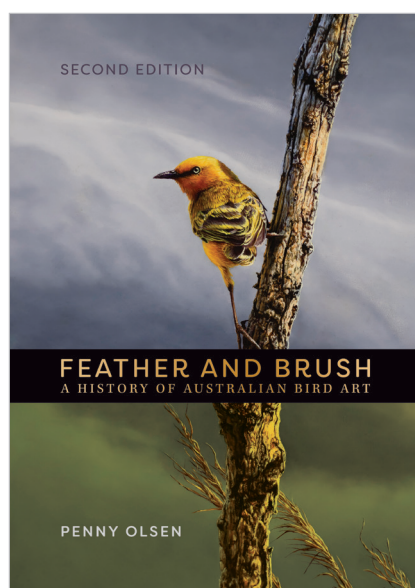


Book Review



Feather and Brush, A History of Australian Bird Art. Second Edition. Penny Olsen 2022. CSIRO Publishing. Hardback, 352 pp. Colour photographs. ISBN 978146314171. RRP Au\$ 69.99

Penny Olsen, prolific author and ornithologist, is an honorary professor at The Australian National University and among her many talents is the ability to describe the history of Australian ornithology in an engaging, insightful and rigorously researched manner. This publication traces the history of Australian bird art from the earliest contributions by First Nations people to those of the plethora of contemporary artists who feature birds in their work. It is illustrated with more than 400 colour images (depicting the work of 158 artists) that range from the largely decorative to the ornithologically correct. The first edition was published 20 years ago and this second edition includes new and revised chapters and 200 new artworks.

The Introduction acknowledges the important contribution of First Nations artists, but establishes that the book's focus is mainly on the European contribution, which was historically fundamentally ornithological and concerned with the discovery and description of new species. Chapter 2 details the artistic contributions stemming from the early Dutch and English explorations of Australia before European settlement/colonisation, notably those emanating from the voyages of William Dampier and James Cook. By the end of Cook's final voyage of discovery in 1777, nearly 100 Australian bird species had been recorded. The next chapter focuses on the twelve years from first settlement in 1788 to 1800, a period when the bird artists were still relatively unskilled in natural history and were mainly naval officers, government officials and convicts. Noteworthy contributions in this era were what Olsen describes as the aesthetically pleasing, if not particularly scientific, paintings of First Fleet midshipman George Raper and the first drawings of an Emu by Arthur Bowes Smyth, a surgeon on the First Fleet vessel *Lady Penrhyn*. Dr John Latham illustrated and described many bird specimens sent back to England in this era and became known as the grandfather of Australian ornithology.

In Chapter 4 Olsen covers the period from 1800 to 1840 when exploration of Australia's coastline and interior by settlers and surveyors commenced in earnest. Two of the many bird artists of this period were John William Lewin and James Stuart. Lewin, the son of a famous English ornithologist and illustrator, became Australia's first resident professional artist and produced the first book on Australian birds. Olsen tells us that his writing was unexceptional, but he produced well composed paintings that broke the mould of the usual stylised, Europeanised vision of Australian fauna by depicting lively, realistic birds in more natural postures and settings. The talented naturalist James Stuart, during his time on Norfolk Island as a clerk and then assistant surgeon at the penal settlement, painted watercolours of birds mainly in breeding colonies and family groups, unusually for the time with their nest, eggs and young, including several species that are now extinct or were unknown to science at the time. Earlier in Sydney he had discovered the Brown Antechinus *Antechinus stuartii*, which was named after him. By the 1930s, Australia had been transformed from a penal settlement into a mainly agrarian colony and in parallel its birdlife had become better known and illustrated.

Olsen points out that from 1770 to 1840 many artists also made important contributions to the illustrated ornithology of Australia without ever actually visiting the continent! These were the professionals who studied and illustrated the specimens sent home from Australia predominantly by British settlers and visitors. Their work appeared in accounts of expeditions and extravagant monographs that were mostly too expensive for the general public to afford. Many of these illustrations were essentially the first descriptions of "new" species. Among these contributions were the first published illustration of an Australian bird, the Rainbow Lorikeet, and the first depiction of the iconic Laughing Kookaburra. Olsen explains that the current scientific name of the latter species, *novaeguineae*, resulted from an act of plagiarism and deception that implied that the bird was discovered on an expedition to New Guinea that never actually occurred! These contributions by artists unfamiliar with Australia were not restricted to Great Britain, because many beautiful illustrations of Australian birds also appeared at this time in French monographs that were based on specimens collected on French expeditions to the continent.

Chapter 6 outlines particularly the seminal contribution of John and Elizabeth Gould and their co-artists to Australian ornithology and bird art. John Gould is best known for his monographs of bird illustrations, including *The Birds of Australia* (1840-1848). However, his contribution to Australian ornithology was far greater than just these beautiful illustrations because he collated and brought together a huge volume of information on Australian birds' natural history, including some that he himself acquired during his two-year year sojourn in the country. The Goulds' contribution to ornithology has been the subject of several articles and books and needs no further elaboration here.

By the end of the nineteenth century much of Australia had been explored and the great age of the study of the natural history and illustration of its birds was drawing to its close,

hastened by the advent of the camera and photographic images. However, Olsen points out that there were still a few notable Australian bird artists in the early part of the twentieth century, among whom Neville William Cayley is perhaps best known. Cayley wrote and illustrated several bird books, most famously *What bird is that* (1931), the first field guide to Australian birds. Olsen remarks that the illustrations in this book were small, basic and poorly reproduced, but the book was hugely popular and a best-seller for many decades.

After a brief renaissance in Australian bird art marked by the production of several lavish tomes on specialist topics full of superb illustrations (such as those by Cooper, Trusler and O'Grady) in the 1960s and 70s, field guides and handbooks became the main art-illustrated bird books from the 1980s onwards. Notable among the suite of field guides published in this period were the landmark contributions of Slater (1970 and 1974), Pizzey and Doyle (1980), Simpson and Day (1984) and, most recently, Menkhorst et al. (2017). Olsen points out that the field guide artist's exacting task is to distil and accurately represent the essential features that distinguish one species from another, sometimes in flight if this when the birds are most often observed. The pre-eminent handbook on Australian birds is *The Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds*, which was published in seven volumes from 1990 to 2006. As well as summarising all that was known about the bird species' natural history at the time, this monolithic work contains illustrations of all the species described that were contributed by a talented suite of artists.

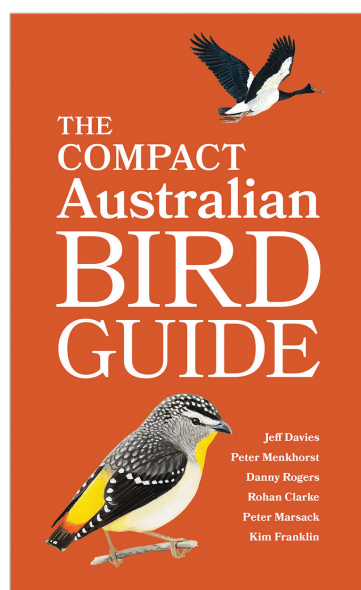
The final two chapters in Olsen's book provide brief summaries of the lives and art of four recent Australian bird artists (Robert Ulmann, Lars Knudsen, William T. Cooper

and Peter Slater) and 52 contemporary ones. Obviously it is impossible to do justice to all these vignettes here and I will mention just two. Peter Slater, with whom most Corella readers will be familiar, illustrated more than 20 books on birds and reckoned that he illustrated every Australian bird species at least four times! He trained as a teacher and started his artistic life as a bird photographer. Olsen tells us that he had no formal artistic training and painted from recollection and direct observation, mainly in acrylic. He is perhaps best known for *The Slater Field Guide to Australian Birds*. Nicholas Day was born in England and at the age of ten migrated to Australia. He spent three years as a birdkeeper at Melbourne Zoo before becoming a full-time artist. Day illustrated all the birds in Ken Simpson's *The Birds of Australia* (1984) and contributed to Chris Doughty's *The Birds of The Solomons, Vanuatu and New Caledonia*. Later he worked as a ranger at the Phillip Island Penguin Parade before establishing a new studio in 2020.

Olsen's book is meticulously researched, very well written and stunningly illustrated. I particularly like the fact that many of the illustrations are accompanied by a short description of the work (title, size, medium, provenance and a little interesting background) that supplements rather than repeats the content of the main text. I found very little to criticise about this publication, except perhaps that the historical temporal organisation is a little awkward in a couple of places, resulting in some repetition e.g. on the Goulds' contributions and Slater's field guides. Most amateur and professional ornithologists will find this book fascinating reading, even if they are not particularly artistically inclined. Those who are so inclined will find it an invaluable source of information about the history of Australian bird art.

Alan Lill

Book Review



The Compact Australian Bird Guide. Jeff Davies, Peter Menkhorst, Danny Rogers, Rohan Clarke, Peter Marsack and Kim Franklin 2022. CSIRO Publishing. Soft cover. 264 pp., coloured illustrations. ISBN: 9781486312245. RRP AU \$34.99.

This publication is a compact edition of the very popular *The Australian Bird Guide*, which is arguably the premier field guide now used to identify Australian birds and was originally published in 2017, with a revised edition in 2019.

As suggested by its title, the new book is a much smaller and lighter version of its predecessor, so it is particularly well suited to be a "carry-around" field guide. It includes over 700 accounts of species that reside in, or are regular visitors to mainland Australia, Tasmania and surrounding coastal waters.

This compact version uses most of the illustrations from its bigger predecessor but at a slightly smaller scale, and it does not repeat the extensive text from the original guide. However, the text accompanying each of the species illustrations has been carefully written to provide essential basic information on plumage, size, voice and habitat that enhances fast and accurate identification. Unlike the layout in the original publication, the text and distribution maps are positioned on the same page as the illustrations.

Given its size, the *Compact Australian Bird Guide* will be far more suitable for use as an identification aid in the field than its bigger 'cousin', which is more suited to the role of a reference book that is safely housed at home.

Jeff Hardy