Red-backed Fairy-wren - *Malurus melanocephalus*

Male Red-backed Fairy-wren.

Female Red-backed Fairy-wren. The tail is relatively short and lacks any trace of a blue tint often found in fairy-wren females. Note the orange-red bill and whitish-brown between eye and bill.

The Red-backed Fairy-wren - *Malurus melanocephalus* - (10 to 13 centimetres) is like other fairy-wrens in that it has a different appearance depending on gender and breeding condition. Breeding males are black with a red or crimson saddle over the back, wings are often brown. Bill is black, legs and feet are pale brown. Tail is black and not as long as other fairy-wren species males, nor is the breeding male tail as long as the females. Non-breeding males are similar to females, sometimes with traces of red visible.

In autumn breeding males moult to adopt non-breeding plumage similar to females which is retained for five or six months. During the transition patches of the red back can be seen on a scruffy bird.
Older, dominant males moult from breeding plumage directly into breeding plumage and avoid non-breeding plumage entirely.

Females are mid-brown above; cream-white below, bill is orange-brown. Face is plain and lacks identifying marks. Tail of female red-backed fairy-wrens is pale brown like the rest of the upper parts. Unlike most other fairy wren females, which often have traces of blue tinting the tail, there is no trace of blue in the tail of this species. Immature birds are coloured as for females but more buff in colour with longer tails.

The Red-backed Fairy-wren is found from the Kimberley across tropical northern Australia to Cape York and down the east coast into near-coastal northern New South Wales. Lives in open woodland and forest, grasslands, spinifex and swamps. They forage actively in the morning and evening gleaning insects from vegetation.

There are two versions. The northern one, found across northern Australia, including Cape York, is more crimson than red and has a shorter tail. This is known as race *cruentatus*. The other version, found along the coast of Queensland and into north-east New South Wales, has an orange-scarlet back; this is known as race *melanocephalus*.

Sedentary and communal breaking into small groups or pairs to breed and later gathering in loose flocks of 20 to 30. Females are courted by the males carrying red petals. Breeding takes place from August to March, later in the north. The nest is a grass dome low in in a grass clump or small bush; near watercourses the nest is placed higher, sometimes in a pandanus. Three or four eggs are laid, white with small red-brown spots at the larger end; oblong-oval in shape, about 16 by 12 millimetres.