

## REVIEW

### Bowerbirds

Peter Rowland

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Bowerbirds comprise one of the most admired avian lineages, and are particularly known for their extraordinary natural history, extravagant reproductive behaviours, curious evolutionary affinities, and, most recently, for inspiring the construction of a robotic female bowerbird (Knight 2005) to test Darwinian theories of male attraction and female control in mating strategies (Patricelli *et al.* 2002). Bowerbirds have also played a critical role in classic and recent scientific work on speciation, sexual selection, and sensory perception. Against this background of scientific knowledge it is perhaps surprising that most bowerbird species remain rarely observed, poorly known, and understudied in the scientific and conservation literature.

Public appeal, as the main aim of CSIRO's Australian Natural History Series, is thoroughly achieved by Peter Rowland's book on Bowerbirds. It is a pleasant read, conveniently structured, and guided by evolutionary theory. This latter factor is commendable because in this day and age it remains critical that books on the environment, which are aimed at natural historians and high school and university students, shall be firmly based on evolutionary concepts and principles when interpreting organismal diversity, behavioural displays, and geographic distributions.

The book sets out to provide an understanding of bowerbird phenotype, behaviour, and evolution, detailing plumage, anatomy, bower construction displays, mating systems, and parental care

strategies. This volume is not an identification guide to the handful of species in the family Ptilonorhynchidae. However, at the intersection of the introductory section and the species accounts is a useful traditional key identifying bowerbirds to the species level and, in some cases, the sex of adult birds. Yet, despite the frequent diagrams, maps and photos (black and white, and colour) illustrating the book, there still remains a desire by this reader for an overview of patterns, plumage, size, displays, and bowers against the totality of diversity amongst bowerbird species.

The underlying theme throughout the book is the duality of both knowledge and lack thereof on species-specific traits among bowerbirds. For instance, while the "addiction" to blue objects by the Satin Bowerbird (*Ptilonorhynchus violaceus*) has been made world famous through natural history documentaries and accessible viewing at national park visitor centres, other species remain poorly known. This is not fully remedied by the details of the available information given in the species account section of this book, especially when contrasting the wealth of detail provided on the Australian over the New Guinean bowerbird taxa.

Overall, this is a widely accessible book on the natural histories, behaviours, and various species of bowerbirds that shall go a long way to attract current interest in this group of birds from birdwatchers, natural historians, and scientists alike.

#### LITERATURE CITED

- Knight, J. 2005. Animal behaviour: when robots go wild. *Nature* 434: 954-955.  
 Patricelli, Gail L., J. Albert C. Uy, Gregory Walsh & Gerald Borgia. 2002. Sexual selection: male displays adjusted to female's response. *Nature* 415: 279-280.

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