

# Leaden Flycatcher

*Myiagra rubecula*

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Hunter Bird  
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A male Leaden Flycatcher with its crest erect. Note the shape of the boundary between its breast and belly. (Photo: Alwyn Simple)

The Leaden Flycatcher is about the size of a Willie Wagtail (in fact it's slightly smaller) and almost as agile. The male is essentially a blue-grey and white bird, with an erectable crest. Females are similar but they have an orange-rufous throat. The potential confusion species locally is the Satin Flycatcher, which is rare in our region except at high altitude. However, mis-identifications happen regularly.

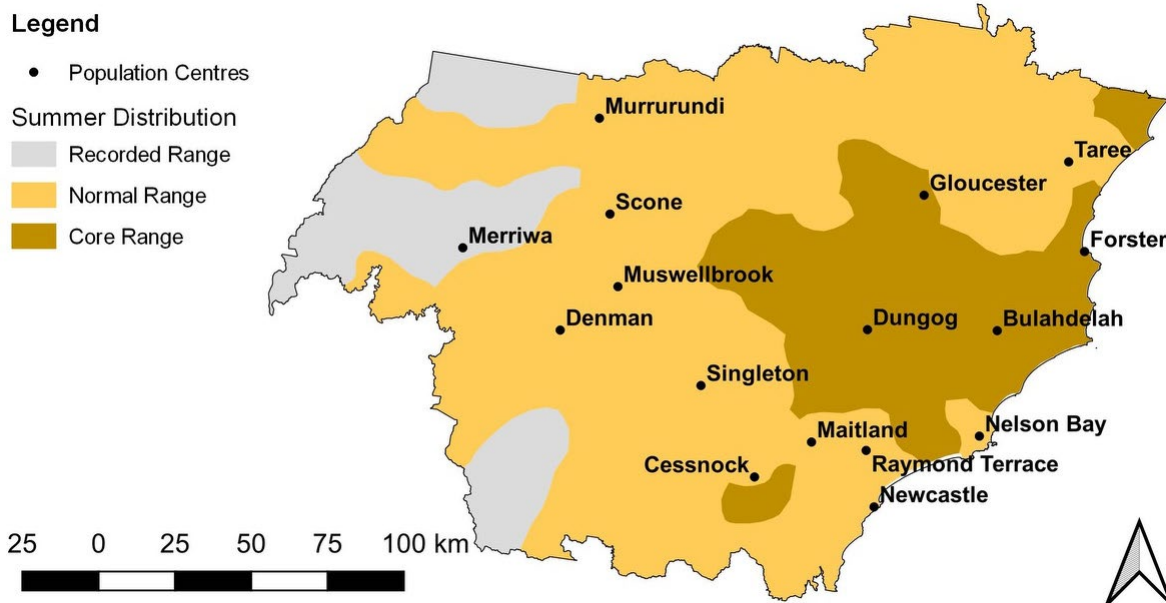
Male Leaden and Satin Flycatchers have quite similar appearance; they also have similar calls. The Satin Flycatcher is slightly the larger of the two species but that is not a reliable indicator unless the bird is in the hand. Confusion can occur because, in certain light conditions, the blue-grey ("leaden", as in the metal) head and back of the Leaden Flycatcher can seem dark, almost as dark as for the male Satin Flycatcher. A useful way to differentiate the two

species is to look at the shape of the boundary between the dark breast and white belly. For the male Leaden Flycatcher, that boundary line is essentially straight, with a small upwards curvature at the edges. For the male Satin Flycatcher the boundary curves strongly downwards at the edges.

Female Leaden and Satin Flycatchers are difficult to tell apart. Everything about the female Leaden Flycatcher is “understated” by comparison with the female Satin Flycatcher – it’s a bit smaller, the undertail is a bit paler, the upperparts are not glossy, the throat is a bit paler. None of those are of much practical use in the field. Look for a male!

## Regional Status

The Leaden Flycatcher is a regular spring/summer visitor to our region, and breeds here. Birds begin to arrive back in about mid-September from their winter grounds in northern Queensland and New Guinea. They stay until March, and sometimes there are April records. It is found in well-wooded areas throughout the region.



Summer distribution of Leaden Flycatcher in the Hunter Region (map by Dan Williams)



A male Leaden Flycatcher in “normal” pose ie no crest showing – again, note the shape of the boundary between its breast and belly. (Photo: Dawn Riggett)

## Sub-species

There are six sub-species, four of which are found in Australia. On the Australian east coast south of Cape York, there are two migratory subspecies *rubecula* (South-eastern Leaden Flycatcher) and *yorki* (Eastern Leaden Flycatcher). However, the range for *yorki*, including intergrade birds, stops at around the Clarence River – all the birds in the Hunter Region should be *rubecula*. The differences are subtle, and they are not well described in HANZAB – but apparently *rubecula* is the largest of all the subspecies and it has paler lores.

## About the name

Leaden Flycatcher

The term “flycatcher” was introduced into the English language in 1678 by the naturalist John Ray, as a translation of the Latin *musci-capa* (“fly-eater”). It is now used around the world as a term for small birds which have the habit of catching insects, such as flies, on the wing. “Leaden” refers to the blue-grey colouration of the male’s upper body plumage – which makes for a nice balance given that the scientific name refers to the female’s plumage!

### *Myiagra rubecula*

The genus name means flycatcher, from the Greek word *myiagros* (itself a combination of *muia*, fly, and *agredō*, seize). Incidentally, there was a minor Greek god named *Myiagros*, whose job was to chase away flies and other pests during the ritual sacrifices to Zeus and Athena. The species name is from the Latin words *ruber*, red, and *gula*, throat. Somehow, the “g” eventually became a “c”. Clearly it is a reference to the female – one of the few instances where a feature of a female bird has been used for the scientific name. The name was bestowed by Latham in 1802 – given the attitudes of the time, he probably didn’t realise he was looking at a female.



A female Leaden Flycatcher. Note the indistinct boundary between its breast and belly.  
(Photo: Alwyn Simple)

Design Rob Kyte at Conservation Matters 0420 821 460 Text by Alan Stuart based on information mainly sourced from • HBOC’s Hunter Region annual bird report series • Volumes 1-7 of HANZAB (the Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds) • Bird in the Hand (ABSA information sheet series) • Menkhorst et al. (2017). The Australian Bird Guide • Ian Fraser & Jeannie Gray (2013). Australian Bird Names A Complete Guide • Richard Schodde and Ian Mason (1999). A Directory of Australian Birds (Passerines) • Richard Cooper, Ian McAllan and Brian Curtis (2020). Atlas of the Birds of NSW and the ACT, Vol 3.

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