

SEX AND AGE CHARACTERS OF THE YELLOW-THROATED SCRUB-WREN

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The plumage differences between sexes of the Yellow-throated Scrub-wren *Sericornis citreogularis* are distinctive and well known (Disney 1974; NPIAW 1982; Reader's Digest 1986). However, other than some subtle differences in plumage outlined in NPIAW (1982) and Reader's Digest (1986) there has been no simple method of ageing birds. This paper presents an easy and reliable means of separating this species into age classes using iris colour.

METHODS

Information was gathered from live caught birds caught during the course of banding activities at Pappinbarra Field Studies Centre, 45 kilometres west of Wauchope, New South Wales, from 1983 to 1991. A total of 180 birds were banded using ABBBS bands and 71 were subsequently retrapped a total of 176 times. Iris colour, as determined in full sunlight, was noted on individual data record cards (Lane 1987) on most of these occasions.

SEXING

The sexes of all birds can be determined using the plumage characters outlined by Disney (1974). The forehead, face, area under and through the eye and ear coverts are black in the male and greeny-brown in the female. These

differences are evident in all age classes although care should be exercised when attempting to age pulli as the facial area of juvenile males is dusky rather than glossy black.

AGEING

The prime indicator of age, in both sexes, is the colour of the iris.

Juvenile

Juveniles can be separated from older birds by (1) the lax and fluffier plumage; (2) distinct fleshy yellow gape; (3) grey iris; (4) dusky black facial area in males. These distinguishing features are lost within three months (retrap data), probably sooner as a relatively small number of juveniles were caught relative to immatures (Table 1). The age category is 'J', following the ageing system adopted by the Australian Bird and Bat Banding Schemes.

Immature

The plumage is similar to that of the adult. They are, however, readily distinguished by the brown colour of the iris. Retrap data indicates that this colour is retained for at least six to seven months and this is also suggested by the data presented in Table 1. The iris colour then gradually changes to the adult plum colour. Immatures can still be recognized by the brown outer ring of the iris. It is not known precisely how long it takes for the iris colour to change completely to plum but a time span of not more than seven months is indicated and is most likely to be about four months. The age category is 'I'.

Adult

A complete change to the adult plum coloured iris is achieved in about 12 months. A juvenile banded in January had a brown iris in April, a brown iris turning plum in October and a

TABLE 1

Frequency of capture of juvenile and immature (by iris colour) Yellow-throated Scrub-wrens handled at Pappinbarra Field Studies Centre.

	Number of birds												
	J	F	M	A	M	J	J	A	S	O	N	D	
Juvenile	4	1										3	1
Immature													
Brown iris		13	28	33	7	27	4	4	4	4	1	4	
Brown/plum iris	1		2	6	1	5		7	1	2	2	1	

completely plum iris in late December. The iris colour does not vary in response to such stimuli as breeding condition. Any bird with a complete plum iris may be assigned the age category '2+'.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study show that Yellow-throated Scrub-wrens can be sexed from fledging, unlike the White-browed Scrub-wren *S. frontalis* which has a female-like immature plumage (Disney 1974), and can be aged by noting iris colour. This has been summarized as a Bird in the Hand (Geering 1992). Juveniles may be readily identified by plumage texture, the presence of a distinct yellow gape and the grey iris colour. Immature birds have either a completely brown iris or a brown iris with a plum centre whilst adults have a completely plum iris. Using these criteria all birds can be reliably aged.

Large-billed Scrub-wrens *S. magnirostris* also undergo similar iris colour changes but as yet the timing of these changes has not been established

but appears to be similar to that of the Yellow-throated Scrub-wren.

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PREDATION ON GOULDIAN FINCH *Erythrura gouldiae* BY REPTILES

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INTRODUCTION

Studies on wild populations of the Gouldian Finch *Erythrura gouldiae* have been conducted in the Northern Territory since 1986 (Woinarski and Tidemann 1992). The species is classed as endangered (Joost and Garnett 1990). It co-occurs with Masked Finch *Poephila personata* and Long-tailed Finch *P. acuticauda*, both of which are abundant in northern (central and west) Australia (Blakers *et al.* 1984).

There have been no records of predation on the Gouldian Finch by reptiles although Brown Tree Snakes *Boiga irregularis* and small goannas *Varanus timorensis* have been found

in hollows in which finch nests have been built (pers. obs.). Ghost Bats *Macroderma gigas* have been recorded taking Gouldian Finches (Shulz 1986).

Observations of predation on a Gouldian Finch adult by an Olive Python *Liasis olivaceus* and a nestling by a Spotted Tree Monitor *Varanus timorensis* are reported.

STUDY AREA AND PREDATION

Observations were made (1) at a rock-hole situated in a creek, and (2) at a nest in *Eucalyptus tintinnans*, in the Yinberrie Hills (14°09'45"S, 132°06'E) about 50 km north of Katherine,