

THE PURPLE-BACKED WREN

(*Malurus assimilis*)

By C. E. RIX

The following remarks are made after an examination of a large series of skins in the collections of the South Australian Museum, Captain S. A. White, and the writer.

In the examination of these skins both sexes were considered, but only the adult males in full breeding plumage are enumerated herein.

In all seventy male specimens of *Malurus assimilis* and seven of *Malurus lamberti* were examined. Unfortunately, those of the latter species lacked exact data; two skins were from "Willoughby, N.S.W." (a suburb of Sydney), while the others were labelled either "coastal New South Wales" or "New South Wales." These seven specimens resembled each other in all essential features. Exact localities were given for each of the specimens of *Malurus assimilis* and differences were noted in the colours of the ear-coverts in specimens from various districts or regions.

Specimens could be grouped under two headings, namely

- (1) *Malurus assimilis assimilis* North Southern Queensland; central, southern and south-western New South Wales; north and north-western Victoria; southern South Australia.
- (2) *Malurus assimilis mastersi* Mathews Northern, western and south-western Queensland; north-western New South

Wales; northern South Australia; Central Australia; Western Australia, except south-western corner.

The ear-coverts of *mastersi* are distinctly lighter in colour than those of *assimilis*, and are of a colour almost identical with that on the head and back of *lamberti* specimens examined.

Thirty-five specimens of (A) *assimilis* and 34 of (B) *mastersi* are listed below from the following localities:

(A) *Southern Queensland*: Yanco Station (6). *New South Wales*: Stephens Creek, Broken Hill (1), Lake Victoria (1). *Victoria*: Panitya (1), Nhill (1), Manya North (1). *South Australia*: Renmark (1), Hundred of Auld (1), Sutherlands (1), Portee (1), Bowhill (2), Hundred of Freeling (6), Bell Rock, near Barmera (2), Tailern Bend (1), Meningie (1), Sheoak Flat (1), Long Plains (1), Marion Bay, Yorke Peninsula (1), Port Broughton (1).

(B) *Queensland*: Caloola Station, Leichhardt River (1), Sedan, Cloncurry River (2), Mt. Leonard (1), Gates Station, Diamantina River (1). *South Australia*: Mt. Gason (1), Simpson Desert (2), Marree (1), Gammon Range (1), Kopperamanna (1), Finke River (1), Ernabella (1), Port Germein (2), Laura (2), Kallioota (1), Kanowna (1), Dalhousie (1), western slopes of Flinders Ranges (1), Moolawatana (1), Wertigo

(3), Donald's Plain (1), Yardea (1). *Northern Territory*: Coniston Station (1). *Western Australia*: Canning Stock Route (1), Geraldton (1), Fortescue River (3), Dirk Hartog Island (1).

No differences could be detected in specimens from the extremes of the ranges of *assimilis* and *mastersi*. Skins of *assimilis* from Yanco in south Queensland were exactly like ones from Yorke Peninsula, South Australia; similarly specimens of *mastersi* from Leichhardt River, north Queensland, could not be separated from examples from Geraldton, W.A. Apart from the colour of the ear coverts, the writer found no other sub-specific characters present; actually, specimens were separated (with two exceptions) by reference to the colour of the ear coverts and without reference to locality. The two exceptions mentioned were the specimen from the Hundred of Auld and one of the skins from the Hundred of Freeling. In these the colours were slightly different from typical specimens of either group, but probably nearer to *mastersi* than *assimilis*, although according to locality they belong to the latter group. The other five specimens from the Hundred of Freeling were typical *assimilis*.

Mack (1), who regards *assimilis* as a race of *lamberti*, states that when a series of *lamberti* skins are examined evidence of gradation towards *assimilis* and *mastersi* can be noted. No such evidence was provided by the material available to the writer. Mack also remarks on the paucity of specimens of *lamberti* from the area of convergence with *assimilis* and *mastersi*. Possibly this is because the ranges of the three forms do not meet.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The writer takes this opportunity of thanking the Director of the South Australian Museum and Captain S. A. White for the opportunity of examining the skins upon which the foregoing remarks were based.

REFERENCES

- (1) Mack, G., 1934, A Revision of the Genus *Malurus*. *Mem. Nat. Mus., Melb.*, No. 8, 100-125.

(*Editors' Note*: While the conception of what constitutes a species is largely a matter of individual judgment and experience, the modern trend is to *reduce* the number of

species. Mr. Rix's treatment of *Malurus assimilis* as a full species is contrary to the published findings of such authorities as Mack, Mayr and Serventy, and Mathews, who all regard it as a form of *Malurus lamberti*. Furthermore, Mayr and Serventy (*Emu*, XLIV, p. 36) also regard *Malurus pulcherimus* as a race of *M. lamberti*.)