

AUSTRALIAN NATURAL HISTORY SERIES

AUSTRALIAN BUSTARD



MARK ZIEMBICKI



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PREFACE

Sighting an Australian bustard for the first time in the wild is a memorable experience for many people. I still vividly recall my own first encounter with these impressive birds. It was in the Lakefield National Park region of northern Queensland. As a southerner I vaguely knew of the bustard, but the large male standing his ground before us as we pulled up in our Toyota struck me by his size and stately appearance. The encounter was brief, but it left an indelible impression and that feeling of excitement one gets when sighting a new species, particularly one of such grandeur and mystery, for the first time. I wasn't to know it at the time, but our paths were to cross again in a decidedly more profound manner.

A few years later the bustard was to become the focus of my PhD research. In choosing a study subject, my intention was to focus on a single species that could be used as a model for examining the complex movement patterns made by many of Australia's birds. The bustard is considered a highly mobile species that undertakes widespread and dispersive movements in relation to highly variable environmental conditions. It also employs an interesting and highly specialised mating system, while its cultural significance to Aboriginal people across the country adds an additional element to its appeal. For such reasons the bustard, if you'll pardon the pun, seemed to fit the bill nicely as a potential study subject. To my surprise, it soon became obvious that very little was known about the species. The Australian bustard had never been formally studied in the field. Much of what was known was based on descriptive or anecdotal accounts by amateur naturalists and casual observers. Max Downes had undertaken some pioneering surveys in parts of the Northern Territory and South Australia, while the only detailed study of the bustard's behaviour was based on a captive population in southern Australia by Kate Fitzherbert in 1978. Much of the information making up this book is based on these pioneering studies and in large part on my own research of the species ecology in the tropical savannas of northern Australia. In the outback, most people know the bustard, where it is more commonly known as the bush or plains turkey. However, the species remains poorly known to most Australians. It is my intention in writing this book to shed some light on the species and convey some of the charm and mystery of this cryptic and lordly icon of the outback.

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TALKING TURKEY



The Australian bustard is an icon of the outback and Australia's heaviest flying bird, yet remains poorly known to most Australians. It is a denizen of open country; of the broad open plains, shrub lands and woodlands that characterise vast expanses of the Australian continent. Having declined from much of southern Australia since European settlement, its contemporary strongholds are in the remote northern and central regions of the country. Travelling these parts and sighting a bustard as it walks imperiously across an outback road is an impressive spectacle and a highlight that makes it into most naturalists' travelogues. Less often witnessed, but even more majestic, are the spectacular display routines that males perform to court females during the breeding season.

One of the most striking physical features of the bustard is its size. It is an impressively large bird. Among the bustard family's greatest claims to fame is that it includes the heaviest of all flying birds. The heaviest recorded weight of a great bustard (at just under 21 kilograms) only marginally eclipses the heaviest Kori bustard ever recorded. By comparison, the

heaviest Australian bustard ever recorded was a specimen from Victoria weighing 14.5 kilograms – perhaps not quite competing for the heavyweight championship of the world, but holding the record for Australia’s heaviest flying bird nonetheless.

Notwithstanding such notable trivia, the bustard is inherently interesting biologically. It is perhaps surprising therefore that it is relatively poorly known to science. Until recently there had been no detailed studies of the bustard’s ecology in the field. Much of what was known was based on descriptive or anecdotal accounts by amateur naturalists and casual observers, while the only detailed study of the bustard’s behaviour was based on Kate Fitzherbert’s pioneering work on a captive population in southern Australia. One reason for its relative anonymity is its shy, cryptic nature. It generally shuns populated areas, residing mostly in remote regions. It is slow moving, does not fly frequently, and often remains still, relying on camouflage for protection. It is scarce in many parts of its range and has virtually disappeared from much of south-eastern Australia and other settled areas where it was formerly common. For such reasons wild populations are a challenge to study.

First European encounter

During James Cook’s first voyage of discovery to the Pacific between 1768 and 1771 he and his crew first landed in Australia at Botany Bay on 29 April 1770. Heading north while charting Australia’s east coast in the *HMS Endeavour*, their second landing was at a location near the place Cook called Round Hill Head, near the township known today as Seventeen Seventy. Here Cook went ashore with botanist Joseph Banks and his assistant Daniel Solander, and they became the first Europeans to have sighted an Australian bustard. They promptly shot it. Solander’s subsequent description of the collected bird (which given its weight must have been a male) rendered the bustard one of the first scientific descriptions of a native Australian land animal, and the first official technical report of a land animal in Queensland (Figure 1.1). In honour of the first bustard to fall at a European hand the bay in which the *Endeavour* was moored was duly named Bustard Bay.

An excerpt from Cook’s journal entry of 23 May 1770 reads:

All or most of the same sorts of land and water fowl as we saw at Botany Bay we saw here, besides these Black & white ducks, and

Bustards such as we have in England one of which we killd that weigh'd 17½ (pounds) which occasioned me giving this place the name of Bustard Bay.

Joseph Banks in his journal made reference to the culinary delights of the shot bird:

At Dinner we eat the Bustard we had shot yesterday, it turnd out an excellent bird, far the best we all agreed that we have eat since we left England, and as it weighd 15 pounds our Dinner was not only good but plentyfull.

Cook's reference to the bustard 'such as we have in England' is to the great bustard; however, by the time he had written these words, great bustard populations across their entire range were already in drastic decline and were very rare in Britain. The primary reason for their demise was hunting, and in smaller part to habitat alteration. But while the birds were hunted for food, it was mostly trophy hunting that was to blame, largely because of the great popularity of firearms, taxidermy and specimen collecting (often under the pretext of science) during this era. As the species declined, so its rarity increased the attraction of collecting it, until eventually

2-3.
pileata. OTIS capite juguloq; levi, pileo nigro pectorali nigra
Habitat in Nova Hollandia, prope Bustard Bay.
Caput leve supra oculos atrum; infra oculos albidum,
flocis nigris minutis adspersum.
Supercilia nigra, lineolis albis variegata.
Jugulum imberbe, sed undiq; pennis laevis vestitum
colore colli.
Collum undiq; albidum, floccis crebris minutissimis
fuscis irroratum.
Pectus superne colore colli, inferne colore abdominis,
facies (torque) nigra in medio.
Abdomen album

Figure 1.1: An extract of Daniel Solander's original description of the Australian bustard as written in Latin was one of the first scientific descriptions of an Australian animal and the first in Queensland. Reproduced with permission of the trustees of the Natural History Museum, London

there was no longer a viable population. The last breeding record of the great bustard in the United Kingdom was from Suffolk in 1832.

Place, people and plant names

Bustard Bay was the first of many places named after the Australian bustard in the European lexicon. Just to the north of the bay is Bustard Head (in the Bustard Head Conservation Park). Across the country there is a Bustard Creek, a Bustard Beach, a Bustard Lagoon and a Bustard Spring Gully. There are several Bustard Bores and two Bustard Islands. Near Groote Eylandt in the Northern Territory, there are the Bustard Isles, named by another famous explorer, Matthew Flinders, who passed through the area in January 1803 during his circumnavigation of Australia aboard the *Investigator*.

There was little wood upon the two sandy isles ... they were partly covered with long grass amongst which harboured several bustards, and I called (them) the Bustard Isles.

Matthew Flinders, 1814

Across much of outback Australia, the Australian bustard is more colloquially known as the wild, plains or bush turkey – a name owed more to its popularity as an honoured guest at Sunday or Christmas roasts than any close phylogenetic affinity to its North American namesake. This name, sometimes confused with the Australian brush turkey (the mound-building megapode of eastern Australia), gives rise to many more place names. Outside the brush turkey's domain, there is a Turkey Creek in the Northern Territory and in every state except Tasmania. There is a Turkey Bore, Turkey Camp, Turkey Channel, Turkey Cock Gully, Turkey Cock Spring and the Turkey Flat Winery. There are the Turkey Hills, several Turkey Flats, a Turkey Hole, Turkey Heath, Turkey Island, Turkey Lane, Turkey Lagoon, Turkey Plain, Turkey Point, Turkey Rest, Turkey Ridge, Turkey Tank, Turkey Waterhole and a Turkey Well. And when one turkey just isn't enough, there is the Turkey Turkey Waterhole.

There are of course also very many sites of Aboriginal significance named after the bustard in local Aboriginal languages. One anglicised example is Turkey Dreaming, a hill in the Northern Territory, and a sacred site for the local Gagudju people. The Ngarigo people who occupied lands

outside of Canberra were themselves named after the bustard which was common on the Monaro Plains prior to the arrival of Europeans.

The bustard also lends its name to common plant names. There are several manifestations of the turkey bush including *Myoporum deserti* and *Grewia retusifolia* (also, and more commonly, known as emu bush). Both plants produce fruits that are a favoured food for both bustards and emus. *Calytrix exstipulata*, a widespread, common shrub in the northern savannas, is also known as turkey bush; however, it does not produce edible parts for birds and its association with turkeys is unclear.

As an aside for the record, the 'turkey nest' in outback Australia is a term used to describe a type of dam that consists of a completely enclosed earth embankment which is filled by pumping water from an alternative source, such as a bore or nearby creek. The term is widely applied across outback Australia, and 'turkey nests' are particularly common on the flat open plains that bustards frequent. However, there is no direct association between the two. The name is derived from the Australian brush turkey and its habit of scraping together earth and leaf litter to form its distinctive nest mound.

Australian folklore

Bustards, while perhaps not as familiar as some Australian animals, have their place in Australian folklore and culture. Like many Australian plants and animals, the bustard has been used as a trademark for business names or logos. One of the first such uses was by the Turkey Flat Vineyard in the Barossa Valley in South Australia. Established in 1847, the winery was named by the original settlers after the large flocks of bustards in the area. Unfortunately, the species is long gone from the region, but it lives on in spirit and is immortalised on the labels of the vineyard's wines (Figure 1.2).

For understandable, if not perhaps somewhat discriminatory reasons, it is unlikely that many Australian sporting teams are ever likely to be named the 'Turkeys' in the ilk of the 'Wallabies', 'Socceroos' or the 'Kookaburras'. But there is at least one sports team that call themselves the 'Bustards' – an over-35s rugby league team in Queensland. The team formed as an offshoot of the Eagle Junction Rugby League Club. While the club's main team retained an eagle in their club logo, the over-35s team adopted their own crest depicting an old eagle on crutches (Figure 1.3). The origin of their name is in fact a clever play on words. As over 35 year



Figure 1.2: The bustard adorns the wine labels of the Turkey Flat Vineyard range.

olds with broken bodies they were in effect the *busted* Eagles but spelt the name 'Bustard' in honour of the bird. Hence, while retaining a hybridised, if not somewhat scientifically suspect, official 'Bustard Eagles' team name, the old boys are affectionately known as 'The Bustards'.

For many people the bustard is often (or at least was) synonymous with food. Almost without exception, the journals of explorers and early settlers that came across bustards, were littered with references to the sport of shooting turkeys or to their gastronomic virtues. Some even offered recipes or tips on how to best cook them.

While riding on the plains Dick would sometimes cut down a wild turkey with his stock whip and the old cook would make what he called a sea pie, although a plains pie would be a better title. These turkey pies were a luxury we did not enjoy every day. The wild turkeys, or bustards as they were called, would sooner perish on the



Figure 1.3: The Bustard-Eagles rugby league club motto.

*plain than come into the well for a drink, probably because they knew
what their fate would be if they did.*

Tom Booth, Corrong Station, Hay Plain 1870

The bush poet also celebrates the bustard both for its aesthetic attributes and for its famed eating qualities. The bustard is generally held in high regard and a fair degree of affection across the outback, and it was without doubt an important and appreciated source of subsistence for many outback folk, and in many cases a fondly missed one.

*The black scrub turkey's now protected,
like the bustard, grey turkey from the plain.
So we the northern and inland seniors,
won't taste the food from early days again.*

*Those were hard years, no fancy tucker,
long hours worked, and money always short,
Bird and beast hunted about the country,
game taken for the table never shot for sport.*

*Young scrub turkey braised with trimmings,
along with potatoes and onions filled the pot.
Whilst the inland fare young plain turkey,
a bushman cooked in camp ovens like as not.*

Australian Bustard

*No fancy table settings or crisp white linen,
strong tea, bread or damper, just basic things.
But bush fare slow cooked to perfection,
in those hard years seemed the food of kings.*

'The Birds of Black or Grey' – Bernard de Silva



Figure 1.4: An Australian bustard shot during the CT Madigan expedition to the Simpson Desert 1939. Image courtesy of the State Library of South Australia. SLSA: B 20349 – Simpson Desert – 1939



Figure 1.5: Lithograph of the Australian bustard from Gregory Mathews's 'Birds of Australia'.