

Catching flies and other things

May 2005

We are always pleased to hear the distinctive sound of a Scissors Grinder calling from the lower branches of a large River Red Gum next to our house. They often come by at this time of the year and, sure enough, we heard the rasping, grinding call last week. These birds, also known as Restless Flycatchers, resemble the more common and bolder Willie Wagtails but have more extensive silky white underparts that extend up to the bill, while the wagtail's white chest finishes abruptly at the base of the throat. The Scissors Grinder has a sleeker, more elongated look.

They share similar feeding preferences both being very proficient at catching insects in flight. They can both deal with insects up to 30 mm long. Willies tend to be more "twitchy" and are always active. They startle their prey by wing flashes and tail wagging. The Scissors Grinder on the other hand tends to hover over low shrubs with open mouth whilst producing their characteristic loud call. This seems to have the same effect as the wagtail's active movements. Both birds favour semi-open grassy environments with some low to medium sized shrubs. Scissors Grinders have a preference for spiders and can often be seen hovering and picking them off from under the eaves of buildings and around window frames. Willie Wagtails are frequently seen riding on the backs of farm animals. They keep a sharp lookout for disturbed insects that are quickly dispatched. In winter they get much of their prey from the ground.

Another common flycatcher is the Grey Fantail. It is quite small and drably arrayed. These cheerful, busy little aerial acrobats are well known to walkers in the bush. They follow humans, and other large mammals, feeding on the smaller insects that are disturbed by their passage. They live amongst denser shrubbery and taller trees than the two previous birds. They are rarely seen on the ground other than to drink, preferring to search amongst the foliage and small branches for flying prey and leaf sucking insects such as lerps. Small flies, gnats and mosquitos make up a major part of their diet.

Each of these birds has an individual character. None are shy or retiring. They all have distinctive calls. Anyone taking the time to observe their behaviours will get a lot of satisfaction. Besides, they make a huge contribution to keeping harmful insects in check.

Photos shown below:

Restless Flycatcher (or Scissors Grinder).

Willy Wagtail – 'twitchy' and active near the ground.

Grey Flycatcher – acrobats of the lower tree canopy.

