

Feather Fascination!

with local Birdwatcher, Jim Butler

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BRISBANE'S FAIRY-WRENS

Three of Australia's nine Fairy-wrens live in and around Brisbane. There is the **Superb Fairy-wren** found in many people's gardens and our parks; the **Variegated Fairy-wren** which is mostly a woodland bird; and the **Red-backed Fairy-wren** of the grasslands. The Fairy-wrens are not migratory, so when they find suitable habitat they stay as long as it can support them. The males of these three species are probably the most spectacularly coloured birds in our district. In late 2013 BirdLife Australia conducted a nation-wide survey to find Australia's favourite bird. The winner, by a country mile was the male Superb Fairy-wren. It left the rest of Brisbane's icons far back in the bush buffeted by its slipstream: the Magpie (2nd), the Kookaburra (4th), the Rainbow Lorikeet (5th), Tawny Frogmouth (6th), etc.

The Fairy-wrens, particularly the Superb Fairy-wren, are also the winners in the research conducted in Australia by ornithologists. Its life cycle is the most intensively studied of any Australian bird. Firstly, this is because the Fairy-wrens breed

cooperatively, with all members of the social group (4-8 birds) caring for the young. Cooperative breeding among birds was first discovered in Australian Fairy-wrens. Cooperative breeding arises because the male offspring remain in their natal territory and help the adults rear the next brood. Secondly, it was discovered that the Fairy-wrens are socially monogamous and yet have the highest rates of extra-pair paternity known in birds. Most of the young Fairy-wrens reared by a group are sired by males outside the group. During the breeding season, the female attends the dawn chorus event seeking to mate with a male from other groups. After this discovery in the Fairy-wrens, and using DNA techniques more widely, it has been shown that monogamy is rare in birds, occurring in just 14% of the world's woodland bird species.

Happy Beautiful Birding

~ Jim

Image: Male and female Variegated Fairy-wren
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