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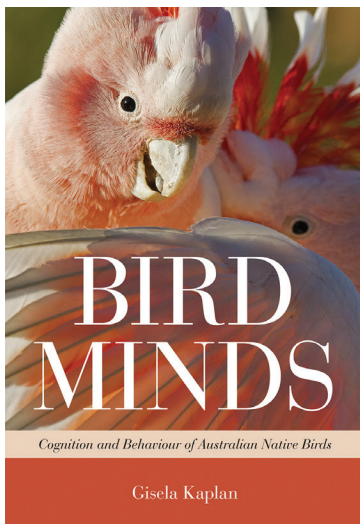
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Book Review



Bird Minds: Cognition and Behaviour of Australian Native Birds

Kaplan, Gisela T. 2015. CSIRO Publishing. Paperback 280 pp, black and white photographs, illustrations and tables, two appendices. ISBN: 9781486300181. RRP \$45.00.

This book is an ambitious attempt to draw together a large body of research from a number of scientific disciplines, combined with a lifetime of personal experience, into a single volume book. The result lies somewhere between popular science and a scientific review, making some very complex issues accessible but not overly simplified. The breadth of topics covered is reflective of the author's own background in neurology, ornithology and wildlife care.

The first chapter sets the scene by describing the unique geological and evolutionary history of Australia that has shaped the biota we have today. What I first noticed was how much there is that we simply do not know – a common theme throughout the book. This is followed by eleven chapters describing various aspects of native birds' behaviour and ecology and the cognitive complexities required for each of these attributes. The subjects covered include foraging, tool use, nest building, play, mimicry, learning, emotions, communication and the ability to understand abstract concepts.

What is it that makes Australian birds unique and worth discussing in such depth? The first curiosity is the high number of cooperatively breeding species in Australia. It is with good reason that Australia has been dubbed the land of cooperative breeding i.e. birds that live and breed in groups. This is obviously a topic about which the author is passionate and a large part of the book is dedicated to these species. Secondly, Australian birds are relatively long-lived compared to most northern hemisphere birds. Lastly, there is good evidence that songbirds evolved in Australia before spreading across the globe. Despite all this, Kaplan points out, Australian birds are vastly underrepresented in scientific literature. For this reason, the author draws on examples from all over the world, including some from other taxa such as apes and humans, as well as drawing upon her own extensive experiences observing wild and rescued birds. Although these stories and anecdotes provide a lot of depth and interest to the book, many of them would be difficult to verify or replicate, a fact that should be taken into consideration when reading them. The author also selectively chooses references that promote her point and is often generous in the importance she gives to some studies or parts of studies that support her argument.

Behaviours are described very vividly, so that even without the drawings you can picture the birds acting them out. I am sure all of us can relate to many of the analogies drawn, such as cockatoos filling the role that monkeys occupy on other continents. Occasionally I found myself a little lost in the flow of the book, as there is a fair bit of 'jumping around', and I frequently found myself re-reading paragraphs or sentences. However, this happens less and less throughout the book as more concepts are explained. The final chapter provides a good summary of the rest of the book and goes some way towards answering the question we all want to ask – who is the 'smartest' bird of all?

This book is written for those with an interest in birds and bird behaviour, but without the means or knowhow to trawl through the huge body of pertinent scientific literature. If you enjoyed any of Kaplan's numerous earlier works (such as *Australian Magpie: Biology and Behaviour of an unusual Australian Songbird*; CSIRO Publishing 2004), you will certainly also enjoy this book.

Catherine Young