

you can search for your latest cockroach discovery and find out much more about it. What fun!

Well produced, like other similar recent invertebrate guide books by CSIRO Publishing, and copiously illustrated with (mainly) high quality images (more than 500), this book should be on every naturalist's bookshelf or in their day-pack. In an era where many of us consider that Google has the answer to everything, guides of

this nature remind us that **it doesn't** and that websites rarely, if ever, package information as neatly and conveniently as a well-constructed book.

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Where song began: Australia's birds and how they changed the world

by Tim Low

Publisher: Viking, Melbourne, 2014. paperback,
406 pages. ISBN 9780670077960. RRP \$32.99

In my small collection of documents about birds there is a snippet from *The Australian*, dated July 24–25 2004, page 24, headed 'Bird theory takes flight'. It refers to a report published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, announcing that 'the DNA of ... perching birds ... showed they appeared in the western part of the ancient Gondwana supercontinent, the section which eventually formed Australia, New Zealand and New Guinea'. Thus a 150 year old avian evolutionary theory, which assumed that nightingales, mockingbirds, cardinals, robins and others had evolved in Europe or Asia, was overturned. At the top of the above-mentioned news cutting, a knowledgeable birdwatcher colleague has written 'We knew this ages ago!'

Most people didn't know this ages ago, but thanks to Tim Low's latest skilfully written, very readable book, everyone can become ac-

WHERE SONG BEGAN

Australia's birds
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quainted with the story of how the old theory came to be discarded, and how strongly some eminent biologists rejected the facts. And that's not all — there is a wealth of other information, not only about birds, but also plants, mammals (including people), biogeography, ecology and conservation. The author has travelled extensively to investigate his subject matter, and accounts of his first-hand observations contribute to the book's appeal. Recent research is noted, but this book was published before blame for the spread of the plague through Europe was transferred from the black rat to the gerbil (page 255).

The Introduction (essential reading) precedes twelve chapters, each of which has from four to ten subdivisions, all listed in the Contents along with their page numbers, making for easy navigation. The main text is followed by source notes, a bibliography, acknowledgements, photo credits and a very useful index. There is a sparse sprinkling of typographical errors, but the only one that bothered me is on page 36, where the Striated Pardalotes in the photo are referred to as 'striated honeyeaters'.

The book begins with a fascinating section about sugar. In forms such as nectar, lerp, plant exudates and manna, this substance has led to aggressive avian defence of food sources and, in many cases, harsh calls to match. However, as the chapter titled 'The First Song' indicates, Australia also has some fine songsters, especially the lyrebirds which, along with the scrub-birds, are of ancient origin. Songbirds have influenced human music, a fact that prompts Low to ask 'whether human music would have reached the height it has had that first songbird not sung in an Australian rainforest' (page 77).

Other topics explored include relationships between Australian birds and those of New Guinea; Australia as a land of parrots (termites and fires have a role here); the Southern Cas-

sowary; birds creating habitats by spreading seed; ocean birds; and people's treatment of birds. Much of the latter is shocking, for example the slaughter of millions of birds; the thoughtless, disastrous destruction of habitats; inappropriate feeding; and widespread disrespect for the domestic chicken. Some species have taken advantage of the effects of human presence, but sadly, many others — especially small birds — are present in far fewer numbers than they used to be. Governments have found that they can cut funding for the protection of threatened species without losing elections, and with plenty of noisy, smart, colourful members of the parrot family in full view, it is easy for other species to be forgotten. Low points out that any discussion about declining birds must include the winners people see, or it will fall on deaf ears.

I found this book quite gripping, and am not surprised that it has met with an enthusiastic reception. If you haven't read it yet, make sure you don't miss out.

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Ninety-nine Years Ago

Bird life on Fraser Island, Gippsland Lakes

By G.A. KEARTLAND

For many years the scarcity of native birds in the vicinity of any of the larger towns has been very noticeable, and what few are seen are so wild that nature-students seldom obtain a close view of them without recourse to the gun. Even with that aid many are too shy to be approached within killing range. Various opinions have been expressed as to the cause of this state of affairs. Whilst some attribute it to the introduction of starlings, minahs [sic], and sparrows, which are now to be found in thousands in some of the parks or on farms near Melbourne, others are equally certain that what have not been killed or driven away by thoughtless shooting have fallen victims to the domestic cat. Perhaps both views are to some extent right.

From *The Victorian Naturalist* XXXIII, p. 42, July 6, 1916



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