

THE GENUS MALURUS

9 THE SUPERB WREN



Subspecies *cyaneus*
Male in nuptial plumage
Photo: "Noodle snacks"

The Superb Blue Wren, *Malurus cyaneus*, also known as the Superb Blue Fairywren or colloquially as just Blue Wren, is a member of the Maluridae family, commonly found across south-eastern Australia. The species is sedentary and territorial, and exhibits a high degree of sexual dimorphism; the male in nuptial plumage has a striking bright blue forehead, ear coverts, mantle, and tail, with a black mask and black or dark blue throat. Eclipse plumaged males, females and juveniles are predominantly grey-brown in colour. At first all dull-coloured birds were taken for females; this misconception gave

early observers the impression that males were polygamous. Two subspecies are recognized: the larger and darker Tasmanian form *cyaneus* and the smaller and paler mainland form *cyanochlamys*.

In keeping with the other malurid wrens, the Superb Blue is notable for several peculiar behavioural characteristics. They are both socially monogamous and 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 pairings. Male Superb Wrens pluck yellow petals and display them to females as part of their courtship display.



Subspecies *cyanochlamys*
Female "scolding"
Photo: "Fir0002"

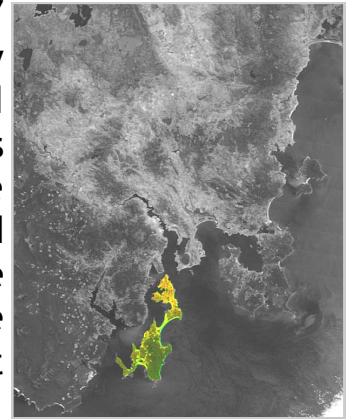
This wren can be found in almost any area that has at least a little dense undergrowth for shelter, including grasslands with scattered shrubs, moderately thick forest, woodland, heaths, and even home gardens. In some locations they have adapted well to the urban environment and are commonly encountered in suburban Sydney, Canberra and Melbourne, but less so in Adelaide.

The Superb Blue Wren is one of the twelve malurid species found in Australia and lowland New Guinea. The Superb Blue's closest relative is the Splendid Wren, *M. splendens*. These two "Blue Wrens" are also related to the Purple-crowned Wren, *M. coronatus*, of north-western Australia.



Old World Grey Wagtail
Motacilla cinerea
Photo: "Kclama"

William Anderson, surgeon and naturalist on Captain James Cook's third voyage, collected the first Superb Blue Wren specimen in 1777 at Bruny Island's Adventure Bay in Tasmania. He named it *Motacilla cyanea* because its tail reminded him of the European Wagtails of the Old World genus *Motacilla*. The



South-west Tasmania
Bruny Island highlighted
Photo: NASA

genus *Malurus* was later described by Louis Jean Pierre Vieillot in 1816, thus giving the species its current scientific name.

Two subspecies are currently recognised, though future DNA studies may prompt reclassification. They are:

- *M. c. cyaneus*, the nominate subspecies described in 1782, is found throughout Tasmania and on the Bass Strait Islands. They are larger and darker than the mainland subspecies, the males have a deeper azure blue coloration. The birds on King Island were described as a separate species *elizabethae* in 1901 by A.J. Campbell as they are an even deeper blue. Those on Flinders Island have plumage intermediate between the King Island and Tasmanian forms. However, in 1982 Schodde reclassified *elizabethae* as *cyaneus*.
- *M. c. cyanochlamys*, the mainland subspecies was described by Richard Sharpe in 1881. This race is smaller and paler than that of Tasmania, and Queensland males are even lighter than more southerly birds, having a pale silvery-blue crown, ear-tufts and mantle.

The Superb Blue Wren is 14cm (5½") in length with a body weight 8-13g (0.28-0.46 oz). Males are, on average, slightly larger than females. The tail averages 5.9cm (2½") in length, and is one of the shortest in the genus. The bill which is relatively long, narrow, pointed and wider at the base averages 9mm (0.4") in *cyaneus* and 8mm (0.3") in *cyanochlamys*. Wider than it is deep, the bill is similar in shape to those of other birds that feed by probing for or picking insects off their environs.

Like other malurid wrens, the Superb Blue is notable for its marked sexual dimorphism. Nuptial males exhibit highly visible plumage of brilliant iridescent blue contrasted with black and grey-brown. The brightly coloured crown and ear-tufts are prominently featured in courtship displays. The breeding male has a bright blue forehead, ear-coverts, mantle and tail, brown wings, and black throat, eye band, breast and bill. Females, immatures and non-breeding males, are a plain fawn colour with



Female with young
Photo: Nevil Lazarus

a lighter underbelly and a fawn tail in females and immatures, and a dull greyish-blue one in males.

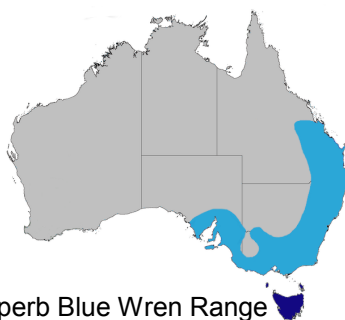
After their first winter, the males develop a black beak. In females and juveniles the beak is brown. Young males moult into nuptial plumage the next breeding season. However, sometimes this first nuptial moult is incomplete and some residual brownish plumage remains. It can take another year or two before a complete moult

occurs. Both sexes moult in autumn after breeding, with males assuming the fawnish-buff eclipse plumage. Nuptial plumage is again assumed by the males in the following winter or spring. A breeding male's blue plumage, particularly the ear-coverts, is highly iridescent due to the flattened and twisted surface of the barbules¹. Ultraviolet light is strongly reflected by this blue plumage, and may be even more obvious to other wrens, as their colour vision extends into this part of the spectrum.

Vocal communication among Superb Blues is primarily used for contact between birds in a social group and for advertising or defending a territory. The alarm call is a series of brief sharp *chits*, universally given and understood by small birds in response to predators. Females emit a *purr* while incubating. Roosting social groups often emit a soft "contented" chirring murmur prior to settling for the night.



Male vocalising



Superb Blue Wren Range
■ *M. c. cyanochlamys*;
■ *M. c. cyaneus* Map: "Gnangarra"

The Superb Blue Wren is common throughout most of the relatively wet and fertile south-eastern corner of the continent, from the south-east of South Australia (including Kangaroo Island and the Adelaide Hills) and the tip of the Eyre Peninsula, through all of Victoria, Tasmania, coastal and sub-coastal New South Wales and Queensland, through the Brisbane area and extending inland north to the Dawson River and west to Blackall.

It is a common bird in the suburbs of Sydney, Melbourne and Canberra, but has not penetrated the suburbs of Adelaide to the same extent.

¹ Barbules are a part of the tree formed by feathers: the trunk, or axis, being the *rachis* and the *barbs* the main boughs, barbules are the secondary branches, and have minute hooks called "barbicels" for cross attachment.

The Superb Blue is found in wooded areas, generally with plenty of undergrowth, Lantana, *Lantana camara*, a prolific weed in Australia, has also been beneficial in providing shelter in disturbed areas, as has the introduced and invasive blackberry (*Rubus* spp.) It is not found in dense forest nor in alpine environments. Forestry plantations of pine (*Pinus* spp.) and eucalypts are also unsuitable as they lack undergrowth.

Unlike others of the genus, it appears to benefit from the urban environment. Colonies can be found in Hyde Park and the Royal Botanic Gardens in Sydney's urbanized centre. In the early 1960s a number of Superb Blue Wrens were transferred from the Cherry Gardens area of the Adelaide Hills to the Adelaide Botanic Gardens. The transferred birds, and presumably their offspring, were present in the north-east portion of the gardens for some years after. However, a growing population of feral cats in the gardens is most likely the cause of their disappearance in the mid 1970s.

The main form of locomotion is a series of hops and bounces. The proportionally large tail, which is usually held upright, provides balance, and is rarely still. The short, rounded wings provide good initial lift and are primarily used for short flights, from bush to bush. Extended flight is avoided where possible.

During spring and summer, the Superb Blue is active in bursts throughout the day and accompany their foraging with song. At this time of the year insects are numerous and easy to catch, allowing the birds to rest between food-gathering forays. During these inactive periods the group perch together and indulge in mutual preening and quiet song. During winter food is harder to find and the group spend the day continuously foraging.

Male Superb Blues have been recorded exhibiting several courtship display types. One such display is the 'sea horse flight', so named for its seahorse-like undulations. During this exaggerated flight ritual, the male extends his neck, and with his head feathers erect, tilts his body from horizontal to



Face Fan Display
Photo: Cas Liber

vertical, slowly descends and alights on the ground then springs upwards with a rapid beating of his wings. Another such display is the "face fan display". This occurs as a part of aggressive or sexual display behaviours, and involves flaring of the iridescent blue ear-tufts by erecting the feathers.

During the breeding season, male Superb Blue Wrens, like others of the genus pluck petals and display them to females. This petal offering is part of the courtship ritual.

Males sometimes show petals to females in other territories even in the non-breeding season. Presumably, this is a form of self promotion.

Pairs usually bond for life, although both members of the pair will regularly mate with other individuals. As a result of this behaviour a proportion of the young raised will have been fathered by males from outside the group. It has often been observed that non-group males who mated with the female of a bonded pair assist in the raising of the bonded pair's young.

The breeding season is spring through to late summer. The side entranced nest is a domed structure of loosely woven grasses interlaced with spider webs, and is generally situated in thick vegetation and close to the ground. Two or more broods may be raised in a breeding season. The usual clutch is three or four matte white eggs with reddish-brown splotches and spots. These measure 12 x 16mm (0.45 x 0.6 inches). The incubation period is fourteen days. The chicks are born blind, red and featherless, but quickly darken as the feathers grow. The eyes open by day five or six and the young are fully feathered by the tenth day. All members of the group are involved in feeding and faecal sac removal for ten to fourteen days, by which time the young are ready to leave the nest. Fledglings are able to feed themselves after another twenty-eight to thirty days. They then remain in the family group as "helpers" for a year or so before joining another group or assuming a dominant position in their home group. Superb Blue Wrens are commonly host to the parasitic Horsfield's Bronze Cuckoo, *Chrysococcyx basalis*, and, occasionally, the Shining Bronze Cuckoo, *C. lucidus*, or Fan-tailed Cuckoo, *Cacomantis flabelliformis*.

Like all malurid wrens, the Superb Blue is an active and restless feeder, usually foraging on open ground near shelter, but also through low foliage. The diet predominantly insectivorous, consisting of a wide range of small creatures such as ants, grasshoppers, shield bugs, flies, weevils and various larvae. Small quantities of seeds, flowers, and fruit are also taken. The foraging method employed is termed "hop-searching", and occurs on the ground and in shrubs less than two metres (6.5') high. Because this foraging method renders them vulnerable to predators, the feeding group tends to stay fairly close to cover. During winter, when food is scarce, ants are an important food of "last resort", and constitute a high proportion of the diet. Nestlings, in contrast to adult birds, are fed a diet of larger items such as caterpillars and grasshoppers.

The Superb Blue Wren is listed as "least concern on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species.

R.V.C. with help from Wikipedia

This concludes the series on the Australian members of the Malurus genus.