

## **Black-and-White Form of the White-winged Fairy-wren** *Malurus leucopterus* in Western New South Wales

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Schodde (1982) and Slater et al. (1989) stated that the black-and-white form of the White-winged Fairy-wren *Malurus leucopterus* race *leucopterus* is confined to Barrow and Dirk Hartog Islands off the Western Australian coast. However, on 21 September 1993 I observed a black-and-white Fairy-wren about 7 km east of the Fowlers Gap homestead. The Fowlers Gap Arid Zone Research Station is 112 km north of Broken Hill, New South Wales (31°5'S, 141°45'E).

The bird I observed was in an area where the dominant shrubs were the chenopods *Maireana* sp., *Atriplex* spp., *Bassia* spp. and occasional clusters of *Cassia* sp. Ground cover was predominantly Mitchell Grass *Astrebla* sp. along with a profusion of forbs (ephemeral plants) resulting from this year's above-average rainfall (Station records).

On the first sighting of the Fairy-wren, my attention was drawn to the striking contrast between the black and white plumage. I had the opportunity to observe this bird for five minutes. It stayed in the company of several other Fairy-wrens which had pale buff-coloured body plumage and pale blue tails, presumably females and young males. These birds flitted from bush to bush with the black-and-white Fairy-wren usually perching momentarily on or near the top of the bush. When I moved closer, around 10 m, this bird usually sought cover in the bush, exiting later near the ground.

The group remained in an area of about a hectare, as defined by the chenopods. I had the opportunity to observe the black-and-white Fairy-wren in many poses and from many different angles. Later in the day I returned to the same site and had a further opportunity to observe this bird for nearly 10 minutes, again through binoculars (Kassel 10 x 50) at distances as close as 10 m. The black plumage was notable not only for the contrasting background it provided for the white wings but also a clearly discernible glossy sheen when viewed at some angles.

Blakers et al. (1984) listed a number of sightings on the mainland of birds in dark plumage. Schodde (1982) has suggested that reports of the black-and-white form of the White-winged Fairy-wren on the mainland are attributable to mistaken identification of the blue-and-white form, as some of the blue plumage can be dark. However, given the period over which I observed this bird, from many angles and under bright sunny conditions in the late morning and early afternoon, I believe my description is accurate, which would indicate that in some instances the Schodde suggestion may not be correct.

This bird was presumably a mutant and such plumage is probably not common in mainland White-winged Fairy-wrens. Start (1991) has described another sighting of a black-and-white Fairy-wren on mainland Australia, north of Innamincka amongst the sandhills and spinifex country in South Australia.

The sighting of a black-and-white Fairy-wren near Fowlers Gap may be relevant to the understanding of genetic differences between the subspecies. In this area, the blue-and-white form is common (Fowlers Gap Station records). Another plumage variant, a white-backed White-winged Fairy-wren, has been recorded to the north of Fowlers Gap, at the Bulloo River Overflow (Boles & Dingley 1977).

## References

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*Received 27 January 1994*

