

THE BOWER BIRDS OF AUSTRALIA

Family Ptilonorhynchidae

Continued from the June edition

#2 WESTERN BOWERBIRD

Chlamydera guttata



WESTERN BOWERBIRD
at Alice Springs Desert Park
Photo: Richard Fisher

The Western Bowerbird is a common Australian species, that has a disrupted distribution, occurring in both Central Australia and the Pilbara region of Western Australia. The species was first collected in 1861 by the explorer Francis Gregory, who gave the specimen to John Gould. The specific name *guttata* means spotted, referring to its plumage. Its similarity to the Spotted Bowerbird it has often cause it to be treated as a subspecies.

The Western Bowerbird shares its range with, the Great Bowerbird, but is smaller in size. It is 24-28 cm long and weighs between 120-150g. Both sexes are similar in size and dimensions. However, the tail of the female is slightly longer than that of the male. The plumage is brown with reddish or buff spots on the throat, chest, neck, back of head and wings, with a pink erectile crest on the nape. The tail is brown and the undersides buff. The female is similar to the male but more spotted on the throat.

The diet consists of fruits, particularly those of the Rock Fig, Sandalwood, Snake Gourd (*Trichosanthes cucumerina*) and Mistletoes. They will also to feed on cultivated fruits if available. Other items taken include nectar, flowers, insects such as ants, moths, beetles and grasshoppers, and spiders. They are rarely found far from water as they need to drink frequently.



SNAKE GOURD
By: Sansum S. Edwards
1804



FRUIT OF THE ROCK FIG
Ficus platypoda
Photo: "Melburnian"

Like most Bowerbirds the Western is polygamous, with a male mating with a number of females in a breeding season. The female undertakes all nesting, incubation and chick-rearing responsibilities. As is characteristic of the family the male constructs an elaborate bower with which to attract females. Western Bowerbird bowers are paired avenues of sticks, 20-25cm in height, and 25-35cm long, placed on top of a platform of sticks. The bower is predominantly decorated with green and white objects, that may include

berries, fruits, shells, pebbles and bones. Man-made objects may also be used, including glass, bullet shells and metal objects. Each bower may be used for several years, and when a new bower is constructed material from the old bower is recycled. The male calls to advertise his bower, and to attract females. When a female arrives to inspect his handiwork, he will perform a ritualised dance routine, fanning his tail, jumping and wing flicking, accompanied by further calling. Decorative items from the bower are held in his bill and shaken vigorously, and the pink crest on his neck will be erected.



BOWER NEAR FINKE
circa 1930



JOHN GOULD
Ornithologist

In 1840 John Gould reported to the British Zoological Society that the bower of the “*Western Bower Bird, Chlamydera guttata*, might be called an avenue, being about three feet in length, and seven or eight inches broad inside; a transverse section giving the figure of a horse-shoe, the round part downwards. They are used by the birds as a playing-house or 'run,' as it is termed, and are used by the males to attract the females.”

The female constructs a shallow cup nest of small twigs on a larger platform of sticks, between 2-6m in a tree, shrub, or often in a clump of Mistletoe. The usual clutch is one or two eggs, which are green to buff, glossy and covered in dark scribble patterns. The incubation period is unknown.

R.V.C. with help from Wikipedia

Series to be continued

July 2009

BIRD KEEPING IN AUSTRALIA