

Identifying Australia's most elusive birds

November 30 2023



A red goshawk soaring through the sky. Credit: James Watson

University of Queensland scientists have analyzed more than 3.8 million volunteer hours of birdwatching data to identify Australia's most elusive species. The research is published in the international journal [*Emu*](#).

Louis Backstrom from UQ's School of the Environment led the research

and said the Coxen's fig-parrot was the bird that was most elusive to Australian birdwatchers, based on the data found in the [eBird](#) and [Birdata](#) databases.

"Coxen's fig-parrots are small, dumpy, green parrots with very short tails, and historically they were scattered in rainforests between Bundaberg in Queensland and the Hastings River in New South Wales," Mr. Backstrom said.

"They've been sighted only once in every 81,000 citizen science bird surveys on the east coast of Australia.

"But there are so few recent sightings that this mysterious little bird could be extinct."

Senior author on the [research paper](#), Professor James Watson, said being on the 'least known' list did not automatically mean the bird was rare.

"This list of elusive birds doesn't necessarily show the species that have the lowest populations or ones which are being driven to extinction by human activities because many of our rare and [threatened species](#) are actually quite well-known," Professor Watson said.



The painted-snipe was sixth on the list. Credit: Nigel Jackett

1



Coxen's Fig Parrot

1 in 81,000 citizen science surveys

This tiny emerald-green parrot used to live in the rainforests of south-east Queensland and northern New South Wales, but has not been confidently sighted in two decades, and no live photographs of the species exist.



Letter-winged Kite

1 in 8,100 citizen science surveys

A famous "boom-and-bust" bird of arid Australia, this nocturnal bird of prey survives almost entirely on plagues of the native long-haired rat but the frequency and size of rodent irruptions has dwindled, putting the kite at risk of extinction.



2

3



Night Parrot

1 in 5,600 citizen science surveys

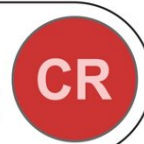
Once considered the "holy grail" of Australian ornithology, scientists are learning more about this species thanks to collaborations between university academics, Indigenous Ranger groups and non-profit conservation organisations.



Buff-breasted Buttonquail

1 in 3,300 citizen science surveys

This species may have taken the Night Parrot's title as the "holy grail" bird for Australian twitchers. Research by University of Queensland scientists has cast a new light on the buttonquail, which has not been confidently sighted in a century.



4

5



Red-chested Buttonquail

1 in 2,300 citizen science surveys

This handsome species, like its relative above, is cryptic and hard to find. Despite their extensive range across northern and eastern Australia, birders rarely see Red-chested Buttonquails, and little is known about the species' ecology.



Australian Painted-snipe

1 in 2,200 citizen science surveys

A bird of our inland wetlands, this beautiful wader went completely unrecorded by citizen scientists during 2022. New crowd-funded research is now working on uncovering the secrets of this elusive and endangered species.



6

7



Eastern Grass Owl

1 in 1,500 citizen science surveys

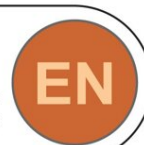
This nocturnal species has declined across much of its range. Habitat destruction via coastal development threatens Eastern Grass Owls, but birds can still be found around some cities on the east coast, including Brisbane and Newcastle.



Red Goshawk

1 in 1,400 citizen science surveys

Recent research has shown this iconic raptor has disappeared from more than a third of its range over the past half century. It survives in the savanna woodlands of northern Australia, but urgent action is required to safeguard it into the future.



8

9



Australian Masked Owl

1 in 1,400 citizen science surveys

A nocturnal denizen of forests and woodlands across much of Australia, many populations of this beautiful but cryptic owl are at risk of extinction, and little is known about the threats facing the species.



Black-backed Bittern

1 in 1,300 citizen science surveys

A secretive species, Black-backed Bitterns typically choose to remain hidden in the reedbeds but for the occasional foray into the open where they delight birdwatchers, sometimes close to Australia's major cities.



10

Australia's top 10 most elusive birds. Credit: James Watson

"Many [endangered species](#) receive research and conservation attention or are frequently seen by citizen scientists and birdwatchers.

"What this list shows is our country's most hard to find species—while some are quite rare, many simply live in remote and hard to get to places while others are secretive or nocturnal."

The researchers hope the insights can assist [conservation efforts](#).

"The work we have been doing in the Research and Recovery of Endangered Species Group at UQ has already helped conservation efforts for Australia's night parrot, red goshawk and Australian masked owl," Professor Watson said.

"This list has helped us identify those [species](#) that need more attention.

"Hopefully, we have also inspired bird lovers around the country to seek out these lesser-known, hidden gems."

The team would like to thank Rohan Clarke, Glen Ehmke, Birdlife Australia, CSIRO publishing, Mark Balman and Birdlife International for facilitating and permitting the use of the data in the analysis.

More information: Louis J. Backstrom et al, Using citizen science to identify Australia's least known birds and inform conservation action, *Emu—Austral Ornithology* (2023). [DOI](#):

[10.1080/01584197.2023.2283443](https://doi.org/10.1080/01584197.2023.2283443)

Provided by University of Queensland

Citation: Identifying Australia's most elusive birds (2023, November 30) retrieved 28 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-11-australia-elusive-birds.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.