

Both a black and a rufous-brown plumage morph nestling in a Black Butcherbird brood

Clifford B. Frith

Malanda Qld 4885, Australia. Email: frith4885@outlook.com

Abstract

Photographs of a brood of two Black Butcherbird nestlings showing one in the black and one in the brown morph feathering provide the first documentary evidence of such plumage in nestlings and juveniles in the species.

Copyright all content: © 2025, Frith. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the *Creative Commons Attribution License*, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

Handling editor: Peter Valentine

Citation: Frith CB. 2025. Both a black and a rufous-brown plumage morph nestling in a Black Butcherbird brood. *North Queensland Naturalist* 55: 82-84.

In Australia, the Black Butcherbird *Melloria (Cracticus) quoyi* (Russell & Rowley 2023) occurs in the north-east corner of the Kimberley, Western Australia, across the north of the Northern Territory, and on Cape York Peninsula and southward along coastal-zone Queensland to just south of Mackay, with a distributional gap about the Burdekin River area (Schodde & Mason 1999; Russell & Rowley 2009). It also occurs widely in lowlands, foothills, and some higher parts of New Guinea (Pratt & Beehler 2015; Gregory 2025).

Of the four Australian Black Butcherbird subspecies it is stated that three have only black-plumaged juveniles and immatures, whereas in the subspecies *Cracticus quoyi rufescens* of northern Queensland they may be of a black or a rufous-brown morph (Schodde & Mason 1999; Menkhorst *et al.* 2017). Juveniles of the black morph are said to be unknown (Higgins *et al.* 2006). Although a photograph of mine showed a nest containing a nestling in black body feathering and another in rufous-brown plumage, the text failed to note its significance (in Russell & Rowley 2009). As the print literature lacks documented confirmation of body feather colouration in nestlings and juveniles of the subspecies *C. q. rufescens*, I present photographic evidence of nestlings in both morphs.

A pair of *C. q. rufescens* feeding two sibling nestlings that had acquired body and some crown feathering were photographed on private property adjacent to Kennedy National Park, near Cardwell, Queensland,

in November 1984. Although both adults were in typical black adult plumage, one nestling had black and the other rufous-brown feathering. That is, the nestlings were one of each of the two colour morphs, black and brown, found in only this Australian subspecies of Black Butcherbird (Fig. 1).

Although it is reported of the two morphs of *C. q. rufescens* that both may be found in one brood (Debus 1996; Strahan 1996; Russell & Rowley 2009; Menkhorst *et al.* 2017), no evidence or source is cited, even though my photograph (of the brood shown in Fig. 1) appeared six pages before the text on the species in one publication (Russell & Rowley 2009). The significance of my photograph may not have been overlooked by the authors, however, as it is common for authors not to see pictures that are to illustrate their text prior to publication of large compilation books. The nestling and juvenile black morph plumage is here photographically and textually confirmed to occur, in a single brood, in the subspecies *C. q. rufescens*.

Acknowledgements

My late friends Margaret and Arthur Thorsborne kindly permitted photography on their property, and my dear late wife Dawn W. Frith provided assistance and support. Thanks to my good friend Peter Valentine for kindly digitally scanning slides and to Stephen Debus for constructive critical input and advice.



Figure 1. Close up of a brood of two sibling Black Butcherbirds *Melloria (Cracticus) quoyi rufescens* in the nest (above) and being fed by a parent (below). Photos: CB Frith.

References

- Debus SJS. 1996. Black Butcherbird. In *Finches, Bowerbirds & Other Passerines of Australia*. ed. R Strahan. National Photographic Index of Australian Wildlife. Angus & Robertson: Sydney.
- Gregory P. 2025. *Birds of New Guinea Including Bismarck Archipelago and Bougainville*. Lynx Nature Books: Barcelona.
- Higgins PJ, Peter JM Cowling SJ. 2006. *Handbook of Australian, New Zealand & Antarctic Birds. Vol. 7 Boatbill to Starlings. Part A Broadbill to Larks*. Oxford University Press: Melbourne.
- Menkhorst P, Rogers *et al.* 2017. *The Australian Bird Guide*. CSIRO Publishing: Melbourne.
- Pratt TK, Beehler BM. 2015. *Birds of New Guinea*. Princeton University Press: Princeton.
- Russell EM, Rowley CR. 2009. Family Cracticidae (Butcherbirds). In *Handbook of the Birds of the World. Vol. 14. Bush-shrikes to Old World Sparrows*, eds J del Hoyo, A Elliott, DA Christie, pp. 308-343. Lynx Edicions: Barcelona.
- Russell E, Rowley I. 2023. Black Butcherbird (*Melloria quoyi*), version 1.1. In *Birds of the World*, eds J del Hoyo, A Elliott, J Sargatal, DA Christie, E de Juana. Cornell Lab of Ornithology: Ithaca, NY, USA. <https://doi.org/10.2173/bow.blabut1.01.1>
- Schodde R, Mason IJ. 1999. *The Directory of Australian Birds: Passerines*. CSIRO Publishing: Melbourne.
- Strahan R. 1996. *Finches, Bowerbirds & Other Passerines of Australia*. Angus & Robertson: Sydney.