

## Book reviews

### BOWERBIRDS

By Peter Rowland

2008. Published by CSIRO Publishing, Melbourne. 144 pp., colour photographs, line illustrations. Paperback, \$A39.95, ISBN 9780643094208.

The bowerbirds (Ptilonorhynchidae) are a small but charismatic family, half of whose 20 species are found in Australia, eight of them being endemic to it. It is therefore appropriate that *Bowerbirds* by Peter Rowland has been added to the list of ornithological titles published in the CSIRO Publishing Australian Natural History Series.

Four brief introductory chapters, comprising 20% of the text of the book provide a general background to the family, with 70% of the book as an account of the biology of each of the Australian species. The remaining few pages contain brief descriptions of the 10 endemic New Guinea species. Given the very special biology of this remarkable bird family, the result should be an exciting and entertaining read. This was not my experience. If that sounds like a criticism of the writing alone, it is not. There are also weaknesses in presentation, which speak of an author poorly served by editorial supervision. That needs some justification, so I shall return to it at the end of this review.

On content, the author's intention has been 'to condense the published knowledge acquired by ornithologists who have studied bowerbirds over the years'. In many respects *Bowerbirds* achieves this, but its style is rather flat and impersonal, its coverage patchy and its presentation poor.

Condensing current knowledge of bowerbirds is actually quite a challenge. Over the last 25 years there has been an explosion of exciting research on them. The stimulus for this research has come largely from a revival of interest in the Darwinian concept of sexual selection that began in the 1980s. A lot of this research therefore concentrates on male bower-making and related courtship behaviour so, although our knowledge of the basic natural history of these species has also been greatly improved by recent research, there is a bias towards sexual selection in the literature, which also contains quite a lot of complex theoretical argument.

*Bowerbirds* has, for a book of its size an extensive and up-to-date bibliography of over 130 research papers and books on bowerbird biology. The author does not cite these within the text of the book because he feels that this is not appropriate to his readership. I think he is right, and the opportunity remains for an enthusiast to track down primary sources. The condensation of this literature is, however, achieved in a style that is factual but rather colourless, giving an impression that the author has limited direct field experience of his subject.

Two-thirds of the first chapter, entitled *Introduction*, is about bowers. Certainly this is the signature characteristic of the family but Chapter 4, *Bower evolution and sexual selection*, is devoted to bowers, leading to some duplication. Chapter 1 fails to provide a feel for the overall biology of the family or of the structure of the book. Bowerbirds have other important and interesting aspects to their biology, features that emerge through the book but which could have been highlighted in the Introduction: bowerbirds are for example largely fruit eaters, they have very small clutch sizes,

and are talented vocal mimics. Some of these topics are referred to in Chapter 2, *Classification and morphology*, and in Chapter 4, but an introductory chapter should be there to provide signposts.

Chapter 3, *Habitat distribution and conservation*, was an opportunity to give a particularly Australian view to the book. Eight of the 20 species of the family are, after all, endemic to Australia. We learn later in the book that the Golden Bowerbird, has been 'evaluated as Least Concern on the IUCN Red List'; its distribution is none-the-less a mere pinprick on the face of the globe. The future of that species is a uniquely Australian responsibility and Chapter 3 contains none of that immediacy. Instead, we get some very general comments about habitat destruction and a list of bullet points that tell us what might happen to the living world in the face of 'climate change', for example that we could see 'changes in species' geographic limits'.

Accounts of each of the 10 bowerbird species in Australia make up the large Chapter 5, in which the biology of each species is described under a standardised plan of subheadings. Entries are variable, but for example, the sections on nests and eggs are generally good, and, it is nice to see that these exclusively female activities are well represented in a book inevitably dominated by the flamboyant behaviour of males. Sections on diet are particularly detailed, but the sections on population status and conservation are not. Personally, I wanted to know how adapted bowerbirds have become to the presence of humans and how likely is this to affect their future survival? Maybe that is not a priority, but certainly information like this would have made the text more personal and engaging for the reader.

It should be said at this point that a particular strength of the book is its colour photographs. They are of a high quality and provide at least one image of a male of each of the 10 Australian species, and of most of the females. The bowers of most of the species that make them are also shown, including those of two New Guinea species. Unfortunately the colour photographs also expose a major deficiency in the book: its layout and presentation.

The colour photographs are bunched together in two compact groups. That is not unusual and may be a constraint imposed by the printing process. To overcome it, all colour plates need to be numbered and referred to in the appropriate places in the text. Neither of these things occur. Significantly, exactly the same problem was highlighted in a review in this Journal of another book in this CSIRO Publishing series (see *Emu* 109, pp. 90–91). This is a failure in editorial control. In *Bowerbirds*, the failure is particularly marked. The only figure that accompanies the description of each species is a distribution map. It shows an outline of Australia with generally a single black patch indicating the range of the species. Certainly it is useful but, bearing in mind its low information content, it is just too big (about ten times the area of distribution maps now common in bird identification books). It is also on its own; the text is otherwise unenlivened by a single line-drawing of a courtship display or sound spectrograph of a mimicked call. The pages just look uninteresting.

More disturbing still, there are numbered figures in the introductory chapters of the book that could be referred to in the species descriptions but are not. For example, a good black and white photo (Figure 4.4) showing sticks painted by the male satin

bowerbird is not referred to when the bower of this species is fully described 50 pages later. Figure 1.3 showing the outline of a bird with its body areas labelled was, you would imagine, included to help the reader wherever the plumage of each species is being described. It is never referred to in any part of the text, not even on the page where it appears. The book contains 18 numbered figures (black and white photos, line drawings, and the distribution maps); 13 of these are not referred to in any part of the book. Well, many of them do appear on the same page as text covering the same or similar material, but even that is no excuse

for leaving out the link between figure and text. Readers are being forced to hunt around this book to find the relevant illustrations, which must surely damage their enjoyment. More than one person should be taking responsibility for how this book has been turned out. It is a missed opportunity to have produced a publication that fails to do justice to such a spectacular group of birds.

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## OWLS, FROGMOUTHS AND NIGHTJARS OF AUSTRALIA

By David Hollands

2008. Published by Bloomings Books, Melbourne. 336 + xii pp., many colour photographs. Hardback, \$A60, ISBN 9781876473648.

This book is a second, revised edition of Dr Hollands' earlier *Birds of the Night* (1991, Reed, Sydney), which received favourable reviews and some constructive comment (e.g. *Australian Bird Watcher* 14, 1992, 320–321). Hollands' ornithological work could be described as adventure photography and amateur natural history (he is a medical doctor by profession), combining ground-breaking photographic stints at the nests of all of the Australian owls and caprimulgiforms with significant contributions to knowledge of their general biology. The 2008 edition contains much new material deriving from additional field work on the owls since 1991. It is a narrative of the obtaining of the photographs, along with detailed observations on the nest life and general ecology of the birds, with a 'Field Guide' section at the back summarising what the author knows about the birds under the categories *Field characters*, *Voice*, *Food and hunting*, *Breeding* (from displays to post-fledging), and *Distribution*. Short final chapters (some new material) also include quantitative pellet analyses for Sooty Owls at two cave sites (Marble Arch and Jenolan) and for Powerful Owls at three inland Victorian sites; a commentary on threats to and prospects for Australian owls; and details of a recently devised method for capturing Australian forest owls (basically, multidirectional call-playback beneath a collapsible fishing net suspended in the tree canopy, as pioneered by Rod Kavanagh).

Most of the owl narrative chapters are essentially as in the 1991 version, with between one and seven pages of new text added to the end of each, and in some cases some revision of the 1991 text. The Powerful Owl text has been extensively rewritten (although essentially the same story up to 1991), and information on this species for the period 1991–1996 is mentioned only briefly, as it was covered in Hollands' recent book *Owls: Journeys Around the World* (2004, Bloomings, Melbourne). The Masked Owl account has some new introductory text and information on injured owls; the dark male in the 1991 version has become "she", although males can be as dark as females. The Powerful and Sooty Owl accounts are the most extensively enlarged, and a chapter on the Christmas Island Hawk-Owl (studied since 1991) has been added. The Boobook, frogmouth

and nightjar accounts remain unchanged, as those species were not studied since 1991, except that there is a small addendum on the Spotted Nightjar's demise in the Victorian mallee. Overall, the new information is very valuable, notably on the post-fledging period of the Sooty Owl and the decline of the Powerful Owl in inland Victoria. A surprising omission, though, is Hollands' experiences with Rod Kavanagh on Powerful Owls, although he includes his experiences with Rohan Bilney on Sooty Owls and with Kavanagh and Matthew Stanton on Barking Owls.

The photos are a gallery of the behavioural nest life of these secretive, often almost inaccessible birds and a record of the growth stages of their chicks: a remarkable achievement. There are many new photographs in the 2008 edition. However, there is the occasional enlarged and hence slightly 'soft' and distorted image across a double-page spread – surely unnecessary in an already coffee-table-sized book.

The Field Guide section has been partly updated, but contains some minor flaws (including a few not corrected from the 1991 edition). Many of these matters could have been corrected by reference to reviews of the 1991 edition, and to HANZAB 4 and subsequent literature. However, the bibliography of Hollands' book has been minimally updated since 1991. Although HANZAB is listed, it was evidently scarcely consulted; the same could be said of Newton *et al.* (2002, *Ecology and Conservation of Owls*, CSIRO Publishing, Melbourne). New books listed are mostly global works on owls, which are often less than accurate on Australian species. The list of 'papers and other sources' is little changed from 1991, although for most species there have been much better papers published since. The bibliography does list a few post-1991 papers, but it could have listed at least the other significant post-HANZAB ones, most of which are in Australian journals such as *Emu*, *Corella* and *Australian Field Ornithology*.

The unfortunate lack of reference to the newer literature has led to several errors and omissions throughout the text. For example: in the identification of the Rufous Owl the text should emphasise the difficulty of separating its calls from those of the Powerful Owl, and that in the overlap zone the birds should be sighted to delineate the Rufous Owl's true southern limit; the Rufous Owl's diet also includes large arboreal mammals. The Powerful Owl's roosting sites commonly include sheoaks; the female (as well as the male) calls and responds territorially; and the owl's diet includes introduced Black Rats in cities. The Boobook's subspecific

names should be italicised; the 'Bray' call is a female food-begging call, and the yelp ('Yow') is a juvenile first-autumn call (a stage in the development of the 'Boobook' call); its prey includes birds larger than passerines (e.g. rosellas) and mammals up to juvenile Ringtail Possums in size; and a nestling period of 5–6 weeks is correct if one allows for 'branching' at 5 weeks and flight from the nest tree at 6 weeks. For the Barking Owl, weights are understated (southern adults can be over 700–800 g); the significance of the scream is not 'unknown'; and in much of southern Australia its main prey is arboreal mammals such as gliders (*Petaurus*) rather than rabbits. For the Barn Owl, the issue of bill-snapping versus tongue-clicking is again unresolved, but *Tyto* owls definitely bill-clap; there are in fact Australian records of this owl's incubation period in the wild. For the Grass Owl, also, there is an Australian record of the incubation period (albeit in captivity), and the claim of 42 days for the African Grass Owl may well be incorrect (cf. 33–35 days in well-studied *Tyto*). For the Masked Owl, dark-morph birds of subspecies *novaehollandiae* can be male; the incubation period is ~35 days not 42; juveniles are darker than adults of equivalent morph; and at least some Nullarbor records are valid. For the sooty owls, Norman *et al.* (1992, *Proceedings of the Royal Society of London, B, Biological Sciences* **269**, 2127–2133) did examine New Guinea subspecies *arfaki*, which is morphologically intermediate between the Lesser Sooty and southern Sooty. The identity of the Mackay (Eungella National Park) bird(s), i.e. as southern Sooty Owl (*tenebricosa*), has been known for a decade (cf. HANZAB 4). Extensive pellet data for the Lesser Sooty Owl do exist (HANZAB again!). For the Marbled Frogmouth, egg dimensions are overstated (probably because of inclusion of misidentified Tawny Frogmouth eggs); the young has in fact been described and some knowledge of growth and fledging has been obtained; and the whole account would have benefitted from a review of the late Gordon Beruldsen's remarkable study (2003, *Australian Field Ornithology* **20**, 126–138). For frogmouths in general, evident mis-sexing in

the 1991 edition, in the narratives and Field Guide, has mostly not been corrected (other than Tawny Frogmouth photograph captions, where the daytime incubator and larger sex is correctly identified as male). For the Owlet-nightjar, the nestling period has been sharpened up as 26–29 days. In the Grass Owl narrative, "Brodefacum" (rodenticide) should be brodifacoum. Although individually each of these is minor, the overall effect is to create a text that appears less reliable than it could be. This seems a missed opportunity to update what is otherwise an excellent source of information on these birds of the night.

In the book's *Introduction*, Hollands mentions DNA taxonomy but takes issue with the lumping of the two sooty owls, preferring instead to continue recognising the Lesser Sooty Owl as a separate species (despite the morphological and genetic anomaly of the taxon *arfaki*, cf. above). Contrariwise, he does not follow DNA evidence that the Asian/Australasian populations of the Barn Owl are genetically separable as a full species.

The book is pitched at bird enthusiasts, and is written in popular style with much anecdotal information. Nevertheless, there is much in it of interest to scientists, and readers of *Emu* would appreciate the quantitative dietary analyses, descriptions of behaviour, and insights into the general ecology and natural history of owls and other night birds. The new chapter on threats to owls is largely the author's subjective personal opinion, based on his experiences of the owls and their responses to events such as wildfire, prescribed fire and habitat clearance and fragmentation, but deserves to be heeded by ecologists and land managers as a focus for research and conservation. However, following recent bird atlas data showing declines in some common owls in the sheep–wheat belt, his assessment of the Boobook and Barn Owl may be too optimistic.

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