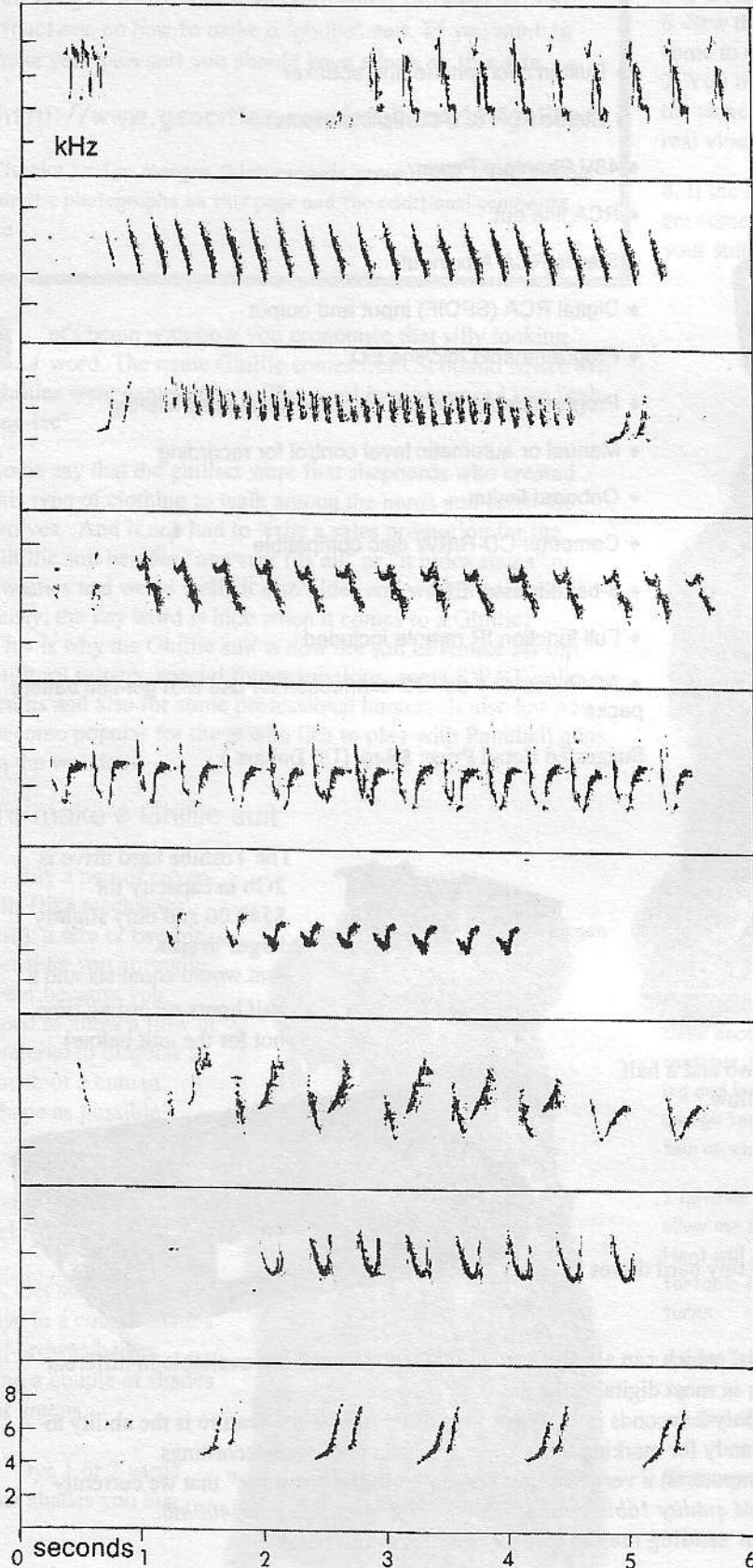


# White-Browed Scrubwren

## *Sericornis frontalis*

### The Bicycle-pump Bird



### Look and Listen

Listen to the sounds on the CD as you follow the sonograms of these 22 song variations of the White-browed Scrubwren.

The songs were recorded by Vicki Powys at Sunny Corner NSW, 17th November to 4th December 1996, 4-5 am EST, using a Sony Pro DAT with ME 67 and ME 64 microphones. A total of 140 minutes of taped song yielded 145 song phrases, which were then analyzed to define these 22 song variations. The sonograms were produced using AudioGraph software on an iMac.



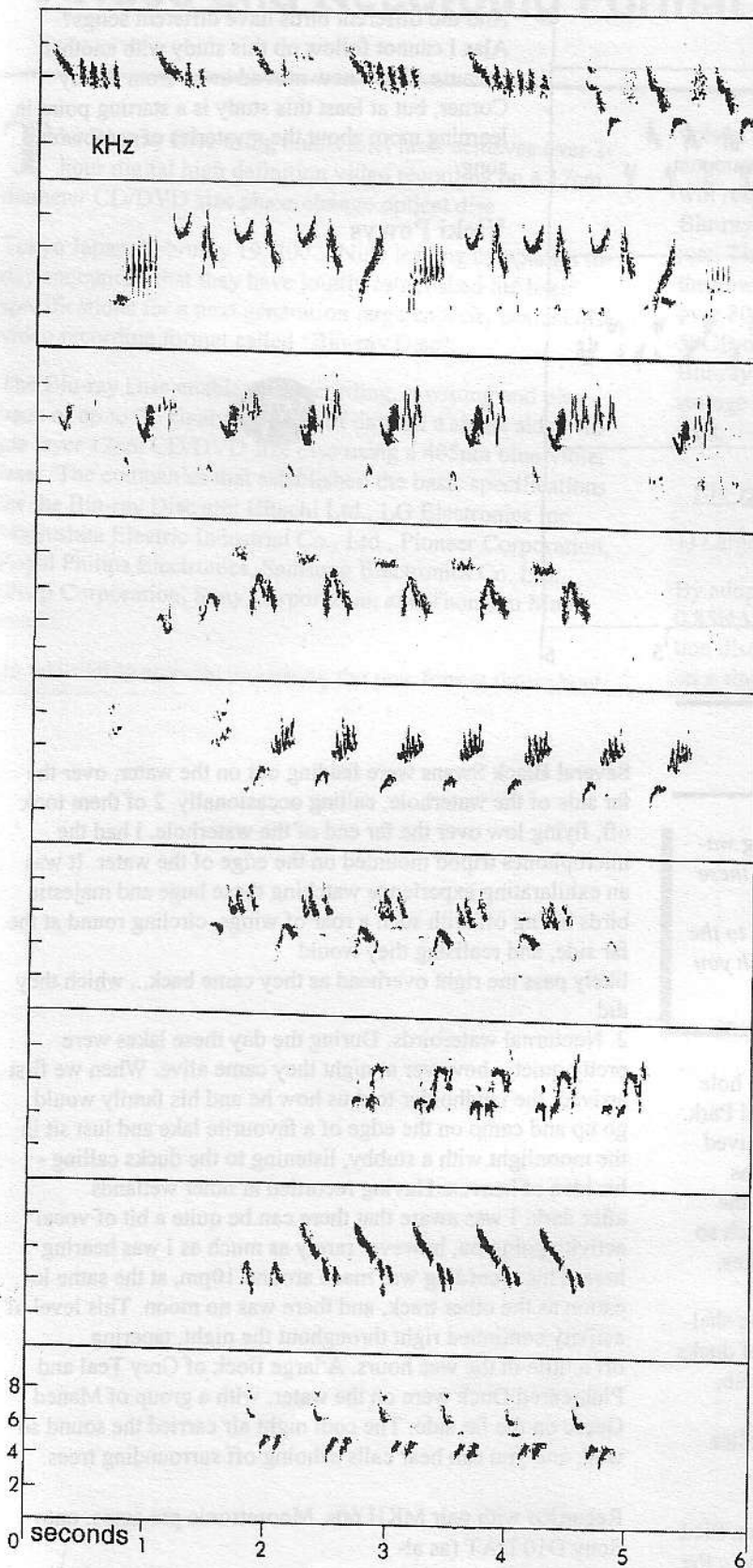
**W**hite-browed Scrubwrens often seem to get in the way when you're out in the bush recording. For example, when you're standing very quiet waiting for a lyrebird to call, the scrubwrens will hop up really close to the microphone and keep up their constant harsh scolding calls until you're forced to pack up and leave.

But when you're trying to record the scrubwrens' own seldom-heard song it's a different matter, they fly off as soon as they see you coming, and if you've planted a mic somewhere, they won't go near it.

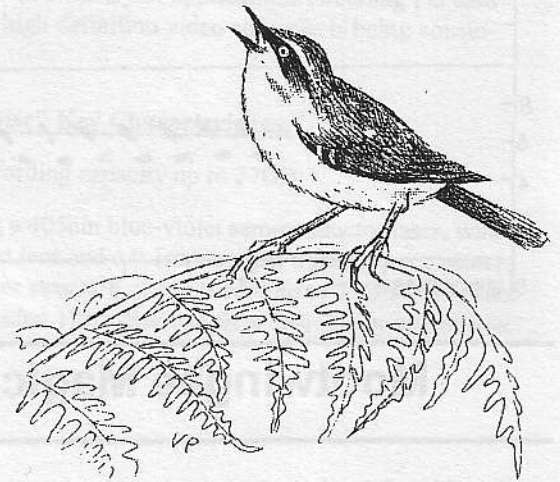
When I was living at Sunny Corner (that's in the high country of NSW) I seemed to be surrounded by scrubwrens, and so it became something of a challenge to me to try and collect as many of their song variations as I could. There were five or six scrubwren pairs living in dense bracken-fern and bushland near my house, and they all seemed to share the same repertoire. They endured the winter snows, and their spring songs didn't seem to change much from one year to the next.

When I began my recording project in the late spring of 1996, I reckoned there might be about six song variations in half a hectare. In fact I collected 22 different songs from that one small patch, over a period of several weeks.

In spring, those scrubwrens called intermit-



tently for about 20 minutes each morning, well before sunrise. In the half-light they would give a short burst of song from a low tree branch or a fence post, then dart back into the bracken ferns before emerging at a new song perch a few minutes later for another brief burst of song. Often, but not always, neighbouring birds would answer one another with the same song phrase, and some phrases seemed more popular than others. I had to get up at 4 am on those cool spring mornings, to have any chance at all of capturing their songs. I was using a gun microphone and fixed microphones, with mixed success.

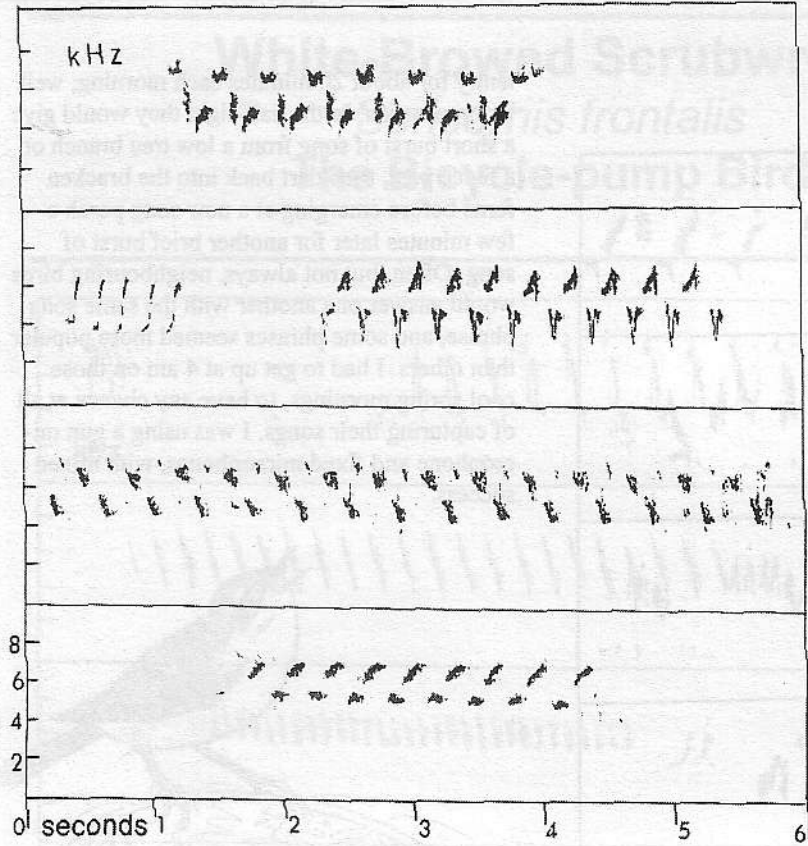


When I hear White-browed Scrubwrens in other locations they always sound a bit different to the Sunny Corner birds, so it's likely that there's a lot of regional variation happening with scrubwren song. But with such large repertoires occurring in each small area, it would be hard to demonstrate this wider regional variation. Perhaps too, where scrubwren populations are more dense, there's more competition between males and a greater number of song types may develop.

A dear old friend of mine who lived near Carcoar NSW reckoned that one of his local scrubwren songs sounded exactly like a bicycle pump in action, and he said he only ever heard that particular song variation in one area, near where he lived. He said my Sunny Corner birds never gave that particular call. But if you think about it, the repetitive nature of the scrubwren songs all have that squeaky pump action - as Pizzey describes it in his field guide - a repeated "tseer-tseer-tseer" and "seat-you-seat-you". As you can see from my study, there's a lot of variations on that theme!

In my study, I was amazed at how many song





types there actually were. So I wonder how many more variations I'd have got if I'd recorded every single morning each spring? And was there a whole new batch of songs each year? And did the birds just make up the songs as they went along? And did different birds have different songs? Alas I cannot follow up this study with another because I have now moved away from Sunny Corner, but at least this study is a starting point in learning more about the mysteries of scrubwren song.

Vicki Powys

