





GREY-CROWNED BABBLER

Pomatostomus temporalis

The grey-crowned babbler is the largest of Australia's four species of babblers and earned its common name from the incessant chattering that goes on within a family group. It's a species that's widespread throughout north-western, northern, central, and eastern regions of the mainland, but in south-eastern Australia, where vast agricultural landscapes have replaced the birds' favoured habitats of open forests and woodlands, populations of grey-crowned babblers are in decline. A similar situation is gradually unfolding in other areas of their range, with the species classified as endangered in Victoria and South Australia, and the nationwide population of grey-crowned babblers estimated to have declined by 95 per cent since the early days of European settlement.

This is a bird that has dark brown plumage on its back and wings, a cream crown, throat, and chest, a curved bill, a long brown tail tipped with white, and a wide dark brown stripe that stretches from its bill, beyond each yellow eye, and down to the neck. Immature birds, which have similar colouring, can be distinguished by their dark eyes.

Grey-crowned babblers are highly social and gregarious birds that live in small family groups consisting of an adult pair and their offspring, and there's always plenty of chattering going on among the group of up to 15 individuals as they forage for food. They spend much of their time on the ground where they energetically rummage among fallen leaves and other material on the forest or woodland floor for the insects, spiders, small reptiles, and earthworms that form a major part of their diet. They peck at the bark of trees, and scratch around the base of trees, shrubs, and decaying logs in their search for prey, occasionally eat seeds if little else is on offer, and will visit gardens that have substantial quantities of mulch among which they can scavenge for food.

Silence is an unfamiliar concept to grey-crowned babblers for they use their considerable vocabulary of calls to continually remain in contact with other members of their group, and if a sound is interpreted as a warning of danger, they'll run into the closest area of dense vegetation, and only fly up into a tree if the threat persists.

Babblers are monogamous birds, and although there's only one breeding pair within each group, the other birds play a vital role within the family unit. They help to construct the roosting nests that are used by all members of the group, and cooperate to build the nest in which the primary female will eventually lay her eggs. If an old nest is available, the birds may take the easy option of renovation and reuse the nest for several years, but when a new nest is required every bird knuckles down to the work of creating something that's far more than a primitive construction. Grey-crowned babblers' nests, which are usually built in the fork of a tree, are made from twigs, with the relatively complex design including an awning over the entrance and a landing platform beside an opening that leads into a nesting chamber lined with grass and feathers. And as the female patiently incubates her eggs, the rest of the mob dutifully supply her with food, and when the eggs eventually hatch, they also help to feed and care for the chicks that are their latest batch of siblings.



SATIN BOWERBIRD

Ptilonorhynchus violaceus

The satin bowerbird is the most well known of the seven species of bowerbirds that are found in Australia, but it's the bird's behaviour, rather than its appearance, that has brought this species notoriety, for it has the curious habit of collecting anything that's blue, as long as it's small enough for the bird

Left: A grey-crowned babbler in the author's garden.

to transport to the secluded heart of its kingdom.

Satin bowerbirds inhabit the woodlands and humid forests of eastern and south-eastern Australia, from around Gladstone in central Queensland to the Dandenong and Otway Ranges of Victoria, with smaller populations also found in far north Queensland. And while they prefer the seclusion of the wildest places in their extensive range, they're not averse to setting up home in urban parks and gardens, providing there are suitable areas of native vegetation available in which they can feed.

To say the adult male satin bowerbird is entirely black is an understatement as pronounced as describing rubies as being merely red, for he's a handsome character with a pale blue to yellow bill, vivid blue eyes, and glossy black plumage that gleams with a dazzling deep blue metallic sheen. Younger males have a similar appearance to that of females that have olive green feathers on the back and head, a chestnut brown tail and wings, under parts that are beautifully patterned with a light green to cream and brown scalloped design, a dark brown to black bill, and blue eyes, and it's five years before their plumage begins to resemble that of adults, and seven years before they don their truly stunning attire.

Satin bowerbirds are omnivorous and consume a wide range of foods, including fruit, flowers, leaves, seeds, and insects, with the daily menu dependant on the seasonal availability of food, but one thing they seem unable to resist is green beans, and when marauding flocks arrive in home gardens and descend on agricultural crops to gorge themselves on these succulent vegetables, no one puts out the welcome mat.

Adult males generally prefer their own company, but females and immature birds routinely gather in

Right: A female satin bowerbird searching for food in Ben Boyd National Park in New South Wales.





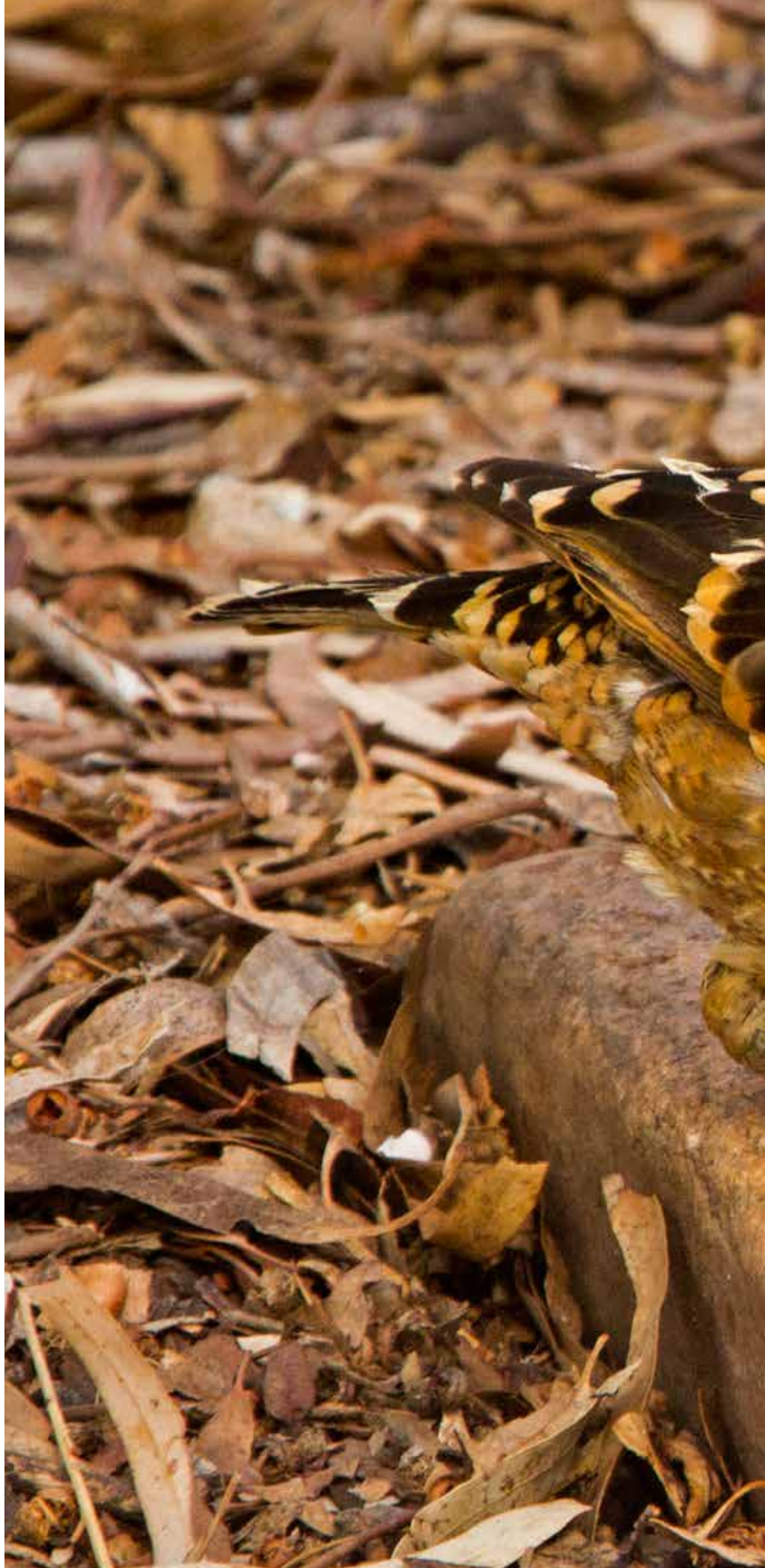
small groups and occasionally in large flocks. During winter months they tend to inhabit relatively open woodlands, but when their thoughts are focused on finding a mate, they return to the more congested growth of forests and each male enthusiastically begins preparing his territory to impress the local females, with his bower being the focal point of his domain.

With almost fanatical diligence he creates his bower, starting with two parallel walls of vertical sticks that are almost invariably positioned in a north-south direction and painted with a mixture of vegetable matter and saliva. At each end of this avenue he clears a 'stage' that he decorates with blue objects - from wild berries, flowers, and feathers, to scraps of paper, plastic, and metal, clothes pegs, drinking straws, and bottle tops, and although a male satin bowerbird may be a shy and reclusive character for much of the year, his determination to create the most highly ornate bower gives him the confidence to forage around picnic and camping areas and parks and gardens for anything blue, and he's not averse to snatching a blue pen or other desirable item from right under the nose of its human owner.

When there's a good source of food available, several birds build their bowers in relatively close proximity to one another, and while each protects his bower from his neighbours, there's always intense rivalry, with birds attempting to destroy the work of others and pilfering the blue treasures that lie at the entrance of their competitors' bowers.

The bower is where the male courts any female that wanders in to admire his handiwork, and just to ensure that he gets her attention, he performs elaborate displays, and dances, with wings outstretched, on his decorated 'stage'. If she's suitably impressed, the female moves into the bower where the pair mate, and once she's left his

Right: A spotted bowerbird at a camping area near Alice Springs in central Australia.





kingdom to begin the construction of her nest, the male rearranges his blue treasures and fastidiously tidies his bower in readiness to catch the eye of the next female that comes his way.



SPOTTED / WESTERN BOWERBIRD

Chlamydera maculata

Australia can boast of two widely separated populations of this attractive bowerbird, one of which, known as the spotted bowerbird, inhabits inland areas on the eastern side of the continent and thrives in dry woodlands in Queensland and New South Wales. The second group is known as the western bowerbird, and there's no more complex reason for its colloquial name other than the fact that it inhabits western regions of the continent where its range extends from the central western coast to central Australia.

Both populations are of identical appearance and have highly decorative speckled plumage that's chocolate brown flecked with chestnut on the wings, tail, and back, a slightly lighter hue on the head, throat, and upper breast, and light brown on the lower under parts. The most distinctive feature however is the vivid mauve band on the back of the bird's neck, and although both sexes have similar plumage, females wear a slightly smaller neck band.

The spotted / western bowerbird enjoys a varied diet of fruits, flowers, seeds, and insects and, like the more familiar satin bowerbird, it's a kleptomaniac, but unlike its closest relative that gathers anything that's blue, the male of this species likes a touch of bling in its world. Adult males collect anything that's bright and shiny, but not usually blue, including silver food wrappers, shards of glass, and metal bottle tops and ring pulls, and will even help themselves to glittering jewellery if the opportunity presents itself.

The male's horde of treasure is used to decorate his bower and thus attract the most discerning females. The

bower, which is usually created in an area that's protected from inclement weather by overhanging foliage, yet able to be illuminated by the morning sun, consists of two parallel walls built from vertical sticks and grass that are coated with a blend of grass and saliva, with its sole purpose being to attract females with which the bird that's the king of the castle can mate. The clearings at each end of the bower, where gleaming objects are often scattered among an array of white pebbles and fragments of sun-bleached bones and shells, are where, as a female approaches, the male puts on an impassioned performance, with his energetic dancing accompanied by a repertoire of curious sounds, some of which mimic the voices of other birds.

When a female eventually enters the bower, the pair mate, and the moment one lover has scurried away, the amorous male fusses over the décor to ensure that another female will give her nod of approval to his efforts.

Females, after leaving the bower, have serious work on their minds, and each selects a suitable site in which to build her nest. It's usually little more than a shallow bowl of sticks that's positioned well above the ground and hopefully out of the reach of feral cats and foxes, and well away from the bower where the male, with no interest in helping any of his mates to incubate their eggs or to raise their chicks, dedicates himself to the task of attracting as many mates as possible.



SPANGLED DRONGO

Dicrurus bracteatus

In the 1920s, Australian punters urged on a racehorse named Drongo, and although it frequently crossed the finish line in second or third place, it failed to win any of its 37 races. After Drongo's retirement, its name became the nickname for other horses that were equally unlucky, and eventually Australians began to use the word 'drongo' as a derogatory reference to anyone who was not only unlucky, but was also

a no-hoper or a fool. There's nothing remotely foolish about the bird that's known as the spangled drongo however, for its colloquial name was derived not from that of a nag, but from the indigenous word for a bird of similar appearance that once inhabited the forests of Madagascar.

Spangled drongos are found throughout northern and eastern Australia, but in summer months some head south to cooler climates. Usually living alone or in pairs, they inhabit coastal woodlands, rainforests, and mangrove wetlands, and will also visit urban areas if a suitable habitat and supplies of food are available.

With its gleaming black plumage that has an iridescent green to blue sheen, a dark grey bill, and bright reddish brown eyes it's a most attractive bird, and its long forked fish-like tail makes it instantly recognisable. Both males and females are of a similar appearance, but young birds have feathers that are a rather dull black.

Although fruit and nectar are always on the menu for spangled drongos, it's insects that are the main ingredient of their diet, with large stick insects, which they snatch from the foliage of trees, being among their favoured foods. They often perch on a high branch from where they can get a bird's eye view of the comings and goings of creatures that might be their prey, and when they spot what they're looking for, they launch themselves into the air, and with fast, skilful, and acrobatic manoeuvring, they catch flying insects before these tiny creatures realise that death is on its way.

The spangled drongo is not a gregarious bird, in fact it's almost anti-social and can be very aggressive towards other birds, including much larger species that encroach on what it sees as its personal domain. It will chase other birds that are feeding and steal any morsel of food that they drop as they flee from the neighbourhood grouch, and it will put on a temper tantrum, with distinc-

Right: A spangled drongo at a bird bath in the author's garden.





A female green figbird in the author's garden in Queensland.



● A male green figbird in the botanic gardens
in the Queensland city of Bundaberg.

tive chattering and cackling sounds, if other birds dare to approach a bird bath that the drongo intends to monopolise.

When they settle down to begin a family, spangled drongos build a cup-shaped nest from twigs, vines, and grasses that are woven together with threads of cobweb, and it's then that their aggressive nature pays off, for they vigorously defend their nest and its valuable eggs and chicks against any birds that venture too close, and thus ensure that their offspring have every chance of survival.



GREEN FIGBIRD

Sphecotheres vieilloti

The green figbird has an extensive range that stretches from the Kimberley region of Western Australia, across the top end of the Northern Territory, and down the eastern side of the continent as far south as Victoria. And although it inhabits rainforests and riverbank woodlands where native trees offer seasonal feasts of fruit, the figbird will also visit urban parks and gardens, providing there's an ample supply of food on offer.

No one could be blamed if, after seeing both a male and a female, they assumed that they had spotted two unrelated species, for their physical appearances are almost as different as those of a cabbage and a pumpkin, with the only similarity being that both sexes have a dark grey bill.

The female, with her dark brown back and head, creamy white under parts that are streaked with dark brown, grey legs and feet, and bare grey skin around each eye, is attractive in a rather drab way, but the male is a far more classy character. The vivid red face patches that surround his eyes are a dramatic contrast to his black head, grey neck and throat, olive green wings and upper breast, and the white feathers on his lower breast and under his tail. And while such varied colouring makes him a good looking bird, males that have made themselves at home in northern Queensland really stand out from the

crowd, for they have a yellow breast.

Green figbirds, as their name implies, have a penchant for scoffing native and cultivated figs, but that's not the only fruit on which they regularly dine. A wide range of wild fruits and berries are on their varied menu, and they'll satisfy their appetites for the sweet treats of life with mulberries, pawpaws, and bananas, with the damage they cause to crops of bananas having earned the figbird the alternative colloquial name of 'banana bird'. If fruit is in short supply they'll happily supplement their diet with a wide range of insects, and will descend on any urban garden when they realise that a rain bush, *Murraya paniculata*, is covered with its tiny red berries. And several birds will eagerly congregate on these and other fruiting trees and shrubs to gorge themselves on the delicacies that Mother Nature has laid at their doorstep.

The seeds of most of the fruits that they consume usually pass through the birds' digestive system without being damaged, and as these are eventually passed with a dollop of faeces as a little useful fertiliser, green figbirds repay Mother Nature for her generosity by spreading seeds far and wide, thus allowing new trees to grow to produce another crop of fruit for the birds' future needs.

For much of the year they live alone or in small family groups, but when the breeding season arrives and each has found a mate, several pairs build their cup-shaped nests in close proximity to one another and settle down to raise their families in the high branches of the forest canopy with the hope that, when the chicks hatch, there'll be an abundance of fruit to satisfy the appetites of the ravenous youngsters.



WHITE-WINGED CHOUGH

Corcorax melanorhamphus

The white-winged chough, a resident of the forests and woodlands of eastern and south-eastern regions of mainland Australia, with the exception of northern Queensland, might not be

the most glamorous of birds, but when it comes to personality it's an unrivalled star.

White wing patches, which are usually only visible during flight, are the obvious reason for its common name, but with the rest of its plumage being as black as ebony this is a bird that's often mistaken for a crow, but its bright red eyes and curved dark grey to black bill set it apart from other equally black species. Both males and females are identical in appearance, but juveniles have feathers that are a less glossy black than those of their parents, and they gaze at the world through brown rather than red eyes.

White-winged choughs are not particularly elegant when in flight, for they flutter around with a slow flapping action that's interspersed with short bursts of gliding, but their lack of skill in the air is of no concern to these highly sociable birds, for they prefer to spend the majority of the day on the ground.

In chattering family groups of up to 20 birds they stroll confidently across grasslands, woodlands, agricultural areas, and urban parks and gardens. And with their complex vocabulary of sounds they continually communicate with one another as they rummage energetically among fallen leaves and other debris on the ground and feast on worms and snails, insects, including ants, bees, and wasps, and a wide range of seeds and small fruits. One distinctive call brings other members of the group running to share the delicacies that have been unearthed, while another avian message sounds the alarm when there's a hint of danger. In such a situation the birds initially do nothing more than run, but if a threat persists, they fly up, squawking loudly, into the low branches of nearby trees until it's safe to resume their leisurely terrestrial way of life once again.

When the breeding season arrives, every member of the group, which usually consists of a breeding pair and their offspring, dutifully assists in the construction of a large bowl-shaped



nest that's made with mud reinforced with fragments of bark and other plant material and located on a high branch. And every bird, young and old, also helps to incubate the eggs, to feed the chicks, and to defend the nest and its tiny occupants from predators.

When the fledglings finally take the courageous decision to leave the nest, their first adventure is merely a brief and fluttering flight to the ground. They scamper along after the other members of the group, quickly learning the ropes, noisily begging for food from older

birds, and instinctively realising that survival depends on a rapid response to the alarm calls of other birds, for

Above: A juvenile white-winged chough on a nest made of mud in woodlands in Queensland.



A family of white-winged choughs in the author's garden were feeling the heat of a summer's day.







choughs are easy prey for cats, dogs, and foxes.

Young birds take four years to reach maturity and during this time they remain with their parents, and in the logic of white-winged choughs, the more the merrier is the key to survival, for an increased number of birds within the group means that there's a greater chance of spotting predators while there's still time to escape. And occasionally, to maximise the population of their group, white-winged choughs turn to a little villainy and kidnap the chicks of neighbouring families.



Left: White-winged choughs that are regular residents in the author's Queensland garden were feeling the heat on a summer's day.

A family of white-winged choughs cooled off on a summer's day in a bird bath in the author's garden.





DOUBLE-BARRED FINCH

Taeniopygia bichenovii

In the early half of the 19th century, James Ebenezer Bicheno, the colonial secretary of Van Diemen's Land, who was also an author, a botanist, and a farmer, proclaimed that "gardening advances civilisation by combining the innocent, useful, and beautiful", and he was spot on with that observation. He might never have considered that his name would be immortalised in connection with anything other than a memorable quote, but he was mistaken, for his name is now tied to one of Australia's smallest and most charismatic birds, the double-barred finch that goes by the far from easy to pronounce scientific name of *Taeniopygia bichenovii*.

It's a species that's at home in the northern and eastern regions of the continent, and in inland areas where there are woodlands and bushland with an understorey of grasses, as well as adequate sources of water.

A white face surrounded with a black band has earned this native finch the colloquial name of 'owl-faced finch', and it's the second black band across its white chest that has led to it being christened with the more familiar name of 'double-barred finch'.

It's not a bird endowed with plumage in dazzling and gaudy hues, for its head and back are merely light brown, its wings are black with white spots, its relatively long tail is black, and its bill and legs are a drab shade of grey. Males and females are almost identical, but juvenile birds have lighter plumage, with the bands across the chest being less prominent, and while it might not be the best looking bird on the block, the entertaining and energetic activities of this diminutive bird make it a delight to watch as it goes about its daily life with incessant and cheerful chirping.

Double-barred finches, which often flutter across the landscape in flocks of

Right: A double-barred finch in the author's garden.





A double-barred finch in the callistemon tree in which it had built its nest in the author's garden.





40-50 birds, are primarily seed eaters, and are most at home in environments where grasses provide an ample supply of seeds and low shrubs offer shelter and nesting sites. They generally feed on the ground, sometimes in a large group, and at other times merely with a mate, and will dine on insects in addition to seeds, particularly when they have hungry chicks to satisfy.

These are birds that are passionate about building nests, although their techniques are relatively primitive and the resultant construction is certainly no complex avian mansion. A pair will spend many hours every day flying back and forth to and from their chosen nesting site, which is usually in a low tree or a shrub with dense, often prickly foliage. The materials they utilise frequently far exceed the length of the bird's body, and long stems of grass, fragments of other plant material, strands of animal or human hair, and Spanish moss, when available, trail behind them as they fly towards the nesting site where they drag each prize through the tangle of leaves. The result of their endeavours is a rather scruffy spherical nest, with an entrance in one side, that's lined with fine grass and feathers. Several pairs often build their nests in the same tree, but when the task is completed, it's not necessarily breeding that's on the mind of these tiny birds, for many use their nests simply as places to roost during the night or to shelter from inclement weather.

RED-BROWED FINCH

Neochmia temporalis

Only someone with the intelligence of a greasy dish sponge would fail to comprehend the logic behind the colloquial name of this attractive small bird, for its vivid red brow is there for all to see. Much of the remainder of the plumage of both males and females is nothing more appealing than olive green and grey, but each bird has a bill of the same dazzling red hue as its

prominent eyebrow, and a red rump that has given it the alternative common name of 'red-browed firetail finch.'

These hyperactive little birds can be found in eastern Australia, primarily on the coastal side of the Great Dividing Range, in an area that stretches from the northern tip of Queensland to eastern South Australia, with their favoured habitats being open areas of tall grasses that are in close proximity to dense shrubbery, and not too far from water. And incessant muted twittering is the first clue that a flock of red-browed finches is in the vicinity.

In recent decades, populations of these tiny birds have declined or disappeared entirely from areas that have been cultivated, heavily grazed by livestock, or suffered from the impact of long-term droughts, for in these situations the grass seeds that are their major source of food are either in short supply or non-existent. Insects are also on the menu of these gregarious finches that routinely feed in small flocks, and with a flurry of wings and panicked chirping, they vanish into the nearest patch of dense vegetation when predators or humans come too close for comfort.

The task of nest building is one that both males and females share and, using fragments of twigs and pieces of grass, they create a far from elaborate spherical structure with a side entrance that's rarely more than two metres above the ground among the dense foliage of a shrub, and where the constant supply of grass seeds that they'll need to feed their young will be right on the doorstep.

Right: A red-browed finch on the doorstep of a camping area beside the Turon River in New South Wales.









LEADEN FLYCATCHER

Myiagra rubecula

The leaden flycatcher is one of the most misidentified birds in eastern Australia, particularly in Queensland where it's often mistaken for a satin flycatcher, a species that generally inhabits more southern areas of the continent. These hyperactive birds are found in a wide range of habitats, from open woodlands and forests to coastal environments dominated by mangrove trees in an area that stretches from the Kimberley region of Western Australia, to northern Australia, and along the eastern coast as far south as Victoria and Tasmania.

The leaden flycatcher's scientific name '*rubecula*' is derived from a Latin word meaning 'red breasted', but it's the female of the species, who's more eye-catching than her mate, to whom this description refers. Her head is grey, and her back, tail, and wings are brown, but her upper breast is orange while her male counterpart has merely grey to black plumage on his upper parts and his throat, and white feathers on the rest of his body. Young birds have brown to grey upper parts, streaked wings, and brown chests with only a hint of orange colouring.

This energetic little bird is constantly on the hunt for insects that are the major component of its varied diet that includes dragonflies, cicadas, beetles, native bees, and wasps, many of which the leaden flycatcher grabs while in flight as it zips frenetically among the trees in a seemingly chaotic pattern, settling only briefly on a branch or other perch before whizzing off again on its frenzied hunt.

In the breeding season, leaden flycatchers construct a shallow, cup-shaped nest primarily of bark and grass that's held together by strands of cobweb, and once their parental duties have come to an end, those that have raised a family in south-eastern

Left: A female leaden flycatcher in the author's garden.

Australia migrate north to spend the winter in eastern and north-eastern Queensland.



RESTLESS FLYCATCHER

Myiagra inquieta

The restless flycatcher is found throughout northern and eastern mainland Australia, as well as in the south-western corner of the continent, and is more at home among open woodlands, including those in arid areas, than in dense and humid forests.

It's a bird that's often confused with the more common willy wagtail, for both have primarily black and white plumage, but the restless flycatcher routinely demonstrates its most distinctive feature by raising the feathers on the crown of its head to create a small crest. These restless birds have a satin black head, a dark grey bill, a dark grey back and wings, and white feathers from under the chin to the underside of the tail. Both females and juveniles are similar in appearance to males, but may have a slight orange tinge on the breast and a brown hue to their wings.

The restless flycatcher didn't earn its colloquial name by sitting still all day, and when it's out and about, food is usually on its mind as it flies through the air, darting here and there in a seemingly erratic manner. Its favoured foods are spiders, centipedes, and worms, in addition to a wide range of insects, including termites, wasps, moths and butterflies, and caterpillars, and it catches its prey with perfectly honed skills. It hovers close to the ground or above foliage, uttering the distinctive scraping call that has given it the alternative colloquial name of 'scissors grinder', then dives onto its unsuspecting prey and flies

to a perch to scoff its meal.

When the breeding season arrives, restless flycatchers busy themselves with the task of nest building, and construct their cup-shaped nests, which are made from scraps of bark and grass that are held together with strands of cobweb, on a branch that's usually close to water. Some species of cuckoos take advantage of the bird's hard work and replace the flycatcher's eggs with their own, but with up to three clutches of eggs laid in a single season, restless flycatchers have several chances to successfully raise a new generation of their species.



GREY SHRIKE-THRUSH

Colluricincla harmonica

Many people wouldn't give the drab grey shrike-thrush a second glance, but looks can be deceptive, for this is a bird that puts on a spectacular performance as it struts confidently across Mother Nature's outdoor stage. And the show goes on, day after day, in woodlands, parks, and urban gardens in all but the most arid regions of both the mainland and Tasmania.

Its highly variable plumage ranges from primarily grey in the eastern areas of its range to predominantly brown in the north, while birds in western areas have a combination of both colours. And while there's no argument about the fact that the grey shrike-thrush's attire is far from dazzling, when it performs its staggering repertoire of melodious songs, no one could contest the claim that this is the best songbird in the country.

It sings while it's resting on a perch, when it's admiring its own reflection in the window of a building, and when, on its own or with a mate, it's searching for food. This far from fussy eater

Right: A restless flycatcher on the back of a camper's chair in outback Queensland.





A grey-shrike thrush in the author's garden.





A grey-shrike thrush after bathing
in a pool in the author's garden.



rummages among the foliage of trees or on the ground for the ingredients of its varied diet, which include insects, spiders, frogs, and small lizards, with the main course occasionally followed by a dessert of small fruits and seeds. For some other birds, the song of the grey shrike-thrush is a warning of imminent danger, for this charismatic and seemingly placid bird has a far less pleasant side to its character. It's a predator that's more than eager to feed on the eggs and helpless chicks of its neighbours.

Grey shrikes-thrushes are usually monogamous, and a pair generally inhabits the same extensive territory during their entire lives together. They're creatures of habit, or so it appears, for a pair often construct their cup-shaped nest in the same spot every year, and both male and female share the tasks of nest building, of incubating their eggs, and of feeding the chicks that eventually hatch and that give these cheerful songsters something else to sing about.



PIED CURRAWONG

Strepera graculina

Strepera, the name of the genus to which the pied currawong belongs, is a Latin word meaning 'noisy', and when the bird identifies itself with its loud and repetitious call of 'currawong, currawong' it's easy to see how it earned both its scientific and colloquial names. Throughout the day its calls, combined with repetitive high-pitched whistling, reverberate throughout the forests, woodlands, and urban environments of the eastern Australian mainland, from northern Queensland to Victoria, as pied currawongs communicate with their mates and family members. But they're at their most vocal early in the morning, at dusk, and when, by some miracle of nature, if old wives' tales are to be believed, they accurately prophesy the arrival of rain.

The pied currawong, which is a relatively large bird with predominantly black plumage, is often mistaken for a

crow, but patches of white under its tail, and at the tip of its tail and its wings reveal its true identity. It has bright yellow teddy bear eyes, dark grey legs, and a large grey to black bill that has a hook at its tip. Both males and females are very similar in appearance, but immature birds have dull grey to brown plumage, dark brown eyes, and a yellow tip on the bill.

In urban areas they are opportunistic scavengers that eat household scraps and that frequent picnic and barbecue areas where free handouts are invariably on offer. They flutter among the foliage of trees and hop and strut confidently along the ground in search of food that includes lizards, insects, caterpillars, ants, mice, and small fruits such as those of native figs, lilly pillies, and white cedar trees. And occasionally they capture small mammals and stash each carcass in the fork of a tree to be devoured at their leisure.

Pied currawongs are unquestionably two-faced characters, with one of the worst facets of their behaviour, at least for their victims, being that they prey on the chicks and eggs of other birds, and with their populations increasing in many urban areas, they're implicated in the decline of the communities of some species of smaller birds. Some of these have learnt to recognise the signs of dangers, and researchers demonstrated this with the chicks of white-browed scrubwrens that fell silent when they heard a recording of a pied currawong walking through leaf litter.

These avian predators, by ingesting and dispersing the seeds of introduced plant species, are also implicated in the spread of many invasive weeds, including prickly pear cactus. But it's not all bad news however, for pied currawongs, with their ravenous appetite for insects, including the larvae of codling moths that damage apples, play a valuable role in controlling insect pests in orchards, farmlands, and home gardens.

Right: A pied currawong at an urban picnic area in Queensland.









They frequently congregate in relatively large flocks, but when they're ready to start a family pied currawongs prefer to share their lives only with their mate or other members of a small family group. Both the male and his mate diligently gather nesting material, but it's the female who takes on the task of constructing her bowl-shaped nest from twigs and lining it with grass and other soft material. With the nest in the fork of a high tree, the eggs will be safe from most predators, but none are beyond the reach of channel-billed cuckoos that often toss out a currawong's eggs and replace them with their own. Unsuspecting currawongs vigorously defend their eggs from other birds that might consider them to be a tasty meal, and remain blissfully unaware that, in some cases, the treasure that they guard so diligently may be the enemy in disguise.



MAGPIE

Gymnorhina tibicen

The magpie's species name '*tibicen*' is a Latin word meaning 'flute player', and while this most familiar of birds lacks the ability to play any musical instrument, it has a wide array of delightful and melodious calls.

It's a distinctive bird that's readily recognised by almost every Australian, for it can be seen wherever there's a combination of both trees and open areas, and that means that the magpie is equally at home in cities and towns as it is in woodlands and agricultural areas. And it's only the densest of forests and the most barren deserts that are devoid of these charismatic characters that are either loved or hated.

The pattern of the magpie's plumage varies slightly across its range, but in most areas the majority of its body is black, with males generally having white feathers on the nape of the neck, the edges of the wings, and the upper section of the tail. In females, these areas are usually light grey, and although juvenile birds wear similar

attire to that of their parents, they have mottled grey feathers on their under parts and on their backs.

Magpies have a varied natural diet that includes worms, small lizards, insects, spiders, mice, and frogs. If times are tough, they'll stoop to eating seeds and fruit, and will occasionally dine on the most unpalatable of prey - on the introduced and poisonous cane toad. They've discovered that, by flipping one of these repulsive creatures over onto its back, they can eat its soft belly, which is devoid of the harmful toxins that the toad exudes from other parts of its skin, and live to tell the tale.

When they're hunting for more elusive prey, magpies, with their highly sensitive hearing, dawdle along the ground listening for the sounds of insects and their larvae that might be wriggling in the soil beneath their feet. And when they're confident that there's life within their reach, they stab the soil with their pointed bills and pull out their doomed and struggling prey.

Magpies are also opportunists that will grab a free snack wherever it's on offer. They gatecrash barbecues and picnics, waiting patiently on the sidelines for whatever scraps are tossed their way or left behind by human diners. They wait close to camp fires and bushfires for any roasted treats that may be available once the fury of the flames has died. And they arrive uninvited on the doorsteps of houses where residents are happy to feed them in return for nothing more than the pleasure of sharing a moment of their lives in the company of these wild creatures, and perhaps being rewarded with a song.

The magpie's voice is one of the iconic sounds of the Australian bush and of the corners of suburbia that it also inhabits, and while these appealing birds can mimic the calls of many other species, it's the magpie's own unique and inimitable song that has earned it a

Left: An immature magpie in a public park at Urbenville in New South Wales.



An immature magpie
at Urbenville in New
South Wales.



An adult male magpie.





place in the hearts of many Australians. The renowned 19th century British ornithologist, artist, and writer John Gould commented that “to describe the note of this bird is beyond the power of my pen”, but other authors have attempted to write the words to the magpie’s most common song, and in their opinion it goes like this. “Waddle, giggle, gargle”, and “quardle, oodle, ardle, wardle, doodle”.

Magpies, which can reach the ripe old age of 25 years, live in small and highly territorial groups, and although they generally interact peacefully with humans, they can become extremely aggressive during the breeding season. A group may contain several females that are all intent on raising a family, but the duties of fatherhood are usually all down to one male who has a hectic time mating with all the females and defending the group’s extensive territory. People who venture too close to a nesting site are seen as an imminent threat and routinely come under attack from swooping male magpies, and it’s then that these birds, which are loved by so many, become the subject of fear and hatred. The trick to avoiding their anger is to wear a broad brimmed hat with sunglasses placed on the back of it to represent eyes, and for cyclists, who are often the subject of an aggressive male’s attention, eyes painted on the back of a safety helmet or a tall pole with a flag attached to the bike will make a bird think twice about waging war on its human neighbours.



GREY BUTCHERBIRD

Cracticus torquatus

The charismatic grey butcherbird flutters across the landscape of a vast section of Australia, from central eastern Queensland to southern Australia, including Tasmania, and it also inhabits the northern regions of Western Australia and the Northern Territory. It’s a bird that’s relatively easy to please when it comes to finding a home, and although natural wooded environments are its number

one choice of accommodation, the grey butcherbird will happily take up residence in urban areas, and in arid and semi-arid regions of the continent if there’s suitable vegetation available.

It’s certainly not the most colourful of birds, but that doesn’t mean that it’s an unattractive character, for with a black head and face, a white collar separating its black plumage from the silvery grey feathers of its back, wings that are grey with black edges and black tips, a black tail, and white under parts, the grey butcherbird wears very smart attire. And with dark brown eyes and a bill that’s light grey with a black tip that has a conspicuous hook, it’s dressed to kill, for this primarily carnivorous bird, as its colloquial name suggests, has butchery on its mind.

The grey butcherbird will occasionally snack on seeds and small fruits, but it’s young and vulnerable birds, small lizards, and insects that are routinely the victims of this skilful predator. It grips its prey, which is often caught on the ground, with its purposely designed bill, and if there’s more food than it can consume at a single sitting, it simply utilises a twig or the fork of a tree as a butcher’s hook and hangs the remains of its meal up for later use or to impress a prospective mate.

This is a bird that’s an opportunistic feeder, and it has enthusiastically adapted to life in urban environments where food is as easy to obtain as a suntan at a nudist beach, and with humans leaving food scraps at picnic and camping areas, and providing a banquet for the varied species of wild birds with which they like to share their lives, there’s no chance that grey butcherbirds will ever feel the pangs of hunger.

They’re generally solitary creatures, except when they’re members of a family group or in an amorous mood and looking for a mate. In the breeding season, in a tree high above the ground, each pair toils to create a bowl-shaped

Left: A grey butcherbird in the Bundaberg botanic gardens in Queensland.

nest of twigs that's lined with grass or other soft material. The tedious task of incubating the eggs is left to the female, but when the chicks eventually hatch, her mate comes to the party and attends to his paternal duty by continuously providing food for the demanding brood.

The young birds, even when they've left the nest, are in no hurry to leave home and adopt an independent lifestyle. But unlike some humans, they don't expect to be waited on hand and foot by their doting parents, for every member of an avian society has to pull its weight, and the juvenile grey butcherbirds that remain with their parents for the first year of their lives are expected to assist in raising the next generation of their siblings.

The grey butcherbird, like its close relatives the pied butcherbird and the black butcherbird, is loved by many Australians, yet it's despised and even feared by others. Its complex and melodic songs, together with its eagerness to accept any invitation to a free feast, make it a welcome visitor when it arrives on the doorstep of many Australian homes, but it's a different story during the nesting season. It's then that the grey butcherbird's aggressive behaviour, which almost replicates that of the magpie, ensures that it's far from welcome in an urban neighbourhood where, with the beating of its wings and the snap of its bill, it attacks anyone who it sees as presenting a threat when they unintentionally venture too close to the doorstep of its nesting site.



MAGPIE-LARK

Grallina cyanoleuca

The colloquial names of some birds can lead to confusion, particularly in the case of the magpie-lark, for it's neither a magpie nor a lark. Its other common names of Murray magpie, mudlark, and peewee have a tad more relevance however, for this attractive black and white bird is frequently seen on the meandering banks of the Murray River, it utilises mud to create its nest,

and the distinctive call of 'pee wee, pee wee' is a clue that the magpie-lark is in the vicinity.

The populations of many species of birds have declined as a consequence of land clearing, but as native vegetation has been replaced with agricultural crops, and housing estates have sprouted where once there were woodlands, magpie-larks have taken the changes in their stride and have adapted to a wide range of habitats. Rainforests and arid treeless deserts are certainly not their cup of tea, but these confident birds, which spend much of the day on the ground, make themselves at home in open areas and farmlands where they forage for food that includes insects and their larvae, and earthworms. They quietly patrol the edges of wetlands and coastal shores for other tasty snacks, they stroll across the manicured lawns of city parklands, and they hunt for food in urban gardens throughout Australia, with the exception of Tasmania.

With their ebony black and snow white plumage both male and female magpie-larks are always conspicuous characters. The female of the species has a white throat and a white face, while the male has a black throat and a black face with a white eyebrow, and both have a pale pink bill and cream eyes. Immature birds have a black forehead, a white eyebrow, and a white throat.

Magpie-larks generally pair for life and will aggressively defend their permanent territory from unwelcome intruders, and they rarely hesitate to launch an attack on much larger birds that ignore the duet that a pair sings as a warning to others to keep their distance.

They have plenty to chirp about when they get down to the business of breeding, and both male and female birds share the task of creating their nest, which is usually on a high branch near water and constructed from grass and other plant material that's glued together with mud. And in good

Right: A magpie-lark on the beach at Hervey Bay in Queensland.





seasons, when there's an abundance of food, the female may lay several clutches of eggs and, with the help of her mate, will successfully raise a healthy gaggle of chicks.



SPOTTED PARDALOTE

Pardalotus punctatus

The spotted pardalote, which is also known as the spotted diamond bird, is one of Australia's smallest birds. It thrives in eastern Australia, in a range that extends from central Queensland to eastern South Australia and Tasmania, and also resides in the south-western corner of Western Australia. But as it prefers to live high among the trees of forests and eucalypt woodlands, it's only those with a hefty dollop of patience and a substantial serving of good luck who'll be rewarded with a glimpse of this quiet and unobtrusive little creature.

The crown of its head, its wings, and its tail are black with white spots, its back is a drab greyish brown, as are the sides of its head, it has prominent cream to white eyebrows, a yellow throat and a red rump, and its under parts are creamy yellow to light brown. Females have plumage of a less intense colour than that of males, with the spots on their feathers being pale yellow rather than white, and juveniles are even less colourful.

The spotted pardalote is a gregarious little bird that frequently shares its habitat with the slightly larger striated pardalote, and although it may often be alone or with no one other than its mate, it enjoys the company of a flock of its own species in seasons when food is plentiful.

They feed among the foliage of the woodland canopy and dine primarily on spiders and insects, including moths, caterpillars, beetles, and scale insects, descending to the ground only to drink.

Right: A striated pardalote prepares to leave its nesting burrow in a bank in the author's garden.







In the breeding season they temporarily leave the treetops for another safe and secluded location, for in common with other species of pardalotes they nest in tunnels, up

to 600mm long, that they excavate in earthen banks. Each has a nesting chamber, lined with fragments of bark, grass, and feathers, at the far end, and a pair will often reuse the same

refurbished tunnel for several years.

A subterranean retreat guarantees that the birds' eggs and chicks are safe from predatory birds, but not from reptiles, and pardalotes, in an attempt



chirping of their chicks that reveals their presence in a hideaway that's well beyond the reach of their most determined enemies.



EASTERN YELLOW ROBIN

Eopsaltria australis

Eopsaltria, the name of the genus to which this colourful robin belongs, is an ancient word that means 'singer of the dawn', and it's an appropriate description, for in the forests and woodlands that it inhabits, the eastern yellow robin is invariably the first bird to welcome each new day. It begins its repetitive and monotonous song, a series of five or six high pitched beeps, often well before the sun has tossed its first rays of light across the horizon, and it's impossible to ignore Mother Nature's most reliable alarm clock.

This attractive little robin is a resident of eastern mainland Australia, with its range including coastal and adjacent hinterland areas from northern Queensland to the eastern section of South Australia. It brings a vibrant dash of colour to the shadows of eucalypt woodlands and rainforests, mallee and acacia scrub, and coastal heathlands as alone, with a mate, or as a member of a small family group, it flutters through the vegetation. And urban parks and gardens that include suitable habitats will also tempt eastern yellow robins to make themselves at home.

Both male and female birds are of a similar appearance, with a grey back and head, grey wings with black tips, a light grey throat, vivid yellow under parts, a yellow rump, and a black bill, but young birds, with plumage that's primarily of a reddish brown colour, bear little resemblance to their parents and fool many people into assuming that they're members of a completely different species.

Being out and about earlier than many other birds, the eastern yellow robin is definitely the early bird that gets the worm, or at least the juiciest of insects, for it's insects, including moths, grasshoppers, ants, wasps, and flies, in

addition to spiders, that routinely satisfy its appetite. It discovers food among the foliage of trees, and occasionally catches insects when in flight, but most of its prey are caught on the ground and are victim's of the robin's well-honed hunting technique that utilises patience, speed, and the element of surprise. In its distinctive pose, the eastern yellow robin clings to the trunk of a tree from where it scans the ground for any hint of a free takeaway meal. And when it spots something that takes its fancy, the bird pounces onto the doomed creature, scoffs it, and returns to its lookout position to wait for the next course on the menu to meander unsuspectingly past.

As the breeding season gets under way, female eastern yellow robins get in the construction mood and, in the high fork of a tree, they build their small cup-shaped nests from grass and fragments of twigs that are laced together with silken strands of cobweb. Each female may lay up to three clutches of eggs in a single season, and that's a good insurance policy, for cuckoos frequently destroy the eggs of robins and replace them with their own.



Left: A female spotted pardalote in woodlands on the doorstep of a camping area near Newnes in New South Wales.

to guarantee the highest level of security for their brood, will occasionally nest high above the ground in hollow pipes that form part of the framework of a building, and it's only the subtle

An eastern yellow robin on the doorstep
of a camping area in the Wollemi National
Park in New South Wales.



A red-capped robin near the homestead
at Lake Everard station, in outback
South Australia.



RED-CAPPED ROBIN

Petroica goodenovii

The Reverend Samuel Goodenough, the 18th century British bishop of Carlisle, might have prayed for immortality, and his request was answered. He earned a place in history as the first treasurer of the Linnean Society of London, which was founded in 1787 and survives to this day, and whose illustrious members are dedicated to the study and dissemination of information relating to natural history. And as a bonus an adaptation of his name christened the Australian red-capped robin with the species name of '*goodenovii*'.

The name of the genus to which the red-capped robin belongs is derived from two ancient Greek words, '*petro*' meaning 'rock', and '*oikos*' meaning home, for the country's smallest robin frequently settles on rocks that are within its habitat.

It lives in arid and semi-arid zones of the Australian mainland, and in varied inland environments such as eucalyptus, mulga, and cypress pine woodlands, and acacia and mallee scrub, and can also be seen in vineyards, orchards and other agricultural areas where there are clusters of trees.

It's the male of the species who's the most handsome character, for he has a vivid red cap and a red breast that provides a dramatic contrast to his black throat, head, back, and bill. His lower under parts and the sides of his body are white, and his black wings and tail are streaked with white. The female, on the other hand, has primarily drab grey-brown plumage, brownish wings, and a reddish brown patch on her forehead. Young birds are similar to females, although with varied streaks of dull colours on their plumage.

These hyperactive little birds, which are usually seen alone or with a mate, are gourmet diners that know exactly what they want when it comes to good food. They're happy to eat a wide range of insects, including grasshoppers, moths, and bees, but a study of one group of

these stunning birds revealed that 95 per cent of the food they had consumed was beetles, with the remainder being ants. Red-capped robins occasionally catch their prey while in flight or while foraging among the foliage of trees, but their favoured tactic is to pounce, from a vantage point such as a low branch or old stump, onto insects that are on the ground.

At breeding time, it's the female who's in charge of the action, for it's she who selects a nesting site in the fork of a tree and who attends to the hard yakka of building a cup-shaped nest of bark and leaves that, as with the nests of many other species, is lashed together with cobweb. She optimistically lays her eggs in the hope that the nest won't be discovered by cuckoos that will destroy the eggs and replace them with one of their own. And it's then down to Mother Nature and Lady Luck to ensure that the chicks will not become the victims of marauding reptiles or avian predators, such as the grey-shrike thrush and the grey butcherbird, both of which have a taste for young and succulent robins.

The male red-capped robin does his bit to ensure the survival of his family by providing food for his mate while she's incubating her precious eggs, he defends the nesting site from other birds that might come too close for comfort, and he settles onto a lofty perch to sing his repetitious song to warn other robins that this tiny corner of the bush is his family's personal domain.



GOLDEN WHISTLER

Pachycephala pectoralis

Pachycephala, the name of the genus to which the golden whistler belongs, is derived from two Greek words meaning 'thick head', a reference not to the level of the bird's intelligence, but to its stocky neck and head. It's generally

Right: A male golden whistler on the doorstep of a camping area at Dunn's Swamp, in the Wollemi National Park in New South Wales.





the regal plumage of this glorious bird that draws more attention than its solid build however, for the golden whistler is the unchallenged king of colour in any forest or woodland that he inhabits in an extensive range that stretches from northern Queensland to south-eastern areas of the mainland and to Tasmania, and that also includes southern regions of Western Australia. Any habitat with a relatively dense covering of trees, from eucalypt woodlands and mallee scrub to rainforests, attracts these glorious birds, and they'll happily take up residence in urban parks and gardens if there are adequate trees to satisfy their demands.

It's the male of the species that's the most eye-catching character, for he has vivid yellow plumage on the underside of his body and tail, an olive green to yellow back and wings, a black head with a yellow collar, a black bill, chestnut brown eyes, and a white throat that's separated from his yellow chest by a wide black band. The female, by comparison, is a drab creature that would turn the head of no one other than her mate, for her plumage is primarily a dull grey-brown, and immature birds are of a similarly bland appearance.

Golden whistlers usually feed alone and forage among the foliage of trees for insects and spiders, with small native fruits also on the menu, but when the breeding season arrives they come together to mate and to share the task of building a nest, high above the ground, in the fork of a tree. The shallow bowl-shaped nest, which is created with twigs, grass, and fragments of bark bound together with silken strands of cobweb, is no unique construction, but the new generation of golden whistlers that will be raised within it are guaranteed to bring another touch of regal beauty to their forest home.



Right: A male rufous whistler in the author's garden.









RUFIOUS WHISTLER

Pachycephala rufiventris

Rufous whistlers can be seen throughout the Australian mainland wherever there's a suitable habitat of forests or woodlands with an understorey of shrubs, and they'll also take up residence in agricultural regions and in gardens that have sufficient vegetation to make them feel welcome.

The rufous whistler, like its gaudier relative the golden whistler, has a stocky head and neck and a short black bill. The male of the species, with his dark grey head, back, and wings, a white throat, a black band across his breast, chestnut brown to orange under parts, and a relatively long tail is a very handsome character indeed and far outshines females who can boast of nothing more than dull grey to brown upper parts, under parts that are white streaked with dark grey, and flanks that are daubed with a hint of chestnut brown.

They usually forage higher in the trees than other species of whistlers, and although they feed mainly on insects, they'll also tuck into seeds and fruit when their favoured foods are in limited supply.

Having found a mate, they remain monogamous, and although it's the female who attends to the hard work of creating a nest, her mate comes to the party once she's laid her eggs and helps to incubate the eggs and raise the young.



SPLENDID FAIRY WREN

Malurus splendens

Anyone who, after one brief glimpse of the male of this species, fails to agree that it's unquestionably the most splendid of birds would have to be as blind to beauty as an inebriated tadpole. The tiny splendid fairy wren is found in several areas of the continent, including south-western Western Australia, much of South Australia except coastal

Left: A female rufous whistler in the author's garden.

regions, southern and central regions of the Northern Territory, north-western Victoria, western New South Wales, and south-western Queensland. And it's most at home in arid to semi-arid areas where there are dense shrubs, such as in mulga and eucalypt woodlands and mallee scrub, and in regions where the landscape is dominated by carpets of saltbush where these stunning little characters flutter energetically among swathes of low vegetation.

It's the dazzling male that, when dressed to impress in his breeding plumage, makes those who are fortunate enough to spot him gasp in amazement, for with his predominantly cobalt blue and iridescent plumage he's the most handsome bird around. He has a black band at the base of his tail, another across his breast, and one above his eyes that connects with yet another streak of black across the back of his neck. The crown of his head may be a lighter shade of blue than that of his body, and he has light blue cheek patches, and a black bill. When he has no interest in attracting a mate and breeding, he's a less colourful character with merely dull brown plumage, although he retains a tinge of blue on his wings and tail. Females are similar in appearance to non-breeding males, but have a hint of blue on their tails, a reddish brown colour around their eyes, and reddish brown bills.

Splendid fairy wrens live in small groups, each of which usually consists of an adult male, two adult females, and several juveniles that forage together among shrubs for the insects that form the major part of their diet that's supplemented with the tiny fruits of saltbush.

When the time comes to breed it's a family affair with birds young and old all having a role to play. The male dons his brightest attire for the occasion, and while he flaunts his finery for all to see, the female fashions a small domed nest, with an entrance at the side, from grass and fine pieces of bark, and settles down to incubate her eggs. And when the chicks eventually hatch, the rest of the

group all pull their weight by bringing food to feed the doting mother and her perpetually hungry chicks.

SUPERB FAIRY WREN

Malurus cyaneus

In 1777, William Anderson, a naturalist who accompanied Captain James Cook on his third voyage to Australia, brought a specimen of the superb fairy wren on board the creaking ship, and his fellow travellers must have been as sleepy as a mob of comatose barnacles if they remained unimpressed by the beauty of this tiny creature. Fortunately, there are plenty of opportunities for modern day Australians to be dazzled by this beautiful bird too, for it's found in south-eastern Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria, the south-eastern corner of South Australia, and Tasmania, where it inhabits woodlands with dense undergrowth, grasslands with scattered low shrubs, and areas with thickets of introduced plant species - including weeds such as lantana and blackberry that only small birds such as wrens appreciate. Superb fairy wrens are also regular visitors to urban parks and gardens that have low and dense vegetation and, never shy to introduce themselves, they'll dart enthusiastically across the landscape and, with their energetic antics, will entertain and mesmerise anyone who has the honour of being in their presence.

It's the male of the species that elicits the greatest gasps of delight from those who see him, particularly when he has donned his elegant breeding plumage, for it's when he's ready to start a new family that his drab brown feathers are exchanged for ones of a brighter hue. With an iridescent blue forehead and face patches, and swathes of blue across

Right: A male splendid fairy wren, in the early stages of developing his breeding plumage, on the doorstep of an outback camping area in the Northern Territory.









the top of his back, a dark blue tail, a black throat, and a brown chest and wings, this tiny bird is indeed superb. Once males reach four years of age they retain their gaudy plumage throughout the year, but younger non-breeding males are barely distinguishable from females, except for the fact that their tails are dark blue while those of females are brown, and they lack the orange patch around each eye that is a distinctive feature of the female of the species.

They live in family groups, each of which is comprised of a single female, a dominant male, several non-breeding males, and a few juvenile birds. And although adults pair for life, they're considered to be among the most promiscuous of all bird species with each partner mating with so many other individuals that more than 75 per cent of the young birds in a family group are the offspring of males from another group.

A male, as part of his courtship display, often presents a female with the yellow petals of a flower. She needs little more persuasion to mate with him, and eventually lays her eggs in a domed nest constructed, from grass and cobweb, among low vegetation. When the chicks eventually hatch, all members of the group attend to the chore of feeding them, and when the fledglings take their first hesitant steps into the world beyond the nest, the other birds within the group continue to provide them with food, and with her brood well cared for, the female can nest again before the breeding season comes to its conclusion.

Foxes and cats prey on vulnerable chicks, but their future is in jeopardy right from the moment a female lays her eggs, for some species of cuckoos play their age old trick on these unsuspecting birds. They lay their eggs in the nests of superb fairy-wrens and, when the cuckoo's eggs hatch, the chicks

Left: A male superb fairy wren confidently explored the interior of the author's tent in the Wallingat National Park in New South Wales.

A male superb fairy wren, a juvenile or in non-breeding plumage, at Platypus Flat camping area near Dorrigo in New South Wales.



A female superb fairy wren at Platypus Flat
camping area near Dorrigo in New South
Wales.





A male superb fairy wren in Wallingat
National Park in New South Wales.



condemn the fairy-wren's offspring to a certain death by tossing them out of the nest. Superb fairy-wrens have become wise to the deception however and, alerted by the unfamiliar begging call of the impostor that has taken their chicks' place, they frequently abandon the nest and leave the baby cuckoo to starve. Evolution has now taken the cuckoos' side however, for these parasitic birds, according to researchers, have begun to imitate the call of a fairy-wren chick, and are thus more likely to be accepted and raised by their foster parents.

These confident little birds are easily recognised by their distinctive plumage and erect tails as, with animated hops and bounces, they forage, on the ground and among low shrubs, for insects that are the major component of their diet. They also dine on seeds, flowers, and earthworms, and during winter, when other food may be scarce, they satisfy their hunger with ants. And just like the crew on Captain's Cook's ship, any modern day bird watcher is sure to be mesmerised by the undeniable beauty of this most sociable of birds.



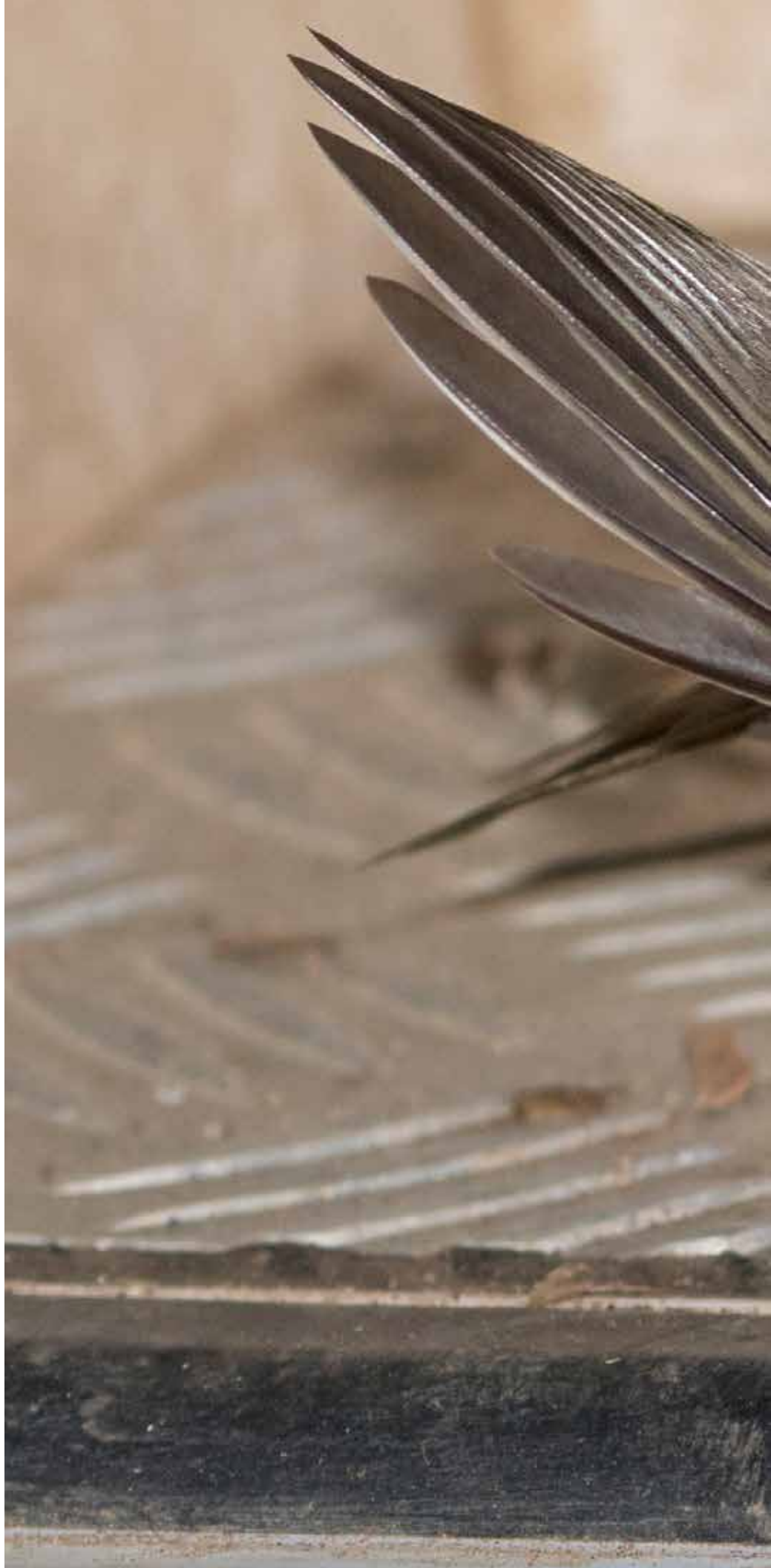
WHITE-BROWED SCRUBWREN

Sericornis frontalis

At first glance, the white-browed scrubwren might be seen as a drab and unappealing character, but this is a bird with a vibrant personality that makes it one of the avian stars of the bush. It's the most common and widespread of the five species of scrubwrens that call Australia home, and is a resident of the rainforests, woodlands, and heaths of a coastal region that stretches from northern Queensland to around Adelaide in South Australia.

These confident and inquisitive little birds, which usually live with a mate or in a small family group, spend most of their time in low and dense vegetation, and they're definitely not birds with

Right: A white-browed scrubwren literally on the doorstep of the author's campervan near Scone, New South Wales.





itchy feet, for most spend their entire lives in one relatively small territory.

The male of the species has a dark brown bill, red legs, dark grey to brown plumage on his head and back, similarly coloured wings with white streaks on the top section, a dark grey to black face, a white stripe both above and below each of his pale yellow eyes, a white throat, and a cream breast, with the rest of his under parts being brown. Both females and immature birds are similar to males but have slightly lighter colouring.

White-browed scrubwrens usually feed on the ground where they feast on insects and enjoy the occasional snack of seeds, but these charismatic and hyperactive little birds will take food wherever it's on offer and, with minimal hesitation, they'll fly into buildings and even flutter into vehicles if there's a vague hint that a crumb or two might lie unguarded.

They exercise a tad more caution when building a nest however, for each globular construction is well hidden close to the ground among a tangle of dense vegetation. And with all members of the group tending to the needs of the chicks and ensuring that they're well fed and cared for, these endearing little creatures will continue to strut across nature's vast outdoor stage and cast their spell of enchantment over all who see them.



YELLOW-THROATED SCRUBWREN

Sericornis citreogularis

For reasons that remain unclear, yellow-throated scrubwrens exist in two widely separated regions of eastern Australia, one of which is in northern Queensland, while the other is an area that stretches from south-eastern Queensland to southern New South

Right: A female yellow-throated scrubwren on the doorstep of a camping area near Dorrigo in northern New South Wales.







Wales.

These cheerful little birds flutter and chirp among the dense undergrowth of rainforests and the damp vegetation that hems gullies that slice through moist

Above: A brown thornbill on the doorstep of a camping area near Dorrigo in northern New South Wales.

eucalypt woodlands. They energetically forage among carpets of leaf litter for the insects, other invertebrates, and small seeds that are the varied ingredients of their diet. And in areas that are also inhabited by superb lyrebirds, they let their neighbours do the hard work and follow them as they rummage among the debris on the forest floor and expose

tiny creatures that the yellow-throated scrubwrens can greedily snatch from under their noses.

These attractive little birds have distinctive black faces and foreheads, yellow eyebrows above their dark brown eyes, and bright yellow throats. The crown of their heads and their backs are dark brown, their under parts



and so too are the nests that are usually built in a tree that's overhanging water. It's a long pear-shaped residence with a small covered entrance in one side, and being constructed from a combination of roots, leaves, fragments of palm fronds, moss, and twigs and secreted among dense foliage, it's a secure retreat in which the happy couple can remain undisturbed and raise two or more broods each season.



BROWN THORNBILL

Acanthiza pusilla

The tiny brown thornbill certainly doesn't stand out from the crowd in either size or decorative garb, but its bold and outgoing behaviour makes it the Prince Charming of the forest, with anyone who spends a few minutes in its presence guaranteed to fall in love.

Its extensive range stretches from south-eastern Queensland to the Mount Lofty Ranges of South Australia, and to Tasmania, and although brown thornbills are residents of coastal regions, they're also at home in the forests of the Great Dividing Range, and in the woodlands and acacia scrub of adjacent inland areas. And being birds that prefer dense undergrowth, they'll happily take up residence in urban parks and gardens if they find that the vegetation there is exactly what they're looking for.

The brown thornbill, as its name suggests, has a predominance of brown plumage. Its head, back, and tail are light brown, its wings are olive to brown, and it has a reddish brown rump, a black bill, and dark eyes. Its most ornate features are its light grey throat and chest that are both streaked with a darker shade of grey that fades into the creamy white feathers of its lower under parts. Both sexes are similar in appearance and young birds display only minimal differences.

When the birds have found the perfect spot to set up home, there's a good chance that they'll claim it as their permanent domain, particularly

if there's a reliable supply of insects that are the main component of their diet. They frequently feed with a mate, foraging in dense vegetation that's close to the ground and, in addition to insects, they'll also feast on seeds, nectar, and small and succulent fruits.

With the perfect habitat and ample food a pair know when life is as good as it gets, and they'll stay together to make the most of the good times. The female understands her role in life perfectly well, and eventually, among low and often prickly vegetation or dense grasses, she builds a small domed nest, lays her eggs, and settles down to incubate them. The male then lends a hand to feed the chicks that will eventually imitate their parents and, with their cheerful and musical song, remind all who wander into their world that small can be beautiful too.



WELCOME SWALLOW

Hirundo neoxena

When the icy fingers of winter begin to stretch across the land southern populations of welcome swallows generally migrate to northern regions of the country. When they return south to their old haunts it's a sign that spring has returned, and in cold climates that's a very welcome event indeed.

Welcome swallows can be seen, at some time or another, in most areas of the continent, although they generally steer clear of northern and north-eastern regions of the country and the most arid of its deserts. They've been the winners rather than the losers as humans have continued to inflict dramatic changes on the landscape, and their reward has been a range of new habitats that have allowed their population to increase. These are not birds that favour dense forests, and land clearing practices have created the open habitat that they prefer, and with bridges, tunnels, road culverts, and buildings all providing ideal nesting sites, welcome swallows are as happy in an urban environment as termites

are creamy white, and their wings are brown with yellow edges, and they complement their attire with pink legs and black bills. Females have brown, rather than black faces, and immature birds are generally of a duller hue than adults.

Yellow-throated scrubwrens are well camouflaged in their natural habitat,

A welcome swallow at the botanic gardens in
the Queensland city of Bundaberg.









in the rotting timbers of an outback dunny.

Large flocks can often be seen performing elegant aerial displays as they pursue flying insects among city buildings, over waterways, lakes, and wetlands, in agricultural areas, and across grasslands, and occasionally they venture out to sea in pursuit of their prey. It was their presence above the ocean waves that provided another logical basis for their colloquial name, for sailors whose vessels travelled at the whims of the wind knew that swallows would never be too far from land, and dry land was always a welcome sight.

The welcome swallow looks its best in sunlight, when the metallic blue-black feathers of its head, back, and wings sparkle and shine. Its reddish orange forehead, throat, and upper breast create a dazzling contrast to its less gaudy light grey under parts, and it adds another touch of glamour to its attire with a long forked tail that has two even longer narrow feathers trailing behind it. Both males and females, with their dark grey bills and legs, are of a similar appearance, but young birds have little to brag about, for although they sport some glossy black feathers, they have only creamy white colouring on the forehead and throat, and have shorter and thus less impressive tails than adults.

They feast on a great variety of insects that they catch in flight, and each tasty morsel is guided into the bird's gaping mouth with the help of short bristles on each side of the bill that also protect the bird's eyes from any damage that might be caused by struggling victims and their flapping wings.

Many welcome swallows are creatures of habit and, with a long-term partner, they return to the same nesting site year after year, and there are plenty of sheltered locations on offer that humans have created seemingly for the birds' convenience. The swallows glue their cup-shaped mud nests to the walls

Left: A welcome swallow in the botanic gardens in the Queensland city of Bundaberg.

Right and opposite page: Black-faced woodswallows on the doorstep of a camping area in the Diamantina National Park in outback Queensland.





of both natural caves and city buildings, onto the rafters of farm sheds, suburban bus shelters, and the high roofs suspended over the bowsters of service stations, and onto the supporting framework beneath bridges.

The female alone takes on the patient task of incubating her eggs, but her mate lends a hand to care for the chicks, and with two broods frequently raised each season, there are always plenty of hungry mouths to be fed.

BLACK-FACED WOODSWALLOW

Artamus cinereus

The black-faced woodswallow is a bird that favours the arid and semi-arid inland regions of the continent, and although it can be seen across much of the mainland, its most common haunts are west of the Great Dividing Range in Queensland, New South Wales, and Victoria. And despite its preference for dry and open country, it will also venture into woodlands and settle close to lakes and wetlands and in irrigated agricultural areas

Its species name *cinereus* is a Latin word that means 'like ashes', and that's a term that adequately describes the primary colour of the black-faced woodswallow's plumage, for it has a greyish brown head, back, and wings, with most of its under parts being a similar colour. The black face mask that gives the bird its colloquial name stretches from the base of its light grey bill that's tipped with black and around its dark eyes, and it has an equally black tail. Immature birds are primarily brown with extensively streaked feathers, and a light brown bill.

Artamus, the name of the genus to which the black-faced woodswallow belongs, is derived from an ancient Greek word meaning 'to butcher' or 'to murder', and it's insects that are for the chop when they catch the eye of this agile aerial predator. It settles, often with others of its kind, on fences, power cables, and trees that offer a clear

view of both the sky and the ground, and may appear to be doing nothing more than taking life easy until, in an instant, it launches itself into the air and grabs one of the unsuspecting insects that are a major component of its diet. It can hover and soar with elegance as it searches for its prey, and dines on the sweet treats served up by Mother Nature as occasionally, with its brush-like tongue, it sips on the nectar of flowers.

The black-faced woodswallow is a highly sociable bird, and although several may feed together, it's during cold weather and when they settle down to roost that they really appreciate the company of their mates. They huddle together in a depression or a hollow in the trunk of a tree, piling on top of one another to keep warm and chattering quietly until sleep overtakes them.

During the breeding season they evolve into an even more cooperative society. They build their nests, primitive constructions of twigs that are placed in a low tree or a hollow in a stump or man-made structure, close together, and several members of the group feed the chicks and carry out sentry duty. From a high vantage point they scan the landscape for any hint of danger and patrol the skies to watch for predators that see young and vulnerable birds as readily available takeaway meals. And when danger becomes a reality, they mob any potential predators, including much larger birds of prey, until they concede defeat and look elsewhere for a free feed.

The protective attitudes of black-faced woodswallows also benefit other members of the avian community, and hooded parrots in the Northern Territory have learned to appreciate that these smaller birds are very good neighbours. The woodswallows are always alert, and when they emit an alarm call, the hooded parrots, which are often busily feeding on seeds or fruit,

Right: A female rainbow bee-eater beside the beach at the Queensland city of Hervey Bay.







heed the warning of the neighbourhood watch brigade and make a dash for safety.

Black-faced woodswallows play a similarly beneficial role on Queensland's Cape York Peninsula too, for here they live side by side with golden-shouldered parrots, an endangered species that's endemic to this remote northern region. The parrots spend much of their day on the ground where, as they feast primarily on grass seeds, they give little thought to the dangers that may come from the skies above. The parrots' chicks are easy pickings for predators such as pied butcherbirds and birds of prey, but with black-faced woodswallows playing their invaluable roles as sentries, every chick has an increased chance of survival.

Unfortunately, the level of protection offered to the parrots may be diminishing as the population of black-faced swallows on the Cape York Peninsula is in decline, a fact that's believed to be due to a reduction in bushfires that has resulted in an increase in the density of vegetation, which doesn't suit the swallows' demands. And any continuing reduction in their population may drive the glorious and colourful golden-shouldered parrots even closer to the brink of extinction.



RAINBOW BEE-EATER

Merops ornatus

The briefest glimpse of this spectacular bird is enough to comprehend the reason for its common name, for its plumage is daubed with almost every gaudy colour of the rainbow. During summer months the rainbow bee-eater flaunts its undeniable beauty in almost every corner of mainland Australia, with the exception of some south-eastern and south-western areas, arid deserts,

and dense forests, but in the southern extremities of its range, when the first chill breath of wind hints that summer is in its death throes, the birds migrate north to a warmer climate.

They can be seen throughout the year in Queensland and other northern parts of the mainland where they thrive in a great diversity of habitats, including forests, woodlands, and cleared areas that are within easy reach of water, in addition to coastal sand dunes, cliffs, mangrove wetlands, farmlands with remnants of native vegetation, orchards, and vineyards.

The rainbow bee-eater is a slim bird with an almost metallic sheen to its green, blue, orange, and yellow feathers. It has an orange crown, a green forehead, and a wide black stripe from its relatively long black bill to an area behind each dark red eye, with a vivid blue patch of feathers beneath this black stripe. The bird's throat is golden yellow to orange, with a black band separating it from the blue green under parts, the upper part of its back and its wings are green, with the lower sections being turquoise blue, and its narrow tail is dark blue to black with two long thin extended feathers, which are shorter in females than males. Young birds have less vivid colouring and lack both the black band across the chest and the prominent long tail feathers of adults.

From a perch on a fence, a high branch, or a power cable, rainbow bee-eaters zoom off in search of flying insects that are the prime ingredients of their diet. They're skilful aerial acrobats that, as they dash through the air at hyperactive speeds, catch their prey on the wing. It requires a lot of food to sustain their high energy levels, and each bird consumes several hundred insects every day, with moths, dragonflies, grasshoppers, beetles, bees, and wasps all featuring on the menu. Fortunately, Mother Nature has given bee-eaters the gift of immunity to the stings of bees and wasps, but whenever a bird returns to its perch with a stinging insect in its bill it rubs the doomed creature against a hard surface to remove its sting, just

to be on the safe side.

Rainbow bee-eaters are highly sociable birds that, for much of the year, roost in trees in either small groups or large flocks. When spring makes its inevitable return, some birds return to their favoured southern haunts to breed, others head further afield - to New Guinea and the Solomon Islands, and many remain in the warm northern regions of Australia.

These are birds that mate for life, and males know when they're on a good wicket, for after mating they head off to have a good time elsewhere, leaving the females to attend to all the hard work of creating a nest that's no flimsy structure of grass and twigs. Slowly and methodically each female bee-eater excavates a tunnel, up to a metre in length, in the sandy bank of a river or stream, in a mound of soil, in the bank of a roadside cutting, in the wall of a quarry, or in any other suitable location. It's designed with a nesting chamber, that's lined with grass, at the far end, and when the construction has been completed, the eggs are laid and the male returns to provide his mate with a constant supply of insects while she patiently awaits the hatching of her chicks.

Many pairs use the same tunnel year after year, with several neighbours constructing their nests side by side. The birds roost together in their tunnels every night, in the knowledge that they and their precious offspring are well hidden from nocturnal predators, such as owls, but not every story has a happy ending, and when cane toads and reptiles are on the hunt for food, rainbow bee-eaters, in their subterranean chambers, have little chance of escape.



Left: A male rainbow bee-eater beside the beach at the Queensland city of Hervey Bay.





BROLGA

Grus rubicunda

Once upon a time, if an aboriginal legend is to be believed, there was a beautiful young girl named Buralga who loved to dance. She sealed her fate when she rejected the amorous attentions of an evil sorcerer, for in revenge he changed her into a bird, and today this stunning and elegant creature, like the girl that it had once been, dances across the Australian landscape.

The brolga, which is also known as the 'Australian crane' and 'native companion', is the official bird emblem of Queensland and is featured on the state's coat of arms, and although it's primarily a resident of northern and north-eastern Australia, it also inhabits semi-arid inland regions of the continent that stretch as far south as central New South Wales and western Victoria.

The population of brolgas is believed to be 20-100,000, and although that figure offers proof that this is a prolific species, the birds' numbers are declining, particularly in the southern extremity of their range. These imposing and beautiful birds generally live close to water, and make themselves at home in areas where wetlands, coastal mudflats, grassy plains, and irrigated farmlands are on the doorstep, but with the continual destruction of the habitats that are essential for their survival, and the predation of eggs and chicks by foxes and feral cats, the life of a brolga is not as easy as it once was.

This is a large bird that stands almost two metres high. It has predominantly light grey plumage with black tips to its wings, a long slender neck and long legs, a long grey bill, and golden yellow eyes. Its most distinctive feature however is the vivid red skin that covers its head, with the exception of its grey crown, as well as its cheeks and throat. Males and

Left: A brolga in a dry riverbed near the Queensland outback town of Boulia.





females are of identical appearance, but immature birds lack the red head band and have dark eyes.

Brolgas usually spend their days with a mate, in a small family group or, during the non-breeding season, as members of a large flock, and although each is a picture of avian elegance as it strides across the landscape, it's when a brolga takes to the skies that this iconic creature, with its wing span of more than two metres, presents an elegant aerial performance that's as mesmerising as its terrestrial dance.

Brolgas are as happy in wetlands as fruit bats in an orchard of ripening mangoes, for it's here that they forage for a range of foods that includes tubers and roots, fleshy leaves, molluscs, crustaceans, and frogs. And if that's not enough to satisfy an avian appetite, they'll also tuck into cereal grains and other seeds, and scoff insects and small lizards, and as they wade through the shallows of saltwater swamps they have no qualms about drinking the saline water, for they have the ability to excrete excess salt through special glands near their eyes.

Brolgas are among the most entertaining of Mother Nature's diverse cast of performers, and their most enthralling display begins when one or more birds takes the first steps in a complex dance routine. During the first act, a bird plucks some grass from the ground, tosses it into the air and, while dancing, catches it in its bill. Then, with its great wings outstretched, it continues the dance, jumping into the air, bowing gracefully, and bobbing its head up and down to the accompaniment of a repertoire of calls. These are monogamous birds that usually share their lives with the same mate year after year, and although a single bird may perform to impress its mate, several will often dance together in an entrancing performance that can be seen at any time of the year, but that's also part of a courtship ritual.

For brolgas, it's usually rain that

Left: A brolga in flight at the Queensland outback town of Boulia.

triggers the urge to mate, and the happy couple establish their nesting territory in a wetland area that offers a reliable supply of food. They may take the lazy option and use the abandoned nest of a swan, or simply lay their eggs on bare ground, but those that want the best for their chicks create a nest that's merely a pile of sticks, grass, and other plant material on any soil that protrudes, like a miniature island, from the surface of shallow water. The protective parents know all the tricks to protect their chicks, and in the face of imminent danger they distract a predator by fluttering across the ground as though suffering from an injury, and thus lure the threatening creature away from the chicks that the pair continues to protect until they're ready to breed again.



BUSTARD

Ardeotis australis

With flocks of several hundred bustards once meandering across the grasslands of Australia, early European settlers had a source of food right on their doorstep, and they enthusiastically hunted the large birds that they knew as 'plains turkeys.' Their insatiable appetite for this meaty bush tucker saw populations of bustards rapidly diminish as settlers colonised new areas and brought sheep and cattle to graze on the grasslands that the birds inhabited. Fortunately, the bustard has survived the onslaught, and these large birds, although in greatly reduced numbers, can still be found in inland and northern areas of the continent, where they're usually seen alone, in pairs, or in small groups, rather than in the extensive flocks that were a common sight in the not too distant past.

The bustard, with its predominantly grey to brown plumage, is one of Australia's largest birds. Its back and wings are coffee coloured and speckled with dark brown, it has a relatively short brown tail, a long light brown to grey

neck, a similarly coloured head with a black crown, a white eyebrow above each of its golden yellow eyes, cream to white under parts, and a grey bill, with the only conspicuous difference between the sexes being the fact that females are slightly smaller than males.

These are nomadic birds, with their wanderlust triggered solely by the necessity to find food and water. They spend much of their time on the ground where they walk along slowly in a snooty and arrogant pose with the neck held erect and the head sloping backwards. And they prowl slowly through grasses and low vegetation in search of the wide range of foods that satisfy their appetites, and that include grasshoppers and other insects, small reptiles, rodents, frogs, foliage, fruit, and seeds.

If disturbed, they often simply stand still as though a lack of motion provides invisibility, or merely stroll away from any perceived threat while appearing to display little concern about what's going on in the vicinity. Taking to the skies is always a last resort, and although bustards often roost in a tree, they'll frequently settle down to sleep on the ground on the treeless plains that are a dominant feature of their habitat.

Males strut their stuff more energetically and put on an entertaining performance when they're eager to attract a mate and, in an area that has been cleared of vegetation, each strides backwards and forwards, with its tail raised, while emitting a loud roaring noise that's produced by the bird's inflated throat sac. The female eventually lays one or two large eggs, either on the bare ground or on some grass, where her survival and that of the chicks that will ultimately hatch is in the hands of fate.

People no longer relish the taste of roast bustard that, like all native species, has legal protection against any direct threats from *Homo sapiens*, but other predators, including foxes, feral cats, and dingoes, have no qualms about feasting on the eggs and the vulnerable chicks of this great bird of the plains.



Right: A bustard near the western Queensland town of Injune.







A bustard in flight near the western
Queensland town of Injune.





FAN-TAILED CUCKOO

Cacomantis flabelliformis

In a distant era, one that was dogged by superstition and ignorance, a glimpse of the fan-tailed cuckoo was regarded as an omen that bad fortune and inclement weather were just around the corner. And with its genus name *Cacomantis* being derived from the Greek words '*kakos*' meaning evil, and '*mantis*' meaning prophet, this Australian cuckoo was officially tagged as an unwelcome visitor.

This prophet of doom and gloom is found throughout eastern Australia, in south-western Western Australia, and in Tasmania, where it resides in forests and woodlands.

It's an attractive bird with a dark grey back, wings, and head, a reddish brown throat fading to lighter brown on its under parts, black and white horizontal stripes on the underside of its tail, and a short, curved, grey bill. But it's the bright yellow ring around each of the bird's dark eyes that is its most conspicuous physical feature, and while both males and females are similar in appearance, younger birds are duller and browner in colour.

Hairy caterpillars, some of which can inflict a painful sting, are creatures that most people are keen to give a wide berth, but fan-tailed cuckoos are more than happy to see these wriggling larvae, for they are the birds' favoured food and they're able to scoff them with no ill effects. They also dine on a variety of other insects and their larvae, in addition to moths, and when it comes to searching for their prey, fan-tailed cuckoos do so in a genuinely laid back style. Each bird sits silently on a branch, doing nothing more energetic than scanning the ground below for signs of life, and once a prospective victim is spotted, the cuckoo darts down to snatch its prey from the ground, or grabs a fluttering insect from the air or from nearby foliage and returns to its perch to consume its meal.

When the fan-tailed cuckoo arrives on the scene and the distinctive

call 'cuckoo, cuckoo' that gives this attractive bird its common name reverberates across the landscape, a prediction of bad times to come, at least for some species of birds, becomes a reality, for like most other species of Australian cuckoos, these are parasitic birds that lay their eggs in the nests of their unsuspecting neighbours. Some 50 species have been recorded as being the unwitting hosts of the fan-tailed cuckoo, and it's thornbills, flycatchers, fairy-wrens, and scrubwrens, that are among its victims.

The female cuckoo lays a single egg in each of several nests, and each time she tosses out one of the eggs of the nest's owner. The cuckoo's eggs generally hatch before those of the host and instinct tells the chick that, to guarantee its survival, it must eject any other eggs or chicks from the nest. The young bird's seemingly unaware foster parents then rear the solitary cuckoo chick as their own and attend to the demands of the monster in their midst with the same parental devotion that they would have given to chicks of their own flesh and blood.



PALLID CUCKOO

Cuculus pallidus

The pallid cuckoo, the most widely distributed of the 13 species of cuckoos that call Australia home, is not too fussy about its habitat, for it's found in forests, woodlands, and open country across the continent.

In common with most cuckoos, it's the bird's monotonous call that often gives the first hint of its presence, and with its seemingly endless whistling going on and on, often well beyond nightfall, the pallid cuckoo can be hard to ignore. It's easy to spot when it perches on exposed branches, on power cables, and in other similarly conspicuous places, but with its predominantly brown plumage the

Left: A fan-tailed cuckoo in the author's garden.

pallid cuckoo is well camouflaged when it settles among dense foliage.

It's a relatively large, slender bird with mottled plumage that, on its back and wings, is grey to brown speckled with cream, with its head and under parts being a lighter shade of brown to cream. Its tail has broad darker bands on top and is lighter underneath, its bill is grey to brown, and each of its dark eyes is surrounded by a distinctive yellow ring. Immature birds, although similar in appearance to adults, have slightly lighter plumage.

Pallid cuckoos spend much their day lethargically waiting and watching for food to arrive on their doorstep, and when something palatable passes by, they pounce. Hairy caterpillars, grasshoppers, and beetles are among the favoured foods of these avian connoisseurs, but they'll enthusiastically dine on a wide range of other insects and their larvae that they usually consume on the ground, unless a tiny creature wandering among nearby foliage provides an dining option that's simply too good to ignore.

The pallid cuckoo is easy to please in many respects, and it's far from fastidious during the breeding season. This parasitic bird considers almost any nest to be an inviting place in which to lay its eggs, and around 80 species of birds, including honeyeaters, woodswallows, flycatchers, and willie wagtails, have been recorded as victims of the anti-social behaviour that makes the pallid cuckoo a neighbour that's as welcome as a swarm of wasps in a nudist colony. The female of the species does what all cuckoos do once they've found a suitable nest - she tosses out one of the eggs of the nest's owner, replaces it with her own, which is of a similar appearance, and hastily flees from the scene of the crime. When the bird whose egg has been destroyed returns to her nest, she settles down to incubate the eggs with maternal devotion and

Right: A pallid cuckoo at a camping area in Mungo National Park in outback New South Wales.





remains blissfully ignorant of the dirty deed perpetrated by the villain of the story. The cuckoo's egg is usually the first to hatch, and the tiny chick instinctively does what's required to ensure its survival. It laboriously hurls any remaining eggs out of the nest, thus ensuring that it will be the sole beneficiary of every mouthful of food delivered by its doting foster parents. And despite the fact that the cuckoo soon becomes far larger than the birds that have raised it, they continue to feed the ever-growing young bird with seemingly no concept of the fact that they've been duped.



BLACK-FRONTED DOTTEREL

Elseya melanops

The Oxford dictionary defines the word 'guttersnipe' as a street urchin, and a young, uncared for and mischievous child. The black-fronted dotterel, which is also known as a 'black-fronted plover', is often referred to as a 'guttersnipe', and that's a peculiar name for a bird that invariably displays neat and clean plumage, and that never seems to be getting into any mischief, other than dabbling in a little mud.

This attractive little bird can be seen in most regions of Australia, although it tends to shun the most arid parts of the continent, and although it's occasionally spotted wandering beside saline mudflats and coastal estuaries, its favoured habitats are freshwater wetlands, the stony beds of rivers and creeks, the muddy edges of lakes, and the shallow pools of water that laze in outback claypans.

The black-fronted dotterel has some very distinctive features, including a black and white head, a white chin, and a white breast with a black stripe. Its legs are pink to orange, its bill is bright red with a black tip, and its dark eyes are ringed with red, and with decoratively patterned brown plumage on its back and its wings, this diminutive bird is another vivid example of Mother Nature's artistic skills. Both males

and females have similarly attractive plumage, but immature birds have lighter coloured feathers than adults and lack the prominent black stripe around the breast.

They spend their days alone or with a mate, and are energetic characters that are fascinating to watch as they go about the routine task of searching for the insects and small aquatic creatures that form the basis of their diet. At times they dawdle across the soft mud at the water's edge, then rush quickly and silently along, rather than flying in pursuit of a passing insect. They stop momentarily to peck at the mud, and in their hunt for food they scurry on their way again at a pace that continually alternates between short bursts of speed and a dawdling stroll as they repetitively peck at the ground.

Their brown plumage provides them with excellent camouflage, and when they settle down to nest they're almost impossible to see. The nest, which is usually close to water, is a simple construction that's often little more than a shallow depression in the ground, with the bird's eggs laid among tidal debris or riverbank pebbles.

As a predominately ground dwelling species, black-fronted dotterels are particularly vulnerable to predation by feral cats and foxes, and with many of the wetlands and shallow lakes that they frequent drying up due to repetitive droughts, some populations of these delightful little birds are sadly in decline.



EMU

Dromaius novaehollandiae

In 1696, when a Dutch ship sailed past the coast of Western Australia in search of any survivors from a ship that had been lost at sea two years earlier, its captain, Willem de Vlamingh, recorded an amazing sight. He saw a gigantic bird that was later referred to, in Arthur Phillip's 1789 book 'Voyage to Botany Bay', as the 'New Holland cassowary'. Today it's known as the emu and it's an



iconic species that has pride of place on the Australian coat of arms.

The name 'emu' is thought to have originated from an Arabic word meaning 'a large bird', and with a height of around two metres, the emu, which is the largest bird in Australia and



the second largest in the world after the African ostrich, is certainly an impressive character.

Sadly, the population of emus that once thrived on both King Island and Kangaroo Island vanished into the abyss of extinction soon after the arrival

of Europeans. Those that were part of the great diversity of fauna of Tasmania fared a little better, and strode across the landscape until 1865 when the last survivor vanished into the shadows of history. Today, at least on the mainland, emus thrive in huge numbers, and can

be seen dawdling along on their own, in small groups, or in huge flocks.

They're often regarded as being

Above: A black-fronted dotterel beside a waterhole near Eulo in outback Queensland.



A male emu with his chicks beside a camping area in Currawinya National Park in outback Queensland.







creatures of arid and semi-arid inland regions, but they also frequent coastal and hinterland areas and are even occasionally spotted wandering along sandy beaches, strolling across golf courses, and meandering through agricultural areas, and in such situations they're rarely welcome for they cause considerable damage to crops and, in their efforts to escape when frightened, they damage fences. It's only dense forests and the most barren of deserts that are excluded from the emu's range, and although these great flightless birds usually steer clear of urban areas, severe droughts force them to venture into outback settlements in a desperate search for food and water.

Dromaius, the name of the genus to which the emu belongs, is derived from a Greek word meaning 'racer', and although it cannot fly, the emu can race along the ground, with its long neck outstretched and its thick skirt of feathers bouncing and billowing in the wind, at a speed in excess of 40km/h.

The long shaggy feathers that cover the emu's body can be in varying shades of brown or grey, with birds that inhabit cool and damp areas having darker plumage than those that thrive in warmer and drier climates, while birds that stride across the red soils of many outback regions have a reddish tinge to their plumage. The emu's neck has only a light covering of feathers, with some areas having nothing more than bare blue skin. It has amber coloured eyes that have translucent secondary eyelids that move horizontally across the eyes to provide protection from dust, and with huge claws on its equally huge feet, the emu has the perfect weapon with which to fight off any of its own species that are unwelcome in its territory.

Emus are far from particular about what they eat, and although the main ingredients of their diet are grasses, the fruits and flowers of native plants, and other vegetation, including the foliage of acacias and casuarinas, they'll also feast on spiders and a range of insects and their larvae. They regularly ingest small stones too, for these are an

essential aid to their digestive system, and they wash it all down with copious amounts of water.

Like other birds, they like to bathe every now and then, and anyone who's watched one of these gigantic birds sitting down and splashing in the shallow water of a stream or a large puddle will agree that it's a sight that's triggers tears of laughter.

Emus communicate with each other via a series of booming and grunting sounds. The male does most of the grunting, primarily during the breeding season and when his mate is laying her eggs, as a vocal signal to alert other males to the fact that they're not welcome in his domain. And it's the female who does most of the booming, a sound that's created in her inflatable throat pouch, and that's part of a courtship display as well as a warning to other birds that may be tempted to encroach on her territory. When faced with a perceived threat or when they discover an unusual object, sometimes something as innocuous as a parked vehicle or a camper's tent, a curious and cautious emu will peer out from the vegetation, with its long neck extended ahead of it, and make its displeasure at any intrusion known with sounds that readily convey the message that the emu is top dog in the bush.

Any ardent feminist couldn't fail to admire the female emu, for after fighting with others to claim the most desirable mate, she lays a clutch of up to 15 large dark green eggs in a simple nest on the ground, and walks away to leave the male to get on with the demanding task of raising a family as a single parent. Even hunger and thirst fail to lure him away from his paternal duty, and although he occasionally moves momentarily to turn the eggs, he neither eats nor drinks during the eight weeks that he patiently incubates the eggs, and by the time the chicks, cloaked in pyjamas of striped and fluffy

Left: Emu chicks beside a camping area in Currawinya National Park in outback Queensland.



down, emerge from the eggs, old man emu has lost a third of his body weight. He's the most dedicated of fathers, and it's he alone who tends to the young birds that he aggressively defends from predators and from other emus until, as the next breeding season approaches, his offspring are ready to find their own place in the wild world.

Each female, providing she can find a mate who isn't too preoccupied with his parental duties, can lay several clutches of eggs each year, and although predators such as eagles, reptiles, foxes, and dingoes enjoy nothing more than a nutritious meal of emu eggs or succulent chicks, these great birds continue to thrive in large numbers.

Some people regard the emu more as a curse than as an iconic national treasure, with farmers being among the first to complain when the birds' populations soar, and it was in 1932 that landowners were at their most vociferous. Wheat farmers in the Campion region of Western Australian (some 350kms north-east of Perth) saw their livelihoods under threat when an army of an estimated 20,000 emus arrived on their doorstep. And having found the perfect habitat, with ample supplies of food and water, the invading hordes staked their claim to ownership of the land. In response to the farmers' request for assistance, the government instigated a wildlife management

strategy that became known as The Great Emu War. The military operation to cull the birds using machine guns began as a farce with only a few birds initially killed. Eventually around 1,000 were shot, and with the threat barely reduced, farmers continued to demand assistance, but their requests were denied. Eventually a bounty system was instigated, and this proved to be the optimum method of controlling the

Above: An emu at Currawinya National Park in outback Queensland.

Opposite page: Emus near the outback town of Wanaaring in New South Wales.



Emus in bushland near the outback town of Wanaaring in New South Wales.









emus, and with a price on their heads, more than 57,000 were killed in a six month period during 1934.

Despite the slaughter of The Great Emu War and the fact that populations of emus have declined in some areas, their overall numbers have escalated considerably since European settlement, thanks to the increased availability of water sources that have been provided for livestock but that are utilised by wildlife in semi-arid regions. And with emus now farmed for their meat, oil, feathers, and hides, these imposing birds face a future that will see them grace the Australian stage for all to admire or despise for centuries to come.



TAWNY FROGMOUTH

Podargus strigoides

This peculiar bird was first described by English naturalist John Latham in 1801, and although its species name ‘*strigoides*’ is derived from two Latin words meaning ‘like an owl’, the tawny frogmouth bears no relationship whatsoever to an owl, despite the many similarities in the lifestyles of these nocturnal predators. *Podargus*, the name of the genus to which the bird belongs, owes its origin to two Greek words, ‘*podos*’ meaning ‘foot’ and ‘*argos*’ meaning ‘idle’, a reference to the frogmouth’s feet that are barely visible when the bird is perching, and that, lacking the curved talons of owls, are not used for capturing prey.

Tawny frogmouths can be found throughout Australia, including Tasmania, and reside in a wide range of habitats, from forests and woodlands to urban and agricultural environments, but they draw the line at dense rainforests and treeless deserts.

Mother Nature has dressed the tawny frogmouth in near perfect camouflage,

Left: A tawny frogmouth on its nest near the town of South West Rocks in New South Wales.

and the first clue that the bird is nearby is often its soft and repetitive call, 'whoom, whoom, whoom', that reverberates through the darkness of the night. Both male and female birds have plumage that's primarily greyish brown and streaked with black and dark brown, and under parts that are slightly lighter in colour, with a light grey bill and large golden yellow eyes completing the bird's relatively drab appearance.

Tawny frogmouths are creatures of the night, and during the day they take life easy and sit motionlessly on an exposed branch, with their eyes closed and their heads pointed upwards in a pose that gives each bird the appearance of a piece of weathered timbered.

With large eyes and excellent hearing they are highly successful hunters, and rather than catch their prey in flight, they take the leisurely option and pounce on their victims, which include insects, rodents, small lizards, frogs, worms, slugs, and snails, as they wander silently along the ground in what they assume is the safety of darkness. The small chicks of other birds are also fair game for tawny frogmouths, and they'll swoop from a lofty perch to snatch moths and other flying insects from the air. It's a tactic that often pays off, but it's also one that has some dire consequences for the birds, many of which are killed when they dive on prey that's illuminating by the headlights of speeding vehicles.

They are monogamous birds, and in the breeding season they construct a primitive nest of twigs and leaves that's usually sited on a forked branch of a tree. Both the female and her mate play a role in incubating the eggs, with the male taking the daytime shift and his partner sharing the task during the night. Every chick is a welcome addition to the population of these birds that play an important role in controlling both rodents and insects, and although, as a species, they face no imminent threat of extinction, human activities often make life difficult for tawny frogmouths. These are birds

that live for up to 14 years and that spend their entire lives in the same territory, and when land is cleared of vegetation for urban or industrial development, for road construction, or for agricultural pursuits, the world that tawny frogmouths have called their home is destroyed forever and a community of these wondrous wild creatures faces an uncertain future.



NANKEEN NIGHT HERON

Nycticorax caledonicus

In Australia's colonial era, early settlers used a Chinese fabric called nankeen to make some of their clothes. It had the same cinnamon brown colour as the feathers of the heron that was frequently seen around permanent sources of water, so to distinguish this bird from other heron species it was given a common name that made it instantly recognisable. It became known as the nankeen night heron.

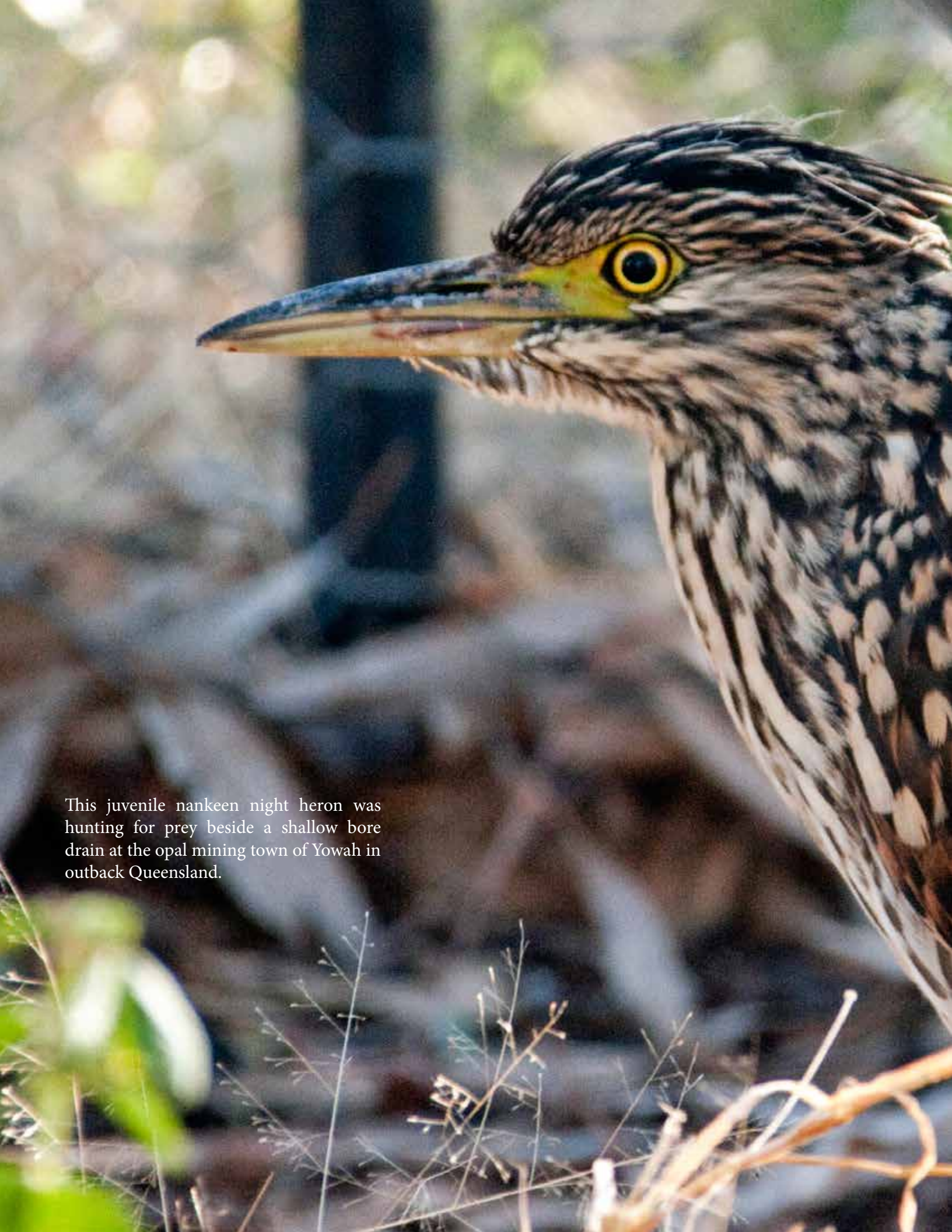
Fortunately, it's not essential to be out and about in the dark to see this distinctive bird in its natural habitat, for despite its colloquial name, it's not a strictly nocturnal species. Woodlands and forests on the banks of waterways, lakes, coastal estuaries, and freshwater swamps throughout mainland Australia are its favoured haunts, and it's occasionally seen in similar environments in Tasmania. During daylight hours, particularly in overcast or wet weather, the nankeen night heron may be out and about searching for food, but when it's not stealthily hunting its prey, it settles down to take life easy and dozes among the foliage of a tree at the water's edge.

There's often some confusion about the identification of this attractive bird, for it wears two distinctly different costumes. The feathers on the back and wings of an adult are the cinnamon brown colour that gave birth to its colloquial name. The lower parts of its

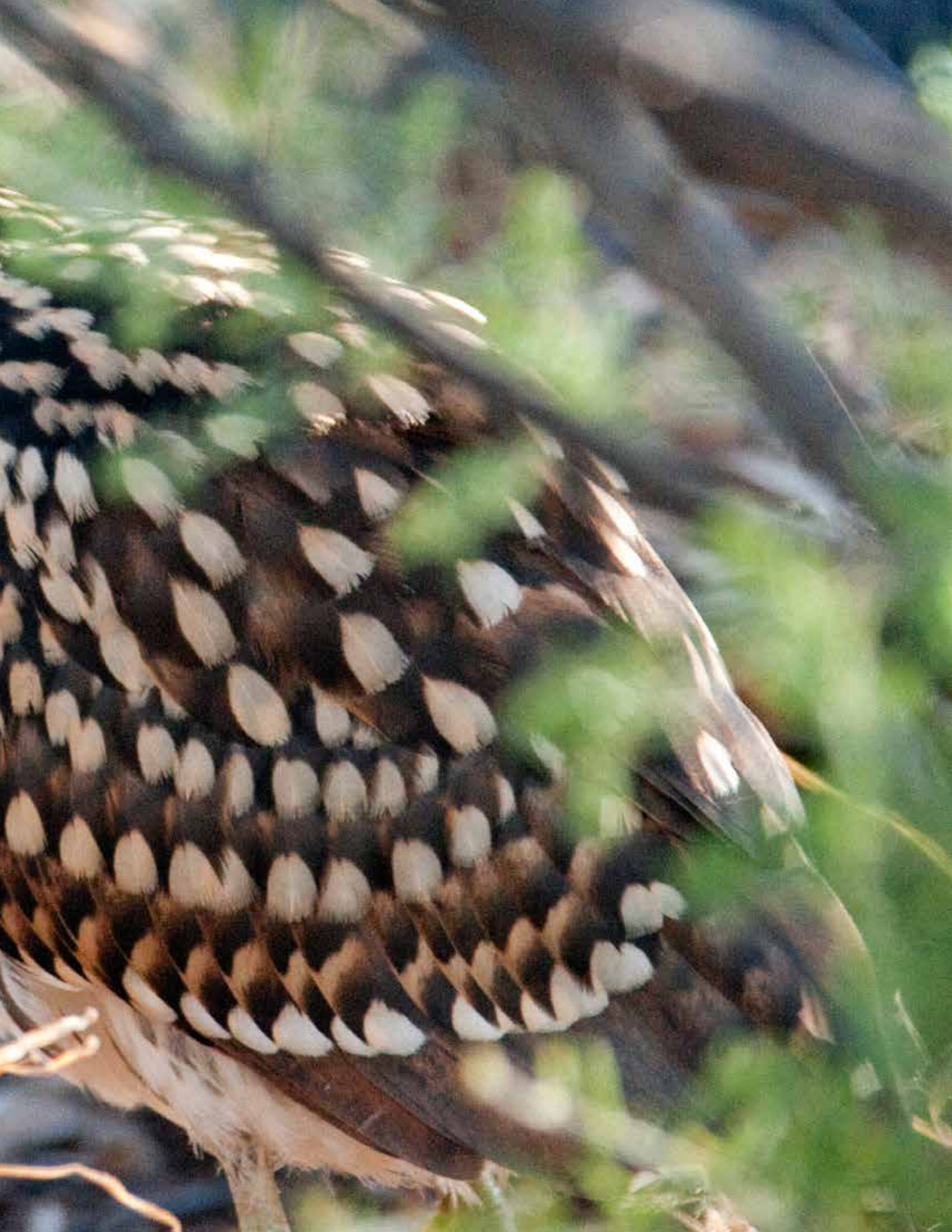
Right: A nankeen night heron in outback Queensland.







This juvenile nankeen night heron was hunting for prey beside a shallow bore drain at the opal mining town of Yowah in outback Queensland.



body and its neck are creamy brown, its face is white, its bill is grey, the crown of its head is black, and it has yellow eyes, legs, and feet. Juvenile birds however, bear little resemblance to their parents, for their entire body and head are draped with plumage in decorative patterns that are a mixture of light brown, dark brown, and white streaks. As they mature, they gradually develop the black cap worn by adults, but the rest of their plumage remains streaked and mottled until they reach full adulthood.

Droughts, the decline of wetlands, and the interruption of river flows have had a dramatic impact on populations of nankeen night herons, for they thrive only in areas where there's a permanent source of water that ensures that their favourite foods are right on the doorstep. They become increasingly active at dusk, and feed in shallow water where, as they probe the mud with their long pointed bills, they catch small crustaceans, fish, frogs, and aquatic insects, and occasionally they satisfy their hunger by eating the eggs and small chicks of other birds.

When it's time to start thinking of raising a family, breeding birds reveal their intentions by developing two or three long, narrow, white feathers that adorn their heads. Males busy themselves by collecting nesting material, while females create a simple platform of twigs in a tree that overhangs the water and that's often among a colony of other nesting birds, including egrets and cormorants.

It might require a little patience to discover a nankeen night heron as it sits, perfectly camouflaged, in its daytime retreat, but any glimpse of this stunning bird, young or old, male or female, in whatever attractive dress it might be wearing, is guaranteed to provide a memorable experience.



Right: This sacred kingfisher had plenty to chirp about after snatching a meal from a pond in the author's garden.

SACRED KINGFISHER

Todiramphus sanctus

The sacred kingfisher spreads its colourful wings not only over Australia, but also over New Zealand and some of the remote islands that are dotted across the Pacific Ocean. The Polynesian people of these islands once regarded this slender and attractive bird as a sacred being that controlled the ocean waves, and for islanders for whom the sea was an integral part of almost every aspect of life, any creature that could influence the tantrums of the sea was worthy of a hefty serving of respect.

It's one of the most commonly seen of the 10 species of kingfishers that are found in Australia, with its extensive range including woodlands and forests, particularly those in close proximity to streams, rivers, and wetlands, and the coastal woodlands and mangrove forests that fringe river estuaries and ocean inlets.

The sacred kingfisher is generally a solitary figure that's rarely seen with a mate, other than during the breeding season, and a glimpse of one of these dazzling and almost hyperactive birds is often little more than a flash of glittering feathers as it zooms through shading riverbank foliage at a speed replicating that of a falling star racing through the night sky.

It has a turquoise to dark blue back, tail, and head, a buff coloured patch above its dark grey bill, and a black stripe from its bill to the nape of its neck. A creamy white collar is wrapped around its neck, and its throat and under parts are also creamy white, although the plumage on this part of the bird's body can vary considerably, from ochre coloured to white, with the brightest colouration being in winter and spring. Both sexes are of similar appearance, although females and immature birds usually have lighter plumage.

Despite their common name, sacred kingfishers rarely eat fish and although they'll occasionally dive into a garden pond and snatch a goldfish from the water in less time than it takes for a

spider to blink all eight of its tiny eyes, they're more adept at hunting terrestrial prey than at capturing elusive aquatic creatures. They perch on a branch or other convenient lookout point and keep their eyes peeled for any sign of the small lizards, frogs, and insects and their larvae that are the main course on their menu. And when the moment's right for action, they pounce onto the ground with deadly speed and accuracy, and return to their perch to devour their prize.

For sacred kingfishers, the hard work begins in earnest when the breeding season arrives, for they're smart enough to realise that, to improve the chances of survival for their chicks, a discreet and secure site for their nests, and one that's inaccessible to predators, is a priority. Each pair, using their bills to chip away at hard and compacted material and the claws on their feet to rake away the soil, excavates a nesting hollow that's often located in a riverbank, but more often than not they become squatters in someone else's home where two clutches of eggs are often laid in a season. And their preferred residence is in a termite mound that's attached to a tree trunk. The termites promptly repair the damaged interior wall of their home to segregate themselves from the bird's nesting chamber, and both birds and insects live in neighbourly harmony.



KOOKABURRA

Dacelo novaeguineae

The kookaburra, which was first described by French naturalist Johann Hermann in 1783, owes its curious colloquial name to the aboriginal word 'guuguubarra'. It's the bird's early morning call that has led to its alternative name of 'laughing jackass', and it's a sound that, according to an aboriginal legend, reminds the mythical people of the sky that it's time to light the fires of the sun to illuminate and warm the earth. It's an appealing yarn, but there's a more down to earth interpretation of the varied calls of this iconic bird, for each has a specific



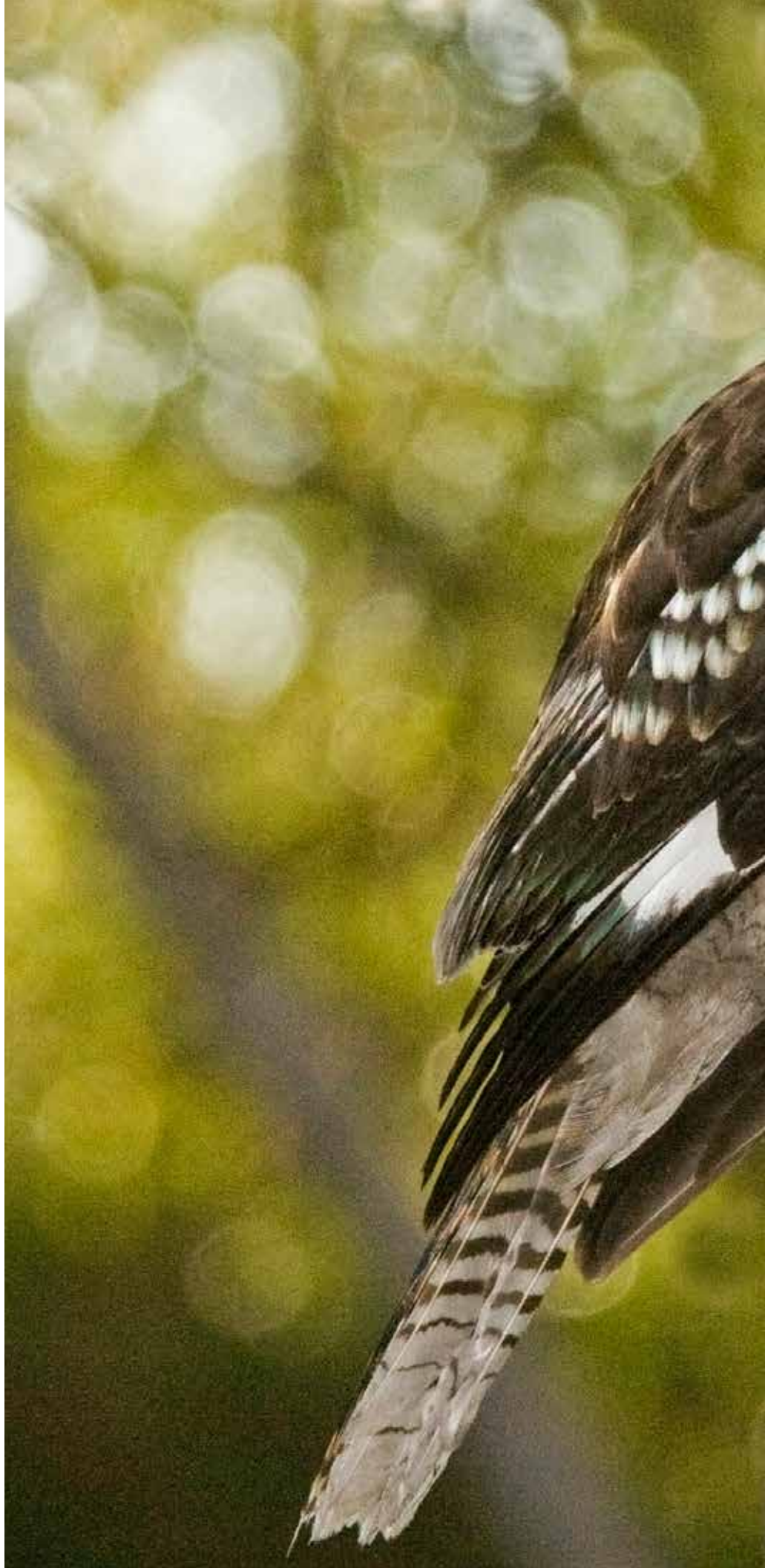
meaning, with some proclaiming the bird's territory, while others alert its mates to danger, let them know that there's food on offer, or announce that someone's on the lookout for a breeding partner.

Kookaburras are members of the kingfisher family and are the largest of the 10 members of this group that reside in Australia. These iconic birds make themselves at home in woodlands and open forests in the eastern, south-eastern, and south-western regions of the continent, and have been introduced into Tasmania, and to both Kangaroo and Flinders Islands. They're so appealing that New Zealanders found them irresistible, and in the latter part of the 19th century, kookaburras were introduced to the land of the long white cloud, but only those that were released on Kawau Island survived, with the distinctive voices of their descendants routinely heard on the island and adjacent areas of the mainland.

The kookaburra is a relatively stocky bird with a predominantly dark brown back, and wings that are of a similar colour with flecks of light blue. The plumage of its head, neck, throat, and under parts is a creamy white flecked with light brown, and it has a short broad tail that's cream with dark brown horizontal stripes, a bill that's dark grey on the top section and white underneath, and a narrow chocolate brown streak from each of its dark eyes to the back of its neck.

Kookaburras, despite being kingfishers, seem to find the concept of catching fish about as appealing as most of us would find a weekend in a broom cupboard, and although they'll dive into a garden pond to catch a goldfish that's easy prey, fish are generally not high on their menu. Sitting silently and motionlessly on a fence post or the branch of a tree, kookaburras often appear as comatose barnacles, but they're not couch potatoes, simply birds that have an abundance of patience, and they'll

Right: A kookaburra in a caravan park at Montville in Queensland.









watch and wait in silence until an unsuspecting victim wanders across the ground below. They're also avid scroungers that frequent picnic and camping areas with optimism that people will eventually donate a snack, and they're attracted by the flames of bushfires where a meal, either roasted or raw, may be on offer. Small snakes, lizards, rodents, yabbies, frogs, snails, the small chicks of other birds, and insects are all components of their varied menu, and when grasshoppers are in plague proportions they form a major part of the kookaburra's nutritious diet.

These monogamous birds, which spend their entire lives with the same mate, are highly sociable characters that, although they're often seen alone, are usually members of a close-knit family group. In the breeding season they nest in a hollow within a tree or in a chamber that they have laboriously carved out in a termites' nest that's on a tree trunk high above the ground, and it's then that the family all pull together. Young birds, which remain with the group for several years, are on the bottom rung of the kookaburras' social ladder and, for the first four years of their lives, they're the dogs' bodies of the group, helping to defend the family's territory, assisting in the tedious role of incubating the dominant female's eggs, and fetching food for successive generations of chicks and fledglings. During this phase of their lives they don't breed, which means that the reproduction rate of kookaburras is relatively low, but with the dedicated care and attention of all members of their family, the one or two chicks that emerge from each nest have a high chance of survival, and with individual birds having a life expectancy of up to 12 years, these iconic and appealing members of the Australian bushland community are certainly not knocking on the door of extinction.



Left: A kookaburra in the author's garden in Queensland.

MASKED LAPWING

Vanellus miles

The golden yellow mask worn by the masked lapwing makes it instantly recognisable, and although it's a species that's found in northern, central, and eastern Australia, it's one that, at least as far as its common name is concerned, presents a little confusion, for there are two slightly different sub-species of this attractive bird.

The one that's commonly known as the 'masked lapwing' or 'masked plover' lives in the northern regions of the species' range, while its close and almost identical relative, which owes its additional colloquial name of 'spur-winged plover' to the tiny spurs that are on its wings and that are believed to be used during fighting, thrives in more southerly regions. Both sub-species inhabit wetlands, mudflats, beaches, and grassed areas, and are often seen strolling through urban parks, for these are birds that have benefited from the human obsession of creating neatly mown lawns.

The masked lapwing has brown plumage on its back and wings, white under parts, a short dark brown to black tail, a white neck and chest, and a black crown. And with dark red legs, a yellow bill, and a bright yellow mask, which is known as a wattle and that covers most of the bird's face, it's a very distinctive character indeed. Birds of the southern sub-species have a wide black stripe on the sides of the breast and on the back of the neck, and have a smaller facial wattle than their northern relatives, and although all birds of both subspecies, including juveniles, are of a similar appearance, immature birds have smaller facial wattles than adults.

They're primarily ground dwelling birds that frequently feed alone or simply wander along with a mate or in a small group as they probe damp soil or mud for worms and insects, eat any tasty prey that they discover as they forage on emerald lawns, or enjoy a snack of seeds when little other food is available.

They'll breed whenever the conditions are suitable, but their choice of a nesting site is often quite absurd. A simple nest of grass and other vegetation is usually constructed in a depression in a grass-covered area, but with little concept of the perils that lie ahead, masked lapwings often settle down to lay their eggs and raise a brood of chicks on a sports field, at the edge of a car park, beside a busy highway, or on the verge of an urban pathway. They aggressively defend their nests, and if their efforts are successful and the eggs aren't stolen by predators or damaged by passing pedestrians or vehicles, the chicks soon discover that life definitely wasn't meant to be easy.

Unlike many birds that are born naked, young masked lapwings come into the world with a protective covering of down and leave the nest and feed themselves within a few hours of hatching. Adult birds do their best to protect their chicks by attacking any creatures, including humans, which come too close to their vulnerable offspring, and occasionally divert attention away from them by fluttering across the ground in a way that suggests that they have an injured wing. It's a tactic that pays off, for despite their often apparent lack of common sense when selecting a nesting site, masked lapwings are thriving in both their wild habitats and the welcoming environments that they have discovered on the doorstep of suburbia.



Right: A masked lapwing at a coastal picnic area at Repton in northern New South Wales.





CRESTED PIGEON

Ocyphaps lophotes

The crested pigeon is also routinely referred to as a 'topknot pigeon' and only someone with an IQ lower than that of a bed bug could fail to comprehend the logic behind its common name, for a permanent crest of feathers rises from its head.

Its range covers most of mainland Australia, with the exception of the south-western and northern regions of the continent, and although it's most at home in lightly wooded areas and open grasslands, it's taken advantage of the changing landscape and has no hesitation in taking up residence in areas where forests have been cleared for agricultural use, if adequate trees have been retained to provide convenient roosting and nesting sites.

The crested pigeon's head, back, and under parts are merely light grey, but that doesn't mean that this is a drab and unimpressive bird. With the upper section of its grey wings striped with black, and the lower sections decorated with vivid green and purple feathers that are trimmed with white, in addition to bright red legs, red skin around its golden orange eyes, and a distinctive crest, Mother Nature has ensured that this pigeon is an eye-catching character. Males are barely distinguishable from females, but immature birds, with their less colourful wings, aren't quite so impressive.

These are birds that often live a relatively solitary existence, but that are also happy to be part of a small group or a large flock when there's ample food and water to satisfy their communal needs.

A CSIRO study of crested pigeons in inland New South Wales revealed that more than 85 per cent of their diet was comprised of seeds, with more than 13 per cent being green leaves, and the remainder being insects. And

Right: A crested pigeon in the South Australian town of Port Augusta.







Crested pigeons in parklands in the Queensland city of Maryborough were putting on a mating display.



while they'll consume the seeds of both introduced weed species and pasture plants, birds that thrive in southern states are irrevocably drawn to one of the region's most prolific weeds, *Echium lycopsis*, which is better known as Paterson's Curse and Salvation Jane. During periods of drought the birds survive almost entirely on its seeds, but in times of high rainfall the weed's leaves are the main course on the crested pigeon's menu.

Food and sex are the primary concerns of most birds, including crested pigeons and every male knows the right moves to flirt with a prospective mate. He bobs up and down, flaunting his charms by spreading his wings and fanning his tail out in an alluring display that's accompanied by subtle cooing. A successful performance eventually results in the object of his desire laying her eggs in a nest that's little more than a ramshackle platform of twigs concealed among the foliage of a low tree or shrub.

The pair shares the parental duties of incubating the eggs and caring for their chicks that will eventually take to the skies, with the subtle whistling sound made by their wings reminding anyone within the vicinity that the far from drab crested pigeon is not too far away.



PEACEFUL DOVE

Geopelia placida

Peaceful by name and peaceful by nature, this attractive little dove is a timid and unassuming bird, with its low cooing call being a familiar sound in the varied regions in which it makes itself at home. Peaceful doves, which can be found across the Australian mainland, with the exception of southern Victoria and the south-western corner of Western Australia, have a preference for woodlands with an understorey of grasses, and open grasslands that are in

Right: A peaceful dove in the author's garden.





close proximity to rivers and streams or other permanent sources of water. And they'll visit urban parks and gardens, providing they offer a suitable habitat that includes ample supplies of food, and trees in which the birds can roost.

Grey is the predominant colour of the peaceful dove's plumage, but thanks to plenty of added decoration, grey has rarely looked so good. The bird's back and wings are a brownish grey with the feathers edged with black. Its neck, throat, and upper breast are light grey to white with an ornate black scalloped pattern, and its breast is pinkish brown. Its head and upper throat are light grey, and its long tail is grey too, but with pink legs, and a bright blue ring around each darker blue eye stretching to the blue-grey bill, the peaceful dove displays a subtle beauty. Juveniles are similar in appearance to adults, although their plumage is of a slightly lighter colour, and they have less prominent stripes and eye rings.

Peaceful doves are usually seen in pairs foraging on the ground for the seeds of grasses and other low growing plants that are the major ingredients of each meal, with small insects sometimes consumed as the second course.

During the breeding season, they quietly go about the serious business of constructing their nests, which are simple platforms of twigs and grass that are well above the ground and out of reach of terrestrial predators. But heaven help other birds that dare to threaten either the nesting parents or their chicks, for it's during this important phase of their lives that these attractive little birds unleash an outburst of aggression, as any parent would do to protect their family from danger, and the peace and tranquillity of the peaceful dove's world is momentarily shattered.



Right: A squatter pigeon near the central Queensland town of Calliope.

SQUATTER PIGEON

Geophaps scripta

Squatter pigeons were once common on the inland plains of New South Wales, but life hasn't been easy for these relatively small birds, and today, with only nine sightings recorded in the state in the last four decades, the squatter pigeon has been listed as an endangered species, and the chances of spotting one in the southern part of its range is on a par with the possibility that a deep sea diver might glimpse a fish knitting a pair of socks.

Despite its demise in the southern part of its range, the squatter pigeon is still alive and well in central and north-eastern Queensland, but its future is by no means assured. Open woodlands with an understorey of grass and in close proximity to rivers or other reliable sources of water are where the squatter pigeon generally resides, but with the continual destruction of its habitat, thanks to land clearing, and the reduction in available food due to drought and overgrazing by livestock, populations of squatter pigeons have also declined in the northern areas of their range, to the extent that they're now listed, in this area, as a vulnerable species.

There's no glitz and glamour about the squatter pigeon, for it comes dressed in primarily brown and white attire, with its back, wings, neck, chest, and head being brown, and its throat and under parts white. But with a white face with a brown streak behind and below each of its dark eyes, and a dark grey bill it's quite an appealing character.

Squatter pigeons feed, mainly on the ground, on the seeds of grasses and legumes, with the seeds of trees, shrubs, and herbaceous plants, as well as the occasional insect or two, tossed in for good measure. And when the time comes for a pair to start a family, their offspring begin their lives as eggs laid in nothing more sophisticated than a shallow depression on the ground that's lined with leaves and grass.





Being predominantly ground dwelling birds, these elusive little creatures, in every phase of their lives, and despite the fact that they're well camouflaged, are frequently the target of predators, with feral cats and foxes implicated in the decline of populations of these timid little birds.



BROWN CUCKOO-DOVE

Macropygia phasianella

Why, it's often asked, is this distinctive brown bird referred to as a cuckoo-dove? And the answer is, for no other reason than that it's a dove with a body shape and a long tail that are similar to those of a cuckoo.

It's a bird primarily of eastern Australia, with its range extending from northern Queensland into New South Wales where it's found in coastal areas in addition to northern and north-western regions of the state. Although the brown cuckoo-dove has a preference for humid rainforests and eucalypt woodlands that border creeks and rivers, it's also quite at home in other habitats that have an abundance of low vegetation, including areas of regrowth on the edges of roads, and bushland that's been colonised by the invasive introduced weed, lantana.

With its chestnut brown head, neck, and under parts, and wings and back that are a darker shade of brown, it's a distinctive bird that's difficult to confuse with any other species. It has a long tail, red legs and feet, and a light brown to cream streak below each of its grey eyes. Birds in the north of the brown cuckoo-dove's range have red eye rings to ensure that everyone knows exactly where they hail from.

The brown cuckoo-dove has a taste for the good things in life, and the sweet fruits and berries of native forests are its favoured foods. When it's hard pushed

Right: Brown cuckoo-doves near the northern New South Wales town of Urbenville. The bird in the foreground has a deformed bill.





to find fruit, it's content to eat the seeds of a wide range of trees and shrubs, and can digest some that are almost as hard as concrete, and when the birds leave the trees to drink and to forage on the ground for fallen seeds, they'll also consume small fragments of stone that aid their digestive system.

Forests are the true home of these attractive birds, and it's here, among the dense foliage of trees, shrubs, vines, and arboreal ferns, that each pair constructs a platform of twigs on which the female will lay her eggs and raise a new generation of birds that will ensure the survival of their species.



SPOTTED TURTLE DOVE

Streptopelia chinensis

The spotted turtle-dove has a secret, but its species name *chinensis* gives the game away, for it simply means 'from China', and that's the only clue that's required to recognise that this distinctive bird is not a native Australian species.

Since their introduction into Australia in the 1860s, spotted turtle-doves have colonised large areas of the country, with the majority of their population being in eastern Australia, in addition to parts of South Australia and Western Australia. Smaller numbers can be found in all other states, with the majority of the birds taking up residence in urban and agricultural areas where food is plentiful.

The spotted turtle-dove is unquestionably a very attractive bird, with much of its plumage, including its head, throat, and under parts, being a light pinkish brown. Its face is pale grey, the brown feathers of its back and wings are mottled with cream and darker brown, and it has red legs, a dark grey bill, and dark eyes, each of which is surrounded by a reddish brown ring. The most distinctive feature of its attire is the large black collar, speckled with white dots, that's wrapped around the sides and back of the bird's neck. Males and females are similar in

appearance, and immature birds have few conspicuous differences other than their collar, which is grey, rather than black and white.

They're usually seen alone or in small groups dawdling along on the ground as they forage for seeds, and although they'll eagerly scoff the seeds of grain crops and weeds, they'll flutter up into trees and shrubs to see what other seeds are ripe for the picking.

Spotted turtle-doves have adapted well to urban areas, and they've acquired the skills required for survival in a foreign land, and the most important lesson they've learnt is where food can be found. They frequent areas where livestock and poultry are fed on grain, and have developed a taste for bird seed and bread that's generously left by humans as a banquet for native birds. They often compete with indigenous species for both natural food and free handouts, and there's evidence that other smaller doves disappear from the landscape when spotted turtle-doves arrive on the scene.

Although they generally breed during late spring or early summer, they'll get down to the business of reproduction at any time of the year if the supplies of food that they'll need to sustain a family are available. And it all begins when the male strides onto the stage and puts on an entertaining performance. He flies steeply into the air, clapping his wings loudly to draw the attention of females with whom he can mate. Then, with his wings and tail spread out to show what a handsome fellow he is, he glides quietly down and settles on an exposed perch, and if a prospective mate appears less than mesmerised by his antics, he tries another tactic to impress her, and struts around, bowing his head up and down, with the black and white plumage on his neck fluffed up to show that he means business.

Spotted turtle-doves might have

Right: A spotted turtle-dove in the botanic gardens in the Queensland city of Bundaberg.







A spotted turtle-dove in the botanic gardens
in the Queensland city of Bundaberg.



honed their flirting techniques to perfection, but they have not yet mastered the intricate art of nest building, for their nests are flimsy constructions that are barely adequate to retain their precious eggs. But with both the female and her mate sharing the tasks of incubating the eggs and caring for the chicks, each new generation has a good chance of survival.

As an introduced species, the spotted turtle-dove is not protected by law, and that means that anyone who wants to play a part in the eradication of the species can capture and kill the birds, although this should of course be done in as humane a way as possible. For those who might be tempted to add an unfamiliar food to their diet, the spotted turtle-dove, when cooked, is said to have flesh that tastes similar to that of a chicken, and perhaps the motto for anyone who's determined to protect the environment from the negative impacts of this introduced species should be, "If you can't beat them, eat them."



SCRUB TURKEY

Alectura lathami

The scrub turkey, which is also commonly referred to as a 'brush turkey', is the largest and most common of Australia's three megapodes, a group of birds that construct huge nesting mounds and that includes the orange-footed scrub fowl and the mallee fowl.

The scrub turkey's range extends through eastern Australia, from Cape York Peninsula in northern Queensland to central New South Wales, and although it inhabits rainforests and damp eucalypt forests and woodlands, it can also be found in drier bushland environments.

It's impossible to confuse it with any other species, for this is a large and distinctive bird with a black back, wings, and upper chest, mottled grey

Right: A scrub turkey in the author's garden.





A scrub turkey on the beach at a
camping area at Inskip Point, near
the Queensland town of Rainbow
Beach.





and white under parts, a large black tail that's fanned out vertically, light brown eyes, and a black bill. And with its vivid red head and neck that's devoid of all but a few spiky feathers, and a bright yellow throat wattle that, during the breeding season, becomes larger in males, the scrub turkey, even in the darkest shadows of a forest, stands out like an emu in a hen house.

These are birds that are easy to please when it comes to food, and as they energetically scratch among the leaf litter and other natural debris that carpets the floor of their forest or woodland habitat, they'll gobble down almost anything that they find, including insects, worms, centipedes, fallen fruits, and seeds. They do an excellent job of controlling insect pests, but it's the birds themselves that are regarded as pests when they arrive, uninvited, in a garden, and if the urge to reproduce wasn't on their agenda, they might be greeted as valuable allies rather than as villains that unleash the destructive force of nature.

It's wonderful to watch a large wild bird strolling through the dense vegetation of a rainforest, but no one's happy to see a male scrub turkey rampaging through a well-tended garden as he frenetically gathers material for his immense nesting mound. Treasured bulbs, flowering annuals, bromeliads, vulnerable and newly planted shrubs and trees, ferns, and mulch spread to keep the ground damp and to suppress weeds - he'll tenaciously rip up the lot. And any attempt to deter a scrub turkey from wreaking havoc is almost doomed to failure, for he'll simply run or flutter to safety and resume his task once the coast is clear again.

Tossing every scrap of plant material behind him, a male scrub turkey eventually creates a nesting mound that can be four metres in diameter and a metre high. Mounds are often reused for several years, and are simply renovated with the addition of new material, and once he's satisfied with his accomplishment, the male heads off in

search of a mate.

Several females lay their eggs in the same mound that, in a single breeding season, may contain some 20 eggs that have been carefully covered with a thick layer of plant material. And with their eggs safely tucked away, the females return to the bush to resume their lives with no concern for their future offspring. The eggs are incubated solely by the heat created by the decomposition of the vegetation of the nesting mound, and to get it just right, the male scrub turkey regularly checks the temperature within the mound by digging small holes in it and testing it with a highly sensitive area near his bill. He then adds or removes material as required to regulate the temperature.

The eggs make a tasty meal for predators such as goannas, but if Lady Luck is on their side and the male scrub turkey has done his job well, a horde of chicks, after a seven week incubation period, kick their way out of the eggs, and instinctively dig themselves out of the mound of debris. If they were expecting doting parents to be waiting on the doorstep to provide them with food and protection, they'd be very disappointed, for scrub turkey chicks are on their own from the moment they emerge into the world. Mother Nature is the only parent they'll ever know, and she has endowed the chicks with the abilities they require to survive alone, for they step into the world fully feathered and with the instinctive knowledge of what to eat and where to find it, and within an hour or two they have also mastered the art of flight.

Even adults are not the most graceful of birds when they take to the air, and they fly only to escape from danger or to roost in the safety of trees.

Scrub turkeys are confident and bold characters that are admired by some people and despised by others, for

Right: A scrub turkey on the railings of a cafe in the botanic gardens in the central Queensland city of Gladstone.





they are birds that are both constructive and destructive, and although land clearing has destroyed much of their original habitat and their populations have declined since the first Europeans stepped onto Australia's shores, scrub turkeys are sure to be enthralling and annoying humans for many years to come.



Right: A male scrub turkey on his nesting mound on the doorstep of a caravan park at the coastal town of Keppel Sands in central Queensland.



