

The Care and Husbandry of *Malurus* spp.

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Species Descriptions

Recently, a legislative change was made within the state of Queensland that allowed us to maintain native softbills for the first time, as I had been personally involved in the development of this legislation from the beginning I waited with anticipation for the start of the new regulations. Although we got blindsided with our expected list we still had a few things to play with and I was not wasting any more time in purchasing my first birds. Now started the steepest learning curve in my avicultural experiences. Although virtually every other state in Australia previously kept some species of softbills there is not a lot of literature to fall back on and no two people seem to agree on the best way to do things (I think this is because there IS NO RIGHT answer). This article will provide an overview of my experiences with the four species of *Malurus* wren group that I obtained in my first twelve months. The important information provided in this article is based on those bits of information that were drummed into my head by the experienced breeders that I purchased my birds from. It is that information that has made the initial transition from finches to softbills a little smoother for me and the most important facts to share.

Those *Malurus* wrens!

Wrens within the genus *Malurus* are often referred to as FAIRY WRENS to distinguish them from the grass wrens, emu wrens, scrub wrens, field wrens and heath wrens. In general usage however we tend to drop the "fairy" part as it just makes it too cumbersome and refer to them mostly just as "wrens". There is considerable argument with regards to the number of species of wren within Australia with the taxonomic splitters and clumpers having a field day with this group. Personally, the more they clump them the better it is as our legislation is based on a 1996 clumping text and does not recognise subspecies differences so a splendid wren is a splendid wren as far as they are concerned which gives us three instead of one species to play with. I will further clump them for convenience (and to annoy the taxonomists) according to their general colours.

The taxonomic options are as follows (choose your own preference):

BLUE WRENS

Superb Blue Wren – *M.cyaneus*

Splendid Wren – *M.splendens* (also known as *M.splendens splendens*)

Black Backed Blue Wren – *M.melanotus* (also known as *M.splendens melanotus*)

Turquoise Wren – *M.callainus* (also known as *M.splendens callainus*)

CHESTNUT SHOULDERED WRENS

Variegated Wren – *M.lamberti* (also known as *M.lamberti lamberti*)

Purple Backed Wren – *M.assimilis* (also known as *M.lamberti assimilis*)

Lavender Flanked Wren – *M.dulcis* (and *M.rogersi* in some texts) (also known as *M.lamberti dulcis* and *M.lamberti rogersi*)

Red Winged Wren – *M.elegans*

Lovely Wren – *M.amabilis*

Blue Breasted Wren – *M.pulcherrimus*

WHITE SHOULDERED WRENS

Black and White Wren – *M.leucopterus* (also known as *M.leucopterus leucopterus*)

White Winged Wren (Blue and White Wren) – *M.leuconotus* (also known as *M.leucopterus leuconotus*)

THE OTHERS

Red Backed Wren – *M.melanocephalus*

Purple Crowned Wren – *M.coronatus*

In all cases the male has a breeding and eclipse plumage and the female is a duller brownish bird (except in the Lovely wren). Hens can be difficult to tell apart between similar species. In the eclipse plumage, usually worn in the Autumn/Winter period, the male resembles the hen except for a little trace of male colour in the tail and wings. A young cock may not colour fully in its first year or two and older male may not revert back to full eclipse each year after 3-4 years of age.

The species that I keep are the Superb, Splendid, Purple Backed and White Winged Wrens and these are the species that will be discussed in this article.

Housing & Pairing

The simplest rule is that wrens require and deserve some form of dense cover (alive or dead).

BASIC RULE #1- A wren in an open bare aviary is merely waiting to stress and die. A planted aviary is ideal and, as wrens do not damage foliage, this is easy to maintain. The greatest issue I have found is compatibility. Some pairs are sweet as pie, others look sweet as pie but will show extreme aggression when you turn your back for a second. In fairness, this is entirely dependent on how you want to house them. Don't get any grand ideas that you can take a pair of wrens, thrust them into a mixed finch aviary and expect them to use the same space as a pair of finches. Some pairs might, for a period, tolerate this sort of stocking density but sooner or later somebody will irritate the wren in some way and pay for it dearly. The sweet as pie look hides a potentially vicious killer that will peel the skin of the back of a finch's head while it lays screaming under foot. The same

pair of birds in a logically stocked aviary will be a dream to look after.

BASIC RULE #2 – Do not put a wren in a situation where it has a chance to show off its fighting ability, because it will always win. I house my wrens in 3 types of cages (a) single pairs in an aviary 3-4 metres long, 1 metre wide and 2 metres high, (b) two pairs of unrelated softbills (1 species of wren and 1 other (Silvereye, Scarlet Honeyeater)) in an aviary 3 metres wide, 3 metres long and 2 metres high. This has yet to be proven successful for me in the long term as those aviaries were only built 2 months ago, (c) 1 pair of wrens in a reduced density finch aviary allowing at least 10-12 square metres of floor area for the pair of wrens and 2 square metres of floor area per pair of non aggressive finches. e.g an aviary of floor area 6 metres x 3 metres houses 1 pair of wrens and 3-4 pairs of finches. If in doubt, go with option (a), give as much room as possible and just enjoy your wrens. Never house two pairs of wrens together. Never place two coloured (I'll explain this later) male wrens together. I had one incident where a male wren was quick enough to shoot out over my shoulder into the walkway and I assumed it was from the last aviary that I had fed. I looked in, saw no male and flushed the bird into "his" aviary. By the time I had finished feeding, that cockbird was dead on the floor with a rather angry resident male standing on its chest plucking out its feathers to make sure it was dead. It happens.

It is best to not pair two wrens side by side (although it can be done). If the cock next door annoys the other and he can't do anything about it, he is just as likely to take it out on his hen or another aviary occupant.

When introducing two wrens (a male and a female) together, it is rarely love at first sight or at least they are reluctant to show their happiness until they have thoroughly defended their territory first.

When introducing 2 wrens, refer to **BASIC RULE #3** – Pair your birds slowly or be prepared to keep lots of spares.

I placed my new pairs in breeding cabinets with a centre divider. A clump of teatree in a corner provided some comfort and retreat and is placed at the outside edge for the first week. A bird is placed on either side and a divider (made of either 6mm bird wire or a frame with mosquito mesh tacked on) is placed between the "pair". Initially the birds will bounce around, occasionally talk to each other but otherwise keep to themselves. After a few days, you may observe them feeding each other through the wire or perching beside each other. After about a week, move the teatree to either side of the divider and watch for sleeping arrangements. If at the end of the day they settle down to roost perched beside each other, all is going well. Anything from 7-14 days after this, pull the centre divider and cross your fingers. A bonded pair will show little, if any, aggression and will allopreen regularly. An incompatible pair may chase each other and should be separated for another week or two. Once they have been together for another 7-10 days I move them into their normal aviary. Introducing a hen into a cock's aviary or vice versa is not recommended. Neutral ground is the key to successful bloodfree pairing. Even when transporting established pairs, hold them in separate compartments while travelling and pair them as above. Wrens seem to have very short memories but even shorter fuses when stressed. It is also prudent in a mixed aviary to not introduce too many other birds whilst harmony prevails, at least during breeding season. In the off season, a pair of wrens will mellow a little and you can get away with a lot more. Don't let my experiences put you off trying these little guys. I have visited aviaries that defied logic with regards to my

experiences and they do just fine BUT just when you think you have wrens sorted out, they change the game plan. Different species have different temperaments but this will vary between collections and individuals. My superbbs are "in your face" but I would not trust them as far as I can throw them. My splendids are equally as enthusiastic about life and seems to be reasonably tolerant of others. My white wings are very shy and to run into a drama with another bird they would need to find them first. My Purple backs were really shy in one aviary but have almost become annoyingly tame in a new aviary they were transferred too. Ask the breeder of your newly purchased birds about the temperament of the birds in their collection.

Reproductive Behaviour

Breeding in my first twelve months was not expected to set new records but I was quite proud of how things have gone so far. In the first 12 months I have had some success (and some failures) with three of the four species (the purple backs were purchased late in the season) and multiclutched two of those (white wings and superbbs).

Most cock wrens colour up into their breeding plumage around about August/September in South East Queensland. Further south they are a little later. Further north they are a little sooner. An older bird will also have a much shorter eclipse period. Many of my birds bred prior to completion of their full breeding plumage and were still breeding when they had started to lose colour.

The breeding setup for all birds was a choice of dried teatree brush, live grass and shrubs and wire tubes of dry teatree brush pieces. Most nests were surprisingly built in the wire tubes, often very close to the door, in the sheltered part of the aviary. Nests were built usually between 60 cm and 150 cm from the floor. Unlike finches, there did not seem to be any particular urge to use the aviary roof as a nest support and jam it up as high as possible. All wren nest are an oval shaped structure with an entrance about 2/3 the way up (about 120mm high, 70 mm wide with a 45mm entrance hole)'. My superbbs and splendids built a text book nest with perfect structural characteristics. My white wings made all of there nest in a way that is best described as a very poor cup with half a roof. It didn't seem to matter to them and is apparently common with them. Materials that were supplied were fine grasses, spider's web (twirled onto a forked stick like fairy floss), coconut fibre, cotton lint, surgical cotton wool (real cotton wool in a handy roll), emu feathers, hessian strips and cow tail hair. The superbbs used everything. The splendids used everything and found things I never even supplied (a 50 cm strip of plastic). The white wings used cotton wool, cotton wool, cotton wool, lots of spider web and a little coconut fibre (a lot like a feather obsessed Cuban finch). Regardless of construction, all nests were quite strong. The females does most of the building although the male often offered materials (although they were obviously substandard based on the looks most hens gave their mates). If for some reason the hen changed her mind about some aspect of the building process, she would simply pull the nest apart and, using the same materials, put it somewhere else. This surprisingly could take place much faster than the original construction of the nest. Again, with the exception of the white wings, the birds were not particularly secretive about the whole process. The first white wing nest was not noticed until the day before fledging but this was in part because the nest was so pathetic it looked like it been an abandoned project so I never took any notice of it. The white

wing hen would always go to the back of the aviary when approached so I had assumed that the nest was down there somewhere.

All the hens were light sitters except one superb hen who just didn't care. She built her nest at waist level, 15 cm from the feed station and sat tight and happy right through incubation. The others had the standard human radar switched on and left the nest if they heard you approaching the aviary.

Most nests contained 2-4 eggs, white or pinkish white with reddish brown spots. Incubation last 13-14 days and the chicks fledge at a ridiculous 11-13 days. The chicks are quite secretive and at best a glimpse is all you expect in the first few days. After this the chicks follow both parents around incessantly but are reasonably quiet about it. All chicks were seen to be feeding themselves after about 12-14 days. This is where things get confusing for me. In the wild, young chicks are kept around to assist with subsequent broods that season and some (mostly young cocks) are kept around for subsequent seasons to assist. In an aviary this can be possible if the aviary is big enough but come next September my males are just as likely to throttle anybody that they think poses a risk. My plan is to remove chicks in July unless the cock bird chooses an earlier date. Sexing the young birds can be quite frustrating as I learnt when purchasing my first few birds. The young cocks develop bluer wings and tails and black bills in most species but in some this may not occur until the following breeding season. These birds are too small for surgical sexing although DNA sexing is an option. A young cock in its first year may only develop a few coloured feathers around its head and upper back but can quite happily breed like this.

Summary

Below is a summary of my trials and tribulations in my first twelve months (but don't let them discourage you).

Superb Blue Wren

Pair 1:

- first nest 3 weeks after purchase. Fledged 3 chicks. Chicks squeezed through a small gap in solid wall dividing these birds from the splendids next door. All 3 chicks killed about 2 minutes later.
- second nest destroyed by kamikaze black breasted button quail, all eggs smashed prior to hatching.
- birds moved to new aviary 1 months later leaving partly constructed nest #3.

- fourth nest built 3 weeks after move. 2 chicks fledged.

Pair 2

- first nest built 1 week after pair 1. Fledged 3 chicks. One chick disappeared after days five, presumed dead but not found.
- nest two built about 5 weeks later. Chick presumed to have hatched but ants found swarming nest and nest deserted.
- moved to new aviary block 4 weeks later.
- Third nest started construction 2 weeks later at time of writing.

White Winged Wren

Pair 1

- hen died of severe threadworm infestation during quarantine period.
- delay on purchase of new hen for approximately 8 weeks.
- pairing with new hen successful after 2 ½ weeks.
- placed in new aviary. Nesting material carried after only 2 weeks. Nest not found until 2 days before fledged when found poorly constructed woollen cup.

- Chick fledged but badly beaten by stubble quail at day 5. Stubble quail badly beaten by me and removed on same day. Chick seen for four more days but disappeared after large storm during the night.
- renested 4 weeks later in a more noticeable site. Nest still poorly constructed. 3 chicks seen to hatched but all chicks missing after 5 days. Very poor supply of live food that week due to insufficient deliveries over Christmas period.
- renested 3 weeks later. Nest almost constructed and actually had a roof this time. Not sure if eggs laid.
- pulled nest apart and rebuilt in about 6 hours 40 cm away. Currently incubating at time of writing.

Pair 2

- no attempts at nesting noted but very young cockbird (about 7 months old)

Splendid Wren

Pair 1

- started building 5 weeks after purchase.
- accidentally let male into aviary with other male. 3 minutes later Pair 1 no longer capable of breeding.
- delay on purchase of new cock for approximately 8 weeks.
- successful pairing after 3 weeks.

- currently incubating eggs 7 weeks after purchase. New cock only ¼ coloured.

Pair 2 (actually trio)

- placed in large planted aviary as pair and last years "hen" chick. Aim to remove chick in July and pair with new cock.
- Young "hen" starts to attack old cock early July. Old cock dies two days later.
- Young "hen" develops striking blue feathers. Moved to aviary on its own.
- actual hen paired to spare cock after 3 weeks.
- moved to new aviary block and no nesting attempted as yet (3 weeks later at time of writing).

Purple Backed Wrens

- purchased 1 pair in December. Placed in very sheltered aviary. Acted very shy.
- no attempts at nesting noted
- moved to new aviary when another pair of wrens moved to new block.
- very changed temperament. Now quite tame and carrying material at time of writing.

As can be seen from the summary above, these are not your standard "put in a nest box and pull out the chicks 6 weeks later" kind of birds. Along with the frustrations comes a real feeling of achievement when things do go well. For those that have access to *Malurus* wrens, you are doing yourself a disservice to not own at least one pair. Few things can match their melodious wake up calls in the morning and no finch species can truly match the inquisitive temperament in such a colourful package. Go on, treat yourself.