

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.

**GREY WARBLER (Riroriro) *Gerygone igata***

**Abundant endemic**

10 cm, 6.5 g. Very small grey bird with a darker tail, *conspicuously tipped white*, and a habit of *hovering* to pick insects and spiders from plants. Adult is grey-brown above, pale grey on face, throat and breast; off-white belly and undertail, red eye. Sexes alike. Juvenile similar but yellowish on face and underparts, brown eye. Flits and hovers among outer foliage and twigs to catch invertebrates. Song a distinctive *long musical wavering trill*. **Habitat:** Scrub (especially manuka and kanuka), forest, parks and gardens. Builds a distinctive domed hanging nest, with small side entrance hole. **Breeding:** Aug–Jan. [Sp 301]



**AUSTRALASIAN WARBLERS Acanthizidae**

59 species in Southeast Asia, Australasia and the southwestern Pacific; 2 endemic species in New Zealand.

warblers, have short, fine bills for gleaning insects in foliage, or more distinctively, by hovering and picking insects from leaves. Most species have a distinctive, loud and beautiful song.

A diverse group of very small or small forest and scrub birds. Many, like the thornbills and

**301. GREY WARBLER *Gerygone igata***

**Plate 66**

**Other name:** Riroriro

**Size:** 10 cm, 6.5 g

**Distribution:** New Zealand only. Subfossil remains are scarce, but Grey Warblers were apparently widespread historically. They are one of the few native passerines to have benefited from human modification of the landscape. They are common through many forest, scrub, rural and city habitats from sea level to the subalpine zone on the main islands and most offshore islands, but absent from the outlying islands, except for the vagrants at The Snares. Scarce on Little Barrier and Kapiti Islands, where forest-bird communities are relatively intact.

**Population:** Widespread and abundant. They are especially common in manuka, kanuka

and gorse scrub.

**Conservation:** Protected endemic. The Grey Warbler is common and widespread, and no specific conservation management is necessary.

**Breeding:** Grey Warblers establish their territories in late July and August. The female takes up to 27 days to build the enclosed nest with a 3 cm diameter hole in the side. About half the nests are pensile (hanging freely from an attachment at the top), and the rest are also secured elsewhere. It is made of rootlets, moss, lichen, leaves, bark, tree-fern scales and fibres, twigs, cobwebs, spider egg-cases, wool, hair and feathers, and is lined with a thick layer of feathers, downy seeds and tree-fern scales. Nests are 1–10 m above the ground,

usually in the lower half of the forest. Eggs are laid in August–December; usually two broods are raised each year with peaks of laying in September and November.

They lay 2–4–5 white eggs (17 x 12 mm, 1.5 g) with reddish-brown speckling concentrated near the larger end. Eggs are laid at 2-day intervals, and incubation starts once the final egg is laid. The female alone incubates for 17–19.5–21 days, and broods the chicks for the first 10 days. The chicks are fed by both parents during the 15–17–19-day fledging period and for up to 35 days after leaving the nest. The male does most of the later care of the first brood as the female prepares to lay the second clutch. Once independent, the young become mobile and disperse several kilometres from their natal territory. First breeding is probably at 1 year old. Pairs are monogamous and persist all year and between years. At Kowhai Bush, adult survivorship was at least 82% and life expectancy was 5 years. The oldest recorded lived 5.8 years, but some are likely to live to 10+ years old.

The Grey Warbler is the only host to the Shining Cuckoo on the New Zealand mainland. First clutches escape parasitism because they are laid before the cuckoos arrive, but often Shining Cuckoos replace an egg in the second clutch with one of their own, and eventually the bigger and faster-growing

cuckoo chick expels all other eggs or chicks.

**Behaviour:** Males defend their breeding territory with long chases interspersed with bouts of loud and prolonged singing; females join in the chases, especially when the intruder approaches a nest. The territories expand into overlapping home ranges between the breeding seasons, and flocks of up to 25 birds form in the winter. Grey Warblers occasionally join flocks of other insectivorous birds such as Silvereyes, Brown Creepers and Whiteheads.

**Feeding:** Diet is almost entirely invertebrates, especially spiders, caterpillars, flies, beetles and bugs, but also includes a few small fruits. Grey Warblers take most of their food by gleaning from leaves, but they often feed in a highly distinctive way by catching prey near the ends of branches while hovering in mid-air.

**In the hand:** Sexes are indistinguishable for most of the year, but only females develop a brood patch; sexes are best distinguished by the behaviour of birds during the breeding season. Juveniles have brown, not red, eyes, and their legs are dull grey, not black, and some have a pale yellow eye-ring. Juveniles moult into adult plumage in January–March, at about the same time that adults moult.

**Reading:** Gill, B.J. 1982. *Ibis* 124: 123–147. Gill, B.J. 1982. *Emu* 82: 177–181. Gill, B.J. 1983. *Notornis* 30: 137–165.