

Dusky Woodswallow

Artamus cyanopterus

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Hunter Bird
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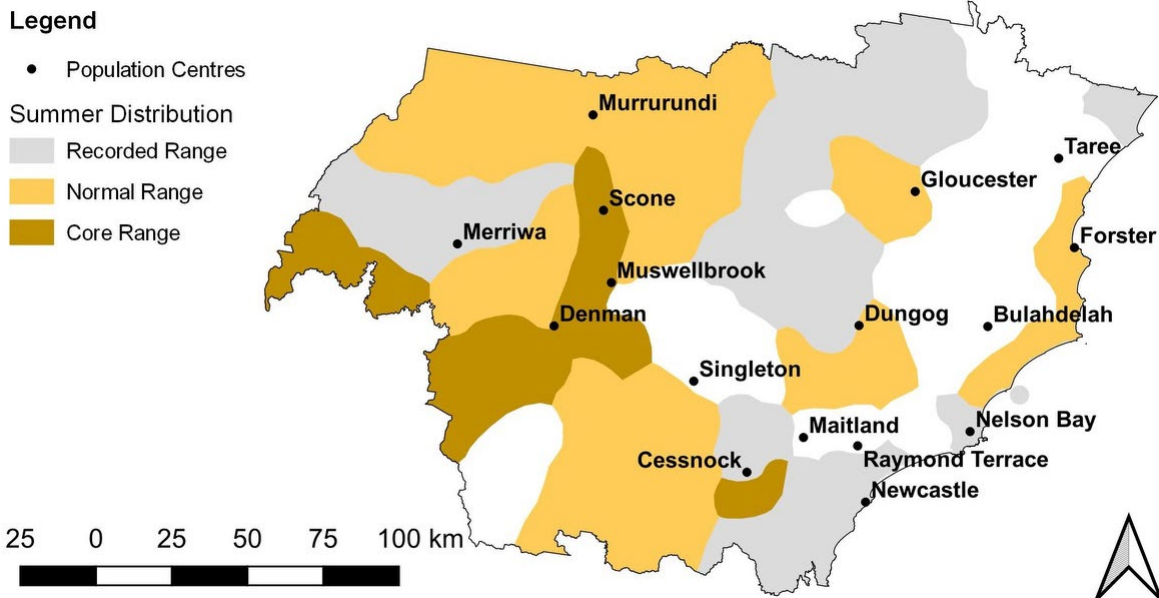
Dusky Woodswallow – note the steel blue wings, black-tipped blue bill and white leading edge (photo: Ann Lindsey)

This is a mid-sized mostly dark brown bird with the characteristic black-tipped blue bill of all the woodswallows. The wings are steel blue. It is the only woodswallow in Australia to have white outer primaries (usually referred to as a “white leading edge”). That feature also appears in the juveniles. Like all the Australian woodswallows, the underwings are white, and like several of them the bird’s undertail has large white corners. The two sexes appear identical.

Juveniles are heavily white-streaked and their bills are pinkish-brown with a dark tip. Immature birds mostly look like adults except they retain some juvenile plumage on the wings and elsewhere – the differences are subtle. They commence moult to adult plumage when approximately six months old.

Regional Status

The Dusky Woodswallow is classified as a summer migrant in the Hunter Region. There are regular breeding records. The extent to which it is a migrant is debatable; there are fewer records in June and July but there usually are no clear departure and arrival dates (see also the section below about Migration).



Distribution of the Dusky Woodswallow in the Hunter Region (map by Dan Williams).

Sub-species

Two sub-species occur: *perthi* (South-western Dusky Woodswallow) which has a narrower white wing stripe and is found in south-western Western Australia extending to the near-coastal parts of western South Australia, and the nominate sub-species *cyanopterus* (Eastern Dusky Woodswallow) which has a breeding range extending from about Adelaide to just north of Brisbane (and including much of NSW).

Migration

Most Dusky Woodswallows in southern Australia depart in autumn and return in spring. Griffieon and Clarke (*The Emu*, 2002) described it as a “South Y movement” – with some birds heading up the east coast and some going north-westwards, towards and into South Australia. In the Hunter Region, there is not a complete exodus but by May each year the numbers in our region have dropped substantially. However, it is not unusual to have records of “overwintering” birds. What is unclear is whether the birds that are present here in summer migrate and become replaced by some southern birds.



A juvenile Dusky Woodswallow, heavily white-streaked and pinkish-brown bill with dark tip (photo: Mick Roderick)

Fun facts

Dusky Woodswallows typically are seen in small flocks, of up to about 20-25 birds sometimes. Larger flocks sometimes form towards the start of the migration period. However, their flocks are nowhere nearly as large as those formed by some other woodswallows, in particular White-browed and Masked Woodswallows, where sometimes thousands of birds are assembled.

They usually nest in simple pairs but sometimes cooperatively, with helpers assisting with the incubation and later, the feeding of nestlings and fledgelings. At night, particularly outside of the breeding season, they roost in clusters, which can be of 100 or more birds (comprising adults and immatures) packed closely together. This is thought to be a response to cold overnight conditions. At night as they prepare to roost, a single bird takes up sentry duty for a few minutes, before joining the cluster just before dark.

They also roost communally during adverse conditions in the daytime (cold, windy or wet), sometimes shifting the roost spot in response to changing weather conditions.



A group of Dusky Woodswallows preparing to roost in a hollow (photo: Dan Herbert)

About the name

Dusky Woodswallow

Early settlers in NSW began calling this bird the Wood Swallow so as to differentiate it from the other swallow that they saw regularly (i.e. the Welcome Swallow). Eventually that name became a single word. After additional members of the genus were discovered, our bird became known by many as the Sordid Woodswallow *Artamus sordidus*. The compilers of the 1926 Australian revised checklist perhaps thought that descriptive name was demeaning, and they changed it to Dusky.

Artamus cyanopterus

In the 18th and early 19th centuries, birds of this genus were considered to be a type of shrike. Thus Vieillot in 1816 named the genus *Artamus* based upon the Greek word *artamos*, meaning butcher or murderer. The species name derives from the Greek words *kuanos*, dark blue, and *pteron*, wing.



Dusky Woodswallow (photo: Mick Roderick)



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