

THE AUSTRALIAN WHITE-BROWED WOOD SWALLOW IN NEW ZEALAND

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ABSTRACT

The presence of the Australian White-browed Wood Swallow in N.Z. is described together with the possible sighting of a Masked Wood Swallow. Both are new records for New Zealand.

On 10 January 1972 the Otago Museum received a telephone call concerning the identification of a bird that had been captured at the Naseby State Forest. The caller, Mr Collett of the Forest Service, gave an excellent description of the bird which ruled out the possibility of it being a normal resident of New Zealand. A further telephone call to Mrs D. M. Shaw, whose husband Mr W. C. Shaw had captured the bird, led to the tentative identification of this bird being a male White-browed Wood Swallow (*Artamus superciliosus*). Arrangements were made to have the bird sent to the Museum and it arrived on the morning of 13 January. The rufous brown underparts and dark grey-blue head, neck and upperparts, together with the conspicuous white stripe above its eye left little doubt that the bird was indeed *A. superciliosus*.

A visit was made to Naseby Forest on 18 January to release the bird and discuss this find with Mr and Mrs Shaw. The following information is recorded.

The attention of both Mr and Mrs Shaw was first drawn to this bird on December 9 1971 by its unusual call. It was again heard and sighted on 26 December and was captured by Mr Shaw. It was placed in a small cage and spent until 18 January in confinement.

On 9 January Mrs Shaw again heard this unusual call and sighted a second bird which she assumed to be the mate of the captive White-browed Wood Swallow. This bird arrived again on 10 January and when the caged White-browed Wood Swallow was placed outside the two birds called to each other. The second bird was sighted again on Monday 17 January. Both Mr and Mrs Shaw separately and independently described this bird: their description tallied neither with a male or female *A. superciliosus* but on being shown the page of illustrations of Wood swallows and Starlings in Frith (1969) both again unhesitatingly and independently pointed to the illustration of the male Masked Wood Swallow *Artamus personatus*.

The identification of the bird as a male cannot be held as absolute. Rowley in Frith (1969) states that the female has the same

plumage pattern as the male, but is browner and the separations between colours are less distinct. This could be a difficult feature to pick up at a distance even using binoculars and thus the identification of the sex of this bird must be held in doubt until a more positive description is forthcoming.

The presence of these two birds together being considered as a possible pair could be justified on the grounds that these two species are known to occur in mixed species flocks, and interbreeding of the two species has been recorded (Rowley *in* Frith 1969). That two birds of one species should find their way to New Zealand is unusual. That two birds of known interbreeding species should both arrive almost simultaneously must be considered an extraordinary coincidence.

Some notes on the behaviour of this swallow in captivity may be of interest. For its first three days in captivity the Wood Swallow refused to eat. On the fourth day it became attracted to sweetened condensed milk which it readily consumed. It was given free access to insects in the home of Mr and Mrs Shaw which it took on the wing. When the bird first came into my hands, it appeared somewhat moribund, and sat on its perch, feathers fluffed up and periodically closed its eyes in the characteristic fashion common to birds close to death. Defecations were very watery and smelly. It was fed a considerable number of blow flies and other insects.

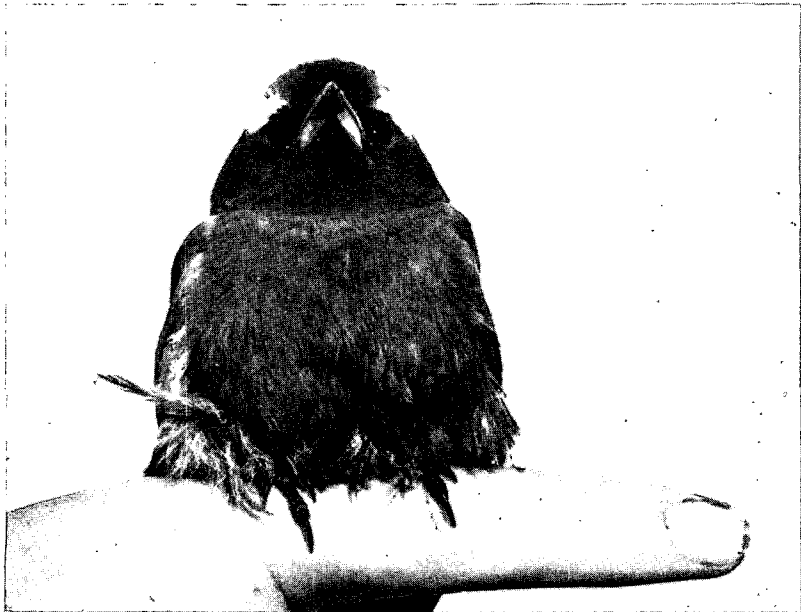


FIGURE 1 — Male White-browed Wood Swallow.

Photo: J. T. Darby



FIGURE 2 — Male White-browed Wood Swallow.

Photo: J. T. Darby

It readily consumed bread dipped in water and also ate a small amount of fruit. Its condition improved considerably over the next few days, freely taking insects held by forceps and drinking honey water from a pipette.

The bird was never completely happy in a cage and usually following a feed would fly against the sides of the cage endeavouring to make its escape. It did, however, take to handling and a large proportion of its nutrition over the last two days of its captivity was gained by holding the bird firmly in the hand and moving around a room and pointing the bird at a distance of an inch or so at a moth or fly that was on a window or wall. Such insects were quickly snatched up and eaten.

Some of the above observations on the feeding behaviour of the White-browed Wood Swallow conflict with those of Rowley (*in* Frith 1969: 456) who states that they are entirely insectivorous.

That they do readily take food other than insects augers well for the possibility that this attractive bird could become established in New Zealand. It is very doubtful that it could survive a Central Otago winter, and one can only speculate that these normally migratory birds might find their way north and thus possibly become established in New Zealand.

The Wood Swallow was banded (No. C10152) and released on 22 January 1972.

Mr and Mrs Shaw are keeping a day to day diary of the movements and sightings of this bird, which is being posted to me at regular intervals. Following the release of the bird, it was not sighted again until 30 January. Since this date, apart from one day, the bird has been sighted at least once each day and frequently more often up to and including 24 February 1972.

The attendant publicity following the sighting of this bird led to dozens of telephone calls and letters from the public. One of these from a Mrs F. Mackay, of Alexandra, suggested a further wood-swallow record. At my request Mr Peter Childs of Alexandra spoke to Mrs Mackay and he agrees that this sighting by Mrs Mackay could be a further record of a wood-swallow in New Zealand.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to Mr Collett who first brought my attention to this bird and particularly to Mr and Mrs Shaw who have proved most helpful in supplying me with full details and maintaining a day to day diary. My thanks to Mr Peter Childs who has been able to visit both Mr and Mrs Shaw and Mrs Mackay on my behalf.

LITERATURE CITED

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