

SPLENDID FAIRY-WRENS

by Rosemary Hutton, Perth, W.A.

Almost everyone in Western Australia knows what Splendid Fairy-wrens (*Malurus splendens*) look like - magnificent flashes of deep cobalt blue, turquoise, sky blue and glossy black of the cocks and demure grey/brown with powder blue "stickity up" tails of hens and immatures that wag like little flags whilst hunting. They are a delight to see but to have some in a large planted aviary in your care is indeed a fascinating and rewarding pleasure.

Like most other beginners in aviculture I was under the impression that the care of these birds was far beyond my capabilities and knowledge, and that their needs were difficult to maintain, being 'softbills' and insectivorous really "put me off". However, after keeping most of the finches, a few doves, quail and some parrots for 5 or 6 years, I was very keen to try a new challenge, something a little different, so my thoughts went again to Splendid blue wrens. After seeing these beautiful little creatures in other members aviaries my mind was made up.

The first trio, a mature cock bird in full colour and 2 young hens, were acquired and released into an "L" shaped, well planted aviary approximately 23m x 4.5m. This contained a mixed collection of finches including, yellow Stars, African fires, Orange-breasted, Pictorellas, Masks, Plumheads, Bengalese, Blue-faced parrot, Auroras and Painteds. (Cordon blues had to be removed because of their blue colouring and close resemblance to hen wrens. Jacarini's and Cubans also suspect mixers but I have no personal experience of these two birds). Spinifex pigeons and Dotterels were ground dwellers but any sort of quail would be compatible.

The trio arrived in July. After settling in, the cock bird chose one of the hens as his mate. She would always remain his partner as these birds are closely pair-bonded. The second hen assumes the role of an "Auntie" helping to claim and maintain possession of the territory, and sometimes helping to rear the young.

The feeding requirements of Splendids seems to be the most frightening aspect of their care and the major factor that deters most people from trying to keep them. However, it's not quite as difficult as first thought. The wrens are insectivorous so a few good, healthy, active compost heaps are needed. These are easy to maintain with kitchen scraps, seed husks and cow or horse manure kept damp. They love semi-matured cheese, just grated through the netting in a convenient spot each morning. An egg-food mixture, done in the blender, takes only 5 minutes to prepare. If whole dried egg powder is used, along with dried dog food, baby rice, wheatgerm and a good vitamin mixture, this can be fed every 2 or 3 days and will provide much extra protein if a good recipe is used. Mealworms are needed to produce good breeding results. During the non-breeding season 5 or 6 per bird per day is quite sufficient when added to the many insects the birds catch in the aviary for themselves. However during, and leading up to, the breeding season (August-February) the birds must have a plentiful supply if you are to achieve good results, at least 3 or 4 dozen per day, fed over 4 or 5 intervals if possible. A moth trap outside the aviary is helpful during warmer months to provide an added source of live food.

I find it is not a hardship for the birds to find much of their food for themselves. They catch flies and insects on the ground, in shrubbery or hawk for flying insects in the air.

It is a fascinating sight to see them wag their tails, then dive on an insect with beaks audibly cracking as they grab it. Large insects, such as crickets, are softened up by beating on a rock or branch before swallowing.

Splendid blue wrens' songs and calls are many and varied, each different one for a set purpose; morning songs and territorial calls are beautiful, they sound alarms, (which every inmate reacts to and dives for cover) and there are a number of communication calls, one of which sounds like a "mew" used by the hen whilst sitting or approaching the nest when young have hatched.

One can spend endless hours watching these birds dart and flit about, hunting for food. They are seldom still but on occasions sit mutually preening in the sun, usually all in a row along a branch, hopping one over the other, as none likes being on the outside. A rare, brief moment may be spent, stretched out with feathers fluffed, in a sunny spot getting the greatest benefit of the warmth. They prefer to bathe on wet foliage rather than in the pool. This too, as is everything they do, a delight to behold.

In mid September the pair went to nest. The hen chose a dense, dark location in an asparagus fern. She did all of the building using fine grasses, rootlets and plant down for lining. The result was a dome-shaped structure about 2m from the ground. The cock participated very little in all of this, however, he preceded this nest building with a fascinating courtship display to herald the commencement of the breeding season. He picks off a flower petal, pink, yellow or orange, (colour not being of importance other than it usually being in contrast to his blue plumage) and flits to and fro, emitting a buzzing sound, to attract the hen. During this the auntie must remain secluded and at all times subordinate to the pair. She in turn catches an insect and offers it to the cock bird. This is then usually followed by a brief mating. In all the 6½ years of keeping Splendids, I have only witnessed copulation on an average of twice a year. This is always carried out in seclusion or in the completed nest.

The usual clutch of eggs laid is 3, sometimes 4. The hen once again does all the brooding, to be relieved only on very brief occasions by the cock bird. The young hatch in 10 to 12 days and are frantically fed as they grow rapidly and fledge at a further 12 to 14 days. These fledglings are well developed, fully feathered, fluffy balls with a very short, powder blue tail. They have enormous appetites and are fed from here on by both parents and any helpers or an auntie. Helpers are older siblings from a previous clutch.

Splendids usually make good parents and feed, care for, protect and upon nearing independence, teach the youngsters to hunt, kill and tenderize their own food. In the wild, at this stage of their lives, the fledglings would be escorted to the outer regions of the territory to relieve the drain on the food supply near the nest site area but later be allowed to drift back to act out their roles as helpers with the next clutch of young. However, within the confined area of the aviary this cannot happen as there is just not sufficient area, consequently these independent young must be caught up and

removed to another aviary or they may be inadvertently killed in the parents efforts to oust them from the nesting area.

In conclusion, let me again emphasise what delightful inmates Splendid Fairy- wrens make to any aviary, ever active, fascinating little balls of courage and beauty. Over a period of 6½ years, and the breeding of 38 young fledglings - 29 of which reached maturity - I can only reiterate further on my utter delight in these "splendid" creatures.

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