

# THE BOWER BIRDS OF AUSTRALIA

## Family Ptilonorhynchidae

### INTRODUCTION

The family has twenty species in eight genera. Bowerbirds are medium-sized passerines, ranging in size from the Golden Bowerbird (22cm and 70grams) to the Great Bowerbird (40cm and 230grams). Their diet mainly consists of fruit, but may also include insects (fed to young), flowers, nectar and in some species leaves.

Bowerbirds have an Austro-Papuan distribution, with ten species being endemic to New Guinea, eight species being endemic to Australia and two being found in both. Their distribution is centred on the tropical regions of New Guinea and northern Australia, but some species extend into central, western and south-eastern Australia. They occupy a range of habitats, including rainforest, both eucalyptus and acacia forest and shrub-lands.

The Catbirds are monogamous and raise chicks with their mate, but all other Bowerbirds are polygamous, with the female building the nest and raising the young on her own. The polygamous species are usually sexually dimorphic, with the female being more drab than the male. Females build nests by placing soft materials, such as leaves, ferns, and vine tendrils on top of a loose base of sticks. They lay either one or two eggs, which hatch after nineteen to twenty-four days, depending on the species.

The most notable characteristic of Bowerbirds is their complex courtship and mating behaviour. The males build a bower, of which there are two main types, to attract mates. One clade (a group of biological taxa [as species] that includes all descendants of one common ancestor) of Bowerbirds build so-called maypole bowers. These are constructed by placing sticks around a sapling, in some species these bowers have a hut-like roof.



SATIN BOWERBIRD BOWER  
Photo: "Dfrg.msc"

The other major bower building clade builds an avenue-type bower made up of two walls of vertically placed sticks. The male places a variety of brightly coloured objects he has collected in and around the bower. These objects, which usually differ among the species, may include shells, leaves, flowers, feathers, stones, berries, and even discarded plastic items, coins, nails, bullet casings, or pieces of glass. The males spend many hours arranging their collection. Bowers within a species share a general form but can show significant individual variation. While the collection of objects adhere to a general pattern, they reflect an individual male's preference and the availability of items from within his

territory, or what can be stolen from neighbouring bowers. Several studies, of different species, have shown that the colour males use for their bowers are matched to the preferences of the local females.

Studies have shown that females searching for a mate usually visit many bowers, often returning to a bower several times to watch the male's elaborate courtship display, and to inspect the quality of the bower and to taste the "paint" the male has placed on the bower walls. Many females end up selecting the one male, and many under-performing males have no chance to copulate. Females who have mated with alpha male in the area one year tend to return to that male the next year and spend less time searching for a suitable mate.

Many species of Bowerbird are superb vocal mimics. Macgregor's Bowerbird, for example, has been observed imitating pigs, waterfalls, and human chatter. Satin bowerbirds commonly mimic other local species as part of their courtship display.

Although Bowerbirds have traditionally been regarded as closely related to the Birds of Paradise, recent DNA studies suggest that while both families are part of the great corvid radiation that took place in or near Australia-New Guinea, the Bowerbirds are not as closely related to the Birds of Paradise as was once thought, but their true relationship remains unclear.

R.V.C. with help from Wikipedia

Series to be continued.

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BIRD KEEPING IN AUSTRALIA