Grey Butcherbird - *Cracticus torquatus*

Grey Butcherbird showing the black head, mostly grey body, white throat and white partial collar (Woodburn, north-east NSW).

Grey Butcherbird showing pale grey-white underside, black tail with white tip (Woodburn, north-east NSW).

Adult Grey Butcherbirds - *Cracticus torquatus* - have a white partial collar (the white collar is visible on the front and sides but does not meet at the back). Throat is white and head black. Most races have a small white patch between eye and beak. The beak is pale in colour with black tip and tipped hook. Eye dark brown, feet grey. Tail black, outer feathers tipped white; underparts are grey-white to white.
Male and female similar but females tend to be browner in colour. Length 26 to 30 centimetres.

Immature Grey Butcherbirds have dusky brown upper parts mottled lighter; underparts are brown-white and the bill is dark grey.

Minor variations distinguish 4 or 5 subspecies all with pale to mid-grey or silvery-grey backs; underside and rump are white or pale grey. Wings upper surface is grey, black and white. Most subspecies have a white patch between eye and beak.

Birds in the Northern Territory and north-west Western Australia (the Kimberley) are silver-grey above with pure white underparts and collar and a black 'necklace' forming a partial breastband; some authorities classify this as a subspecies but subspecies status is not widely accepted. Birds in southern Western Australia also have a partial black 'necklace'.

The Grey Butcherbird is generally similar to other butcherbirds characterised by the white part-collar and white throat. Subspecies classification is not settled.

Lives alone, or in pairs, or in small family groups. Waits quietly on a vantage perch one to 10 metres up then drops to the ground to seize small prey, raids other birds nests. Often wedges larger prey into tree forks for storage and to facilitate dismembering. Main food is insects but small birds, nestlings, reptiles and mice are all taken as well as some fruit and seeds.

Habitats include open forest, woodland, mallee, muiga and acacia scrubland, suburban parks and gardens, farmland. Distributed across the southern half of Australia and into the Pilbara and much of Queensland south of Cape York. Not found in hotter deserts or Cape York Peninsula.

Inhabits similar open forest and woodlands to the Pied Butcherbird but the two species prefer different habitats with the Grey Butcherbird living in denser thickets with closer tree canopy than the Pied.

This is a common species with sedentary or locally nomadic habits. Established pairs hold permanent territories and nest in much the same site year after year. Both sexes advertise their territorial boundaries with vigorous singing from a high tree at the beginning of breeding. Each partner in the song has a recognisable part and either may begin singing. After breeding, singing is more sporadic and immatures may join in.

Breeding takes place between July and January; usually one brood per season. The nest is a cup of twigs, rootlets, grasses and soft fibre; often ginger in colour, built in the fork of a tree between 3 and 10 metres above the ground. Three to five eggs are laid; brownish-green, speckled with red to brown spots; oval, about 31 by 23 millimetres. Incubated by the female; she is fed on the nest by the male. Both parents feed the young and defend the nest. After fledging, young may stay with their parents for some time, even into the next breeding season when they may help to feed the young. Full adult plumage is not achieved in southern races until the second year.

Genus *Cracticus* is in Family Artamidae with Woodswallows, Currawongs and the Australian Magpie.

Some studies have concluded that the butcherbird version found in the Northern Territory and Kimberly should be a separate species named the Silver-backed Butcherbird - *Cracticus argenteus*. This proposal has not been accepted and, pending further studies, *C. argenteus* is retained in *C. torquatus*. 

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