

A Possible Instance of Polyandry

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Polyandry, or the plurality of males attached to a female, is rare among birds other than cuckoos; at least, it has seldom been recorded, from which we may infer that it occurs infrequently. Undoubtedly this is as it should be and quite in accordance with evolutionary theories. However, I observed recently what appears to be an instance of this nature. Withal the following remarks are made provisionally for they are capable of other, and perhaps just as logical, explanations.

On September 14 of this year (1929) a nest of the Variegated or Lambert's Wren (*Malurus lamberti*), containing three recently hatched young and one egg, was discovered through the agitation of the beautifully plumaged male. With depressed tail and body and the feathers on his lower back raised much after the manner that the hair on a cat's back bristles with fright, he assumed the most comical attitudes, constantly moving his head from side to side and sidling along grass stems or small twigs. The female acted similarly but less vigorously.

When I reclined a few yards away both birds became composed, the female going to the nest which she entered head first and then turned, all the while her long tail projecting slightly above the large side opening of the structure. The male then made off on a forage. A few minutes later I was astounded to see a partly-plumaged male, which had been noticed nearby earlier in the day, come to the nest and feed the sitting female. This happened on two subsequent occasions; betimes the female left the nest and returned with food for her young, which were constantly being fed by the partly-plumaged male.

Only three times in about ninety minutes did the fully plumaged male actually feed the young, and then seemingly with reluctance, though he displayed the greatest excitement whenever I visited the nest, coming within a few inches of my hand. On a few occasions he gave to the female the food he was carrying. There were times when both males were in full view of each other without exhibiting the slightest animosity.

While the preceding remarks seem to indicate polyandrous relations, it is, of course, possible that the partly-plumaged male was one of the previous year's offspring, and, not mating this year, had attached himself to his parents. Again there are records of males of the genus *Malurus* breeding in winter plumage or before attaining full colour. Mr. Charles F. Belcher in *The Birds of the*

*District of Geelong, Australia, 1914, p. 287, notes that a Mr. Mulder observed that such was sometimes the case with the Blue Wren (*Malurus cyaneus*), and Dr. MacGillivray, writing in *The Emu*, Vol. xxix., 1929, p. 124, mentions that the Red-backed Wren (*M. melanocephalus*) is known to breed in winter plumage. Might not the half-plumaged male have mated with the female some seven or eight weeks previously, when in all probability he would have then been in very poor colour?*

There appears to be considerable doubt whether the Variegated Wren has a seasonal moulting phase. The late A. J. North, in his *Nests and Eggs of Birds*, vol. i., pt. iv., 1904, p. 220, remarks of *Malurus lamberti*:—" . . . I had the owners of it (a nest) under almost daily observation for over twelve months, and never at any time saw the male except in his fully adult and distinguished livery."

From my own field notes I have records of two isolated pairs of these birds observed during the winter months, on May 7 and 17, 1929, respectively, at localities separated by some fifteen miles. Both males were exactly alike in colouration, i.e., brownish above, lighter underneath with dull blue tails, and having a thin stripe of sooty black along the side of the neck in a position just below the ear coverts known as the malar region.

As both males seemed loath to leave the company of the female, the question arises, naturally enough, were they old males attaining full plumage after moulting or young males coming into colour? If the latter, why were they paired long before the breeding season, which in the neighbourhood of Sydney extends from August till November?

Grass Parrots at Devonport, Tas.—On the morning of October 6, while returning home from Mersey Bluff, I noted a small party of Grass Parrots (*Neophema*) beside the fence of a paddock on the further side of the road. They were very restless, continually on the move and making short flights, and as I had not the binoculars with me, I was unable to ascertain whether the species was *venusta* or *chrysogaster*. There is little doubt that the party had come across Bass Strait the previous night, as these interesting little Parrots do not remain about Devonport, but prefer to move to more inland paddocks. Some years ago I noted quite a number in the short grass at Harford, six or eight miles east from here; and the Westbury district, about half-way between Devonport and Launceston, used to be much frequented by them.—H. STUART DOVE, R.A.O.U., 24/10/29.



Female Variegated Wren at nest.

Photo. by K. A. Hindwood, R.A.O.U.