



Boom & Bust: Bird Stories for a Dry Country

Edited by Libby Robin, Robert Heinsohn and Leo Joseph. 2009. CSIRO Publishing. Hardcover, 300 pp, black and white illustrations. ISBN 9780643096066. RRP \$39.95.

This chunky little book, with its beautiful cover illustration of Budgerigars drawn from John Gould's classic *The Birds of Australia*, sturdy binding and clear type, appeals immediately. *Boom & Bust: Bird Stories for a Dry Country* draws together a collection of stories written by ornithologists and ecologists together with an archaeologist, historian and anthropologist. These stories are melded together by the various authors' impressive depth of knowledge and also their obvious passion for the birds of the dry country and for the dry country itself, 'where creeks run dry or ten feet high'.

In the introduction Libby Robin and Mike Smith explain that the book uses a range of individual bird species as a lens for understanding environmental variability in Australia. The selected stories provide comprehensive accounts of the natural history of the selected birds and also delve into and explore the relations between fauna, people and our unpredictable environment.

The second chapter of *Boom & Bust: Bird Stories for a Dry Country* provides a background to the stories to follow. It provides a very readable account of the post-European settlement history of evolving Western ideas about Australian semi-arid country and deserts and the birds that inhabit these areas. Unfortunately environmental degradation forms a part of this history. This evolution of ideas has been spurred on by the knowledge garnered by people from diverse disciplines and it is appropriate that the stories to follow reflect this diversity. On reading this chapter I am impressed by the accounts of the works of many eminent naturalists. I am also left pondering just how much there is for us still to question, learn and understand.

Having set the stage in Chapters 1 and 2, the reader is treated to well written, authoritative and varied accounts of the Black-tailed Native-hen (Graham Pizzey, Chapter 3); Zebra

Finch (Steve Morton, Chapter 4); Grey Teal (David Roshier, Chapter 5); Australian Pelican (Julian Reid, Chapter 6); Night Parrot (Penny Olsen, Chapter 7); Genyornis (Mike Smith, Chapter 8); Rainbirds (Debra Bird Rose, Chapter 9); Woodswallows (Leo Joseph, Chapter 10); White-winged Choughs (Robert Heinsohn, Chapter 11); and Emu (Libby Robin, Chapter 12). Sources of information in each chapter are detailed in endnotes. A final select bibliography provides a ready reference for the interested reader.

The species described are diverse and so too are the scales, both temporal and spatial, of 'boom and bust'. While a number of the stories deal with annual or inter-annual climatic variability, Mike Smith's account of the prehistoric Genyornis, 'taller than a man and weighing in at 275 kg', examines the pressure of global climate change on Australian ecosystems in terms of very much longer cycles. The ideas discussed in the book are pertinent given our current dilemmas with climate change. Surely any clues regarding past impacts of change and variability, whatever the scale, might help us to understand and fare better with anthropogenic climate change and the added variability it may well induce.

The book deals largely with Western knowledge and ideas. Yet these unpredictable areas were not empty prior to European settlement. Steve Morton, in his chapter on Zebra Finches, acknowledges the great depth of ecological knowledge possessed by indigenous peoples: 'we in the scientific community may well have saved ourselves a lot of time by asking them [Western Desert peoples] earlier about the life history of the nyii nyii [Zebra Finch]'. The inclusion of Deborah Bird Rose's account of rainbirds, the Brolga, Eastern Koel and Channel-billed Cuckoo, and more broadly, Aboriginal culture in monsoonal northern Australia, is most welcome. Her discussion of what is being lost, in terms of the ecological values of the land, not in the distant past but currently, should jolt us all.

This book will appeal to both the avid birder and those with an interest in the natural world. It is, however, more than just a good read. The stories told are informative and thought provoking. For readers who have already had the privilege of spending time in the arid interior or in northern Australia, this book will transport you back to these special areas. For readers yet to seek shade under a mineritichie wattle and marvel at its extraordinary red bark, or hear spoken the beautiful onomatopoeic bird names of the indigenous residents of these areas, this book should inspire.

The book is a deserving winner of the Royal Zoological Society of New South Wales Whitley Medal for 2009. Its contributors should be congratulated.

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