

## ENDEMIC SPECIES FEATURE

### RIRORIRO Grey Warbler *Gerygone igata*

As the name suggest, grey warblers are grey and warble. Their Māori name is riroriro. Being tiny and grey, they are often overlooked, but they make their presence known with loud, distinctive warbling trills, which can be heard throughout New Zealand forests and urban gardens. Its ancestor is thought to have arrived in New Zealand from Australia sometime during the ice ages between 10,000 and 2 million years ago. Their relatively late arrival may explain why riroriro are less vulnerable to mammalian predators than other endemic species.

Grey warblers weigh about the same as a rifleman / tītītipounamu, 6g, but appear larger thanks to their longer tail. They are sufficiently tiny to be able to hover momentarily in mid-air, a move that shows off distinctive black and white bands on their tails. They have red eyes, black legs and a slim pointed bill well suited to a diet of insects and other small invertebrates.

Their breeding season typically extends from August to January. Nests are made of dried grass, moss, lichens, leaves and bark, which the female weaves together with spider webs. She lines the nest with feathers and other soft materials such as thistledown. Riroriro prefer to hide their nests in the thick foliage of small-leaved trees such as manuka and kanuka. The nests are domed, pear-shaped structures suspended from a branch and often secured at several points. A circular hole on the side allows entry into the nest.



Māori believed riroriro positioned the nest entrance on the side sheltered from the prevailing wind and thus could be used to predict if the upcoming season would be good or poor. Each clutch consists of 3 to 5 eggs. The female incubates the eggs and broods the nestlings while the male helps feed offspring and defend the territory. In the North Island, riroriro typically only produce one brood per season, but in the South Island, they usually produce two. Riroriro are the prime host for the brood parasitic shining cuckoo / pīpīwharauoa. Shining cuckoos neither incubate nor care for their own young. Instead, they remove a riroriro egg and replace it with one of their own. When the shining cuckoo hatches, it throws out the other eggs and/or chicks. The ever-obliging grey warbler parents feed and raise the much larger shining cuckoo chick as if it were their own.

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Photo source - Deb Corbett



Photo credit: Rebecca Bowater