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## **FAIRY-WRENS AND GRASSWRENS: MALURIDAE**

by Ian Rowley and Eleanor Russell

1997. Oxford University Press, Oxford. Pp. 274,  
9 Colour plates, 254 x 197 mm. A\$90.00.

Few other birds in the world can hold a candle to the Australian fairy-wrens when it comes to all-round charisma, dazzling beauty and wacky biology, so this group is a fine choice for the fourth volume in Oxford's Bird Families of the World Series. Each volume in this OUP series is something of a hybrid between monograph and handbook, consisting of roughly one-half general chapters, with the remaining pages devoted to species accounts. Whether this will be a successful formula for every bird family remains to be seen. Certainly the problems of this approach are well illustrated by the lop-sided nature of our knowledge of the different groups treated in this book. No less than eight of the twelve species in *Malurus*, the most prominent genus, have been the subject of detailed studies (two of these species, Superb and Splendid Fairy-wrens, feature in textbooks and would easily warrant monographs in their own right). By contrast, we know pitifully little about the remaining four genera in this family. Essentially, therefore, this is a book about fairy-wrens, sprinkled with a handful of anecdotes about the Papua New Guinean wren species, the emu-wrens and the enigmatic grasswrens.

Authors Ian Rowley and Eleanor Russell have been an impressive team, collaborating on research on five different species of fairy-wrens spanning two decades. In undertaking this colossal research effort, they have elevated this group to the status of the best studied genus in Australia, and the fruits of their labours can be admired in this well-written and beautifully illustrated book. Studying fairy-wrens has been a lifelong research passion for Ian, who started working on Superb Fairy-wrens in the 1950s, has since published papers on Splendid, Red-winged, White-winged, Purple-crowned and Blue-breasted Fairy-wrens (not to mention a host of other fascinating Australian birds), and claims to have set his sights on Red-backed Fairy-wrens for his current, well-deserved retirement!

The fairy-wrens first gained prominence because of their unusual cooperative behaviour, documented by Ian in one of the first studies using colour bands to identify birds. Rather than breeding independently, young fairy-wrens often stay in their natal territory and assist their parents with the task of raising successive

broods. Conventional wisdom held that this seemingly altruistic behaviour could be explained by the fact that helpers were indirectly propagating some of their own genes by enhancing the survival of their siblings. However, Ian and co-workers discovered that female fairy-wrens typically shun their social partners, preferring to mate with males outside the group. As a consequence, most helpers are not as closely related to the young they help as was once thought, and traditional explanations have had to be jettisoned.

These remarkable findings and many others are described in this book in a very accessible style, along with information on taxonomy, morphology, biogeography and conservation. Key behaviours are wonderfully illustrated by Peter Marsack's gifted line drawings. Colour plates by the same artist illustrating each species are also gorgeous and true to life. The text has been meticulously researched and data from other studies of fairy-wrens are, on the whole, given thoughtful consideration. Much effort has been put into tabling cross-species comparisons where the data are available. These compilations are one of the highlights of the book and make it an extremely valuable reference work.

Rowley and Russell's discoveries and their legendary determination to challenge northern hemisphere dominated ideas about the evolution of sociality have given their research papers broad international impact and earned them a reputation for original thinking on the subject. If I have a criticism of this volume, therefore, it is that the authors have surprisingly chosen to follow, in their own words, such 'a well-trodden path' in the structure of the chapters and discussion of the data. Given their vast experience with the genus, the authors could have made more of this opportunity to synthesize old and new findings and make sense of them in a fresh evolutionary framework. This shortcoming is highlighted by the fact that the astonishing mating system of fairy-wrens — and the revolutionary implications of recent discoveries (not least the idea that habitual cooperation may set the stage for extreme female infidelity) — are not deemed worthy of a separate chapter and are only cursorily discussed. The authors also seem reluctant to draw on their extensive comparative knowledge of the genus to attempt to address key puzzles (e.g. why do both sexes help in some species but only males in others?) and to highlight unanswered questions to be tackled by the next generation of researchers.

These criticisms notwithstanding, this is one of the

most important publications in Australian ornithology in recent times. It is essential, pleasurable reading for those interested in birds or in animal behaviour, and an outstanding handbook for young researchers on rigorous and thorough approaches to field studies of bird behaviour.

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