

CHESTNUT-QUILLED ROCK PIGEON

Petrophassa rufipennis Collett*Petrophassa rufipennis* Collett, *Proc. Zool. Soc. London*, 1898, p. 354, pl. 28. (South Alligator River, Northern Territory.)

OTHER NAME

Rufous-winged Rock Pigeon.

DESCRIPTION

Length 31 cm.

ADULTS

Head and neck dark brown, each feather centrally pale grey giving a broadly streaked appearance; mantle, lesser wing-coverts and breast dark brown, feathers dull grey towards base giving a scalloped appearance; scapulars, tertials and back to upper tail-coverts dark brown, feathers with narrow paler brown margins giving a scalloped appearance; outermost primary dark brown, with rufous towards base of inner web; remaining primaries dark brown with rufous towards base of both webs, increasing in extent towards inner primaries, which are predominantly rufous with dark brown only at base and tip; secondary-coverts dark brown with very fine paler brown margins and sometimes with faint iridescent green-purple gloss; lores black; fine cream-white feathered lines above and below bare eyering; chin and throat buff-white; underwing-coverts, flanks and abdomen to under tail-coverts blackish-brown, some feathers with faint paler brown margins; tail above dark brown, below blackish-brown; bill black; iris dark brown; eyering black-brown; legs and feet greyish-black; weight males 139–186 g, females 118–194 g. 31 males: wing 143–154 (147.9) mm, tail 118–143 (128.3) mm, bill 18–22 (19.0) mm, tarsus 20–26 (23.9) mm. 23 females: wing 140–154 (145.9) mm, tail 114–133 (124.0) mm, bill 17–20 (18.4) mm, tarsus 23–27 (23.9) mm.

JUVENILES

Like adults, but with more prominent rufous margins to scapulars, tertials and upper wing-coverts.

DISTRIBUTION

Confined to the western Arnhem Land Escarpment, Northern Territory, where patchily dispersed in suitable habitat from headwaters of the Goomadeer River, Nabarlek, Oenpelli and the East Alligator River south-west to Nitmiluk (Katherine Gorge) National Park, rarely ranging farther east to Maningrida, and there are unconfirmed extralimital records from Melville Bay and near the Glyde River in the east, and at the Wellington Range in the north (in Higgins and Davies 1996; Goodfellow 2005). Records from Melville Bay, made between July 1944 and October 1945, were almost certainly of misidentified Partridge Pigeons (see Humphries 1947).

GENERAL NOTES

John Gilbert was a member of Ludwig Leichhardt's First Expedition of Exploration from the Darling Downs in Queensland to Port Essington in the Northern Territory, and his death, when speared by Aborigines near the Gulf of Carpentaria on 28 June 1845, almost certainly deprived John Gould of the opportunity to describe and name the second *Petrophassa* species. In his account of the expedition, published in 1847, Leichhardt records an encounter with Chestnut-quilled Rock Pigeons on 11 November 1845:

A new species of Rock-Pigeon (Petrophassa Gould) with a dark brown body, primaries light brown without any white, and with the tail-feathers rather worn, lived in pairs and small flocks like Geophaps, and flew out of the shade of overhanging rocks, or from moist wells around which they clustered like flies around a drop of syrup.

Frith (1982) suggests that this encounter probably occurred a few kilometres from the edge of the escarpment at the headwaters of the South Alligator River. Gilbert undoubtedly would have collected specimens and sent them to Gould. It was not until 1898 that the new species was described and named by Robert Collett from specimens collected by the Norwegian naturalist Knut Dahl, who also collected for Collett specimens of another two new birds in the region – the Banded Fruit-Dove *Ptilinopus cinctus alligator* and the Hooded Parrot *Psephotus dissimilis*. In his account of collecting expeditions in Arnhem Land, published in 1926, Dahl recalls his encounter with the rock pigeons, which again occurred around the headwaters of the South Alligator River:

I also wanted to secure specimens of the peculiar rock pigeon, which seemed different from almost all pigeons previously found by me. In the tablelands of the Victoria River I had shot a species which in shape and habits of life was similar, and which I subsequently ascertained to be the rare Petrophassa albipennis. It is dark with a large white spot on the wings. The species seen by me on the previous day was considerably larger than this species and had rusty-red wing feathers. After a very careful search among the rocky debris I found a small flock. Their behaviour reminded me somewhat of ptarmigan, and they ran very cleverly between the stones before they rose. I got one with my first shot. It was blackish-brown and on the tail and front part of each feather had a lighter coloured spot. The outer primaries were, as I had previously seen, rusty-red. This species was most decidedly unknown, and I continued to hunt very keenly. The birds had now scattered and number two was not so easily got as the first one had been. A third



OPPOSITE:

Chestnut-quilled Rock Pigeon
Petrophassa rufipennis
Upper: ANWC B05285 adult ♀
Mount Brockman, NT,
18 June 1966
Lower: ANWC B13662 adult ♂
Nourlangie Rock, NT,
28 May 1971.