Forde Rail Quandary

Last month I reported seeing a Lewin’s Rail in Forde. Returning after 10 days away I read that Buff- banded Rail/s had been seen at the same site. These reports left me puzzled. Was my diagnosis wrong? At first sight it would seem so. But things are not always what they seem. I am ready to concede an error, but not yet. Some of the facts need to be looked at.

**Background**. Over 4 weeks in Aug/Sept 2011 a Buff-banded Rail appeared in our former garden in Gilmore on 6 occasions . These encounters allowed the study of behaviour and plumage. I wrote a report that should be in the Dec. issue of Canberra Bird Notes. This triggered my interest in wetland birds, an area of study new to me. And a desire to find more rails. When we moved to Gungahlin in Feb. 2012, I found a wealth of wetlands in Amaroo, Forde and Bonner that were accessible and bounded by bike paths. (A COG member has described Gungahlin as “ghastly”. I have found it a place of marvels, open country with wetlands galore and more forming in new suburbs. ) In recent months I have observed birds here. Some are restless and move between ponds like Hardheads, Grey Teal, Eastern Great Egret and White Faced Herons. Others tend to stay put like Eurasian Coots, Purple Swamphens and Dusky Moorhens.

The movements of Lewin’s and B-b Rs are not well known, so it is possible that the rail that I saw, may not have been the same that others saw. It may have used the site as staging post before moving on, or the larger B-bR/s may have arrived and evicted it. Am I absolutely sure it was a Lewin’s? No. Or a BbR? No. At this stage its status should be downgraded to a ‘possible” until it is resolved. I have 4 photos which show it in the distance and enlargements may help..

**Revisiting my obs**. First sighting I rode over the footbridge and disturbed it on the path . It crossed in front of the bike and was a dark colour with no markings visible. I thought it was a Spotless Crake. Subsequent obs. were usually from a distance of 50 m. with binocs. It was out on grass or on the path. I saw the side, front ( looking at me) and back ( walking away beside the path). Having seen the B-bR at home I knew what markings to look for. When I saw it out on the lawns in the sun, the rusty marks on the head and nape stood out but the white streak above the eyes which should have been obvious, was not. When I saw the black and white banding on the belly, the white spots that should have been on the wings( that would make it a B-bR) did not stand out.. I could have had a blind spot for those two details as the bird was not there for long. On the last sighting I rode past as it was emerging from lomandra near the water’s edge. The white band above the eyes was not obvious. Again , I may have had a blind spot as it was just a glimpse. On no occasion was the stripe on the head or the white spots on the wings obvious as they should have been and for that reason I favoured it as a Lewin’s Rail.

One way that could resolve the matter is to make further obs. and see if there are differences. It may take a week before that position can be reached.

Bill Graham