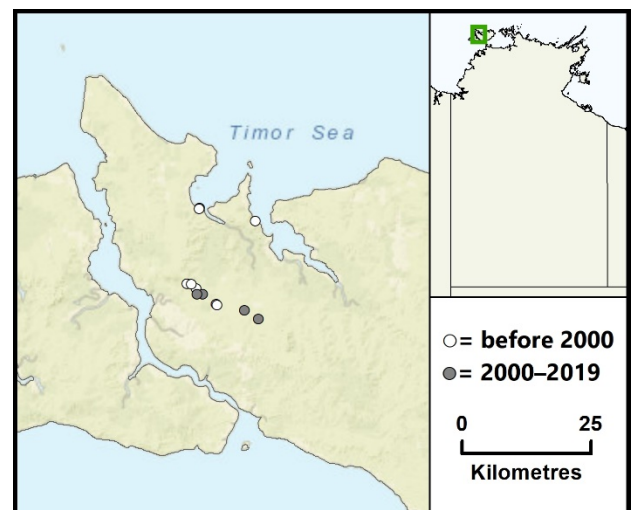


Credit: M. Gardner

Caption: The bird pictured belongs to one of the mainland NT subspecies

Nine subspecies of Horsfield's Bushlark are recognised in Australia, four of which occur in the NT: *Mirafra javanica soderbergi* in the Top End; *M. j. halli* in the east; *M. j. forresti* in the west; and *M. j. melvillensis* on the Tiwi Islands, where it has been recorded only on Melville Island.

NT conservation reserves where reported: None.



Caption: Known localities of Horsfield's Bushlark (Tiwi) in the NT (nrmmaps.nt.gov.au)

Ecology and life-history

Horsfield's Bushlarks generally occur in grasslands, particularly perennial tussock grasslands with rank cover. They tend to be less numerous as tree-cover increases. Horsfield's Bushlark (Tiwi) is largely confined to treeless plains scattered within the tropical forest and woodland matrix that dominates Melville Island. These treeless plains consist of open shrublands dominated by *Acacia* spp. with an understorey dominated by *Sorghum* spp.

Horsfield's Bushlarks forage entirely on the ground, feeding on seeds and invertebrates. They also construct a nest on the ground, under cover, and lay three to four eggs per clutch. In the NT, most breeding occurs from November to early April. Generation length is estimated to be 3.8 years¹.

Threatening processes

The extent of treeless plains preferred by Horsfield's Bushlark (Tiwi) was reduced last century by ~10% through replacement with exotic pine plantations. Further clearing for pine plantations is unlikely to occur. More recent commercial plantations on Melville Island with non-native *Acacia mangium* have replaced eucalypt forests and woodlands, and so it is unlikely to negatively impact the subspecies.

Additional threats to Horsfield's Bushlark (Tiwi) are not clearly understood, and the subspecies may have always occurred at low densities. Fire regimes on the Tiwi Islands have changed significantly over time and are likely to alter the vegetation structure and composition of treeless plains. The fire regime is now characterised by an increased frequency of intense and widespread fires in accessible areas and a low frequency in more remote areas². The spread of weeds, both grassy weeds and feral plantation species, into treeless plains is also likely to alter vegetation characteristics, including fuel loads. Grazing and disturbance by Water Buffalo *Bubalus bubalis*, feral Pigs *Sus scrofa* and feral Horses *Equus caballus* may also degrade treeless plains, though they may also reduce grass density which may be beneficial to the subspecies.

Conservation objectives and management

The primary conservation objectives for the Horsfield's Bushlark (Tiwi) are to: maintain and enhance the condition of treeless plains on the Tiwi Islands; and retain a stable population of the subspecies. Management objectives include developing and implementing a monitoring program for the subspecies.

References

- ¹ Garnett, S.T., Szabo, J.K., Dutson, G., 2011. The action plan for Australian Birds 2010. CSIRO Publishing/Birds Australia, Melbourne.
- ² Woinarski, J., Brennan, K., Firth, R., Watt, F., 2000. Biodiversity conservation on the Tiwi islands: plants, vegetation types and terrestrial vertebrates on Melville Island. Report to Tiwi Land Council, Darwin.
- ³ Woinarski, J., Brennan, K., Hempel, C., Armstrong, M., Milne, D., Chatto, R., 2003. Biodiversity conservation on the Tiwi islands, Northern Territory. Part 2. Fauna. 127 pp. Department of Infrastructure Planning and Environment: Darwin.