



Animal Pest Alert

Red-whiskered Bulbul

NOT INDIGENOUS



PHOTO: JAY YELUNG

The Red-whiskered Bulbul (*Pycnonotus jocosus*) is not indigenous to Australia but it has established small populations here as well as in other countries. It is also commonly kept as a pet here and overseas. The bulbul poses a serious threat to Australia with significant potential to spread further in the wild as populations in Queensland and New South Wales are expanding.

It is important to immediately report any found in the wild in areas where it has not been seen before.



Eastern Whipbird

INDIGENOUS

PHOTO: ROHAN CLARKE



Red-vented Bulbul

NOT INDIGENOUS

PHOTO: KULASHEKARA C S

Red-whiskered Bulbul

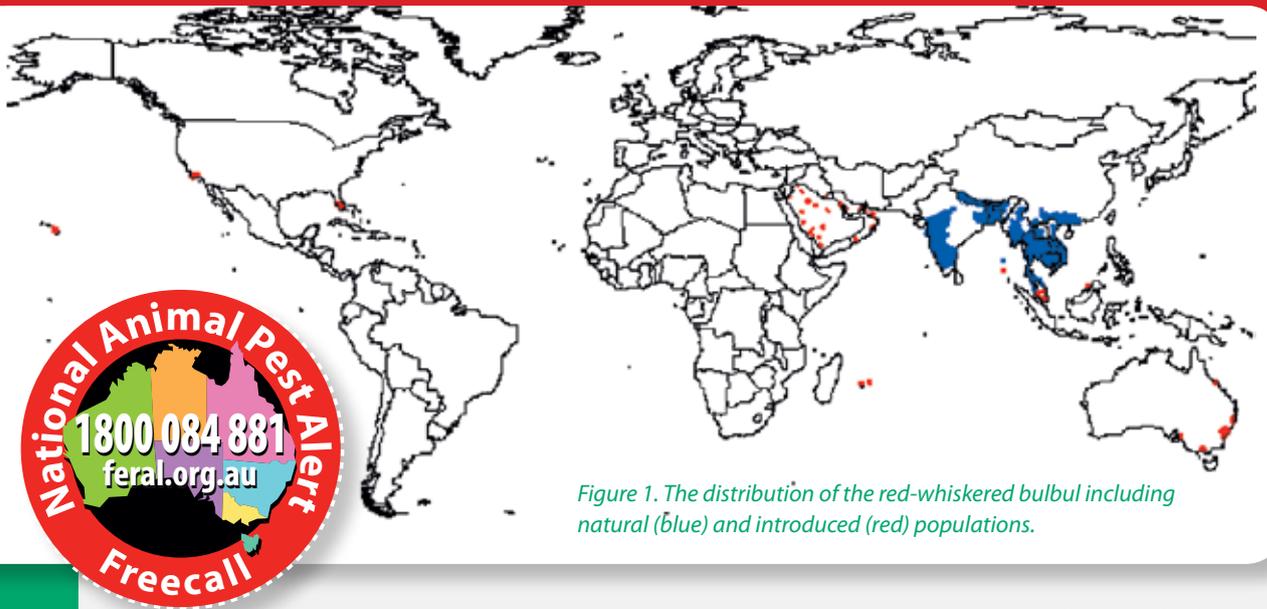


Figure 1. The distribution of the red-whiskered bulbul including natural (blue) and introduced (red) populations.

Description

The red-whiskered bulbul is a medium-sized bird 20 to 22 cm in length (body and tail). This jaunty distinctive bird has an erect black crest, prominent white cheek patches and red undertail feathers. The red whisker mark, from which it gets its name, is located below the eye. It has a white belly and breast and a dark brown to black collar extending down each shoulder. The long tail has white tips, and the bird has a pointed black beak. The long (2 cm) crest is held upright except when the bird is flying.

The immature bird is browner and the crest is shorter. It lacks the red whisker mark and its undertail feathers are pink or tinged orange but it still has the white cheek patches.



Figure 2. Bulbul singing from a high perch (photo: courtesy of MichaelDanielHo.com).

The calls of the red-whiskered bulbul include a cheerful and pleasant *queep-quillya*, as well as incessant loud chattering.

Mistaken identity

It is unlikely that the red-whiskered bulbul would be mistaken for any other birds in Australia. However, the indigenous Eastern Whipbird, which is found in coastal eastern Australia, has a dark crest and is sometimes seen in overgrown gardens hopping through the undergrowth.

The somewhat similar non-indigenous Red-vented Bulbul (*P. cafer*) was also introduced to Australia (Melbourne and Sydney) and New Zealand but none now remain in either country.

Distribution

The natural range of the red-whiskered bulbul includes Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, southern China (including Hong Kong and Naochow Island), India (including the Andaman Islands), Lao People's Democratic Republic (Laos), Myanmar, Nepal, north Peninsular Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam (Figure 1).

The escape or release of pet birds as well as ceremonial release of wild bulbuls has resulted in the establishment of introduced populations in Brunei, southern Peninsular Malaysia, the Mascarene Islands (Mauritius and Reunion, a French territory), the Nicobar Islands (India), Saudi Arabia, Seychelles (Assumption Island), Singapore, United Arab Emirates and the United States of America (California, Florida and Oahu, Hawaii).

The red-whiskered bulbul was deliberately introduced to New South Wales in 1880 when bulbuls were released in Sydney, and later at Coffs Harbour (prior to 1972). Widespread, scattered populations are established around Sydney and surrounding suburbs, and bulbuls have spread westward to areas of the Blue Mountains, north to Newcastle, and south to Wollongong. A small isolated population is centred on Coffs Harbour but the bulbul has also been recorded north in Yamba and south in Forester.

The red-whiskered bulbul was released in Melbourne, Victoria (date unknown but first documented in 1918) and since then

Please report Red-whiskered Bulbuls when

has been recorded at scattered sites around the suburbs. The bulbul was released in Mackay, Queensland in 1983, resulting in the establishment of a small breeding population. There is one record further south in Queensland at Tallebudgera Creek (1991).

The species has been occasionally reported in South Australia (from 1940s to 1993) and in the Australian Capital Territory (most recently 1999), but is not considered established in either jurisdiction. The red-whiskered bulbul has not been recorded in the Northern Territory or Tasmania.

Habitat

The red-whiskered bulbul occupies a wide range of habitats including open woodlands, scrub, forest edges and modified habitats such as parks and gardens, vegetated roadsides, orchards and farmlands. It is common in urban gardens and often lives in cities.

In Australia, it usually occurs in suburban parks and gardens, overgrown weedy areas and along the edges of urban bushland. It is sometimes seen on farmland and the margins of native forests or woodlands.

Reproduction, food and behaviour

The red-whiskered bulbul constructs a small, deep, cup-shaped nest of twigs and leaves, bound together with cobwebs and lined with dry grass and bark. The nest is usually placed in foliage, including creepers growing on veranda lattice. However, sites in thatched roofs, walls and under windows are also used. Nests are seldom positioned greater than 3 m from the ground, and sometimes less than 15 cm. Two to four eggs are laid and two to three broods can be produced each year.

The bulbul is an opportunistic feeder of fruit, berries, seeds, nectar, flower buds and invertebrates such as beetles, caterpillars, grasshoppers and spiders. Around human settlements it will also take kitchen scraps. Most foraging occurs in trees and bushes, but often also on the ground.

The bulbul is not timid around humans and it perches prominently on the tops of bushes, power lines or other high points to sing and chatter (Figure 2). It is restless and quick in its movements.

The red-whiskered bulbul usually occurs in pairs or small family groups during the breeding season. Occasionally, larger foraging groups and roosts form of 30 or more birds, with communal roosts of over 100 birds reported in Myanmar.

In the wild, the red-whiskered bulbul can live for up to 11 years and possibly longer in captivity.

Damage by the red-whiskered bulbul

The red-whiskered bulbul is listed on the Global Invasive Species Database, alongside the Canada Goose, Red Deer and Brown Tree Snake.

In its natural and introduced range the red-whiskered bulbul is considered a minor pest of agriculture. It causes damage to the buds and ripening fruit of orchard crops, including guava,

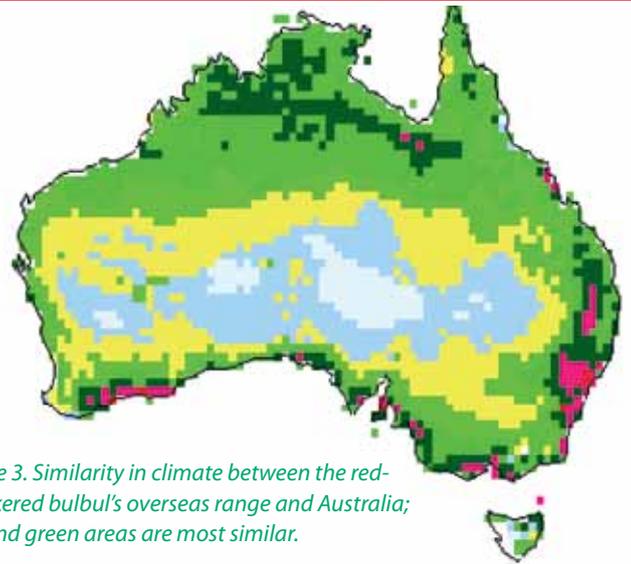


Figure 3. Similarity in climate between the red-whiskered bulbul's overseas range and Australia; red and green areas are most similar.

mango, orange, papaya, plum, raspberry and strawberry. It also causes damage to flowers including orchids, seedlings, vegetables and ripening crops including coffee and pea.

In Australia the species is reported to damage figs, pears, strawberries, orchids and other garden flowers.

In its introduced range the red-whiskered bulbul is considered an environmental pest as it competes with indigenous birds for food and nesting sites. On Mauritius, it competes with the vulnerable Black Bulbul for resources and has possibly contributed to the decline of other indigenous birds, geckos and spiders. It also assists in the spread of many invasive weeds, such as lantana, pepper tree and solanum species such as nightshades. However, its role as a seed-disperser within its natural range is considered beneficial.

The Invasive Species Specialist Group recommends that control of red-whiskered bulbuls be implemented within the first few years of introduction, to take advantage of initial slow dispersal and population growth, after which it is more rapid.



Figure 4. Bulbul feeding on bottlebrush, a favourite food of Australian honeyeaters (photo: Andrew Hardacre).

Red-whiskered Bulbul



Potential to be a pest in Australia

The red-whiskered bulbul is rated as highly likely to establish further populations in Australia and become a pest of agriculture and the environment.

A scientific risk assessment conducted by the Department of Agriculture and Food, Western Australia and endorsed by the national Vertebrate Pests Committee indicates that the red-whiskered bulbul poses a serious threat (the second highest of four categories) to Australia. Part of the assessment showed that the climates of the bulbul's overseas range and areas of Australia are very similar (Figure 3).

It is therefore important that new populations of the bulbul are located and removed so that it does not become more widespread in the wild in Australia.

The red-whiskered bulbul could displace and compete with small indigenous birds including honeyeaters (Figure 4), and assist in the spread of invasive weeds like African boxthorn, bitou bush, blackberry, boneseed, bridal creeper, lantana (Figure 5), olives, privet and exotic solanum species by feeding on the berries of these plants.

Agricultural crops that could be at risk include avocado, banana, blueberry, cherry, fig, grape, mango, pear, strawberry, stone fruit, raspberry, other soft fruits, flowers and various developing crops.

Birds in captivity and spreading in the wild

The red-whiskered bulbul is prohibited in the Northern Territory, Queensland, South Australia, Tasmania and Western Australia, but can be kept in the Australian Capital Territory, New South Wales and Victoria. Where bulbuls are permitted in captivity there are few, if any, measures in place to ensure they remain securely in their enclosures. The appearance of the red-whiskered bulbul in areas where it is not already established or where it has never been recorded, may be the result of release or escape from captivity or bulbuls moving from nearby wild flocks.

A small population of red-whiskered bulbuls was established for many years in Victoria along the Yarra River in east Melbourne, but none have been sighted there for a number of years. A small number of bulbuls were removed from the wild in South Australia in the 1980s, and later (1993) four birds were removed from the Adelaide

Important Disclaimer

The Chief Executive Officer of the Department of Agriculture and Food and the State of Western Australia accept no liability whatsoever by reason of negligence or otherwise arising from the use or release of this information or any part of it.



Figure 5. Bulbul feeding on berries from the lantana, a weed of national significance in Australia (photo: Tadeusz Stawarczyk).

suburb of Glanville. Since then there have been no further sightings.

The bulbul is not established in Western Australia but one was collected from the wild at Safety Bay in 1993, and an illegally-kept pair was surrendered to wildlife authorities in 2003.

Risk management

To help prevent the species from spreading and establishing new populations in the wild in Australia, it is essential that when kept, the red-whiskered bulbul is maintained in secure (preferably double-doored) enclosures. Unwanted birds should be surrendered to the authorities or a responsible organisation, not released into the wild.

Any bulbuls seen in new areas should be immediately reported to the nearest relevant government department or wildlife authority on Freecall 1800 084 881 so that appropriate action can be taken.

Acknowledgments

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