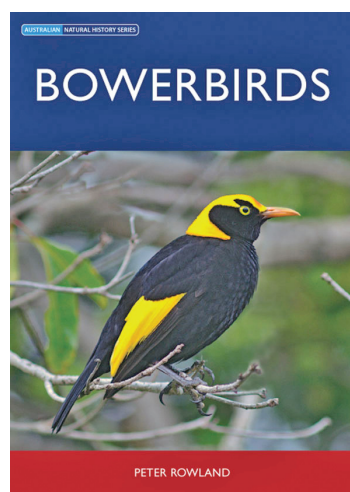


BOOK REVIEW



Bowerbirds

Peter Rowland 2008. CSIRO Publishing. Paperback, 144 pp, colour photographs. ISBN 9780643094208. RRP \$39.95.

Bowerbirds begins with four short chapters, “Introduction”, “Classification and morphology”, “Habitat, distribution and conservation” and “Bower evolution and sexual behaviour”, which together make up a rudimentary introduction to the Family Ptilonorhynchidae. Then there are the species accounts for the ten species that occur in Australia followed by a briefer treatment of the ten species that are confined to New Guinea (eight species are Australian endemics and two of the total 20 species in the Family occur in both countries). There is a dichotomous key to the Australian and New Guinea species respectively but unfortunately in the latter there is an error that means that one of the couplets can never be visited.

The individual accounts for the species occurring in Australia occupy more than half of the text and each account treats its species under a number of headings: Field identification, Other names, Discovery and nomenclature, Description, Subspecies and variations, Vocalisations, Distribution and habitats, Food and feeding, Mating, and Status and conservation; some of these are further subdivided. There is much information here and this section will serve as a useful introduction to the bowerbirds and as a reference into the future. However, the feeling that the content is straining to fill the available space is hard to avoid: the distribution maps are over-large and there are very generous gaps between the individual accounts and between the sections within each account. In spite of this, I felt that the accounts were too wordy and also repeated information that was common to more than one species. A more concise approach could have been to consolidate much of the information into the first few chapters, in some cases in tabular form, and cut down on the size of the species accounts.

The book is repetitive. Table 1 lists all 20 bowerbird species and in the first column both the common name and the full binomial “Latin name” are given; then there is a second column headed “Genus” which repeats the generic name. The same

table includes the size or size range for each species, which is then repeated in the species accounts, including those in the New Guinea supplement. I wonder what is the point of including the same photo twice, albeit slightly differently cropped. The photo – of the display arena of a Tooth-billed Bowerbird – appears in black and white on page 23 and as one of the colour plates on page 41. Surely the author and editors are not so careless that this could be an oversight, but if not, what was the thinking?

Several other of the black-and-white photos do not justify their inclusion. Figure 3.1, depicting a generic tumbledown shack, purports to show that human development is threatening bowerbird habitat in New Guinea, and Figure 3.2, of ‘dense rainforest habitat in New Guinea’ is uninformative and could have been taken just about anywhere.

Some of the prose seems carelessly written and may have benefited from some detailed reviewing. The use of “practice” as a verb (page 9), and the ungrammatical “bouts of song are prolonged...with a small pause between each bout” (page 54) and “the establishment of conservation areas... are valuable strongholds for the species” (page 49) are examples. And the use of the unwieldy construction “species’s”, which I do not think I have seen before, I found irritating.

Bowerbirds is a slight book for the money. It is an introduction to the Family that will appeal to some people, perhaps more general readers rather than serious birdwatchers. It is all right as far as it goes; it’s just that it doesn’t go very far.

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