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SHORT NOTE

Communal roosting by South Island fantails (*Rhipidura fuliginosa fuliginosa*)

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In June 2001, following a snowfall to sea level in Dunedin, Jim Columb found South Island fantails (*Rhipidura fuliginosa fuliginosa*) roosting in his garage on a semi-rural property near Glenfalloch, Otago Peninsula. The fantails roosted tightly packed along a dangling length of electrical cord. The birds entered the garage towards dusk while a light was on, and were shut in overnight to protect them from the weather and possible cat (*Felis catus*) predation. They departed about dawn when the door was opened, were absent all day, and then returned the following evening. At first, 2-4 birds roosted in the garage, but later numbers peaked at 16, including 3 black and 13 pied fantails (Fig. 1). Numbers were greatest when snow was present and the temperature dipped below 0ºC at night. In the evenings when peak numbers were present, birds at the lower end of the cord flew or scrambled to the top of the queue. Towards the end of June, when there were warmer days and nights, the number of fantails roosting in the garage gradually declined.

There are 2 other literature reports of fantails seeking shelter in buildings, both during winter in the South Island. In June 1955, 2 fantails sheltered for 1 night in the kitchen of an occupied house at Sawyers Bay, Dunedin, roosting on wire above a stove (Burrows 1955). At the time there was snow and the weather was stormy. The second report is of at least 7 fantails seen during more than 1 evening entering a shed at Pigeon Bay, Banks Peninsula, to roost huddled together on a loop of wire (Tunnicliffe 1980). Again, the observations were in winter during cold weather.

Given that all 3 reports of fantails sheltering in buildings over night have been in winter during cold weather, and that 2 involved fantails roosting communally suggests that the birds did so to minimise heat loss. The fantail is a small passerine, weighing just 8 g, and populations can decline markedly during prolonged or severe winter and spring storms (Heather & Robertson 2000). Roosting communally in buildings during winter weather, which sheltered them from wind and rain, can appreciably reduce heat loss (Campell & Lack 1985). In addition, because of the fantail's small size, and therefore large surface area to volume ratio, huddling together when roosting communally also reduces heat loss. Huddling is seen in other species of small passerines (Campbell & Lack 1985). Although the fantail is strongly territorial during the breeding season, such behaviour is uncommon after the autumn moult, with loose flocks of 10-20 birds being seen occasionally in winter (Heather & Robertson 2000). Perhaps the communal roosting of fantails is common during cold winter weather, especially in the southern South Island, but is rarely seen because flocks congregate at roost sites during the poor light of dusk, mainly in sheltering forest or scrub.

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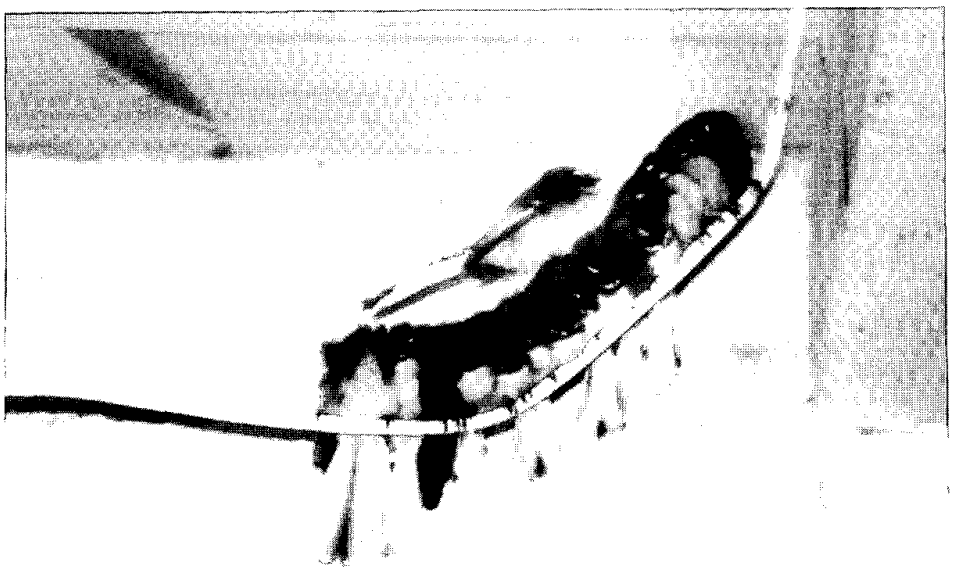

Fig. 1 South Island fantails roosting on electrical cord in a garage when snow was present during June 2001, Glenfalloch, Otago Peninsula. Photo: Jim Columb.

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