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Fernbird: pp 209-212.

North Island Fernbird (Koroatito) *Megalurus punctatus vealeae* (Kemp 1912), Endemic
April 1824 Bay of Islands, Northland

Lesson discovered the Fernbird at the Bay of Islands in April 1824, but omitted to describe it (Andrews 1987). Yate later wrote about the "Utick", but describes another birds' call entirely.

"Matata - A small dusky-coloured bird, with a white and brown spotted breast; a beak like that of the canary-bird; head long, and covered with light and dark-brown spotted feathers. It has light brown feet, with four claws. The tail is composed of four long and four short feathers, similar in texture to those of the Emu and Kiwi. It lives amongst the rushes, in swamps; and has a long shrill cry, very piercing, and at times melancholy. It is remarkably tame, and seems to have no fear of man" (Yate 1835).

Gray described *Spheanoeacus fulvus* in 1862, and gave the type locality as New Zealand. It was differentiated on the basis of being much brighter, with less prominent black markings, and somewhat larger. It appears that two species were considered to be present in both islands during the 19th century.

Buller (1868, 1873, 1888) considered it only doubtfully distinct from *punctata*. Kemp (1912) thought that the type specimens came from the South Island, and so the name *fulvus* could not be applied to North Island birds. He named the North Island birds in 1912. It is unclear if North Island birds were considered to be different before this. Oliver said that *fulvus* was indeterminable. Presumably Gray's specimens are still in existence, and may possibly be assigned to one or other of these subspecies.

South Island Fernbird (Matata) *Megalurus punctatus punctatus* (Quoy & Gaimard 1830), Endemic
January 1827 Astrolabe Bay, Nelson

Quoy & Gaimard (1830), on the *Astrolabe*, discovered the South Island Fernbird at Astrolabe Bay between January 17th and 21st 1827. It frequented marshy places, where it climbed the stems of reeds and flax. Medway (2008b) recently found evidence that the Forsters discovered this fernbird at Long Island, Queen Charlotte Sound in May-June 1773. However the fernbird was not named formally, and later authorities (Gray, Hutton, Finsch) referred the description to a Pipit *Anthus* species.

The Fernbirds were placed in their own genus *Bowdleria* based on anatomical features, but DNA evidence indicates they are closely related to the Australian Little Grassbird *Megalurus gramineus*.

Stewart Island Fernbird *Megalurus punctatus stewartiana* (Oliver 1930), Endemic
1896 Stewart Island

Buller (1896) considered this form a larger race, but did not describe it. Guthrie-Smith (1914) thought that the eggs were different from those of the North Island Fernbird. Oliver described it in 1930. It has richer rufous brown upperparts and browner flanks than the South Island race.

Codfish Island Fernbird *Megalurus punctatus wilsoni* (Stead 1936), Endemic
December 1934 Codfish Island

E.F. Stead found this form in December 1934 (his paper was read in May 1935), and named it after his friend, Major R. A. Wilson. "Last Christmas I spent three weeks on Codfish Island and discovered yet a third type, so distinct as to rank as a subspecies. This I propose to call *B. p. wilsoni* in honour of Major R. A. Wilson, of Bulls, who has done so much to help me in my studies of birds. The type specimen is in my own collection. Generally speaking, the Codfish Island bird is much darker than any form hitherto described.

So far as I know this bird is confined to Codfish Island, where it is not uncommon in those portions not covered with heavy bush. In the scrub and fern along the beach as well as in the scrub on the higher portions of the island, we met them, usually getting a mere glimpse as they fluttered from one bit of cover to another. I found one nest in the top of a thick scrub-bush heavily hung with convolvulus" (Stead 1937).

Holdaway et al. (2001) thought it might deserve specific status. It is a large, dark form, more rufous than mainland forms with a stouter bill, and a thickly-spotted throat.

Snares Island Fernbird *Megalurus punctatus caudatus* (Buller 1894), Endemic
23/1/1888 The Snares

Reischek first collected it on January 23rd 1888, and recognized it as new. "It is different in its habits, plumage, and size from the uticks of the mainland (*Sphenæacus punctatus* and *S. fulvus*), which inhabit swamps and deep gullies, where they slip about through the fern or raupo like a mouse, mostly keeping on or near the ground. The utick of the Snares lives in the trees, and its movements are similar to those of the bell-bird, which on this island is darker in plumage than on the mainland" (Reischek 1888).

H. H. Travers collected some more birds six years later, which were described by Buller as a new species. Oliver said the description was published in Transactions of the New Zealand Institute in 1895, but Buller had described it in Ibis in 1894. Buller had previously referred it to Gray's *B. fulvus*, but on receiving specimens realised it was different.

"In a collection of birds made for me by Mr. H. H. Travers on the last visit of the Government steamboat "Hinemoa" to the various groups of islands adjacent to New Zealand, there are a good many specimens of the Fern-bird or Utick, obtained by him on the Snares. I have hitherto referred this island-form to Mr. G. R. Gray's *S. fulvus*. But the opportunity of examining so good a series (both male and female) has led me to investigate the subject further, and I am now satisfied that the species is distinct.

S. fulvus, although of a "rather larger size" than *S. punctatus*, has a smaller bill and shorter tail. This is not the case with the bird from the Snares, which is altogether appreciably larger, the bill being more robust, and the tail so conspicuously different that I have named the species from that feature: that is to say, instead of its being composed of Emu-like feathers with disunited barbs, the webs are closely set and compact, not differing in any way from the typical tail-feathers of the extensive family to which this genus belongs.

The form which I am now distinguishing appears to be intermediate between *S. punctatus* of New Zealand and *S. rufescens*, mihi, of the Chatham Islands; and its occurrence on the Snares the more interesting as another inhabitant of these islets is the Chatham Island Robin (*Miro traversi*, mihi), which has never yet been found in New Zealand.

This is the *S. fulvus* of my "Birds of New Zealand". The specimens therein referred to as having come from the South, without any locality being assigned, must, I now feel assured, have come from the Snares. They reached me through dealers, and it is almost impossible in such cases to get reliable particulars of the kind" (Buller 1894b).

Holdaway et al. (2001) recently resurrected its specific status, based on its larger size and more uniform brown colouration.