

Bower "Painting" by Lauterbach's Bowerbird

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Summary

Bower "painting" or plastering has not hitherto been recorded for Lauterbach's Bowerbird *Chlamydera lauterbachii*, although such a habit was to be expected for this typical "avenue-builder". A description of bower "painting" by this species, at Mount Hagen, New Guinea, is given, together with some other minor notes on the bird.

INTRODUCTION

Lauterbach's Bowerbird, *Chlamydera lauterbachii*, was discovered in the Ramu Valley by the German botanist Lauterbach in the nineties of the last century (Marshall 1954). It has since been found to occur in the Ramu and Sepik valleys, the Wahgi Valley of the Central Highlands and a portion of Southern West Irian—a distribution which has obvious gaps likely to be filled by later explorations. The bird itself is a typical *Chlamydera* in shape, superficially looking like a yellowish-green Great Bowerbird, *C. nuchalis*. Like the Fawn-breasted, *C. cerviniventris*, species, also found in New Guinea, Lauterbach's lacks the nuchal crest of the Great and Spotted, *C. guttata*, species. Iredale (1956) claims two species but these are not likely to be recognized. They are relegated to races *C. l. lauterbachii* and *C. l. uniformis* by Mayr (1941).

Although usually described as a bird of *kunai* grasslands it probably frequents those areas only where second-growth native gardens or *pit pit* are found. Throughout the Wahgi Valley, that densely populated area between the Kubor Mountains and the Sepik-Wahgi Divide, in New Guinea's Central Highlands, Lauterbach's Bowerbird seems a common species. It is well known to the Highlanders, who, however, do not particularly covet it for plumes—a fate accorded to many other birds of the area. Mayr and Gilliard (1954) consider that the species may well have followed primitive man into the Highlands, as many other savanna and grassland species have done. Centuries ago the Wahgi Valley must have been covered in forest but the agricultural methods of the native population have turned the valley into grassland, bog and second-growth, with the original forest still retreating up the mountain side.

THE BOWER

In December, 1965, I was fortunate enough to locate a bower of this species at Ambra Camp, near Mount Hagen, Western Highlands District, at an elevation of 5600 feet. The bower proved difficult to find, even though the birds were easy to observe, in small parties, in second-growth gardens, and the *Casuarina* groves planted by the Highlanders. The birds were also seen in coffee plantations, at an altitude of 4400 feet in the Baiyer River valley. The bower located was in a gully clothed in dense second-growth and *pit pit*, a tough eight feet high type of cane-grass. It was quite close

to the busy North Wahgi Road, thus evincing a typical Bowerbird tolerance toward the works of Man.

The bower was in a tiny clearing under a dense small tree, the foliage of which hung over the bower at a height of seven feet. Chaffer (1949) gives a diagram of a bower to which that of the Ambra Bird conformed. *C. lauterbachii* differs, of course, from its fellow *Chlamydera* species, in that, as well as a typical "avenue", it constructs two additional walls, one at each end of the avenue and at right angles to the entrances. One photograph (Mayr and Gilliard 1954) shows a similar bower but with much ground litter close to the structure. This was not so with the subject bower, which was built on a slight mound and with bare, almost swept, earth for 18 inches around it. Gyldenstolpe (1955) also mentions this clearing around the bower.

Chaffer describes the ornaments as blue berries and small grey stones, these being chiefly placed at either end and inside the "extra" walls, with some of the stones being left in the main runway. Mayr and Gilliard, however, who examined 17 bowers indicate that most display-objects are in the avenue itself. My observations support Chaffer's description.

This bower, on first examination, had 36 small grey stones and one large (one inch diameter) blue berry at one end, 80 small grey stones and two white stones at the other end, and 42 grey stones smaller than those at the ends on the floor of the main runway. This remained the pattern for a week, with up to two of the big berries being left at either end.

Published descriptions do not seem to fully describe the floor of the "avenue". In the bower at Ambra the sticks of the two main walls were sloped outwards and were interlocked at their base, making the runway very narrow. As described by Mayr and Gilliard, hair-like strands of grass were built as a thin lining to the main bower walls, but not to the "extra" walls at the ends. These were not set in at an angle as were the main sticks of the wall but were placed in a vertical position. The whole structure was built on a platform two or three inches thick and it is probable that it could have been moved without damage, so compact was its construction.

BOWER PAINTING

With a view to later photography a hide was constructed near the bower, and a position taken up at 1700 hours on December 8. The bird came readily enough, uttering a "churring" note similar to *C. cerviniventris*. After hopping from branch to branch in the tree above the bower it flew down and went straight into the "avenue". Even when standing still, looking suspiciously at the hide, it continued to masticate something held in its beak. Then it was seen to run its beak up and down the fine fibres of the bower lining, masticating between movements. It did this for 30 seconds. Then it suddenly stretched its neck, looked in the direction of the hide, "froze"

for a few seconds, uttered a call of alarm similar to the alarm call of the Crimson Rosella, *Platycercus elegans*, and flew off. It continued to frequent the area, uttering this call but failed to return. Subsequent attempts to observe it proved fruitless and Chaffer's comments on the shyness of the species seem well-founded.

The bower was examined and the inner lining was found to be "painted" at what would be the height of the bird's neck, along a two-inch wide band the full length of the avenue. This band was clearly visible at a distance of 10 feet. The "painting" material appeared to be a whitish substance almost like a very weak flour-and-water paste. Some of the lining was removed for later analysis but when the fibres dried the "paste" flaked off into powder.

NESTING

According to the Mogis, the local (and very intelligent) tribesmen, the bird nests early in the New Year. Both Chaffer and Mayr and Gilliard give good descriptions of the nest—a typical *Chlamydera* structure built, in both cases, in a small tree in *pit pit*. Their dates were January and April respectively. However the veteran collector, Shaw-Mayer found the species breeding at Minj, near Hagen, in November (Sims 1956).

CONCLUSION

Yet another "avenue-builder" joins the list of bower "painters" or plasterers. Despite the extra walls on its bower *C. lauterbachi* is very similar in habits to its near relatives, of which one, the Fawn-breasted Bowerbird, may not yet be recorded as a "painter". Although the bird's shyness presents a problem, the observation of *C. lauterbachi's* courtship display will be a worthwhile study.

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