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BOOK REVIEW

Fairy-Wrens and Grasswrens.

Ian Rowley and Eleanor Russell, 1997. Oxford University Press, Great Clarendon Street, Oxford. RRP \$85.00.

This book is the fourth in a series of monographs — Bird Families of the World — published by Oxford University Press. Released in December 1997, it is the culmination of forty years of field work by Ian Rowley, the last twenty being shared with his wife Eleanor.

The authors and illustrator have produced a masterful and up-to-the minute account of what we know about fairy-wrens, grass-wrens and emu-wrens — form a discussion of evolutionary theories to description of social organization and life histories, together with detailed species accounts. The text is complemented by maps, black-and-white illustrations and full colour plates by artist Peter Marsack. The colour plates are brilliant, and show a number of sub-species as well as some immature and juvenile plumages. The other illustrations are all beautifully clear — from the voice sonograms, maps and charts, to excellent descriptions of behaviour.

We are fortunate that the family Maluridae has been one of those most extensively studied in Australasia, with much recent work by Andrew Cockburn and his co-workers of the Australian National University, but especially Ian Rowley and Eleanor Russell in Western Australia. There are still many gaps in our knowledge, but a wealth of material is now available on several species, especially Superb, White-winged, Red-winged, Blue-breasted and Splendid Fairy-wrens. The discussions on social structure and breeding biology are fascinating. The value of colour-banding populations of birds is vividly highlighted.

In fact, the Maluridae have become quite notorious recently, with tales of cuckolding amongst some species. For example, less than 35 per cent of Superb Fairy-wrens are fathered by a male in the family territory. Of particular scientific interest are the insights into co-operative breeding, which are particularly prevalent in this family.

Criticisms are very minor. It would have been nice to have had the colour plates adjacent to the species accounts, instead of being bound together for economy in the middle of the book. Proof-reading must have been meticulous — the only 'typo' noticed was the Fairy-Wren rather than Fairy-wren on the dust jacket!

The text is lively and well-structured. These are authors totally conversant with their subject, who obviously relish the task of disseminating their knowledge. There is a full bibliography and index. It is a pity that the price (\$85.00) will deter many from purchasing it. However, anyone with a scientific interest in ornithology will not regret the investment.

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