

# Bowerbirds

**PETER ROWLAND 2008.**

*CSIRO Publishing, 144 pages. \$39.95.*

Bowerbirds is in the CSIRO's *Australian Natural History Series*, though apart from a small header on the cover, it is a pity that there is no mention of the series and its objectives. This book is a 'little' book in many respects, being just 144 pages and covering a small and in many ways little known group of birds. 'Little known', but as the opening quotation from Barrett, 1945 says, 'wonder birds' perhaps second only in Australia to the lyrebirds. There are just twenty species of bowerbirds split fairly evenly between Australia and 'greater' New Guinea with two species, the Spotted Catbird, *Ailuroedus melanotis*, and the Fawn-breasted Bowerbird, *Ptilonorhynchus cerviniventris*, occurring in both regions. It is interesting to note that in the case of both of these species, the New Guinea populations occur at higher altitudes than their Australian counterparts.

The first four chapters of the book, all rather too brief, in total only 26 pages, cover general information, taxonomy, habitat, distribution, conservation and behaviour including importantly bower construction. There are two very useful summary tables, but in general one has the impression either that little is known about these birds or that the author for whatever reason, does not want to pursue loose ends. The writing style is staccato with many short sentences, so that at times one finds leaps in the text that almost amount to non sequiturs. The text is terse and to a fault is never lyrical. Nevertheless there are some nice facts. For example it is mentioned on p.11. that DNA work has indicated that bowerbirds may be closely related to crows (Corvidae), but that is the end of it. The recent revelations about corvid intelligence, tool making and even tool

making to obtain tools, might perhaps have been related to bower constructions.

However, despite what I see as a weakness, the text does not lapse into the almost pseudoscientific style replete with forced statistics, which mars some modern bird writing. Indeed at times the author bends over backwards to accommodate the amateur reader. Words like 'polygynous' are defined and explained several times and indeed repetition is something of a fault in the species section where relatively short accounts are rather formulaic.

Much of the book, the whole of chapter 4, and long sections in each species account deal with the extraordinary phenomenon of bowers and the related courtship behaviours. These bowers range from none at all, in the catbirds, *Ailuroedes spp*, through the use of courts, e.g. Tooth-billed Bowerbird, *Scenopoetes dentiostriis*, to some of the most elaborate structures produced by non-human animals. In addition, the male birds collect coloured items, paint the walls and maintain bowers sometimes over long periods. All this is extensively documented even for some of the poorly known New Guinea species. Similarly the elaborate chasing and hiding rituals of courtship are described in some detail though sometimes without much attempt to interpret them. Certainly this book never lapses into anthropomorphism! Similarly for many of the species, which are generally good mimics, there are extensive lists of 'vocalisations,' which again unfortunately read almost as repetitive lists without much commentary, though it was intriguing to learn that the Tooth-billed Bowerbird has '...the ability to sing with two voices at once'. I personally would have liked some discussion of what this means in practice.

I started by describing this as a 'little' book, but it would perhaps be more accurate to say that it is sparse. The species maps, for the

Australian species only, are simply outlines of Australia with known range, but no cities, no rivers, no State boundaries and this seems to me to be a waste of potential and usefulness. Purists may argue that most of these features are largely irrelevant to nature, but they are relevant to the readers. The photographs are adequate without being stunning, but this may be because of the reproduction and paper. Certainly the cover is striking.

Overall the structure of the book makes a lot of sense starting with a general introduction to a fascinating and near endemic group of birds. The brevity is surely based partly on lack of information on several of them, some of which were *discovered*, not just described, very recently. However the extensive bibliography suggests that more is known and this reader would have liked to have known more.

The book is modestly priced and despite all my criticisms I found it a pleasant read. It is not a field guide, it is not really a monograph, but rather a general introduction and probably that was what was intended. I certainly came away knowing more about bowerbirds than when I started and the reading was relatively gentle, if not inspiring.

**John Hatch.**