
January 2010

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Bill Pranty

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Recommended Citation

Pranty, Bill (2010) "Status and Current Range of Red-whiskered Bulbuls (*Pycnonotus jocosus*) in Florida," *Florida Field Naturalist*: Vol. 38 : Iss. 4 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/ffn/vol38/iss4/2>

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STATUS AND CURRENT RANGE OF RED-WHISKERED BULBULS (*Pycnonotus jocosus*) IN FLORIDA

BILL PRANTY

8515 Village Mill Row, Bayonet Point, Florida 34667-2662

E-mail: billpranty@hotmail.com

The Red-whiskered Bulbul (*Pycnonotus jocosus*) is a small passerine native to eastern India. Imported from Calcutta, some bulbuls of the subspecies *P. j. ermeria* (Banks and Laybourn 1968) escaped while being transferred from one aviary to another at the Rare Bird Farm in Kendall, Miami-Dade County, Florida, in late July or early August 1960 (Stimson 1962, Fisk 1966, *contra* Ryan 1979). The size of the founding population was small: “a few” birds (Fisk 1966, Rand 1980), “between 5 and 10 breeding pairs” (Carleton and Owre 1975), or “five to ten” birds (Robertson and Woolfenden 1992). Carleton and Owre (1975) monitored the four known communal roosts of bulbuls during the winter of 1969-1970 to estimate the size of the total population. Maximum numbers at each roost varied from 10 to 91 individuals, and the total population was estimated as 250 bulbuls. Carleton and Owre (1975) mapped the bulbul’s primary range during 1969-1970 as encompassing 3.2 mi² (8.3 km²) with “irregular sightings” of bulbuls “up to several miles” from the core area.

Rand (1980) stated that the bulbul population had increased to 500 individuals by 1973, but provided no supporting data. Likewise, Lane (1981, 1984), Toops and Dilley (1986), and Holt (1989) claimed that the bulbul population had increased to 700 or more individuals by the early 1980s. But again, without supporting data, the accuracy of these estimates is equivocal. Robertson and Woolfenden (1992) stated without any details or explanation that bulbuls occupied “no more than 25 square miles (few recent data) in the southern suburbs of Miami.” James (1997) predicted that the bulbul population in Florida would eventually die out. To evaluate the current status and distribution of Red-whiskered Bulbuls in Florida, I sought information from local birders familiar with the species.

METHODS

I reviewed all postings to the Miami Bird Board (Tropical Audubon Society 2010) for Red-whiskered Bulbul locations since 2000, and I followed up this review with a request in May 2009 for additional information on bulbul range. All locations were placed into Google Earth and Geographic Information System (GIS) files. To determine the recent range of bulbuls, I used only the subset of locations active from January 2005 through September 2009.

RESULTS

I received bulbul locations from 14 birders and retrieved additional locations from the Miami Bird Board. These sightings added up to 25 precise locations (*i.e.*, street addresses or road intersections), one other location that could be mapped, and several vague locations that could not be mapped. Of the 26 locations that could be mapped, 20 represented recent (2005-2009) sightings, four were sightings before 2005, and two were unspecified as to year. Based on the 20 mapped locations from 2005-2009, the recently occupied range of Red-whiskered Bulbuls in Florida is approximately 41.7 km² (15.9 mi²) of urbanized land in Kendall and Pinecrest (Fig. 1). This range can be defined as a polygon bounded by SW 61st Avenue and US-1 to the north, SW 54th Court and SW 85th Street to the northeast, SW 157th Terrace and Old Cutler Road to the southeast, SW 140th Street and SW 107th Avenue to the southwest, and SW 86th Street and SW 87th Court to the northwest.

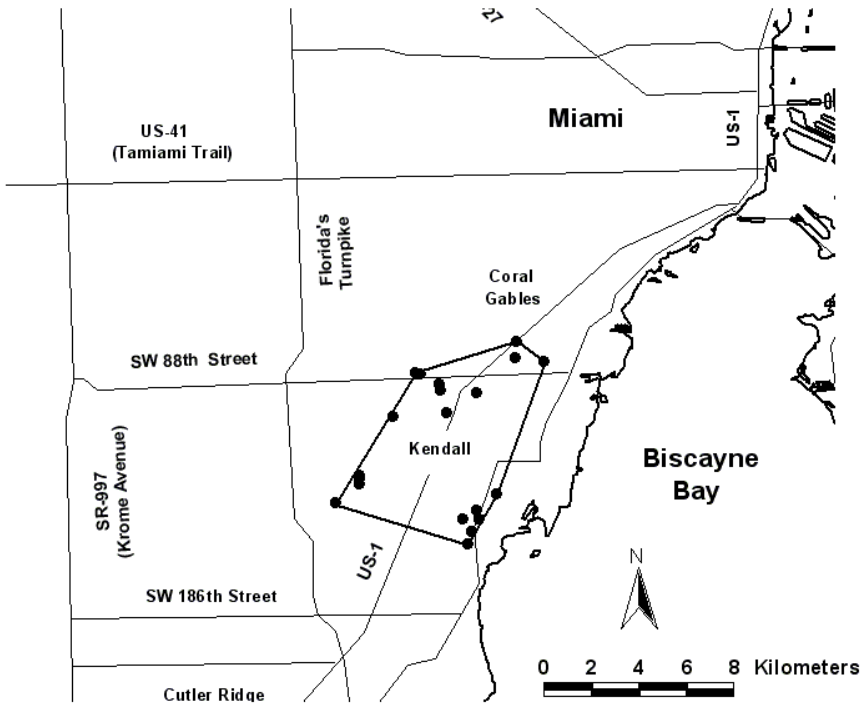


Figure 1. Range of the Red-whiskered Bulbul in Miami-Dade County, Florida, January 2005-September 2009. Each symbol within the polygon represents a specific bulbul sighting. Based on a minimum convex polygon, the currently occupied range of the Red-whiskered Bulbul is estimated as 41.7 km² (15.9 mi²).

Because bulbuls formerly were found as far south as SW 186th Street (L. Manfredi in litt.), some range contraction is evident. Destruction of vegetation by Hurricane *Andrew* in August 1992 may have been a factor in this contraction (M. Wheeler in litt., L. Manfredi in litt.). Bulbuls may be returning to this vacated area (L. Manfredi in litt.), but no recent locations were provided.

Curiously, no roost of Red-whiskered Bulbuls has been reported in Florida since the four that were monitored during 1969-1970 by Carleton and Owre (1975). A flock of 38 bulbuls at Pinecrest during fall 2008 (L. Manfredi in litt.) represented the largest single count since 1970. Because of their very limited range in Florida, Red-whiskered Bulbuls occur within only one Christmas Bird Count (CBC) circle, the Kendall Area CBC, which was established in December 2002. (Data were not submitted for the 2005 CBC, even though the CBC was conducted). Numbers of bulbuls on the first eight Kendall Area CBCs are as follows: 13 (2002), 3 (2003), 0 (2004), no count (2005), 7 (2006), 9 (2007), 4 (2008), and 9 (2009; National Audubon Society 2010). Consequently, no estimate is available for the current size of the Red-whiskered Bulbul population in Florida. However, two birders who live within the bulbul's range consider the estimate of 700 or more birds (Lane 1981, 1984; Toops and Dilley 1986; Holt 1989) to be exaggerated, perhaps greatly so (B. Boeringer in litt., R. Galvez in litt.).

Red-whiskered Bulbuls have maintained a small- to moderate-sized population in east-central Miami-Dade County for 50 years, and have shown resilience in the face of direct- or near-direct-hits by several hurricanes. However, range expansion during this time has occurred very slowly, and is estimated to currently encompass 41.7 km² (15.9 mi²). As a result, Red-whiskered Bulbuls are among the most range-restricted breeding birds in Florida, and are by far the most range-restricted exotic bird considered established in the state. Monitoring should continue to track any changes in the size, extent, and persistence of the population.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank Bill Boeringer, John Boyd, Robin Diaz, Rafael Galvez, Marc Kramer, Larry Manfredi, Don Morris, Brennan Mulrooney, Ed O'Connor, Stephen Paez, Brian Rapoza, Becky Smith, Roberto Torres, and Mary "Mickey" Wheeler for providing information on bulbul observations. Michael P. Moulton, Jon S. Greenlaw, and Gian Basili improved drafts of the manuscript.

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