

CORELLA

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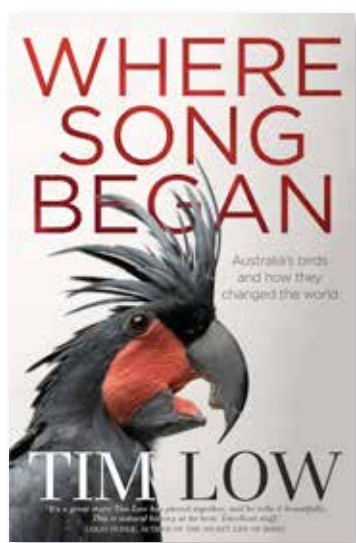
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Book Review



Where Song Began: Australia's Birds and How They Changed the World

Tim Low 2014. Penguin . Paperback, 416 pp. ISBN: 9780670077960. RRP \$32.99.

Travellers to Australia often comment on our country's many remarkable birds. Tim Low's *Where Song Began* brings us up to speed on how our unique birdlife has enriched the avifauna of the world. His examination brings together ecological, biogeographical and evolutionary science portraying Australia as the evolutionary centre for major orders including songbirds, parrots and pigeons. Low argues that nowhere else in the world does birdlife so broadly influence the ecology of their continent. As an amateur ornithologist myself, and having learned much from this single volume, I would recommend *Where Song Began* to ornithologists and wildlife enthusiasts alike.

The first two chapters examine a subset of Australian songbirds that, while not gifted singers, dominate the landscape with their voices. Nectar, and the delicious exudates of psyllid insects (lerp or scale) are particularly desired by honeyeaters, some of which defend their sources relentlessly using noise and aggression. Noisy Miners and Bell Miners are two species that exploit these resources effectively and exclude all other birds using vocal dominance and aggression. Unfortunately Bell Miners do not kill the psyllid insects when feeding on lerp, allowing the insects to overrun and in some cases kill their host trees. Low argues that such strong ecological effects are unheard of in other continents, and are a result of coevolution between birds and native trees over millions of years. Discussing the disproportional influence of noisy birds at the opening of his story effectively glorifies Australian birds which were once derided for the "unpleasant" sounds they make.

The idea that the songbird group evolved in Australia and not Europe was unconventional until genetic techniques provided confirmation. Lyrebirds were already a worldwide favourite for their incredible vocal mimicry, although only

recently were they discovered to be the most genetically distinct Australian songbird, and may also bear resemblance to the earliest songbird forms. Low revels in this fact and also points out that; "vocally, songbirds went backwards after the lyrebird". In support of his overall argument that Australian birds are influential, Low mentions that lyrebirds exert ecological influence by scraping leaf litter which indirectly affects fire frequency. Although lyrebirds are the focus of this discussion, his exploration of complex vocal performance and its origin is broad in its taxonomic coverage, providing a flow of insights that make this his flagship chapter.

Australia's ecology is also strongly effected by parrots shredding trees, and pigeons spreading their seeds. Low appropriately devotes as much attention to these groups as he does to his songbird stars. Parrots are praised for their intelligence and mandibular toolkits which allow them to exert a great and often fatal influence on trees in the search for grubs. Their strong bills are potential weapons, and harsh voices herald their effects; i.e. "small parrots with weak beaks sound meek". While parrots crush seeds, pigeons swallow them whole and colonise whole islands with the fruit tree seeds they carry undamaged in their digestive tract. In a similar way many rainforest trees still rely on the cassowary for dispersing seeds. Although, unlike pigeons, their large ecological footprint is restricted to the mainland.

Australia's dynamic ecology over recent geological time has provided ample opportunity for incredible adaptations by birdlife, and has armed Low with many fascinating stories to tell. He recognizes that New Guinea's mountains are a window to Australia's wetter Gondwanan climate, and a refuge for species less well-adapted to arid conditions in Australia today. The ancient prevalence of fire and its effects on Australian birds is discussed with attention to both aboriginal and contemporary management strategies. Even our "southern hemisphere taxa" of transitory ocean birds are covered, despite being loosely attached to terrestrial territory. Throughout his narrative Low takes every opportunity to share with his audience an informed amazement with Australian birds.

Low's arguments are based on peer reviewed science, and expressed coherently with elaborations made appropriate by his experiences as a biologist. However he often can't resist appending tantalising facts onto paragraphs without the background to explain them fully. Some casual musings add flavor, though readers should be careful to regard them as such, for example Forty-spotted Pardalotes "wear pictures of their foods". Though comments like this lack evidence, they are interesting illustrations born from ample experience and field observation of his subjects. The way he honestly presents the evidence gaps, and laments the absence of fossils (birds don't fossilize easily) can only help progress the field of ornithology by encouraging further exploration. *Where Song Began* provides an extensive and important overview of how, as far as birds are concerned, Australia is the centre of the world.

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Volume 40 Number 2

June 2016

Importance of ‘pre-adaptation’, consumer opportunism and limited interference competition in facilitating urban living by exotic Common Mynas.....	25
..... S. Meles-Taberner and A. Lill	
Diet of the Satin Bowerbird <i>Ptilonorhynchus violaceus</i> in the Illawarra Region, New South Wales, Australia	36
..... M. Mo and D. R. Waterhouse	
Seabird Island	
No. 267. Suomi Island, Easter Group, Houtman Abrolhos, Western Australia	43
..... C. A. Surman and L. W. Nicholson	
Abstracts: ABSA Conference, Yarramundi Conference Centre, 2016	46
Book Reviews	
Where Song Began: Australia’s Birds and How They Changed the World.....	50
..... M. Keighley	
Birds & Animals of Australia’s Top End. Darwin, Kakadu, Katherine, and Kununurra	51
..... D. Franklin	
Recovery Round-up	52