

Range of the Superb Blue Wren in Queensland

By N. JACK, Brisbane

In July 1953 an appeal was made to members of the R.A.O.U. for details of the distribution of the Blue Wren (*Malurus cyaneus*) in Queensland. The response was cordial, and the information sent in from various quarters, plus certain investigations conducted by the writer, may now be summarized.

All of the field-workers quoted would come under the category of "reliable". Only a novice mistakes *M. cyaneus* for one of the other "blue" wrens. Many a fruitless chase in the Brisbane area, on chance information given by people whose knowledge of birds was superficial, and who had insisted they had seen a "blue" wren, revealed that *M. lamberti* was the "culprit".

In 1881 Bowdler Sharpe described a specimen of Blue Wren, taken in the Moreton Bay district, as *Malurus cyano-chlamys*, and this supposed species became known as the Silvery-blue Wren, or Queensland Blue Wren. Although, apparently, it was not common in the Brisbane area, some of the older generation of bird-lovers knew of its existence, and they expressed surprise when informed that it had either become extremely rare or had disappeared from the district. Latterly, the bird has been relegated to a subspecies.

Apparently occurring in the far north-east of New South Wales, this form of the Blue Wren has been noted in the coastal area of Southport. Some distance inland it has been seen at Lamington National Park, at Tamborine Mountain, and at Beaudesert. According to notes sent in by A. H. Chisholm, it has, in the past, been seen on Stradbroke Island. No evidence of its presence on the coastal strip between Southport and Brisbane has come to hand, but that could be due to lack of observers in the area.

I, personally, have never seen the Blue Wren in the Brisbane district. This area, incidentally, was well examined by naturalists in the past. An old record in the *Queensland Naturalist* (November 1910), by G. H. Barker, notes a family of seven or eight Blue Wrens at Northgate, and states that "these birds are not plentiful around Brisbane". Only two recent notes from the area have come to hand, one by Mrs. M. Pearson from Toowong and the other by Miss M. Hawken from Brookfield, both western suburbs. In 1953, substantiating an old record given by Mrs. L. M. Mayo, the Blue Wren was observed at Riverview, between Brisbane and Ipswich, by members of the Bird Observers Club. It is not uncommon at Ipswich itself.

Farther inland, it crosses the border at Wallangarra, and has been noted at Stanthorpe by T. Devaney. Miss D. M. Tilley has supplied some excellent notes on the species from

Warwick. It was also seen at Killarney, years ago, by A. H. Chisholm, in this case the bird being the silvery-blue form.

Some years ago, I attended many of the Toowoomba Naturalists Club's excursions, and on most of these, particularly in the areas known to the local naturalists as "below the range", I had opportunities to study the Blue Wren at close quarters. The rather pale blue of the cheeks and head, and the clear line of demarcation between the dark blue mantle and the white abdomen, were quite evident in most of the mature male birds seen. Superficially, the birds seemed to be *M. c. cyanochlamys*; they were quite different from the heavier and more highly coloured southern forms. Blue Wrens were also seen at Crow's Nest, north and slightly east of Toowoomba, and at Dalby.

In 1920 Rowland Illidge, a well-known naturalist of that period, published some notes in the *Queensland Naturalist* (2: no. 3) which indicated that he was well acquainted with *M. cyanochlamys*, although he wrote of it: "If still about the vicinity of Brisbane, is very rare". He also stated: "Some years ago it was not uncommon at Southport, and I have noted it as far north as Gympie". Since then, there has been no note of the species on the coast north of Brisbane; it does not figure in the list of species seen during the recent R.A.O.U. camp-out at Noosa. However, when Capt. H. L. Bell, a keen field-worker, was residing in Queensland, some time ago, he located the Blue Wren at Kilcoy, and also in the Kingaroy-Nanango district. Both of these areas are south of Gympie, and well away from the coast. Bell also noted the bird at Bunya Mountains, north of Dalby.

Illidge stated that the Blue Wren was plentiful along Dogwood Creek, near Miles, in his time. It is still in that area; I saw a pair nesting near Mrs. G. Makin's home at Columboola.

Pursuing the species westward, Chisholm's notes contain references to the species near Yuleba, in 1950; here the birds were not silvery-blue, as in the coastal form, but were coloured like the southern bird. Further, a letter from Mrs. Phyllis Waddel of Balnakeil, 75 miles south of Roma, has revealed that *M. cyaneus* nests every year in shrubs in her garden.

It used to be generally thought that Roma would prove to be the western limit of the Blue Wren, but E. A. R. Lord has now stated that he saw the species at Warrambah, some 80 miles east of Cunnamulla; there were two families in the garden there, and a hedge of "old-man" saltbush made good cover for them. An appeal to Monty Schrader, at Cunnamulla itself, elicited the information that the Blue Wren had not been seen there, so evidently Warrambah is the farthest-west point that the species has been recorded.

Following the Blue Wren northward, E. A. R. Lord states that in the past he saw the bird at Taroom, north of Miles.

This is substantiated by Arthur Smith, an R.A.O.U. member living in that area. A. J. North also records specimens of the Blue Wren from the Dawson River district, and A. H. Chisholm, writing in *An Explorer and his Birds* (1945) notes that in 1844 John Gilbert observed the species "as far north as the Dawson". Gilbert recorded the Blue Wren near Expedition Range, but failed to see it beside the Comet River.

West of the Comet River lies the town of Springsure. A report from Mrs. G. Makin that she had seen the Blue Wren nesting there, in 1940, brought confirmation from Mrs. A. M. McLaughlin, who wrote that the bird nested close to the house at Buckleton, 14 miles south of Springsure. It was also seen at her son's home 20 miles south-east of Buckleton. Further evidence came from Mr. A. W. Adams of Croydon Hills, who informed Mrs. McLaughlin that he had not seen any Blue Wrens in his area but had seen some in Springsure itself.

On the evidence of these notes, it would seem that the Blue Wren, after crossing the border, extends at least to Southport, and next appears as a rare specimen on the outskirts of Brisbane. It then ranges inland, east of the Dividing Range, to as far north as Springsure. The most north-eastern point would be Gilbert's old record of Expedition Range. Westward, the bird is known to extend to the south of Roma, and it appears to straggle out to a point 80 miles east of Cunnamulla. Its range north of that point is not known, and in fact its western "line" remains obscure. Possibly it also extends east of a line drawn direct from Kingaroy to Taroom and Expedition Range, but lack of notes from east of those areas leaves the bird's eastern "line" also in doubt.

I have not had an opportunity to examine skins in collections, but, as long as there are numbers of keen field-workers, evidence from specimens will always lag behind field-notes. It is hoped that the present notes will act as an incentive to observers in various parts of Queensland to study the distribution of the Blue Wren.

Unusual nesting site of the Grey Thrush.—Near Bendigo, Victoria, during December 1959, a nest of a Grey Thrush (*Colluricincla harmonica*) was built near the top of a tall, smooth-barked *eucalypt* sapling at a height of approximately 35 feet from the ground. It was the usual cup-shaped structure but it was placed in the centre of an open, triple fork and it could be seen from any angle. The birds must have experienced great difficulty in keeping the first pieces of bark in the fork as there were many trailing pieces hanging below the nest.—ROY P. COOPER, Melbourne, 2/3/61.