

# **ANU MEDIA RELEASE**

## **NEWS FROM THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY**

FRIDAY 17 AUGUST 2007

### **LITTLE HELPERS GIVE MOTHER WRENS LONGER LIVES**

Having a helper to assist with the childcare doesn't just make life easier for superb fairy-wren mothers, it can give them longer lives and enable them to breed more, according to research published in *Science* today.

Dr Naomi Langmore, a Postdoctoral Fellow at The Australian National University and member of the team that made the discovery, said that in many animal species, parents caring for their offspring are assisted by 'helpers' - adults that forego reproduction to help others raise young.

"In some bird species, helpers deliver lots of extra food to dependent young, but the offspring don't appear to gain any advantage as a result. We were interested in finding out who really benefits from helping behaviour," said Dr Langmore.

"Our study of superb fairy-wrens shows that mothers benefit from the assistance of helpers in a novel way; females with helpers lay smaller eggs than females with no helpers.

"Not only are the eggs smaller, but they have disproportionately small yolks, thereby saving energy during egg laying. As a result, they are able to live longer and breed more often than females that have no helpers."

The paper "*Reduced Egg Investment Can Conceal Helper Effects in Cooperatively Breeding Birds*," was published today in *Science*. The research was carried out by a team from the Universities of Cambridge and Sheffield in the UK, and The Australian National University, Macquarie University and Wollongong University in Australia. It was funded by The Australian Research Council, the Leverhulme Trust, and The Royal Society.

A photo of the superb fairy-wren is available attached.

For further information or interview:

Dr Naomi Langmore, 02 6125 8436 or 0417 667006  
Jane O'Dwyer, ANU Media Office, 02 6125 5001 or 0416 249 231

**Jane O'Dwyer**  
**Media Manager**  
**The Australian National University**  
T: 02 6125 5001  
F: 02 6125 8255

M: 0416 249 231  
W: [www.anu.edu.au/media](http://www.anu.edu.au/media)

Looking for expert comment? Try [www.anu.edu.au/experts](http://www.anu.edu.au/experts)