

# Morphology of the Noisy Scrub-bird, *Atrichornis clamosus* (Passeriformes: Atrichornithidae): Introduction, with Remarks on Plumage and Systematic Position

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**ABSTRACT.** A brief review is given of previous morphological studies of *Atrichornis* and its relationship to other passerine families. Renewed interest in the relationships of *Menura* and *Atrichornis* in the last two or three decades led to efforts to obtain suitable specimens of both genera. The efforts to obtain the specimen of the rare *Atrichornis clamosus* used in this study are described in detail. This account highlights the long periods necessary to obtain governmental permission to study an endangered species and suggests that *bona fide* scientific enquiry can be stifled by unyielding governmental regulations designed to regulate commercial trade. The studies in this volume illustrate the wealth of scientific data that can be obtained from a single specimen in a carefully co-ordinated study.

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Within the uniquely Australian avifauna, the two species of scrub-bird (*Atrichornis*) are unquestionably among the most intriguing. Found in restricted ranges on opposite sides of the continent, scrub-birds have long been ornithological enigmas. Because they live in exceptionally dense habitat, are terrestrial and cryptically coloured, they are notoriously difficult to see — even when you know, from the loud and persistent song, that a bird is somewhere within a few metres of you. Many professional ornithologists and amateur bird-watchers alike have spent hours sitting or crouched in a spot, with a bird moving about and calling all around them, without catching even a glimpse of the small brown form. Accordingly, until intensive study was begun by the C.S.I.R.O. on the Noisy Scrub-bird in recent years, almost nothing was known of the details of distribution, ecology, behaviour, or even many of the basic facts of the life histories of these birds — and much still remains to be learned (Chisholm, 1951).

The Noisy Scrub-bird (*Atrichornis clamosus*) was first discovered by J. Gilbert in 1842, and described formally

in the scientific literature two years later by J. Gould (1844). Gould's original generic name, *Atrichia*, was later found to be preoccupied (Stejneger, 1885) and altered to the present spelling. The species occurred in south-westernmost Western Australia, and was recorded occasionally in the coastal region between Perth and Albany until late in the 19th century (localities mapped by Smith, 1977). After 1889 it was not seen (or, to be more realistic, heard) again for many decades and was presumed to be extinct. Its rediscovery by H. O. Webster in 1961 at Two Peoples Bay, some 40 km east of Albany, electrified the ornithological world (Serventy, 1966). Since that time, the Noisy Scrub-bird population has increased from 40-45 singing males (the population statistic) (Smith & Forrester, 1981) to 138 in 1983 (Smith, unpublished data). It is a species clearly still in need of continued study and help, if it is to be saved.

The Rufous Scrub-bird (*Atrichornis rufescens*) was described in 1866 by E. P. Ramsay. It was originally found in several isolated areas in south-eastern Queensland and north-eastern New South Wales.

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