

Book Review

Grasswrens: Australian outback identities

**ANDREW BLACK AND PETER GOWER,
2017**

Axiom, Stepney, South Australia, \$45

Hardback, 153 pages

Numerous photos and maps

Grasswrens, though not as colourful as their fairywren cousins, are fascinating to many birders. Well-named as 'Australian outback identities' by the book's subtitle, they reside in many out-of-the-way and remote places around this continent. Then if and when you manage to get there, there are no guarantees that you will see them, even if they are in your vicinity.

These cryptic birds seem to be highly practised at avoiding people, running swiftly with tail erect between clumps of vegetation and rarely venturing much above ground level. I learnt from this book that their thigh muscles and pelvic bones are much more developed than their breast (i.e. flight) muscles and bones.

In his foreword, Leo Joseph describes grasswrens as 'enigmatic' and the thrill of seeing them, often a hard-won experience, as 'electric'.

Andrew Black's text introduces grasswrens within their wider family (Australasian Wrens, Maluridae), covering the history of their discovery, naming and understanding of the relationships between species. The nature and behaviours of grasswrens, their habitats and social organisation are also described. Each species has its own chapter, giving details of its discovery, formal description, distribution



(including a map), population, habitat, subspecies and hints on where to find it. There are also chapters on voice, nests and eggs, and threats and conservation.

Many grasswren species went unreported for decades in the 20th century and it was only the advent of oil exploration and better outback roads that allowed their rediscovery. Even though it has become easier to travel the outback, grasswrens' habit of moving 50 – 200 m ahead of our intrusive presence makes photography of these small birds difficult, to say the least. It is all the more impressive that the late Peter Gower was able to assemble so many excellent photographs of each species as well as their habitats. In addition, Peter contributed an interesting chapter on the photographer's view.

While not setting out to be a comprehensive monograph on grasswrens, this book contains a wealth of information for any reader who has seen or wants to see these birds. For those who want to investigate further, there is a comprehensive bibliography. And if you want to do none of these things, the photographs will provide much enjoyment. For me, this book is a welcome addition to Australia's bird literature.

Merilyn Browne