

Australian Bustard

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CSIRO Publishing. Softback, 120 pages. \$39.95.

When asked to review this small volume in the Australian Natural History Series I responded, "I don't know much about bustards", to which the editor retorted "Who else has seen one in the State recently?" I had just been fortunate to witness groups of up to 20 of these magnificent birds among the lush growth from recent floods at Goyder Lagoon in the far north-east.

Few in South Australia would appreciate that Australian Bustards *Ardeotis australis* were once common in the settled areas. A quick scan of early Adelaide newspapers reveals they favoured "the open grassy plains in the neighbourhood of lagoons, of country that is flooded in winter, and around the grassy lands near samphire and saltbush country", with "very large flocks" seen near the North Arm, Dry Creek, Salisbury and Port Wakefield (e.g. Anon. 1888). Their decline was documented by Boehm (1947 - and incidentally the only publication on the species in this journal) who noted dolefully that "there is little consolation in the thought that the species may still be seen hundreds of miles to the north where so few people can see the birds and fewer still feel inclined to devote time to the study of their life history".

The book therefore is understandably biased towards northern Australia, where the species remains relatively common, and where the author has based his studies. As with previous titles in this series the style is relaxed and aimed at the general reader, while including

details by the author as part of his PhD thesis, based at the University of Adelaide. There are chapters on Australian folklore, Aboriginal cultural significance and new findings, plus more routine sections on taxonomy, status, distribution, life history and conservation. The text is liberally scattered with well-captioned black and white photos, figures and diagrams. Eight pages of excellent colour images are in the centre of the book.

I was fascinated to learn of the bustard's 'lekking' behaviour and of the Cane Toad in the bustard's catholic diet, apparently consumed without ill effect! More study of this aspect is warranted given the vast negative impacts of Cane Toads on other native fauna, and the bustard's ability to exploit abundant sources of food.

Also of great interest was the use of the new satellite tracking technology to detect movements. My appetite had recently been whetted by reading of David Roshier's discovery of the incredible journeys of Grey Teal *Anas gracilis* in response to inland rains (in Robin *et al.* 2009). A colour map traces a female bustard over a 15-month period, but could perhaps have been larger to better display notes and geographic features. Clearly there is much to learn from future tracking studies on bustards and other central Australian species.

More ecological information presented for southern Australia would have improved the book's appeal to our readers, especially given Boehm's (1947) excellent review and various references in regional articles since. For example it is not generally known that in summer bustards gather along the far-west

coast, west of Ceduna, to feed on fruits of the Turkey Bush *Eremophila* (formerly *Myoporum*) *deserti*, or inhabit the low sand-heaths of the Ninety Mile Desert in the Murray Mallee. Also the map of current distribution provides little useful information, and indeed does not include the south-east of South Australia where several records are listed in recent SAOA Newsletters (e.g. Keith district 2001-2005, Rendelsham 2006, Lochaber 2008, Cape Jaffa 2009). The map could have shown an analysis of data from the Birds Australia atlases on relative abundance, seasonal variations or distributional declines.

Given the extent of decline of the Australian Bustard the final chapter is aptly devoted to conservation. Bustards have been exposed to all the major threatening processes that face birds in Australia. Their biggest shortcomings are that they nest on the ground and exploit widely distributed, ephemerally abundant food, including agricultural pests such as house mice and plague locusts that are subject to relentless poisoning programs. New challenges may also result from the rapid spread of Buffel Grass *Cenchrus ciliaris* throughout central Australia. There is therefore a good case for official threatened species listing at the national level. From a South Australian perspective, the mutually exclusive current distributions of the bustard and the introduced Red Fox are noteworthy. Perhaps the more rigorous adoption of fox-baiting programs may re-establish the Australian Bustard as a regular breeding species here in future.

In summary I would recommend this volume to anyone interested in birds and conservation, more especially because it highlights how little is known about some of our most recognised species.

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Page 212 final paragraph: 2 September 2009 should be 2 September 2006.

Page 213 second paragraph: 3 September 2009 should be 3 September 2006.