



Boom & Bust

Bird Stories for a Dry Country

Libby Robin, Robert Heinsohn and Leo Joseph

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INTRODUCTION: BOOM AND BUST

Libby Robin and Mike Smith

I love a sunburnt country,
A land of sweeping plains,
Of ragged mountain ranges,
Of droughts and flooding rains.
I love her far horizons,
I love her jewel-sea,
Her beauty and her terror -
The wide brown land for me!

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Core of my heart, my country!
Her pitiless blue sky,
When sick at heart, around us,
We see the cattle die -
But then the grey clouds gather,
And we can bless again
The drumming of an army,
The steady, soaking rain.

Dorothea MacKellar (1904) – ‘My Country’ (verses 2 and 4)¹

Not everyone shares Dorothea MacKellar’s delight in the contrasting beauty and terror of the ‘wide brown land’ of Australia. Droughts and flooding rains each bring their own difficulties, but the animals that have lived in this land over many years have developed impressive adaptations to cope with scarcity and plenty. The challenge for humans and animals alike in a land of environmental variability is uncertainty. When will those ‘grey clouds gather’ again? When will we ‘bless again / The drumming of an army, / The steady, soaking rain’? The time between rains, ruled by ‘pitiless blue skies’, is a time for holding the nerve, of ecological stretch, and the irregular rains are at the core of a creative ecological pulse. ‘Boom and bust’ are the rhythms of Australia, so different from the regimented seasonality of northern Europe.

It has been difficult for European Australians with the expectation of regular cyclical seasons to find a sense of permanence, to be at home in a place where drought and

plenty stalk each other in unpredictable ways. In 1884 George Roberts, mailman on the Birdsville Track, disappeared. His packhorse was recovered but the mailman was not found. As 400 mm of rain had fallen in the district, people assumed that he had been drowned in the floods. But when his desiccated body was found on stony country near Haddon the following year, local people had to revise their opinion: he had died of thirst.²

This book uses a range of individual bird species as a lens for understanding environmental variability in Australia. It is more than a ‘natural history’; we have chosen stories that illustrate how natural systems play out under human-induced change and in some cases how humans have reacted to such events. Boom and bust is often a cyclical process for birds in the Australian environment. People and natural systems can both create booms and busts and human impacts can magnify or diminish natural patterns. People can interact with natural dynamics to constrain or amplify them in some way. Natural systems can also respond in unexpected ways. Sometimes change is irreversible. The story of biotic interactions with humans can only become more complicated as anthropogenic climate change alters rainfall patterns.

Australia has not ranked well in terms of its habitat and biotic losses since Europeans arrived. It has the doubtful honour of leading the world in mammalian extinctions, with some 30% of its endemic mammal species extinct since 1788. It also has the highest number of threatened species on the

planet. Conditions on this continent are already more variable and uncertain than in the rest of the world. In Australia, places with limited water – not just the desert country, but also the productive temperate south – are all predicted to receive less rainfall in the future.³

The situation is grave, but history suggests that not all stories will be of ‘bust’. The concept of boom and bust enables us to talk about the outcomes of environmental change for some bird species, and provides a key to exploring the idea of adaptation. If we do not understand the underlying natural rhythms of this continent, we will not be able to manage anthropogenic change.

The evolutionary histories of Australian birds offer some insights into the natural dynamics of the continent. Europeans had to overcome expectations created by northern hemisphere conditions, particularly the idea that regular annual seasons are ‘normal’. In this context, the behaviour of birds adapted to Australian conditions has often been deemed ‘exceptional’ because it challenged established theories developed under European and Northern American conditions. A northern hemisphere perspective has sometimes made it difficult to observe the strategies of animals that live in landscapes ruled by variability and aseasonality.

The difficulty of predicting whether any given year will be a boom or a bust year has become part of national stereotypes. Australia is the ‘El Niño continent’; a landscape ‘where creeks run dry or ten feet high’.⁴ But uncertainty is also increasingly a

global phenomenon, and global climate change is already making living with uncertain seasons and extreme weather events more common, even in places where a well-ordered seasonality has been taken for granted in the past. In this book we draw on the natural history of Australia's birds to explore the relations between fauna, people and environment in a continent where variability is normal and rainfall patterns do not follow regular seasons. It is a book that is aimed at Australian readers, but ideas about coping with boom and bust are also pertinent to other continents and increasingly relevant on the global scale.

Endnotes

- 1 MacKellar D (1904) *My Country* (poem). Republished with decorations and illustrations by JJ Hilder (1971) Angus & Robertson: Sydney.
- 2 This story is told in Tolcher HM (1986) *Drought or Deluge: Man in the Cooper's Creek Region*. Melbourne University Press: Carlton South, p. 175.
- 3 Lindenmayer D and Burgman M (2005) *Practical Conservation Biology*. CSIRO Publishing: Melbourne, pp. 1–6.
- 4 This phrase appears in scientific as well as popular literature: Friedel MH, Foran BD and Stafford Smith DM (1990) Where the creeks run dry or ten feet high: pastoral management in arid Australia. In *Australian Ecosystems: 200 Years of Utilisation, Degradation and Reconstruction*. (Eds. DA Saunders, AJM Hopkins and RA How) pp. 185–94. Surrey Beatty and Sons: Chipping Norton, NSW.