

THE GENUS MALURUS

6 THE SPLENDID WREN



Male *M. splendens splendens*
from Western Australia
Photo: Julia Gross

The Splendid Wren, *Malurus splendens*, is found across much of the Australian continent from central-western New South Wales and south-western Queensland over to coastal Western Australia. This member of the *Malurus* genus inhabits arid and semi-arid regions. In breeding plumage the male is of bright blue and black colouration. Non-breeding males, females and juveniles are predominantly grey-brown in colour; this led to the early impression that males were polygamous, as all

dull-coloured birds were believed to be females. The species comprises four similar blue and black subspecies that were once considered separate species.

Like other malurid wrens, the Splendid Wren is notable for a number of peculiar behavioural characteristics. They are socially monogamous but sexually promiscuous. They form pairs between one male and one female, but each partner will mate with other individuals and even assist in raising the young from such liaisons. The male plucks pink or purple petals and display them to females as part of their courtship display.

The habitat of the Splendid Wren ranges from forest to dry scrub, generally with ample vegetation for shelter, but unlike the eastern Superb Blue Wren, *M. cyaneus*, it has not adapted well to human encroachment on the landscape and has disappeared from many urbanised areas.

Within the genus it is most closely related to the Superb Blue Wren. The closest relation to these two so called "Blue wrens" is the Purple-crowned Wren, *M. coronatus*, of north-western Australia.

The type specimen was collected at King George Sound, in Western Australia, in 1830 and described as *Saxicola splendens* by the French naturalists Jean René Constant Quoy and Joseph Paul Gaimard. Three years later John Gould gave it the scientific name of *Malurus pectoralis* and vernacular name of *Banded Superb-warbler*. Although Gould correctly placed it in the genus *Malurus*, the specific name of the former authors took priority. The specific epithet is derived from the Latin *splendens*, which means "shining". Like other malurid wrens, the Splendid Wren is unrelated to the true wren. It was first classified as a member of the old

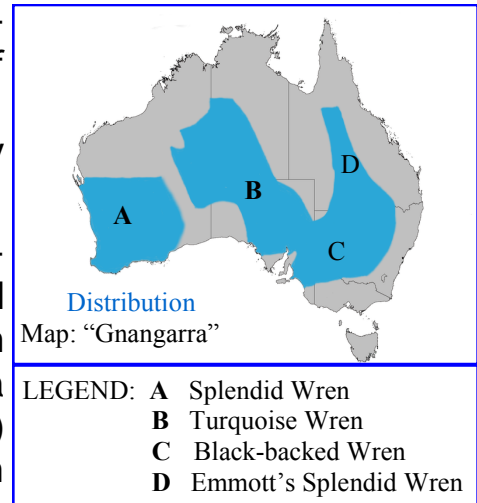


Northern Wren
Troglodytes troglodytes
A true Wren from Europe
and North America
Photo: Martien Brand

world flycatcher family Muscipidae by the British ornithologist Richard Bowdler Sharpe, but was later placed in the warbler family Sylviidae by the same author, they were finally placed in the newly recognised Maluridae in 1975. The most recent DNA analysis available shows the malurid wrens are members of the large super-family Meliphagoidea together with the Meliphagidae (Honeyeaters) and the Pardalotidae (Pardalotes).

Four subspecies are now recognised, They are:

- *M. s. splendens*, known as the Splendid- or Banded Wren, is found in much of central and southern Western Australia. This was the original form named by Quoy and Gaimard in 1830.
- *M. s. melanotus*, known as the Black-backed Wren, was described by John Gould in 1841 as a separate species. It is found in the mallee country of South Australia (Sedan area north-east of Adelaide) through western Victoria, western New



BLACK-BACKED WREN
Malurus splendens melanotus
Face Fan Display
Photo: Nevil Lazarus

South Wales and into south western Queensland. It differs from the nominate subspecies in having a black back and whitish lower belly.

- *M. s. musgravei* was described in 1922 by the amateur ornithologist Gregory Mathews as a separate species from the Lake Eyre Basin in central Australia. It is found in mulga and mallee country across much of South Australia and the southern Northern Territory. It has lighter blue or turquoise upperparts than the Splendid Wren, and has a black rump. This bird is largely synonymous with what was previously known as *M. callainus*, the Turquoise Wren, which had been collected by the South Australian ornithologist Samuel White and named by John Gould in 1867. The original specimen collected bearing the name *callainus* was later deemed to be a hybrid between *musgravei* and *melanotus*, so *musgravei* was resurrected as the name for the Turquoise Wren.
- *M. s. emmottorum* was described from south-western Queensland and given subspecific status in the 1999 review by Schodde and Mason. It was named after Angus Emmott, a farmer and amateur biologist in western Queensland. Emmott's Splendid Wren has been suggested as a vernacular name.

The Splendid Wren is a long-tailed bird 14cm (5.5”) in length. There is a high degree of sexual dimorphism, the breeding male has a bright blue forehead and ear coverts, a violet throat and deeper rich blue back, wings, chest and tail; a black beak, eye-band and chest-band. The non-breeding male is brown with some blue in the wings and has a bluish tail. The female resembles the non-breeding male but has a chestnut beak and eye-patch. Immature males resemble the female. Young males assume breeding plumage the first breeding season after hatching, although this may sometimes be incomplete with some residual brownish plumage still in evidence. Some young males may take



Female Splendid Wren
Photo: “Gnangarra”

another year or two before gaining complete nuptial plumage.

Both sexes moult in autumn after breeding, it is at this time that males assume an eclipse, or non-breeding, plumage. They then moult into nuptial plumage in late winter or spring. Most very old males remain blue all year, moulting directly from one year's nuptial plumage to the next. A fully coloured male's blue plumage, particularly the ear-coverts, is highly iridescent due to the flattened and twisted surface of the barbules. The blue plumage also reflects ultraviolet light strongly, and so may be even more apparent to other wrens, as their colour vision extends further into this part of the spectrum than that of humans.

The call is described as a gushing reel much like that of others of the genus. However, in the Splendid Wren this is harsher and louder than in other wrens. The volume and tone of the reel varies from individual to individual. The contact call is a soft single *trrt*, this is used by a foraging group to maintain cohesion. The alarm call is a sharp *tsit*. Cuckoos and other intruders are met with a threat posture and churring threat. Females emit a soft *purr* while brooding.

Like all the malurid wrens, Splendid Wrens are active and restless as they forage on open ground near shelter, and through low foliage. They move in a series of jaunty hops and bounces, balanced by their proportionally large tail, which is normally held upright and is rarely still. The short, rounded wings provide good initial lift and are useful for short flights, but are not well adapted for sustained flight. However, this species is a stronger flier than most others of the genus. During spring and summer, they are active in bursts throughout the day and accompany their foraging with song. At that time of the year insects are numerous and easy to catch, this allows a group to shelter and roost together between foraging in the heat

of the day. As food is harder to find during the winter months they spend the day continuously foraging.

Splendid Wren groups consist of two to eight individuals who remain in, and defend, their territory year-round. An average territory is 4.4ha (11 acres) in woodland-heath areas; decreasing in areas of denser vegetation, and increasing in proportion to the number of males in the group. A group consists of a socially monogamous pair and one or more “helper” birds of both sexes that were hatched within the territory, but may not necessarily be the offspring of the main pair. Splendid Wrens are sexually promiscuous, each partner mating with other individuals and even assisting in raising the young of such trysts. Research has shown that more than a third of the young in a group are the result of an 'extramarital' mating. The “helpers” assist in defending the territory and feeding and rearing the young. Members of a group roost side-by-side in dense cover, and engage in mutual preening.

Their mainly insectivorous diet is varied, mostly consisting of arthropods such as ants, grasshoppers, crickets and spiders. This is supplemented by small quantities of seeds, flowers, and fruit. When food is scarce in winter, ants are an important “last resort” option, and constitute a much higher proportion of the diet than usual. Foraging is usually carried out on the ground or in shrubs that are less than two metres high; this foraging method has been termed 'hop-searching'. Unlike the rest of the genus, they have occasionally been observed foraging in the canopy of flowering gums. Splendid Wrens tend to stay fairly close to cover when foraging, as when in the open they are vulnerable to a range of predators. The adults feed their young a different diet to that normally consumed, this “nestling diet” includes larger items such as caterpillars and grasshoppers.

A variety of Splendid Wren courtship displays have been recorded, including the 'Sea Horse Flight', so named because the movements mimic those of a seahorse. This is an exaggerated undulating flight where the male, with his neck extended and his head feathers erect, flies and tilts his body from horizontal to vertical and by rapidly beating his wings is able to descend slowly and spring upwards after alighting on the ground. The “Face Fan” display is a part of both aggressive and sexual display behaviours. This display involves the flaring of the blue ear tufts by erecting the feathers, as shown in the photo on page 199.

As is the case with other malurid wren species during the breeding season, males sometimes pluck petals (in this species, predominantly pink and purple ones, presumably as they contrast with their plumage) and display them to females. Even in the non-breeding season males occasionally show petals to females in other territories, presumably to solicit a future sexual

partner for themselves. As noted above, a proportion of young will have been fathered by males from outside the group. Such young are often raised not by just the dominant pair of the group, but with the assistance of other males who have also mated with the dominant female. Thus, petal-carrying might be a behaviour that strengthens the pair-bond. However, the data gathered does not strongly link petal-carrying and presentation to imminent copulation.

Breeding usually occurs from late August through to January, but may vary due to seasonal conditions. The female builds the nest on her own. This is round or domed and is constructed of loosely woven grasses and spider webs with the entrance on one side. It is commonly situated close to the ground and well-concealed in thick and often thorny vegetation, such as *Acacia pulchella* or *Hakea*. Clutches of two to four dull white eggs with reddish-brown splotches and spots, measuring 12 × 16mm (½" × 5/8"), are the norm. The female only incubates the eggs for 14 or 15 days. After hatching the young are fed and their gelatinous faecal sacs removed by all group members for a further 10-13 days, by which time they are fledged. One or two broods may be raised during a breeding season. Young birds remain in the family group as "helpers" for a year or two before moving to another group, usually an adjacent one, or assuming a dominant position in the original group.

Common brood parasites of the Splendid Wren are Horsfield's Bronze Cuckoo, *Chalcites basalis*, and to a lesser extent the Shining Bronze Cuckoo, *C. lucidus*.

R.V.C. with help from Wikipedia