

endangered

by Abby Thomas



Purple-crowned fairy-wren

Deep in the heart of the Kimberley, along several of the river systems, you may spot a tiny bird with a vibrant purple crown: the purple-crowned fairy-wren (*Malurus coronatus coronatus*). The bird, just 14 centimetres tall, is a riparian specialist, only residing in habitat within 20 metres of permanent rivers, billabongs or swamps.

The striking purple crown that distinguishes this species is only present on breeding males. Otherwise both genders are very similar in appearance: a warm brown colour above and white below with a long vertical blue tail.

These charismatic birds sing coordinated duets with their long-lasting breeding mates to ward off other fairy-wrens from their family group and territory. The family group of this species consists of the progeny from previous breeding seasons that stay around to help raise the next generation.

This is known as cooperative breeding, and some helpers remain four or more years.

As early as 1908, collector JP Rogers noted that this species was rare in areas where it was previously abundant. The effects of cattle grazing on riparian understory led to the purple-crowned fairy-wren being first listed as 'threatened' in January 1978, under the Western Australian *Wildlife Conservation Act 1950*. However, re-assessment of all Australian bird species led to the purple-crowned fairy-wren being delisted in April 2002.

The purple-crowned fairy-wren was once again listed in November 2012, as a result of work by the Department of Environment and Conservation, Australian Wildlife Conservancy and external consultants. This survey work showed that the riparian habitat the birds occupy is contracting and deteriorating in quality due to trampling from livestock and feral herbivores, more frequent or intense fires, or floods and

invasive weeds. This has caused severe declines in the number of areas the birds occupy throughout their range.

There are currently five main catchment areas where purple-crowned fairy-wrens are found in Western Australia and three additional catchment areas in the Northern Territory. Due to the purple-crowned fairy-wren's patchy distribution over a large area of riparian habitat, conservation managers and scientists recommend conservation actions to conserve riparian vegetation at a regional scale. This will be the most effective way to conserve this species for future generations. So, while the future of the purple-crowned fairy-wren is still uncertain, relisting the species was the first step in recognising that immediate conservation management is required to safeguard this charismatic little bird.

Photo by David Bettini

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