

Feather Fascination!

with local Birdwatcher,

Jim Butler

Tail Wagging



THE Willie Wagtail has been living in the diverse habitats throughout the Australian continent for millions of years. Aboriginal stories from all around the country characterise it as either a stealer of secrets or a harbinger of bad news. The English ornithologist John Latham described it in 1801 and John Gould called it the Black and White Fantail. And later, because it preyed on the insects disturbed by moving flocks, it was also called the Shepherd's Companion. Today everyone knows the delightful, exuberant Willie Wagtail (20cm) because it lives so conspicuously amongst us: on lawns, ovals, parks and in forests (except rainforests). The Willie Wagtail is the largest of Australia's six fantails, but differs from them in being much taller and more upright, and its ground-level, rather than canopy, foraging.

The origin of the name "Willie" is unknown, but "Wagtail" stems from the constant sideways wagging of the tail. The function and adaptive value of tail wagging are not understood. Wagging may flush cryptic insects, it may signal to other birds or it may be a sign of alertness. The evidence so far has not sorted this out. They typically are seen darting around lawns wagging their tails as they hunt for insects on the ground or in the air. Willie Wagtails are pursuit predators which is a very extraverted foraging technique.

Both the male and female Willie Wagtails build the nest, a neat cup of intertwined dry grasses, bark shreds and grass stems, sometimes with animal hair taken directly from the animal! The nest is coated in cobwebs and is lined with hair, fine grass or other fibres. These beautiful nests, normally placed on horizontal branches, so open and visible, are often parasitised by various cuckoos, and its eggs and chicks can also be lost to bird and snake predators. However, individuals that survive can live for up to 15 years.

Thank Willie for living so close to us!

~ Jim

Contact Jim: beautifulbirds@y7mail.com Image: Willie Wagtail on nest,
Digital Bird Guide: <http://www.moggillcreek.org/> by Ed Frazer at Brookfield