

Rufous Fantail

Rhipidura rufifrons

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Hunter Bird
Observers Club

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Rufous Fantail in almost full adult plumage. Photo: Ray Burton

Description

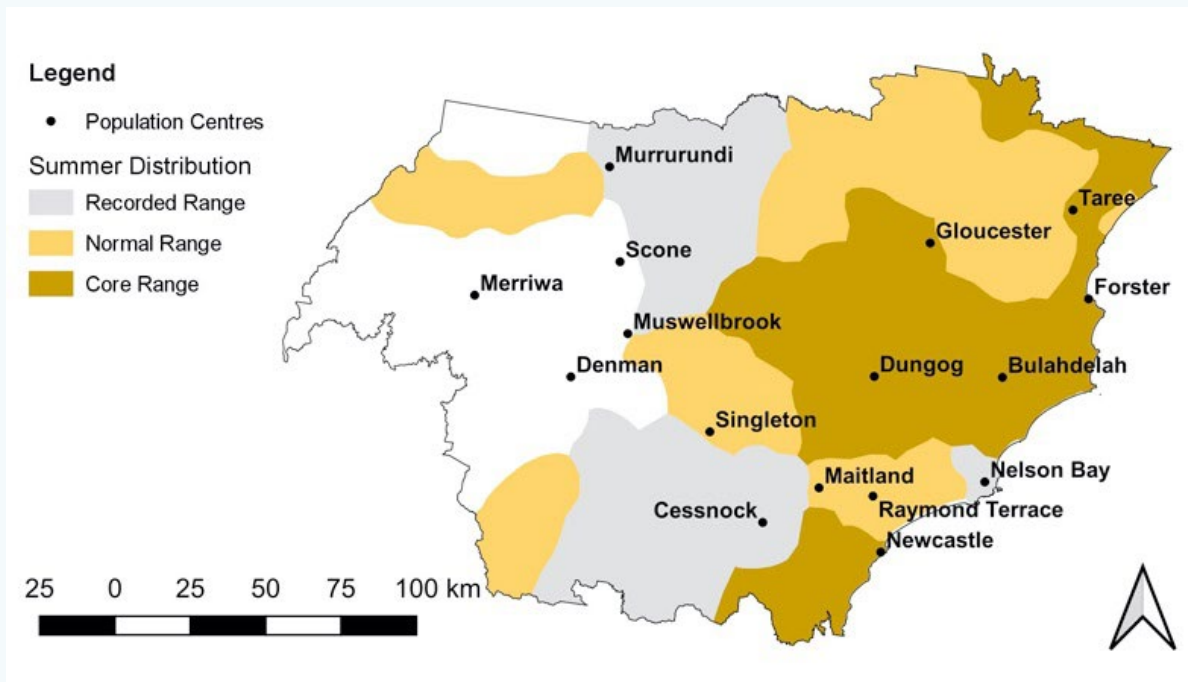
A small active bird of moist understorey in wet forests and rain forests. Adult birds have mostly white underparts and grey-brown upper parts. The forehead, lower back and rump, and the basal half of the long tail all are bright orange / rufous. The bird has a white throat, which extends to the sides of the neck giving a collared appearance which is accentuated by a black upper breast band that merges with the pale lower breast in a band of black specks. The bird regularly fans its tail, revealing that it has a rounded end with pale tips.

Adult male and females are indistinguishable on plumage although the males are slightly larger. Juveniles are similar to adults, but duller all over (more of a rufous-brown, rather than rufous) and the facial markings are less distinct. Immature birds more closely resemble adults but their upper wing and tail are similar to juveniles. The complete moult into adult plumage occurs early in the

second year.

Regional Status

The Rufous Fantail has a widespread distribution in the Hunter Region, although its stronghold is the forests in the east of the region and also the slopes of the Coolah Tops. It is absent from dry woodland areas. It is sometimes seen in open country during migration passage.



The distribution of Rufous Fantail in the Hunter Region (map by Dan Williams)

In winter, it migrates to Papua New Guinea and nearby areas. Birds start departing our region from late February onwards. They begin to return in late September so it won't be long before we start seeing and hearing them again in our wetter forests.



An unusual nest

The members of the Rhipidura genus, including the Rufous Fantail, all build cup-shaped nests with an unusual feature – a long tapering stem (“tail”) which hangs below the main nest structure. The stem of the Rufous Fantail nest is quite fine and thus the general shape is often described as looking like a wine glass. Both parents share nest building and incubation duties.



Juvenile Rufous Fantail. Photo: Rob Palazzi

Sub species

There are two sub-species – *intermedia* (North-eastern Rufous Fantail, found only in Queensland) and *rufifrons* (Southern Rufous Fantail) which occurs in NSW and Victoria. The plumage differences are subtle but *intermedia* is a marginally larger bird. The Arafura Fantail was formerly treated as another subspecies of Rufous Fantail but it now has full species status.

About the name

Rufous Fantail

The name is completely descriptive – “rufous” for the striking colours particularly on the bird’s tail and back and “fantail” for the distinctive tail-maneuvring behaviour of all the members of the genus.

Rhipidura rufifrons

The genus name combines the Greek words *rhipis* (“fan”) and *oura* (“tail”) i.e. “fantail”. The species name combines the Latin words *rufus* (“red”) and *frons* (“forehead”). The bird does indeed have a red forehead, but it seems surprising that this feature was picked out in preference to the bird’s stunning red tail and particularly since juvenile Grey Fantails have a red/buff supercilium which is almost the same plumage feature.



An adult bird with its tail fanned, showing the pale tips. Photo: Chris Herbert

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). *Information in this fact sheet is provided exclusively to members of the Hunter Bird Observers Club*

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