

Western Australian Gerygones

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The gerygones belong in the family *Acanthizidae*, a diverse group of birds ranging from very small to medium sized passerines. In the main they are drably plumaged, but there are notable exceptions. Most of them are centred in Australia and New Guinea. The gerygones extend beyond Australia and New Guinea with three species in Wallacea (2 endemic); one in SE Asia; two in New Zealand, although one of these is now extinct and one in the SW Pacific. The entire family *Acanthizidae* includes Pilotbird, Rockwarbler, Fernwren, scrubwrens, Scrubtit, heathwrens, fieldwrens, Redthroat, Speckled Warbler, Weebill, gerygones, thornbills and whiteface. It comprises 64 species, of which 42 species occur in Australia and its territories, of which 36 are endemic and only occur in Australia which is second only to honeyeaters. Nineteen species occur in Western Australia including two endemics (Dusky Gerygone and Western Thornbill).

The gerygones occupy a wide variety of habitats: from arid and semi-arid eucalypt woodlands, to rainforests and mangroves. A few species are partly migratory and some undertake long long-distance movements. For example the southern White-throated Gerygones breed in SE Australia and migrate north in winter. Mainly feed in the canopy along with the Pardalotes.

The name gerygone is Greek and means "echoes of a child". HANZAB a little ungenerously (I feel) describes their voices as thin and high-pitched; mostly plaintive with notes that rise and fall and some bursts of sound at the same pitch. Speaking personally, I regard the gerygones as among our finest singers - perhaps because a touch of melancholy touches the heartstrings in a way that bright, exuberant song does not. It has an uplifting quality that touches the soul and one can't but help enjoy being a little sad. The name gerygone was proposed by John Gould, which was strange considering he regarded it as "little skilled in song". The name has also been translated as "born of sound".

Many species have, or are, adversely affected by clearance and fragmentation of natural habitat. Overgrazing also has an effect, especially to the Redthroat. Changes to fire regimes are also a danger.

REDTHROAT (*Pyrrholaemus brunneus*)

A rather nondescript little bird with a lovely voice. Found mostly in acacia and chenopod woodlands, often along watercourses or drainage lines. Occurs in arid and semi-arid regions, coasts, plains and inland ranges. Although found in every mainland state, its range is often limited and populations are generally sparse and scattered. WA has by far the biggest range - from Eyre north west to the Pilbara, but absent in the south-west. Redthroats are frequently parasitised by Black-eared Cuckoos.

HANZAB, speaking of its voice, says somewhat confusingly that it is "poorly known" but then also says "often first detected by beautiful song, which is audible at 100m in calm days". Hard to hear on silent or windy days. Seen as an accomplished mimic, mimicking perfectly (although more quietly) the song of the Pied Butcherbird. Voice again described "as beautiful, pleasing, sweet and melodious". Populations have declined in many areas due to clearing and overgrazing.

MANGROVE GERYGONE (*Gerygone levigaster*)

The nominate race *levigaster* is found from Roebuck Bay, east through NT to central Cape York Peninsula. The specific name comes from the Latin *laevum* - favourable (usually in augury) and *gaster* - belly. The race *cantator* is found on the east coast from Cape York to Botany Bay and coastal S New Guinea. Most likely to be confused with the Large-billed and Dusky Gerygones who also frequent mangroves. Interestingly, more often found in adjacent habitats especially melaleucas in the Kimberley.

Generally considered to be sedentary, may be more movement at the southern end of its range. Not always seen, especially in the breeding season, except by those, in Arnold McGill's words, "who enjoy mud-margined tidal flats and who heed but little mosquitoes and sandflies".

Its voice is described as rich, melodious, rising and falling, varied and sustained. At times calls constantly but there is variation according to locality even over a few kilometres. Johnstone says the voice is similar to the Western Gerygone but not as long according to Gould.

WESTERN GERYGONE (*Gerygone fusca*)

Oddly named since it almost reaches the east coast of Australia. Similar to Brown, Large-billed, Dusky and Mangrove Gerygones but readily distinguished from them by its bold black and white tail pattern. When it is seen hovering near foliage a neat bird becomes strikingly attractive because of its fanned tail. It has a preference for a drier climate but does have a few locations in the tropical zone. It is found in three distinct areas from WA - central Australia and eastern Australia. There is evidence of some migratory movement generally from south to north during winter.

Descriptions of its song range from rapturous to fairly dismissive. It has been described as having the qualities of a leaf falling slowly to the ground but not reaching it. I like the description from a visiting ornithologist visiting Perth (it was common on the Swan River coastal plain); he said "I have never heard notes so plaintively microscopic, so clear and yet scarcely perceptible. The ghost of a kitten's mew - the echo of dwarf violins played in the moon - these were the bird's notes".

It has been adversely affected by the removal of native vegetation in the WA wheatbelt and the removal of melaleucas in the Avon valley.

DUSKY GERYGONE (*Gerygone tenebrosa*)

The only endemic gerygone in WA. Range begins south of Carnarvon to Cape Keraudren, absent from Eighty Mile Beach; then from near Frazier Downs to Kimbolton and Trent River on Yampi Peninsula. Three subspecies with the nominate race *tenebrosa* found furthest north in the SW Kimberley. It is the smallest and darkest of the subspecies. *Tenebrosa* means 'gloomy' or 'dark'. Similar to the other mangrove dwelling gerygones and the Western as well, but is the only one of the Australian species that has a pale eye.

Its song is regarded as the least interesting of its genus, being less vigorous and more repetitive. Matthews said it was melodious but hesitant. Discovered at the beginning of the 20th century and named in 1901. Probably the least known of the Australian gerygones. It has more of an eyebrow than its nearest look-alike, the Large-billed Gerygone and its nest is considerably smaller. The two species do not occur together.

LARGE-BILLED GERYGONE (*Gerygone magnirostris*)

As its name suggests, this species has a heavier bill than the other gerygones. The Kimberley and NT race also has a longer bill than the Mangrove and is broader. Found only in the NE Kimberley in WA. Confined to the top end in the NT. In Qld it is found on many of the offshore islands and the eastern coast of Cape York. Common in the New Guinea lowlands and satellite islands. Its movements are poorly known but there appears to be seasonal movement around Kakadu.

Builds a different kind of nest from the others of its genus. It has been described as pendant, bulky, untidy and domed with a long jagged tail, resembling flood debris. In common with other gerygones, often builds its nest close to wasp nests. Both sexes sing - the song of the female is pretty but generally not as loud as the male. Gould said its song was extremely weak twittering but this is kind, it is a fine songster - some even regard it as the best. In common with other gerygones, often parasitised by Bronze-cuckoos.

GREEN-BACKED GERYGONE (*Gerygone chloronotus*)

Smaller than most other Gerygones with a distinctive dark green upper body and upper wing with a white under body and unmarked tail. Its flanks have a brownish wash which extends along the breast in WA birds. Confined to the Kimberley division east of the Dampier Peninsula and the top end of the NT. Found mainly in riparian closed forest, but also in mangroves. Common in monsoon vine thickets. It is also common in New Guinea in the lowlands, but absent from the highlands.

Its song has been described as a reel or an upsweeping, sweetly whistled trilled motif repeated many times without change. Gould, who named it in 1842, thought it was unusual in many respects from other gerygones and could be found wearing a different appellation one day. Not easy to find, but this is true of many of the northern birds.

WHITE-THROATED GERYGONE (*Gerygone olivacea*)

Wide-ranging species, second only to the Western in the size of its distribution areas. There are three subspecies in Australia and New Guinea. The nominate race *olivacea* covers the east coast from the base of the Cape York Peninsula, through Victoria to south-east South Australia. The race *cinerascens* is found in northern and central Cape York Peninsula and the coastal south-east tail of New Guinea. The race *rogersi* is found from Roebuck Bay to the head of the Gulf of Carpentaria, and is the only race found in Western Australia.

Along with the Fairy Gerygone certainly the most of beautiful of the Australian birds. Often regarded as the best songster amongst the Australian birds. This has been described as "quick, sweet whistled notes, first rising, then cascading chromatically up and down the scale in a long, liquid, reeling trill". *rogersi* is said to be slower, meandering up and down scale. The male, being a gentleman sings enthusiastically all the time the female is building the nest and brooding the young. The female is very laconic, responding according to one report, three times to 200 songs from the male.