

BOOM & BUST Bird Stories for a Dry Country

**LIBBY ROBIN, ROBERT HEINSOHN,
LEO JOSEPH (EDITORS) 2009**

CSIRO Publishing. 299 pages, with index and select bibliography. \$39.95

In the world of ornithology there are two main groups of people: Insiders and Outsiders. This book is written by Insiders primarily for Outsiders. We Outsiders ponder the world of the Insider often with a degree of envy since they spend weeks, months and often years out there in the field collecting data and having a good time. The reality is actually quite different and this book gives a fine insight into the contradictions, torment and often frustrations of the discipline. It provides a unique view of the many facets of a specialised academic research career in the field of ornithology.

Boom & Bust is a collection of nicely focussed chapters, (some are referred to as 'papers' and 'essays'), all written by eminent professionals and presumably as a result of an invitation by the Editors, Libby Robin, Robert Heinsohn and Leo Joseph. It is essentially a book about the search for answers about the birds of the arid regions of Australia and how they find locations and breed in times of plenty and how they have evolved unexpected strategies often quite different to northern hemisphere birds. Many species have failed to evolve to meet a changed environment and have become extinct. These days we tend to think that this is entirely our fault but history tells quite a different story. There are lessons that can be drawn from aboriginal experience and about survival during climate change even though the pace of change today may be at an unprecedented rate.

All science is an exercise in the pursuit of answers and most answers lead on to more

questions. The chapter on the Zebra Finch by Steve Morton is a case at point. He points out that Klaus Immelmann showed that boom times for desert finches followed rain events and the return of drought resulted in a collapse of the population. This simplistic view of the breeding success and failure of an Australian desert bird has become embedded in our understanding of cause and effect. But it is not the full story by any means and further research shows a far wider range of influences on Zebra Finch population booms and busts. Read the book to find out where this research is heading.

Graham Pizzey always had the knack of putting a finger on just what made a particular species of bird different. He also wrote well and his chapter on Black-tailed Native-hens (first published elsewhere in 2000) is a model of clarity and insight. He ponders how these birds detect water events hundreds of kilometres away and make their way there over very short periods of time, just as do Grey Teal.

The rise of satellite tracking devices has enabled some of the questions raised by Graham Pizzey, amongst others, to be used to follow the routes taken by some of our dry country birds. The chapter by David Roshier on the Grey Teal dispersion gives some answers as well as providing many more questions. Why on earth would one bird fly a few hundred kilometres to a preferred site when another from the same area can locate a perfectly satisfying site after a flight of only a few kilometres?

With the present flood event at Lake Eyre we can anticipate that once again huge numbers of Australian Pelicans will go there to breed and it will be boom times for them as long as the water and the food lasts. Julian Reid's chapter on the strategies pelicans use to trigger breeding event shows that this cannot be learned from adult birds who have experienced the inland flood event before. The events are often decades and generations apart. Also how do the pelicans time their breeding cycle to coincide with the

abundance of the fish in the inland floodwaters? Plenty to contemplate here.

For a bit of pure scientific excitement the chapter by archaeologist Mike Smith on the extinct *Genyornis* is a great delight. He explains some of the science behind the analysis of fossilised egg shells from the Port Pirie region and shows how the feeding strategy of this bird failed to respond to climate change and ultimately doomed the bird to extinction. One has to ponder the fate of a number of our present bird species in Australia under conditions of accelerating climate change.

Penny Olsen, until recently the editor of 'Wingspan' for Birds Australia, has given an historical perspective to the collection of specimens of the Night Parrot and the prospect that this species has already gone bust with just a chance that it has not yet finally gone to dust. Reports of its existence still come in and the very occasional specimen turns up in unexpected locations. The dry interior of Australia is so vast and the bird so cryptic that finding it anywhere is harder than finding a needle in a haystack but then the Eyrean Grass wren was not seen for over 80 years before being rediscovered.

The final three chapters in this book are written by the Editors: Robin, HeinsolNE and Joseph. As one might expect they draw together the contributions and discuss the role that evolutionary ecology brings to reading the lessons of history. Their chapters on the vastly differing strategies present day species such as woodswallows, choughs and emu's have evolved to make possible their survival make satisfying reading.

Each chapter concludes with an impressive series of notes and references and there is a full index and a Selected Bibliography all giving the impression that the world of academic writing for the interested bystander is not compromised by popularist simplification.

Members of BirdsSA who live in South Australia will want to read this book. It is about much that takes place in the desert areas of the State. A number of the locations will be very familiar and some of the contributors are ornithologists who started their careers as members of BirdsSA.

The book is well worth the money in my opinion.

Rod Attwood