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The Mangrove-Robin

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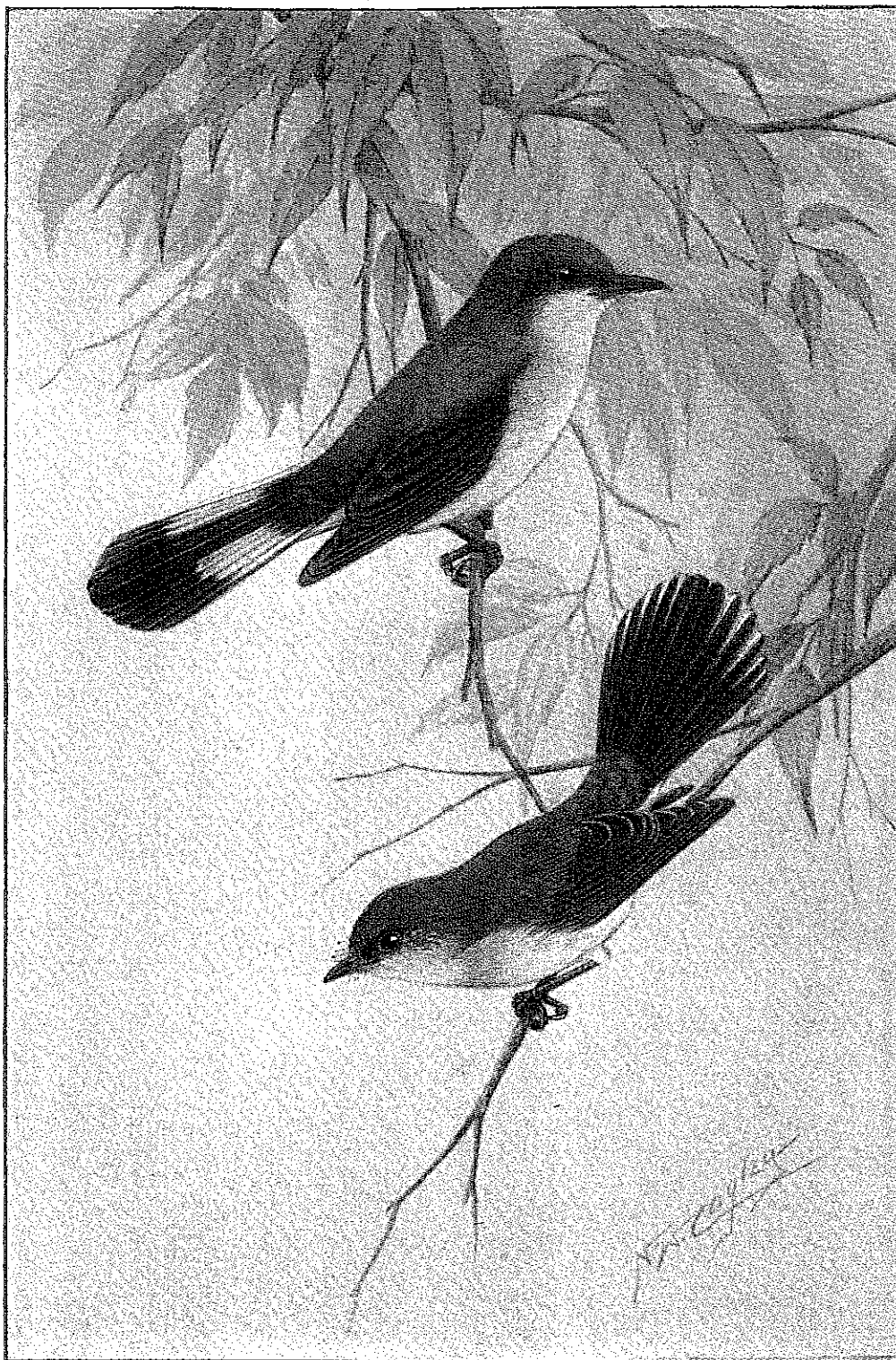
The original skin of the Mangrove-Robin (*Quoyornis leucurus*) was obtained by John Gilbert at Port Essington in the late "forties" of the last century but was, unfortunately, much too dilapidated to permit the species at that time to be adequately described or figured. Some twenty years later several good examples were secured by Cockerell at Somerset, Cape York, Queensland, and the species was then described by Gould as new in the *Annals and Magazine of Natural History*,* under the name *Eopsaltria leucura*. Gould repeated the description in *The Birds of Australia*, Supp. 18, 1869. The two publications referred to came out on the same day, but the description in *The Birds of Australia*, accompanied by a plate, has priority. Mathews, in honour of Jean Rene Quoy, in 1912, introduced the generic name *Quoyornis* for the bird previously called *E. georgiana* = *leucogaster* Gould, and in 1920† proposed the generic name *Penecœnanthe* for what was then known as *Quoyornis leucurus*.

The geographical distribution of the species is given by *The Checklist* as coastal tropic Australia; the southernmost locality in the synonymy being the Norman River in the "Gulf" country. Campbell and Barnard‡ record the Mangrove-Robin breeding near Cardwell, and in the collection of the Australian Museum are several skins taken by Cairn and Broadbent from the same locality. In March, 1932, and again in November and December of the same year, I found the bird inhabiting the extensive mangrove swamps skirting Rockingham Bay. In view of these facts and the references given in the synonymy in *The Checklist*, it should be

*Vol. IV, Series IV, p. 108, 1869.

†*Birds of Australia*, Vol. VIII, p. 274.

‡*The Emu*, Vol. XVII, p. 2.



Upper : Mangrove Robin (*Quoyornis leucurus*)

Lower : White-breasted Robin (*Q. georgianus*)

Neville W. Cayley, pinx.

safe more particularly to define the range of *Q. leucurus* as from mid-western Australia along the north-western coast to Melville Island, around Cape York, and down the north-eastern coast to Rockingham Bay—roughly four thousand miles of mangrove-studded coastline.

In northern Australia we have many birds which have been referred to by various writers as “mangrove-dwellers” but which, in reality, spend comparatively little time among the mangroves. In *Q. leucurus*, however, we have a true bird of the mangroves, for this quietly-coloured though protectively-garbed Robin seems to live entirely in the peaceful seclusion of the tropic mangrove swamps.

Along the shores of Rockingham Bay and the Hinchinbrook Channel grows a tall straight-stemmed variety of mangrove, rough-barked and large-leaved; these are in thousands, so close together that they are almost impenetrable. Usually there is no beach; the waves of the Coral Sea simply beat against the outer fringe of the mangroves and gradually filter through the trunks and tall spreading roots to the narrow sand-bank and strip of scrub which separates the first belt of mangroves from the more extensive areas of the common well-branched variety. It is among these tall outer mangroves that *Quoyornis leucurus* makes its home. Sheltered by the large leaves from the torrential tropic rains and from the boisterous winds of the Pacific by the closely-packed trunks, the Mangrove-Robin lives in peaceful seclusion with apparently no natural enemies. Here Hawks cannot penetrate and reptiles are unknown. There appears to be an unlimited supply of insect food, and as there is apparently very little competition by other birds, it seems extraordinary that *Quoyornis* is not very much more plentiful than it is.

I will not readily forget my initial meeting with this distinctive little Robin. Early one autumn morning I paused at the edge of a perfect wall of mangroves, uncertain whether or not to force my way through to the sea, when a beautiful though somewhat mournful note came from the depths of the swamp. A speculative whistle instantly brought a Mangrove-Robin within a few inches of my face. It flew silently; in fact had I not been facing the direction from which it appeared, its presence would never have been suspected. It has the familiar old “Yellow-bob’s” trick of sitting quietly and almost motionless on a bough, and by so doing (aided by its oblitative colour scheme) will usually pass unnoticed at a few yards. During the time the Robin was about me it was quite motionless, save for the occasional slight fluttering of the wings. It was quite silent also, though I did my best to provoke it to further vocal effort. An extraction from my note-book is as follows:—

Rockingham Bay, 17/11/'32: A Mangrove-Robin was "called up" from the depths of the far southern swamp. He often fluttered his wings, flew from tree to tree and once emitted a delightful little musical outburst, but was immediately silent again. The long mournful double-note was thrice heard; it sounded far away when the bird was quite close. Whether this bird is possessed of ventriloquial powers, or whether its mate was calling in the mangroves behind I was unable to ascertain. Shining Flycatchers and a pair of Large-billed Warblers were also in the vicinity; the spirited whistling of the former combined with the Warbler's delightful song, and the Robin's attractive melody, made the usually dismal-seeming mangrove swamp a much more attractive place than customary.

18/11/'32: Was watching a Fairy Warbler when I heard the call of *Quoyornis*. One bird came first and gave a single soft "churring" note, and when I whistled, gave that delightful little warbling outburst previously commented upon. Its mate joined it, whereupon it opened its bill in mock anger and next sang once again. Both birds fluttered their wings frequently. Searched unsuccessfully for the nest until the mosquitoes and sandflies drove me out.

In the two pests mentioned I think we have one of the reasons for our lack of knowledge of most mangrove-dwelling species. It is usually neither difficult nor uncongenial to sit for perhaps hours in a forest or even a jungle, watching some bird, and thus obtaining an intimate knowledge of its behaviour. But when one has to crouch (often knee-deep in ooze) in a mosquito and sandfly infested swamp, such conditions are not altogether conducive to the gathering of field data.

The nest of *Quoyornis leucurus* has many features characteristic of the Robins. It is an open, cup-shaped nest, constructed principally of bark, fibre and spiders' webs. It is lined with rootlets and fibres, and is decorated exteriorly with long fragments of bark. The nest is usually placed in a fork from five to fifteen feet from the mud. The eggs, too, show affinity with those of other Robins. Two eggs appear to constitute a clutch; they are green, prominently spotted brown, or reddish-brown, intermixed with faint lilac markings. The breeding season is stated to extend from August to February. By this it will be seen that the Mangrove-Robin is an extremely irregular breeder, as are also numerous other species in northern Australia, where the "wet season" to a great extent governs the breeding of many forms of life.

A brief description of the Mangrove-Robin is as follows: Dark grey head, merging into bluish-grey on the back and wing coverts; upper tail-coverts blackish; primaries, secondaries, and tertials light brown; throat, white; breast, greyish; abdomen, white. The dark brown tail is heavily banded with white at the base, a feature which is responsible for the now obsolete vernacular, "White-tailed Robin."