

## THE UNIQUE PARDALOTES FAMILY PARDALOTIAE



STRIATED PARDALOTE  
*Pardalotus striatus ornatus*  
Photo: Fir0002  
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Pardalotes are small and brightly coloured birds that range in size from 8.5-12cm (3½ - 4¾ inches) in length. The family comprises of four species in one genus, *Pardalotus*, and several subspecies. The name derives from a Greek word meaning "spotted".

Pardalotes spend most of their time high in the outer foliage of trees, feeding on insects, spiders, and above all Lerps. Their role in controlling lerp infestations in eucalyptus forests is thought to be significant. They are usually found in pairs or small family groups, but sometimes form flocks after breeding.

In temperate areas of Australia Pardalotes are seasonal breeders but may breed year-round in warmer areas. They are monogamous breeders, and both partners share nest construction, incubation and chick rearing duties. All four species nest in horizontal tunnels drilled into banks of earth. The tunnels have an entrance about the size of a mouse-hole, and can be a metre or more in depth. Some species also use tree hollows in which to nest.

Genetic analysis has shown that they are closely related to another Australian family, the Acanthizidae, which includes Scrubwrens, Gerygones and Thornbills. The two are sometimes merged into one family, but the two groups are best kept as two separate families.

Within the family two species, the Forty-spotted Pardalote, *Pardalotus quadragintus*, and the Red-browed Pardalote, *P. rubricatus*, are fairly constant species, but the remaining two species are highly variable and are sometimes treated as more than two species. In the case of the Striated Pardalote, *P. striatus* there are six subspecies that are sometimes elevated to four full species. While the Spotted Pardalote, *P. punctatus*, has one subspecies that is sometimes treated as a full species. Within the family subspecies relationships are unclear, although it is the general opinion that the Forty-spotted Pardalote and the Spotted Pardalote are closely related.

Both the Spotted and Striated Pardalote are larger in the south than they are in the north. There is no size variation between males and females, but in some species there is plumage differentiation between the sexes. They have short, square tails and quite short rounded wings. The bill is short, deep and robust, but lacks the surrounding rictal bristles of many other insectivores.

Pardalotes are endemic to Australia, with the Forty-spotted having the most restricted distribution of the four species, being confined to Tasmania. In contrast the most widespread species is the Striated which is found throughout Australia, only being absent from the driest areas of the inland central and western deserts. The Red-browed is widespread in the north and west of Australia, and the Spotted inhabits the coastal areas of southern and eastern Australia.

Pardalotes are almost exclusively insectivorous. However, they will sometimes consume plant materials including seeds, and a Striated Pardalote has been observed beating and then eating a lizard. During the breeding season they feed either singly or in pairs, but in the winter months have been recorded joining mixed-species feeding flocks. They mainly forage on *Eucalyptus*, with other trees being used much less. Pardalotes forage by gleaning insects from the foliage, rather than catching them on the wing. Many different types of insects and Lerps (a honeydew casing exuded by insects of the family Psyllidae), are the mainstay of their diet. Lerps are also a food source of the larger Honeyeaters, which aggressively defend the resource. A study estimated that up to 5% of a Pardalote's day is spent evading Honeyeater attacks.

## THE SPOTTED PARDALOTE

*Pardalotus punctatus*



Photo: "Noodle snacks"

The Spotted Pardalote is one of the smallest of all Australian birds at 8 to 10cm (3 $\frac{1}{8}$  - 4 inches) in length, and one of the most colourful; it is sometimes known as the Diamondbird, or Diamond Dick. Although moderately common in all of the reasonably fertile east coast, the south-east, and the south-west corner of Australia, it is seldom seen up close enough to enable identification.

All Pardalotes have spots, with the Spotted Pardalote having the most conspicuous spots of all. They always nests in tunnels. Pairs make soft, whistling "wheet-wheet" calls to one another throughout the day which carry for quite a distance. This continuous calling has given rise to the name "Head-ache Bird" in some parts of their range.

One of the difficulties in locating a Pardalote is that the contact call is in fact two birds calling. The initial call is followed by an almost instant response, and thus comes from two different directions. Spotted Pardalote numbers appear to be declining but the species is not yet considered endangered.

## THE FORTY-SPOTTED PARDALOTE

*Pardalotus quadragintus*



Photo: "Nomdeploom"

The Forty-spotted Pardalote is by far the rarest of the genus, now only occurring in the south-east corner of Tasmania.

About 9 to 10cm (3½-4 inches) length, it is similar to the much more common Spotted Pardalote, *P. punctatus*, but has a dull greenish-brown back and head, compared to the more colourful plumage of the Spotted (with which it shares range) and has no brow line. The rump is olive; under-tail dull yellow; chest white, with light yellow tints. The wings are black with white tips, appearing as many (closer to 60 than 40) individual dots when the wings are folded. There is no seasonal variation in plumage; juveniles are of a slightly duller hue than adults.

They are usually found in pairs or small flocks in relatively dry Eucalypt forests with a high concentration of the Manna Gum, *Eucalyptus viminalis*, where they forage methodically and relatively slowly for small insects. They nest in tree hollows.

Now only found in a few isolated colonies in south-eastern Tasmania, most notably on Maria Island and southern Bruny Island. They are occasionally reported from the suburbs of Hobart. It is most successful on Maria Island, which is managed as a refuge, with introduced predators having been eliminated. Sedentary or locally nomadic over its restricted range, it is one of Australia's rarest birds and declining in numbers. The species is currently listed as endangered.

## THE RED-BROWED PARDALOTE

*Pardalotus rubricatus*

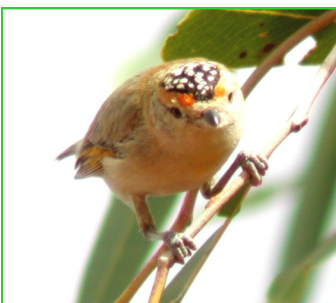


Photo: "Aviceda"

The Red-browed Pardalote occupies the northern two-thirds of Australia, is a fraction larger than the Forty-spotted Pardalote at 10–12cm (4–4¾ inches), and is the least conspicuously coloured of the Pardalotes. It combines the spotted skull-cap of the Spotted Pardalote with the striped wings of the Striated Pardalote.

It is rare in the eastern part of its range, but is common in the north-west, where it prefers dry woodlands, mulga, and trees growing along creek beds. This beautiful Pardalote builds its nest underground at the end of a tunnel. It is listed as "Least Concern".

## THE STRIATED PARDALOTE

*Pardalotus striatus*



Photo: "Aviceda"

The Striated Pardalote is the least colourful and most common of the four Pardalote species. It is a small, short-tailed bird that is more often heard than seen, as it forages noisily for lerps and other small creatures in the treetops.

This species occupies a vast range of habitat types, from tall mountain rainforest to arid scrubland, and is found in all parts of Australia with the exception some of the Western

Australian deserts.

Originally classified as four full species, which are clearly recognisable in the field. They are now just classified as well-defined subspecies. These being:

The Yellow-tipped Pardalote (race *striatus*) is, found mainly in Tasmania, but migrates across the 322km (200 miles) of Bass Strait to the mainland each winter.

The Striated Pardalote (race *substriatus*) central and western Australia.

The Eastern Striated or Red-tipped Pardalote (race *ornatus*) inhabits the sub-tropical east coast, including the Sydney region.

The two races of the Black-headed Pardalote (*melanocephalus* and *urophygialis*) respectively occur from north-eastern New South Wales to north-eastern Queensland, and across the Top End to the Kimberleys.

All forms have a black cap, which may be striated but not spotted, a white wing-stripe and a small, conspicuous, bright red wing-spot in all except *striatus*, which has a yellow spot.

R.V.C. with help from Wikipedia