

Australasia -- Campephagidae: Subsume *Edolisoma tenuirostre muellerii* with *E. t. tenuirostre*

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The Issue: AviList recognizes the subspecies *E. t. muellerii* with a geographic range as “Kofiau and Misool (Raja Ampat Islands, off western New Guinea), and D'Entrecasteaux Archipelago (off southeastern New Guinea).” We’re unaware of a published source recognizing *muellerii* with this distribution and describing the diagnostic characters of the subspecies. Furthermore, it’s difficult to picture a subspecies whose only populations are at insular locations separated by 2,400 km, with the enormous island of New Guinea in between. We recommend subsuming *muellerii* in the nominate subspecies, *E. t. tenuirostre*, following the reasoning argued by Mees (1982) and summarized below.

Background:

- (1) As late as 1982, the wintering grounds of the Sahul Cicadabirds (*Edolisoma tenuirostre*) that breed in Australia were first documented in New Guinea by Gerlof F. Mees (1982). Surprisingly, these migratory populations – subspecies *tenuirostre* and the nearly identical *melvillense* (HANZAB) – when collected in New Guinea had been classified by another name: subspecies *muellerii*. *E. t. muellerii* (now known to be the same population as subspecies *E. t. tenuirostre*) in fact had mistakenly been claimed to be resident in New Guinea. (Mees used the older name *plumbea* instead of the replacement name *muellerii*, see Beehler & Pratt 2016. He also lumped the Australian birds into a single taxon, nominate *tenuirostre* and didn’t subspecies *melvillense*.) Mees carefully demonstrated that the New Guinea subspecies *muellerii/plumbea* is in fact indistinguishable from Australian subspecies *tenuirostre* (including *melvillense*), a conclusion corroborated by the winter dates on specimen labels of the former subsp. The winter range of *E. t. tenuirostre* was then found to include essentially all the New Guinea region. With the help of Mary LeCroy at AMNH, Mees based his conclusion on a very large sample size of specimens from New Guinea and satellite islands held at Rijksmuseum van Natuurlijke Historie, Leiden and the American Museum of Natural History, New York.

Mees’s report is extracted and attached below for anyone wanting to delve into the details. At six pages plus a map, it makes heavy going at times, but not without lighter moments, for example (p. 118): “In other words, *C. t. tenuirostris* is known to vacate Australia almost entirely in winter, yet had never been recorded from outside

Australia, an absurd situation. The obvious place for it to migrate to is New Guinea and the reason why it had not been recorded from that country is now abundantly clear: as soon as migrants reached New Guinea, in the minds of systematists they changed name to *C. t. plumbea* (or *muellerii*) and were regarded as residents.”

- (2) Mees also established that the only breeding population of *E. tenuirostre* on mainland New Guinea is the subspecies *E. tenuirostre aruense*, inhabiting the southern lowlands from Mimike R in the west to Daru Island in the east and including the Aru Is. This form measures significantly smaller than ssp. *tenuirostre*, but it is similar in plumage characters.
- (3) AviList still recognizes *E. t. muellerii*, now much reduced in scope (no longer including mainland New Guinea) and reduced to four insular populations from two places. (1) The first place is certain islands off SE New Guinea, specifically Fergusson Is. and Woodlark Is., documented by specimens from long ago. There is no new information from Fergusson (Boersma et al 2025; TKP, personal observation February 2003). Cicadabirds have been observed singing on Woodlark in November 2005 (TKP, personal observation), supporting the notion of their residency on that island. The taxonomic status of these two populations (Fergusson and Woodlark) needs to be investigated and clarified. The American Museum of Natural History holds specimens of Sahul Cicadabirds from Woodlark, housed in a drawer labeled *muellerii*, which implies they match migratory *E. t. tenuirostre/melvilliense* not resident *aruense* (the nearest population of which occurs many hundreds of kilometers away); these specimens have already been examined by M. LeCroy in collaboration with Mees. (2) The second place supposedly inhabited by *muellerii* is two neighboring islands off western New Guinea – Misool and Kofiau. The Misool Is. specimens in Mees’s study were dated from winter months and thus attributed to migratory Australian migrants, ssp. *tenuirostre*. We’re not aware of any information on the Kofiau birds.

Recommendation: Subsume subspecies *E. t. muellerii* with subspecies *E. t. tenuirostre*, because the former lacks both definition in terms of diagnosable characteristics and a documented geographic range. Mees (1982) offers the most recent review of the Sahul Cicadabirds from the four remote islands designated by AviList as the range for *muellerii* (Kofiau, Misool, Fergusson, Woodlark), and he classified them as *E. t. tenuirostre*.

Four AusRAG committee members have reviewed the proposal and agree with the recommendation.

- Boersma, J., J. J. Gregg, D. Nason, E. Malesa, C. LeBreton, S. Ketaloya, B. Iova, and J. C. Mittermeier. 2025. An ornithological survey of Fergusson Island, D'Entrecasteaux Archipelago, Papua New Guinea: new island records and noteworthy natural history observations. *Bull. B.O.C.* 2025 145(1) 20 pp.
- Mees, G.F. 1982. Birds from the lowlands of southern New Guinea (Merauke and Koembe). *Zool. Verh. Leiden* 191:1–187.