The Splendid Fairywren

Malurus splendens

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Preamble
The keeping of softbills in aviculture, in particular fairywrens, is becoming more popular as people realize that they are not a bird species reserved only for the most experienced aviculturists to house and breed. More importantly, it is a realization that the keeping of softbills is the simple application of different management techniques, feeding requirements, and level of commitment from that of the more "traditional" bird species such as parrots and doves.

Many of us at one time or another have probably seen a species of fairywren in the wild darting about whilst twittering loudly. As aviculturists many of us have probably thought to ourselves how stunning these birds would look in the backyard aviary. One species that could be considered as a candidate for such an undertaking is the Splendid Fairywren which is a fascinating and stunning bird in a well planted aviary.

Other Common Names
Black-backed Fairywren, Turquoise Fairywren, Australian Banded Wren, Banded Blue Wren, Banded Fairywren, Mormon Wren, White's Blue Wren.

Introduction
The word "wren" comes from the European species of bird with the same name, whereas in Australia it has been used to describe a number of small active bird species that dart around on the ground and in thick foliage and scrub layers. The fairywrens belong to the Family Maluridae which is classified to form part of the largest, and arguably the most successful, group of birds collectively known as passerines (commonly called perching birds or songbirds). The name "songbird" is given to passerines because they have a syrinx (similar to the larynx in humans). This is believed to have provided passerines with an evolutionary advantage because the energy used to produce complex vocalizations to partition, hold, and defend living space, is less than the energy used in physical exertion to perform confrontational behaviors (which run the risk of injury) employed by other groups of birds. The Maluridae is made up of five genera. Two of these are endemic to New Guinea (Sipodotus and Clytomyias),
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two are endemic to Australia (being Amytornis - grasswrens, and Stipiturus - emu-wrens), and one is shared by Australia and New Guinea (Malurus - Fairywrens).

The Splendid Fairywren Malurus splendens was described in 1830 and belongs to a group commonly called "bi-colored wrens." The term "bi-colored" refers to the change in plumage colour by mature males. During the breeding season males attain a "nuptial" plumage which is brightly colored, and in the non-breeding season molt to a dull "eclipse" plumage. The male is brightly colored throughout the breeding season so he can display to a prospective mate and to assert himself as the dominant male to the rest of the social group.

The forming of social groups/family parties with siblings is a common behavioral characteristic of the fairywrens. It is also interesting to note that the erect tails typically seen in Fairywrens is thought to play a part in maintaining stability within the social group by acting as a signalling device. Often the dominant animals will have slightly longer tail feathers. With the loss of this display/signalling system (made up by the combination of plumage colour and erect tail) during the molt, it is not uncommon for all members of a social group to molt simultaneously. After the breeding season is over the males molt into a dull "eclipse" plumage. The males are generally brown with (unlike the female Fairywren Malurus cyanus), a slight blue wash through their tail and wing feathers. Females have a russet brown coloration around the eye and have a light brown bill. Juvenile males and females are difficult to sex and adopt the plumage coloration of the adult female but lack blue in the tail.

**Distribution**

The Splendid Fairywren is a widespread species occurring throughout central eastern, central, and far western Australia. Throughout this range they have been described as replacing the closely related Superb Fairywren Malurus cyaneus which occurs through eastern and south eastern Australia. It is generally absent from the northern tropical regions and species as it is often found searching amongst higher levels of tree foliage and shrubs.

**Turquoise Fairywren** Malurus callainus: This race is found through the central Australian part of the distribution where it generally tends to occupy a greater proportion of arid habitats types when compared to those of Malurus splendens. This race differs by having a distinct bright turquoise blue on the crown and back, black rump, sky blue underbelly, and sometimes black scapular feathers. The throat retains the deep violet blue coloration of Malurus splendens. Here its habitat is typified by dense mulga, mallee and salt bush scrub ranging from South Australia through to the central Northern Territory. This subspecies hybridizes/introgresses with Malurus splendens in a broad zone north of the Nullarbor Plain.

**Black-backed Fairywren** Malurus melanotus: This subspecies is in most respects similar to Malurus callainus but differs by having a uniform bright cobalt blue base colour with a distinctly narrower black breast band. This race is found in mallee and porcupine grass habitats from northern Victoria through to south-central Queensland. Although they will freely interbreed, very few field records report of any introgression between this race and Malurus splendens. This is likely to be caused by the Eyrean barrier (a natural "wall") which follows the site of the inland sea bordered in the east by the Flinders Ranges in South Australia.

The delightful colour photo by Warwick Remington accompanying this article depicts an adult male in "nuptial" plumage. Although the definitive provenance of this particular animal is unknown, it possesses the characters that are typical for the subspecies melanotus of the Splendid Fairywren. All three races are essentially the same size around 14cm in length (5.60 inches). Female variation between the races is negligible although plumage coloration tends to pale in more arid regions which, like many other bird species, is in concordance with Gloger's Rule.

The Splendid Fairywren is relatively new to aviculture. This may have to
some extent contributed to the mis-
conception that Fairywrens (and soft-
bills in general) are difficult to house
and breed. In Victoria at the end of
March 1996 there were only 33
licensed specimens in captivity (no
demarcation of subspecies). At the end
of 1997 the number of individuals in
zoological institutions was also very
low with a total of four M. s. melanotus
(black-backed Fairywren) at Taronga
Zoo and 13 (no subspecies given) at
Perth Zoo.

It would appear that it will be some
time before this species will be at suf-
ficient numbers to be readily available
to the general aviculturist. It is also
unfortunate that because of their rarity in
captivity the price tag is somewhat
expensive which may deter many avi-
culturists from keeping them. The
price of birds equates constantly with
availability. These birds cannot be re-
commended for beginners and should
only be undertaken by reasonably
experienced aviculturists. The captive
husbandry of this species is uncompli-
cated, and is basically very similar to
that of the Superb Fairywren.

Aviary Design

Fairywrens in general have rounded
wings which make them well adapted
for maneuvering amongst thick shrubs
and foliage in search of insects. The
disadvantage of this is that they are not
particularly strong flyers over large
spaces and long distances. Unlike the
Superb Fairywren, the Splendid
Fairywren is much shyer and is very
reluctant to leave the safe haven of
dense cover and fly into open spaces.
An adequately sized aviary for this
species could measure 4m x 3m x 2m
(approx. 13 x 10 x 6 feet). The dimen-
sions of this is not designed to provide
a length of flight as you would for a
parrot species but, more importantly,
to provide enough room to plant out
the enclosure with a large variety of
low growing shrubs and bushes that
simulate their natural habitat. This
dense shrub layer and foliage will pro-
vide a habitat that will ensure the psy-
chological well being of the birds and
provide a source of environmental
enrichment in that it will stimulate
behaviors of natural hunting and
searching for insects.

There are a number of plant
species that can be recommended and
readily available at nurseries that pro-
vide the variety and "ecotone" suitable
for the Splendid Fairywren. Tussock
grasses such as Poa labillardieri that
mimic porcupine grass; mat-rushes,
Lomandra sp.; Grevillea sp.; heath
banksia Banksia encifolia; shrub tea-
trees, Leptospermum sp.; bottlebrushes
and heath-myrtles, Callistemon and
Melaleuca sp.; needlewoods, Hakea
sp.; Phyllodinous leafed wattles, Acacia
sp.; common correa Correa reflexa;
slender hop-bush Dodonea viscosa,
heaths and beard-heaths, Monotoca, Epacris, and Leucopogon
sp. (although these can be difficult to
grow and maintain); daisy-bushes,
Olearia sp.; emubushes, Eremobrila
sp.; and saltbushes and bluebushes,
Atriplex and Maireana species. This is
only a short list of suitable plants and
many other plant species could be
used.

The plant species provided here
have been chosen on the basis of their
relatively rigid bush or shrub-like habit
that essentially provide both shelter
and a solid framework for the birds to
construct a nest in. They have also
been chosen for the quantity of flow-
erers that can be produced which will
attract a larger number of insects. The
greater variety of flowering plants that
is provided will attract a greater num-
ber and variety of insects. Exotic plants
can be used but they may not attract
the same number of insects to the
aviary as would native plant species.

Within the aviary there should be a
covered section (a minimum of a
quarter of the aviary) where branches
of brush and trees such as Melaleuca
species can be placed. Here the birds
can seek out shelter from inclement
weather and utilize cover that provides
a sense of security for roosting and
nesting.

Construction of an aviary need not
be "robust" but, more importantly, "air
tight" as fairywrens are excellent
escape artists. Both nylon netting and
small gauge weldmesh wire can be
used. The disadvantage of netting
(although cheaper and desirable if the
aviary also houses quail species) is that
it is easily damaged by falling branch-
es and sticks and requires regular
checks for developing holes and
repairs. The aviary should also be rat
and mouse-proofed as fairywrens are
particularly vulnerable to these pests
because the birds nest and roost clos-
er to the ground than most other bird
species.

Stocking the Aviary

Only one pair of fairywrens should
be housed in an aviary as breeding
pairs are territorial and will not tolerate
the company of any other conspecifics
other than their own offspring. Unlike
the Superb Fairywren, the Splendid
Fairywren parents are known to toler-
ate both the male and female young in
the family social group.

Although the young can be left in
the aviary for successive broods, they
should be removed from smaller sized
aviaries. An aviary can become to con-
gested (particularly if it houses a mixed
collection) and the parents will happi-
ly continue to multiple clutch in the
absence of their previous young when
adequate food is provided.

For larger aviaries it is recommend-
de to leave the young in with the par-
ents because it provides behavioral
stimuli and watching the family group
move around through the shrubs and
bushes together makes excellent view-
ing. The young can only be left with
the parents in the aviary up until the
start of the following spring when the
next breeding season will start.

Fairywrens can be aggressive
towards many finch species but can be
housed with small parrots such as
Neophema species and small ground
birds such as quail. These, with possi-
bly the addition of ground-dwelling
reptiles such as blue-tongue lizards,
can make an interesting "mixed
species" aviary. It is important to
remember that an adequate heat
source (and UV light source if indoors)
and sufficient shelter such as logs
should be provided for most reptile
species.

A word of warning; although they
are not strong flyers, fairywrens are
masters of maneuverability (much
more so than finches), and, being
small and fragile, a measure of
lightheartedness should be exercised
when attempting to net individuals.
Even the most skilled and experienced
Feeding

The splendid Fairywren is essentially an insectivore in that they feed upon low-flying insects and insects gleaned from shrub foliage, dense undergrowth and leaf litter. Their dependency upon insect prey is exemplified by the well developed rictal bristles (stiff hair-like structures at either side of the mouth) that aid the capture of small aerial invertebrates.

Captive birds, if housed in a well planted aviary, can find livefood in their enclosure as well as consuming livefood supplied on a shelf or stand. Insect food can consist of a mixture of live mealworms, maggots, termites, vinegar flies, baby crickets and dead flies — most types are now commercially available. Fairywrens will take insectivore powder mixes and a number of softbill recipes. It is recommended that these are fed daily to ensure that the birds obtain their full dietary requirements while being supplemented with live insects. There are a number of excellent recipes for softbill/insectivore mixes on pages 231-233 of Mark Shephard’s book *Aviculture in Australia* (chapter 9).

A basic softbill mix can consist of mashed egg, grated cheese, crumbled madeira or orange cake mixed with fly pupae. It is important that the birds have adequate food available at all times as these birds have high metabolic rates and can become easily stressed in a short period of time without food.

Breeding in Captivity

Once a breeding pair have established a territory, breeding duties are performed by the female who is responsible for construction of the nest and brooding the young. The nest construction consists of a loosely hanging bag suspended in low dense vegetation where grasses and twigs are woven together with the nesting chamber and entrance hollow lined with soft leaves and downy feathers. In captivity the birds will utilize other materials provided such as dry grass, coconut fibre, human hair, and horse hair. It is always important to provide a range of nesting materials placed either on the ground or in bushes so that the birds are able to choose what they want to use.

The breeding season for the Splendid Fairywren occurs from September to January (in the Southern Hemisphere) and usually 3-4 white eggs with reddish brown spots are laid. The eggs are incubated by the female for between 13-16 days and the chicks are naked when they hatch. The young are altricial and are thus totally dependent upon their parents for the first three weeks.

The nesting chamber is kept immaculate with fecal sacks from the young removed and discarded some distance from the nest. The young will fledge after about 12-14 days and are barely able to fly when they leave the nest. The young will sit in a bush often together, and in close proximity to the nest, whilst being continually fed by the parents for a week or two until they are strong enough to become independent. In many cases, the young from previous broods will help the parents to raise any young chicks of successive broods. This assists a breeding pair to raise a number of clutches in a breeding season.

Although this species has adapted well to the captive environment where some birds have become tolerant to the invasion of privacy by their owners, many other captive specimens have remained very shy. For this reason it is unwise to disturb birds that are thought to be undertaking breeding activity. The parents are very protective of their territory and nest site and become vigorous defenders of their young in the nest. This is typified by agitated behavior and strong vocal warning calls. This behavior can sometimes be used as an indication for the presence of young in the nest without disturbing the nest site.

Another behavior typical of fairywrens is the “rodent run” which is portrayed by an animal hopping along the ground with its head straight forward and tail out horizontal. This is thought to be a “decoy” mechanism which occurs in the presence of a threat to the nest, or young, where a parent bird or helper will perform the rodent run in an attempt to attract the attention to itself.

Summary

The Splendid Fairywren, and fairywrens in general, do not necessarily have to be difficult avian tenants, but only require a little more intensive management than most other commonly kept bird species. The misconception developed by many people that high prices reflect the difficulty in housing and breeding should be dispelled and it should be recognized that prices only reflect the current private market trends and availability of a species.

It should also be remembered that as aviculturists we understand that all birds species in captivity require the same amount of “moral” responsibility and commitment and adequate research prior to purchase. We urge that aviculturists don’t become deterred by high prices, and that they take up the challenge to acquire and breed this species for themselves, as this will provide greater opportunity for others in the future.

We can certainly recommend to those who have experience in aviculture that you should consider creating a planted, multi-species Fairywren aviary, as it will surely expand your experience and knowledge, and make for a perfect addition to your collection.

Bibliography

*Aviculture and Recommended Reading*


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