

THE BLUE-BREASTED WREN

(*Malurus pulcherrimus*)

IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA

By C. E. RIX

On October 11, 1909, two male specimens of a *Malurus* were collected by J. W. Mellor at Warunda Creek, Eyre Peninsula. The collector described these specimens as *Leggeornis lamberti eyri* subsp. nov. (2); at the present time they are in the collection of Captain S. A. White.

Sutton (3) included them in his "Birds of South Australia" as *Malurus pulcherrimus*.

Mack (1) considered their association with *pulcherrimus* as incorrect, and classed them as *Malurus lamberti assimilis*.

At various times since 1938 the writer has observed numbers of chestnut-shouldered wrens in the southern portion of Eyre Peninsula and has for some time held the opinion that they differed from *Malurus assimilis*, the Purple-backed Wren. In 1944 Mellor's specimens from Eyre Peninsula were examined and the violet-blue sheen on the throat and breast immediately attracted attention. This feature is not present in *M. assimilis*, and gave support to the opinion gained in the field that the birds seen were *M. pulcherrimus*.

The opportunity of collecting a specimen did not present itself until November 28, 1946, when an adult male was taken near Yallunda Flat, in the Hundred of Koppio. This specimen was compared with Mellor's skins and found to correspond in all essential features.

Further comparisons made with the single specimen of *M. pulcherrimus* from the Wongan Hills, Western Australia, in the South Australian Museum, and with a small series of the same species loaned by the Museums in Perth and Melbourne, have shown conclusively that the birds collected by myself and Mellor are the Blue-breasted Wren, which is generally regarded as an exclusively Western Australian species.

The Blue-breasted Wren on Eyre Peninsula inhabits the southern portion, which has a climate and vegetation different from that of the country usually favoured by *M. assimilis*. The specimens from Eyre Peninsula examined

by Mack (1) were from Donald's Plain and Wertigo, which are further north, in a lower rainfall area.

An examination of seventy specimens of *Malurus assimilis* from many localities has demonstrated that the blue-violet throat and breast in *pulcherrimus* is diagnostic. The colour is readily distinguishable in natural light and less discernible under artificial light. It is also readily apparent in the field when the birds are observed at close range, and especially in bright sunlight.

The writer has seen the Blue-breasted Wren throughout the east coast range of hills on southern Eyre Peninsula, from Winter Hill to Ungarra, and in the heath and bottlebrush country from Sleaford Bay and Kellidie Bay north almost to Yeelanna. None have been seen north of the northern boundaries of the Hundreds of Yaranyacka, Stokes, and Cummins, nor have any been observed in the mallee country along the east coast between the range of hills mentioned above and the sea. Furthermore, no species of *Malurus* has been seen north of the northern limit mentioned above for at least as far north as Toologie Hill. It is not suggested that none are there, but if they do occur they must be very rare. North of this upper limit the rainfall decreases rapidly and the vegetation is dominated by mallee. The range of the birds along the western coastline north-west of Kellidie Bay is unknown.

The occurrence of *Malurus pulcherrimus* on Eyre Peninsula is a considerable eastern extension of the previously accepted range of the species, but is not incompatible with our knowledge of distribution of Western Australian birds. The range is probably not continuous, and variations of the climate in the intervening areas during recent times would account for the isolation of the species in South Australia. Eyre Peninsula is the eastern limit of other species found in Western Australia, e.g. *Colluricincla rufiven-*

tris and *Eopsaltria griseogularis*; the vegetation in this region, also, is regarded by botanists as being of Western Australian origin.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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REFERENCES

(1) Mack, G., 1934, "A Revision of the

- Genus *Malurus*." *Mem. Nat. Mus. Melb.*, No. 8, 100-125.
 (2) Mellor, J. W., 1921, "Description of a New Wren." *S.A. Orn.*, 6 (1), 10.
 (3) Sutton, J., "Birds of South Australia." *Ibid.*, 9, (2), 55-66.

(Editors' Note: Mr. Rix's investigations confirm the note published by E. Ashby in 1924 (*S.A. Orn.*, 7, 184-5) that Mellor's specimens were conspecific with *M. pulcherrimus* after he had made comparisons with Western Australian examples of that species. Ashby's identification was ignored by Mack but was the basis for Sutton's inclusion of the species in the South Australian list.)