

THE GENUS MALURUS

7 THE VARIEGATED WREN



Male Variegated Wren

Photo: Brett Donald

The Variegated Wren, *Malurus lamberti*, lives in diverse habitats spread across most of Australia. Four subspecies are recognised. The brightly coloured breeding male exhibits a high degree of sexual dimorphism, having chestnut shoulders and a blue crown and ear coverts. Males in eclipse plumage, females and juveniles are predominantly grey-brown. However, females of the subspecies *rogersi* and *dulcis* (previously called Lavender-flanked Wrens) have mainly blueish-grey plumage.

Like the other malurid wrens, the Variegated is a cooperative breeding species, with small groups of birds maintaining and defending territories year-round. These groups usually consist of a socially monogamous pair and several “helper-birds” who assist in raising the young. The males pluck yellow petals and display them to females as part of the courtship ritual. The Variegated Wren’s diet is mainly insectivorous. They forage and live in the shelter of scrubby vegetation across 90% of continental Australia, which is a far larger range than that of any other of the *Malurus* genus.



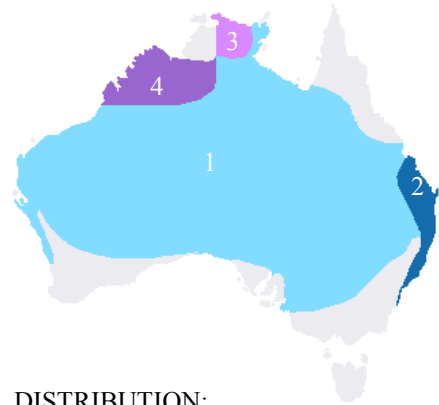
Photo: Glen Fergus

The Variegated Wren was first described by Nicholas Vigors and Thomas Horsfield in 1827, and was initially considered to be a colour variant of the Superb Wren, *M. cyaneus*. Their scientific name commemorates the British collector Aylmer Bourke Lambert. Within the genus it belongs to a group of four very similar species known collectively as Chestnut-shouldered wrens. The other three species being: the Lovely Wren, *M. amabilis*, of Cape York, the Red-winged Wren, *M. elegans*, of the southwest corner of Western Australia, and the Blue-breasted Wren, *M. pulcherrimus*, of southern Western Australia and the Eyre Peninsula.

There are four recognised subspecies; with intermediate forms at the fringes of each subspecies, contrasting with the well-defined borders between *M. lamberti* and the other chestnut-shouldered wrens. However, molecular analysis may shed more light on relationships and the current taxonomic treatment may change. The Purple-backed and Lavender-flanked Wrens were considered distinct species in the past. The subspecies

are:

- *M. l. lamberti* the nominate subspecies from coastal eastern Australia and the original form described by Vigors and Horsfield in 1827. Unlike other subspecies, the head of a male in breeding plumage is a uniform blue, the crown is azure and ear coverts are lighter. The back is blue rather than purple.
- *M. l. assimilis*, commonly known as the Purple-backed Wren, ranges across central Australia, from Queensland and western New South Wales to the coast of Western Australia. This form was initially described in 1901 by the Australian ornithologist Alfred John Northand who named it the Purple-backed Superb Warbler. Breeding males of this and the other two northern subspecies differ from *lamberti* by having a darker violet-blue crown and a purple back. However, the females are identical. There is a broad area where intermediate forms between *assimilis* and *lamberti* occur. This intermediate area is bordered by Goondiwindi, Wide Bay, Rockhampton and Emerald in southern Queensland.
- *M. l. dulcis*, is commonly known as the Lavender-flanked Wren, and is found in Arnhem Land. This subspecies was described in 1908 by the amateur ornithologist Gregory Mathews. However, this and *rogersi* were long thought to be forms of the Lovely Wren, *M. amabilis*, this idea persisted until intergrades with *assimilis* were noted over a wide area of northern Australia. Like *rogersi*, the females are predominantly blue-grey rather than grey-brown and have white lores and eye rings rather than the rufous coloration of the other subspecies.
- *M. l. rogersi* occurs in the Kimberleys and was originally named by Mathews in 1912. It was also originally known as the Lavender-flanked Wren and considered to be the same taxon. Though the males are similar to the widely occurring inland *assimilis*, the females are predominantly blue-grey rather than grey-brown. There is a broad hybrid zone, in north-eastern Western Australia and the north-western area of the Northern Territory, where females of both subspecies have been recorded.



The Variegated Wren is 14-15cm (5.5-6 inches) long and weighs 6-11g (0.21-0.38oz). Like other malurid wrens, it is notable for its marked sexual dimorphism, the males adopt a highly visible breeding plumage of brilliant

iridescent blue and chestnut, contrasted with black and grey-brown. The brightly coloured crown and ear tufts are prominently featured in courtship displays. In nuptial plumage the male has strikingly bright blue ear coverts, often with the crown slightly darker; a black throat and nape; a royal blue upper back; chestnut shoulders and a bluish-grey tail. The wings are grey-brown and the abdomen creamy white. Eclipse plumaged males, females and juveniles are mainly grey-brown. All males have a black beak and lores (*ie* the eye-ring and bare skin between eyes and bill), females have a red-brown bill and bright rufous lores. Immature males develop black beaks by six months of age, and moult into nuptial plumage the first breeding season after hatching. However, this may be an incomplete moult with some residual brownish plumage still apparent. Full nuptial plumage may take another year or two to perfect. Both sexes moult in autumn after breeding, with males assuming an eclipse non-breeding plumage. The males will then moult into nuptial plumage in the following winter or spring. The blue plumage, particularly the ear-coverts, of the breeding males is highly iridescent due to the flattened and twisted surface of the barbules. This strongly reflects ultraviolet light, and so may be even more prominent to other wrens, as their colour vision extends into this part of the spectrum.

Variegated Wren vocalisation is primarily used as both contact between birds in a social group and for advertising and defending a territory. The basic song is a high-pitched reel of a large number of short elements (10-20 per second); that lasts between 1-4 seconds. This species reel is the softest of all malurids. Their alarm call is a short, sharp “*tsit*”.

Their typical habitat is scrubland with plenty of vegetation to provide dense cover; with a preference for rocky outcrops and patches of *Acacia*, *Eremophila* or *Lignum* (*Muehlenbeckia*). They have been observed sheltering in mammal burrows to avoid extreme heat. In populated areas such as suburban Sydney, they prefer more densely covered situations than the related Superb Wren. However, a survey in 2007, in Sydney's northern suburbs, has suggested that Variegated Wrens may prefer areas of higher plant diversity rather than denser cover as such. Forestry plantations of pine (*Pinus* spp.) and eucalypts are generally unsuitable habitat as they lack undergrowth.

Like all malurid wrens, the Variegated is an active and restless feeder, particularly on open ground near shelter, but also through low foliage. They move in a series of jaunty hops and bounces, balanced by their proportionally long tail, which is usually held upright, and is rarely still. The short, rounded wings provide good initial lift and are useful for short flights, though not for extended jaunts. During spring and summer, like

other malurid wrens, male Variegateds have been observed carrying brightly coloured, predominately yellow, petals to display to females as part of their courtship ritual. These petals are displayed and presented to a female in the male's own or even another territory.

Females and males feed young equally, while "helper-birds" assist in defending the territory and feeding and rearing the young. Birds in a group roost side-by-side in dense cover and also engage in mutual preening. Occasionally larger groups of ten or more birds have been recorded, though it is unclear whether such gatherings are accidental or a defined flock.

The Variegated's diet consists of a wide range of small creatures, mostly insects, including ants, grasshoppers, bugs, flies, weevils and various larvae. Unlike the more ground-foraging Superb Wren, they usually forage deep inside shrubby vegetation, less than 2m (6.5 feet) in height.

The breeding season is from spring through to late summer. The nest is usually placed in thick vegetation less than 1m (3 feet) above the ground. It is a round or domed structure made of loosely woven grasses and spider webs, with an entrance in one side. Two or more clutches may be laid in an extended breeding season. A clutch consists of three or four matte white eggs with reddish-brown splotches and spots. The egg size is 12 x 16mm (.45 x .6 inches). Only the female incubates the eggs, which take fourteen to sixteen days to hatch. Newly hatched nestlings are fed, and their faecal sacs removed, by all group members until they fledge at ten to twelve days. Both the parents and "helper-birds" will feed the young until they are independent at around four weeks. The young often remain in the family group as "helpers" for a year or more before moving to another group, although some move on and breed in their first year.

R.V.C. with help from Wikipedia