

Willie Wagtail

Rhipidura leucophrys

I've see him here, I've see him there, I've see him almost everywhere, for the charismatic little Willie Wagtail, in his smart black-and-white uniform, is among the most common of birds – but common is not a word that carries any derogatory connotations as far as this endearing little character is concerned.

Mister William Wagtail has been my faithful companion for aeons and has accompanied me on every journey, or at least that's how it seems, for whenever I stop and step out of my vehicle during a trip into the bush or even into the most remote corner of the outback he's there to greet me. It's almost as though he's tucked himself into one of my campervan's many crevices or clung tenaciously onto the bull bar and hitched a ride to every destination. "I hope you enjoyed the journey and didn't get too windblown," I often greet him as he flutters joyfully before me, but his

monochrome plumage is invariably immaculate with not a single feather ruffled or flecked with dust.

I never need to be coy or cautious in my interactions with this perpetually joyful little fella for the Willie Wagtail, who entertains me with his cheerful twittering as he wags his tail rapidly from side to side, never has any intentions of disappearing from sight. It appears that his only aim is to please me and that's something that my mate William always does to perfection.

This is not a bird that makes himself unwelcome by continually scrounging for food, for he has no interest in breadcrumbs or any scraps





of the food that I find delicious. He's a skilful hunter that catches his own food and he likes nothing better than a feast of insects that, with astounding speed and agility, he grabs from the air while in flight.

A Willie Wagtail is a regular visitor to one of the bird baths in my forested garden but it was an enthralling outback performance by one of these personable little birds that became one of my most memorable avian encounters. On a journey through south-western Queensland I'd stopped to photograph a mob of kangaroos that were dozing in the dense shade of a cluster of Yapunyah trees and while I captured a portrait of the family group my other half had other things to do. As an insomniac he spends most nights awake and often needs to catch a nap during the day and when I returned to our campervan he was sleeping soundly. Rather than disturb him, I grabbed some cake and a flask of water, wandered across to a nearby waterhole and took up a birdwatching position on a log beneath the shading vegetation, but I wasn't alone, for Willie Wagtail had discreetly followed me.

"I'm sure you're not here simply to keep me company?" I whispered as the little bird settled on the ground beside me. "Wherever there's water there are sure to be plenty of insects, so you should be able to get plenty of tucker here," I informed young William. It was a fact that I'm sure he already knew and he glared at me with a look of amazement that momentarily left me feeling a tad embarrassed. "And you thought I didn't know that?" its stare seemed to say and little Willie Wagtail fluttered off to satisfy both its own desire for food and my unspoken demand for entertainment.



With its wings outstretched it danced above the murky water as elegantly as the most accomplished of ballerinas, with the grace of Margot Fonteyn and the strength and stamina of Rudolf Nureyev. It twirled and pirouetted tirelessly in a gracefully and perfectly choreographed performance. It banked from side to side, its wings momentarily dipping into the water and twirled around and around again and again. Finally Mister William Wagtail, in his slow and calculated finale, did a slow lap around the perimeter of the waterhole before settling on a rock



that protruded from the coffee-coloured soup and took a well-deserved bow before his awestruck audience of one, then took to the air once again for an encore performance.

"I'm sorry I left you on your own for so long," my husband said as he arrived on the scene, yawning and rubbing his eyes, yet refreshed after his midday nap. He hadn't noticed my little mate, the enchanting Willie Wagtail, who, with a facial expression that was nothing short of avian laughter, had settled quietly onto a nearby branch. "You must have been bored out here with nothing to do," my human mate said with genuine concern but I'm never bored when I'm in the bush and certainly not when I have my feathered friends to entertain me.

Aboriginal people are said to be wary of Willie Wagtails for they believe that the birds eavesdrop on their conversations and reveal their secrets to others. I have no such concerns for I harbour no secrets that I'm reluctant to share, not even the secret of my next outback destination. "I'll see you at the next stop," I call to the Willie Wagtail each time I clamber back into my vehicle and I know my little mate will be there to greet me once again.

Where you'll find them: They are found throughout mainland Australia in a wide range of habitats and are regular visitors to many urban parks and gardens.

Superb Fairy-wren

Malurus cyaneus

It might be hard to believe that anyone could ever resent the presence of Superb Fairy-wrens, but these attractive little birds have perfected the art of making a nuisance of themselves. It was during a bitterly cold winter, while I was camping among the forests of the Wollemi National Park in New South Wales, that I first made the acquaintance of these hyperactive characters. With no other humans in the vicinity, they invited themselves to become my companions for several days and insisted on commandeering the picnic table as the focus of their activities. Every lunchtime they hopped across my sandwiches and scooped as many crumbs as they could before I shooed them away. And they bathed in the bowl of washing-up water in which I'd lazily left my crockery and saucepans soaking, with their little wings stirring a hint of detergent into billowing foam as



they seemed more intent on having fun than in the serious business of cleaning their plumage.

The inquisitive little blighters fluttered around inside my tent, clambered into my sleeping bag and explored the heap of dirty clothes that, being a temporary slob when camping, I'd tossed into a corner of my humble abode. When I moved the birds on yet again they fluttered so close to my campfire that I expected to see one or more of them with singed feathers and blistered toes. As I boiled some water on my stove they



scampered around my feet, forcing me to keep one eye on the pot of bubbling stew and one eye on the ground to ensure that I didn't tread on a fairy-wren or two.

The highlight of one day came when I was entertained by the hyperactive little birds as they took turns sliding down the handle of a spatula that had been left outside overnight and that was frozen into the ice that was once the water in my washing up bowl. I couldn't contain my laughter as I watched their tiny faces and heard their incessant twittering that I interpreted as an avian version of "Whoopee!" "What fun you lot are having," I said, not bothering to whisper as there seemed to be no possibility that something as simple as a few words would disrupt their pleasure and frighten them away.

If Superb Fairy-wrens could be assigned human characteristics, friendly, cheeky, mischievous and extroverted would all be quite appropriate. These charismatic and inquisitive little birds are tenacious creatures too and the stubborn determination of one individual was on display at the Wallingat National Park in New South Wales. I'd enjoyed a day of fine weather but on day two of my stay in this densely forested park the weather gods were not on my side and I had no option other than to spend the day sitting under the awning of my tent watching the landscape receive a drenching. Few birds were out and about, not that I could blame them but on that day, when there had been as much activity from both wildlife and humans as there might be at an annual gathering of barnacles. I became excited as noon approached. It was the anticipation of the highlight of the day's activities that got my blood pumping, anticipation of an event that would be only a tad more exciting than watching a game of cricket in slow motion. It was time to make lunch and boil the kettle for a cuppa but as I tried to decide what item on my limited culinary repertoire would top



the menu, along came Mister Fairy-wren and food was on his mind too.

Ignoring the rain, he waded through puddles, fluttered among grasses that were bent down under the weight of raindrops and pecked at the muddy ground – then suddenly he hit the jackpot. He began pulling up an earthworm that, in relation to a fairy-wren, was a gigantic creature. I watched the battle of bird against worm in silent awe as the fairy-wren demonstrated the tenacity of a pet rat on a treadmill and the worm equally stubbornly refused to submit to a fate that could only result in its death. It stood little chance of survival however, for in the sodden ground and with a determined enemy it would either drown or be eaten, neither being a good option from a worm's perspective. The bird was the ultimate victor, cramming the worm that was longer than its entire body into its bill, one juicy bit after another.

The bird stood in the rain, savouring the reward of its efforts. "Now you've got a full stomach perhaps it's time to find somewhere to shelter from the rain," I quietly suggested as the wren appeared unsure what to do next. Then suddenly it made a decision and took my advice – and fluttered into my tent. "Why don't you make yourself at home," I said sarcastically, "but don't burn your feet on the hot kettle," I added as it landed on the table to inspect my food. As it settled onto the book that I'd been reading and began to preen its saturated feathers, I didn't have the heart to shoo it out into the cold and miserable weather.



Over the years I've had numerous delightful encounters with Superb Fairy-wrens that live in small family groups. I've been mesmerised by every glimpse into their lives as I've watched them flitting among tall grasses and dense shrubs in their usual hyperactive way as they search for insects that are the main component of their diet that also includes seeds, small flowers and of course earthworms.

Although it's usually a gaudy male that's the first to capture my attention I never ignore the females of the species, even though they're far less glamorous than their companions. During the breeding season the male, with his iridescent blue plumage, is as conspicuous as a shark in a goldfish bowl, but it's only males that are more than four years of age that retain their gaudy plumage all year long. The younger little blokes and females have drab brown plumage but with all males having dark blue tails and females wearing an orange patch around each eye there's no confusion about who's who in the wonderful world of Superb Fairy-wrens.

Where you'll find them: They inhabit woodland areas that have dense undergrowth, grasslands with scattered low shrubs, and thickets of lantana and blackberries within south-eastern Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria, the south-eastern corner of South Australia and Tasmania.