

Passerines are the largest group of birds. They are small to medium sized land birds found worldwide, except on Antarctica. All species have four toes, three pointing forward and one back, well-adapted for perching. Most species are song-birds, with complex musical calls, but there are exceptions (e.g. crows). They show great diversity of form, behaviour and breeding biology.

**FANTAIL (Piwakawaka) *Rhipidura fuliginosa***

**Abundant native**

16 cm (including 8 cm tail), 8 g. Small bird with small head and bill; *long tail, often fanned*. Pied phase has grey head, white eyebrow, brown back; yellow underparts, with white and black bands across chest; black and white tail. Juvenile similar, but browner body, rusty-brown wing coverts, and indistinct chest markings. Island subspecies have variable white in tail, most in Chathams. Black phase, mainly in South I, all sooty black except white spot behind eye. Restless movements; twists and jerks on a perch, tail fanned, flies out to seize flying insects. Erratic flight as it hawks over forest or scrub canopy, into an insect swarm over a clearing, paddock, pond or garden. Call a penetrating 'cheet'; song a harsh rhythmical 'saw-like' 'tweet-a-tweet-a-tweet-a-tweet . . .' **Habitat:** Forest, scrub, farmland with hedges and shelterbelts, river margins, parks and gardens. **Breeding:** Aug-Mar. [Sp 304]



**MONARCH FLYCATCHERS**

**Monarchidae**

About 170 species from Africa through southern Asia and Australasia to the South Pacific islands; 1 native species and 1 vagrant in New Zealand.

A varied group of insectivorous forest birds with proportionately large heads and short, broad bills with abundant bristles at the base. Most hawk insects in the air with short flights, but some glean insects from the foliage.

**304. FANTAIL *Rhipidura fuliginosa***

**Plate 68**

**Other names:** Piwakawaka, Grey Fantail (Australia)  
**Size:** 16 cm (including 8 cm of exposed tail); 8 g  
**Geographical variation:** About 10 subspecies, three in New Zealand: North Island Fantail *placabilis*, South Island Fantail *fuliginosa*, and Chatham Island Fantail *penitus*. The South Island subspecies has two colour forms, pied phase and black phase, with black phases making up 12–25% of the population, and with highest percentages in native forest and at higher altitudes. Black phase birds make up less than 0.1% of North Island birds but are recorded mainly around Wellington, indicating some gene flow across Cook Strait.  
**Distribution:** Breeds widely in Australia and Tasmania, Lord Howe Island, the southern Solomons, Vanuatu, New Caledonia, Norfolk Island and New Zealand. The Fantail breeds throughout the North, South and Stewart Islands and their offshore islands, and on the Chathams and The Snares. They have not been recorded on any of the other subantarctic islands or on the Kermadecs. Fantails are common in forest, scrub, farmland where there are scattered trees, farm gardens, orchards and suburban gardens from sea level to 1500 m, but they are scarce in the dry open country of inland Marlborough, the Mackenzie Basin and Central Otago, which are prone to severe frosts and snow in winter. Some adults are sedentary, but others seem to wander and form loose flocks in winter and early spring. Independent juveniles disperse away from their natal territory.  
**Population:** Widespread and locally abundant, especially on forest edges and second-growth scrub habitats. Fantails are one of the

most common and widely distributed native birds on the New Zealand mainland.  
**Conservation:** Protected native. The Fantail is one of the few native forest birds to have benefited from the large-scale clearance of forest and the creation of forest edge and scrub habitats. Fantail populations undergo major fluctuations from year to year, especially caused by prolonged or severe winter and spring storms. These fluctuations can lead to brief local extinctions on islands (e.g. on South East Island, Chathams), but as their annual productivity is high and juveniles (and possibly some adults) disperse, they quickly recolonise temporarily vacated areas.  
**Breeding:** Fantails remain in pairs all year. Males retain the same territory in successive years, but high mortality means that few pairs remain together in successive seasons. Territorial defence becomes obvious in August, and first nests are built in about a fortnight in late August. In the North Island Fantail, the female apparently builds the nest alone, but in the South Island Fantail the male helps, especially early in the season when not looking after dependent fledglings. The nest is a neat cup of dried grass, strips of bark, moss and cobwebs, lined with fine fern fibres, hair and feathers, and with a tail of nest material hanging about 10 cm down from the bottom of the nest. It is usually built about 2–3 m above the ground in a slender fork of an understorey shrub, or on the frond of a tree fern, and is often protected from above by overhanging vegetation and is normally above a gap in the shrub layer. On the New Zealand mainland, eggs are laid from late August to February, during which they raise 2–5 broods; one pair raised 15 young from

16 eggs laid in 5 clutches in a season. Island populations (including the Chathams) have a shorter season, with a later start and earlier finish, and raise up to 2 broods per year.

They lay 2–3–4–5 white eggs speckled with light brown spots (16 x 12 mm). Clutches of 3 eggs are most common at the start and end of the season, whereas clutches of 4 are common in November–December. On the mainland, incubation starts with the final egg, but on the Chathams it begins with the laying of the penultimate egg. Both birds incubate for 13–14–16 days and brood and feed the nestlings during the fledging period of 11–13–16 days. After leaving the nest, the chicks often remain close together and are fed by both parents, but when the female starts building the next nest, the male looks after the fledglings. Some juveniles may breed at c. 2 months old, but most breed the next season at c. 9 months old. Juvenile and adult mortality is high in New Zealand, and the oldest bird recorded lived only 3 years; however, in Australia they have reached 10 years old.

**Behaviour:** Fantails are strongly territorial while breeding, but territories break down in autumn. Loose flocks and communal roosts of up to 10–20 birds are sometimes seen in winter. Calls of Fantails are simple, with the main territorial call of the male being a harsh rhythmical 'saw-like' song: 'tweet-a-tweet-a-tweet-a-tweet . . .' The usual contact call is a penetrating, sweet-sounding 'cheet'. Birds regularly call from near the nest during incubation and brooding change-overs and when waiting to feed nestlings. Males are

more vocal than females throughout the day, and in the early morning only males sing from song-posts.

**Feeding:** Diet is mainly invertebrates, occasionally supplemented with fruit. Main prey are moths, flies, wasps, beetles and spiders, taken while fly-catching in the understorey, along tracks, in forest clearings and river flats, and sometimes above the canopy. They are very manoeuvrable and use their fanned tail to stop in mid-air and to change direction when hawking and fly-catching. Fantails also hop around upside down along tree-fern fronds or among foliage to pick prey from the underside of leaves, or more often to catch insects that fall, and they occasionally hover to pick prey from the undersides of leaves. They rarely feed on the ground, except on predator-free offshore islands. Fantails often associate with feeding Silvereyes, Whiteheads, parakeets or Saddlebacks and feed on insects dislodged by feeding birds.

**In the hand:** Males and females are alike. Juveniles have a tawny, not white, eyestripe, and secondary coverts have large fawn tips, the black throat band is absent and the legs are pale grey, not black.

**Reading:** Blackburn, A. 1965. *Notornis* 12: 127–137. Blackburn, A. 1966. *Notornis* 13: 189–196. Dennison, T.C. *et al.* 1979. *Notornis* 26: 392–395. McLean, I.G. 1984. *Notornis* 31: 279–283. McLean, I.G. & Jenkin, P.F. 1980. *Notornis* 27: 105–113. McLean, I.G. & Jenkin, P.F. 1980. *Notornis* 27: 102–103. Moed, A. & Fitzgerald, B.M. 1982. *NZ J Zool* 9: 391–403. Powlesland, M.H. 1982. *Notornis* 29: 181–195.