

Halls Babbler near Opalton, Queensland

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Early in June 1972 with Mrs H. B. Gill and Mr B. Brokenbrow of Innisfail, I visited Opalton, 137 km south of Winton, central west Queensland, in search of Chestnut-crowned Emu Wrens *Stipiturus ruficeps*, Striated Grass-Wrens *Amytornis striatus* and Halls Babblers *Pomatostomus halli*.

Opalton was a township of 500 to 600 people in the 1890's but now it consists of only a few tents and caravans of the gouger, the rockhound or the more fleeting tourist. It is an area of opal deposit occurring in low ranges up to 60 m high which are the remnants of a formerly extensive series of shales and sandstones overlying the cretaceous rocks of the Great Artesian Basin.

The area has a semi-arid vegetation with *Acacia* spp. (Mulga, Lancewood, Gidgee etc.) in the stony gullies leading from the low hills and a thickening of *Spinifex Triodia* sp. in the more open valleys where the Normanton Box *Eucalyptus normantonensis* predominates. The creek beds are lined with eucalyptus and acacias, and the main watercourse and waterhole mostly with River Red Gum *E. camaldulensis*.

Recently at Mount Isa I had been successful in enticing Grey-crowned Babblers *P. temporalis* into nets by playing back a tape recording of their alarm call which is loud, strident and repetitive. Brief observation of the Halls Babblers, revealed that it was much smaller and quieter than its Grey-crowned relative and its feeding call was more subdued.

One flock had been located in a stony gully well covered with Mulga, Gidgee and other acacias. A net was erected in a thick patch of trees and the alarm call of the Grey-crowned Babbler was played at full volume. The Halls Babblers responded immediately and the flock

of about 15 birds came to investigate and, in a few moments, several were caught in the net. As with the Grey-crowned, once a few were caught the remainder became wary, and despite the distress calls of those caught, carefully avoided the net while investigating the situation. Seven birds were caught, measured, banded and released.

We left Opalton the same day and camped for the night 105 km from Winton on the Winton-Boulia road, in a range of low hills thinly covered with acacia scrub much of which was dead. The next morning a flock of Halls Babblers was sighted, perched quietly in a large dead tree near the camp. The same netting procedure was repeated and five birds out of a flock of about 12 were caught.

Identification

The description was checked on the spot with that given by Cowles (1964) for the type specimen found near Charleville, Queensland. No differences were noted except that several birds had white flecks at the bottom of the eye ring and a touch of white on the tips of the under tail coverts. All birds were in good plumage and no wing or tail moult was noted. There was no evidence of wear on the tips of the tail feathers as is usual with the Grey-crowned Babbler due to its ground-feeding habit. From limited observations of the Halls Babblers' feeding habits and the bill wear evident in the captured birds,

TABLE 1

Measurements in millimetres and weights in grams of Halls Babblers

Details	Status	Wing	Tail	Bill	Tarsus	Length	Wingspan	Weight
12 banded birds (range)		76-83	83-94	21-25*		26-28.5		
Qld. Museum specimen	adult male	81	80	26		26		
British Museum specimen		79	78	22.5		26		
Aust. Museum specimen	young female	76	82	23.4*	(26.2)	27.5	196	235
Aust. Museum specimen	young female	79	82	22*	(25)	26.5	195	233
Aust. Museum specimen	adult male	85	84	23.4*	(27.1)	27.7	201	270
Aust. Museum specimen	adult female	82	83	21.4*	(25.2)	27.1	190	265

Note: The bill measurements indicated by the asterisks were measured from the feather line; those in brackets were measured from the skull.



● Halls Babbler (hand held)—caught for banding.

this species apparently is a ground feeder too. However, while entangled in the net and while being handled, they carried their tails erect in a wren-like position and limited observations indicate that the tail is kept up when feeding.

Measurements

The range of measurements for the 12 birds netted is listed in Table 1 with the measurements of those given by Cowles (1964) for the specimens collected by the Hall Expedition, one in the Brisbane Museum and the other in the British Museum of Natural History. Measurements and weights of four others in the Australian Museum are also included.

General Comments

As we had sighted the Halls Babbler on the Winton-Boulia road west of the Diamantina River, I thought that it may be distributed on the Diamantina watershed which rises in the Selwyn Ranges. One weekend was spent traversing part of this area from McKinley through the range via Tooleybuc, Middleton and Selwyn without sighting the species. Much of this country is relatively flat grassland with small isolated patches of what appears to be suitable habitat of acacias including Mulga and Gidgee.

Limited searches have also been made in the ranges north and west of the area between Dajarra and Duchess, which covers the headwaters of the south-flowing Wills and Burke River systems, but again without success. Time permitting, the next search area will be closer to that of our second sighting south of Kynuna.

Acknowledgement

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Reference

Cowles, G. S., (1964), 'A New Australian Babbler', *Emu* 64:1-5.

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