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## Living with lyrebirds

### **Abstract**

In my family, ornithology meant lyrebirds. Just before I started school we moved to the market town of Croydon, at that time beyond the fringes of suburban Melbourne. The Dandenong Ranges were in our backyard, close by — too close when the major fires of the summer of 1962 swept through, and my father joined the firefighters and came home, late, blackened, with his eyebrows singed. But in late autumn and winter, the Dandenongs were cool, friendly and at peace.

LIBBY ROBIN

## Living with Lyrebirds

Commonly called the Mountain Pheasant. This Bird is remarkable for the Beautiful Plumage of its Tail, and found in amongst the Rocky Cliffs of the Mountains of which it seems to be an inhabitant; with the exception of the Tail, its Beauties are no more than those of a Dusky colour'd Barn Door Fowl; it is said, however, to possess a Sweet Note, by those who have had the pleasure of hearing it. Native Name Golgol.

(Thomas Skottowe, Newcastle Naturalist 1813 on '*Mamura superba*')<sup>1</sup>

In my family, ornithology meant lyrebirds. Just before I started school we moved to the market town of Croydon, at that time beyond the fringes of suburban Melbourne. The Dandenong Ranges were in our backyard, close by — too close when the major fires of the summer of 1962 swept through, and my father joined the firefighters and came home, late, blackened, with his eyebrows singed. But in late autumn and winter, the Dandenongs were cool, friendly and at peace. Dad and I would rise at 5 am, long before dawn, and creep around a chilly and dripping Sherbrooke Forest, with sticky black soil clinging to our hands and knees. Ornithology meant being quiet, listening, searching, for Spotty. I could never quite work out how my father knew which of the birds we heard was Spotty, except that we seemed to follow the loudest and clearest calls. Usually we would find him in a clearing, foraging in deep leaf-mould with his long feet. Sometimes we were really lucky and he would throw his long tail over his head and dance.

My father, like so many enthusiasts before him and since, never tired of the antics of the lyrebird *Menura novaehollandae*. He never noticed it was cold or wet when he was watching lyrebirds. Much has been written about the beauty of their tails, but the fascination of this bird for him was its almost-human personality. With large bright eyes adapted for dark forest life, and teasing calls — master of both mimicry and ventriloquism — Spotty lured us to thinking like a bird. If we could wriggle into a position where we could watch for a sustained period, we could observe the tricks of the trade. He would be here — but his call was over there. Whose call? My favorite was his Whipbird imitation, but it could equally be a Bell Miner, or one of the many scratchy little calls of as-yet-unidentified Little Brown Birds. Spotty was an ornithological schoolmaster. As he worked through his mellow repertoire, Dad would whisper to me the names of the birds

Spotty was imitating. The sounds were not all birds. He did a splendid breaking twig too — the noise he possibly associated with us.

\* \* \* \* \*

The lyrebird is secretive, but not always shy. It takes the trouble to bury its discarded feathers and drop the faecal sacs of its young in streams to be washed away. Yet its bold encounters with the human species have given it a special place in the popular imagination. The mutual fascination of lyrebirds and people emerges from many of the curious lyrebird anecdotes recorded in the ‘Stray feathers’ sections of early *Emus*. The men building a road into Walhalla, east of Melbourne, in 1907 were favoured with a regular ‘building inspector’, a male lyrebird who capitalised on the grubs and worms disturbed by the works. ‘On Friday morning last it paid no fewer than ten visits to the scene of operations’, *The Argus* reported, ‘The bird whistles beautifully, sitting on the bank near, and seems to have no fear of his friends. He has several dancing-beds in the vicinity, and is a beautiful bird, with a tail about 2 feet [60 cms] or over in length’ (‘A Confiding Lyrebird’ 104).

Many of the early twentieth-century reports express concern about nests so close to the ground: ‘In Southern Gippsland foxes have become so numerous that all ground nesting birds are in a fair way to extinction’, *The Australian Naturalist* reported in 1906. ‘It is to be hoped that before the last of [the lyrebirds] fall victims to Mr Reynard, they will learn to build out of reach’. L.C. Cook at Poowong in South Gippsland recorded that indeed lyrebirds learned to build nests higher and higher as fox numbers increased (101).<sup>2</sup> H.V. Edwards described its nesting habits as ‘erratic’, and in 1919 reported a nest in the fork of a tree over 18 feet above the ground (298–99).

The assumption that this bird could ‘learn’ where to place a nest was supported by its ability to learn sounds. It was well-known for its double calls — reflected in many of its Aboriginal names, including Golgol in the Newcastle area and Buln Buln in Gippsland (after which the Shire is named). Anecdotal reports included lyrebirds imitating knapping (chipping stone), chainsaws and even the three blasts of a timber-mill whistle. One bird caused havoc by imitating in duplicate the three whistle sequence of the mill. Thus it inadvertently gave the six blast signal that was reserved for reporting a mill fatality!<sup>3</sup>

The lyrebird’s curiosity about human activities made it possible to domesticate if caught when very young. Jack (1885–1905), a tame friend of S M’Neilly, grew up on a farm at Drouin, in Gippsland. Jack’s life history and antics were closely monitored. At the age of six or seven he developed his magnificent tail, which he shed each year in an annual moult. He fed on grubs, worms and the occasional bit of meat. He loved his bath and preened his feathers for some time afterwards. He was so interested in people that he was constantly in the way — hence his favourite saying: ‘Look out Jack!’ His mimicry included the noise of a horse

and dray moving slowly, dogs howling and chains rattling, a range of musical instruments including a violin, a piano and a cornet, and other useful sayings such as ‘Gee up Bess!’ People so often said to him ‘Poor Jack’, that he had learned a reply: ‘Not poor Jack, fat Jack.’ His death on 18 April 1905 was recorded in *Emu*.

Tom Tregellas (1864–1938) was one of the earliest to make the lyrebird his specialty. He sought to find out as much as he could about its life-patterns and behaviour. For seventeen years he camped regularly in a boarded up large hollow log he called ‘Menura’ in Sherbrooke Forest observing and photographing the Superb Lyrebirds for whom his home-away-from-home was named. About 1913, he started using identifying bands of his own making. He banded every nestling he could find, but never saw any of his banded birds as adults in all his long and careful observation and study. It is possible that the bands he used were worn off by the energetic foraging of the lyrebirds on the forest floor (Reilly 5).

Tregellas’ mission and obsession with the lyrebird enthused a younger photographer, Ray Littlejohns, who was responsible for the first moving-film footage of the bird in the 1920s. Littlejohns recalled that his first introduction to lyrebird technology had not been a happy one: ‘in fact it was one of the most harrowing experiences of my life’ (10). Littlejohns had volunteered to assist Tregellas with one of his lectures on the lyrebird, through operating ‘a lantern of ancient design, illuminated by an intricate carbon-arc system. My failure to coax more than a flickering glimmer of light from the infernal engine wrecked the visual aspect of the lecture’ (10). Nonetheless the lecture kindled more than a flickering glimmer of enthusiasm for lyrebirds in the assistant’s heart, and twenty years later, Littlejohns wrote *Lyrebirds Calling from Australia* a small book illustrated with his own photographs produced to cheer up the troops at war in 1943. It reminded visitors that ‘Australians are more than a little proud of the lyrebird’ (9).

Littlejohns credited Tregellas with changing Australian attitudes to lyrebirds. The former collector turned observer certainly crusaded for lyrebird protection with all the zeal of a late convert. And lyrebirds needed protection. The decorative lyrebird tails of the federation era extended throughout the whole south east corner of Australia in a misplaced gesture of patriotism. The taste for lyrebird tails as parlour decorations was deplored by Spencer Roberts in Queensland: ‘numerous tails adorned, *horribile dictu*, the houses of many of my patients’ (242). John Leach observed one in a lady’s hat on the corner of Collins and Spring Streets, Melbourne (114). Sid Jackson reported on horrific lyrebird drives in northern New South Wales, whereby hundreds of male lyrebirds were slaughtered ‘to supply globe-trotting curio-hunters with the unique tail feathers’ (45).<sup>4</sup> The practice was common in Gippsland too, where male birds were disappearing at an alarming rate. In 1915 L.C. Cook of Poowong reported stories of female lyrebirds ‘deprived of their consorts’. One lone female had chosen to live with the domestic hens on a farm at Glen Alvie, and was a brilliant mimic of her new companions (52).

Littlejohns was wrong when he attributed to Tregellas the connection between lyrebirds and nationalism. Lyrebirds adorned colonial and national postage stamps, furniture and coats of arms long before Tregellas took up their cause.<sup>5</sup> Lyrebird motifs were prominent, for example, on an arch erected by the German community to commemorate the opening of the first Federal Parliament in May 1901.<sup>6</sup> What Tregellas did do was to redirect destructive patriotic fervour towards lyrebird protection and observation, rather than trophy-hunting. Tregellas made the trip to Sherbrooke Forest a visit to a sacred site, something undertaken with respect, on hands and knees.

The lyrebird has, more than any other bird, challenged the latest technology in every era. When Littlejohns took up its cause, he felt the need to show the bird, singing and dancing. Filming birds in the 1920s was a major enterprise, and *Emu* published some frames from his 1925 film (Littlejohns 271–74). The Lyrebird was the subject of the first live broadcast of a bird on the wireless through the Australian Broadcasting Commission in 1932, 1933 and 1934. Littlejohns was behind this and also, in 1931, the first live gramophone recording, *The Song of the Lyrebird* (Chisholm 22; Boswall 65–74).

Lyrebird enthusiasts have often been masters of photography as well as sound. A.J. and A.G. Campbell, L.G. Chandler and A.H. Chisholm were all keen lyrebird photographers. Chisholm, author of *The Romance of the Lyrebird* researched the history of lyrebird discovery, as well as studying them in the field.<sup>7</sup> Michael Sharland who watched over the lyrebird's introduction to Tasmania in the period from 1934–45, was also an outstanding photographer, as was Ralph F Kenyon, who started the first Sherbrooke Survey Group in 1958. More recently, the author, scientist, photographer and retired Director of the National Parks Authority, Len Smith has written two major books about lyrebirds, illustrated with his magnificent photographs. He has also recorded lyrebird song and mimicry. Moving photography has also advanced with the century, and Laszlo and Jenny Erdos' 1986 video, *The Kingdom of the Lyrebird*, includes a spectacular sequence capturing lyrebirds dancing, courting and mating in the wild.<sup>8</sup>

Lyrebirds have been a major challenge to science as well as technology throughout the twentieth century. Because of the patient studies of Tom Tregellas — who thought nothing of waiting 'from dewy morn to dusky eve' to photograph and observe the birds — we knew much about its habits and its habitat, its antics and breeding behaviours (Tregellas 95). We even knew from Charles Stone's observations that its eggs are porous: 'during the process of blowing beads of water exuded over the whole surface' (109). But with all this detailed knowledge we still seemed no closer to understanding how it fitted in with other birds. Here was a bird that could sing like a dream, but could barely fly. It had distinctive big feet, so well adapted for scratching the forest floor. The failure of the bird to fit known categories is reflected in the diversity of its names. In the eighteenth and nineteenth century some called it a 'mountain pheasant', others thought its tail

demanded that it belong with the Birds of Paradise, whilst still others referred [to] it as the ‘wren as big as a peacock’ (Leach 113). By the beginning of the twentieth century, lyrebirds were in an order by themselves, adjacent to but not part of the ‘perching bird’ order.<sup>9</sup>

The twentieth century has seen Passerines transformed from ‘perching birds’ to ‘singing birds’. ‘Singing’ birds have then been divided into oscine (*Passeri*) and sub-oscine (*Tyranni*) according to the structure of their syrinx. The syrinx, named for the nymph chased by Pan who became the reed of the panpipes, is the voice producing organ of birds. The most advanced and complex syrinx is a feature of the *Passeri*. Most Australian passerine families are in this class.<sup>10</sup> The lyrebird’s latest grouping among the *Corvida*, a largely southern branch (parvorder) of the *Passeri* has built on both established knowledge of the lyrebird, and on new studies of its close relative, the scrub-bird. The superfamily *Menuroidea* also includes the bowerbirds and treecreepers. The other very Australasian superfamilies included in the corvine assemblage are *Meliphagoidea* and *Corvoidea*. It is striking how many of the birds chosen as distinctive avifaunal emblems for Australian states and used as national motifs, like the lyrebird, are *Corvida*. There are major exceptions of course, including the Emu, a Ratite of Australasian origins.<sup>11</sup>

In the history of bird-song recordings in the Australasian region, the lyrebird, master of mimicry, was first, and has remained very significant. It [was] the first species recorded by Norman Robinson when the CSIRO Division of Wildlife established a laboratory for the study of animal sounds in the 1960s. Robinson was a pioneer in the field of sound recording and analysis for specialist scientific workers (Boswall 72). The scientific study of bird song has contributed significantly to understanding territorial and other behaviours. For many birds of the north-temperate regions, only males sing, but in the Australasian region and elsewhere, females sing too, sometimes in a cooperative display.<sup>12</sup>

Regional variation and even lyrebird history can be inscribed in song. In a remarkable study spanning over thirty years, Norman Robinson and Syd Curtis, a Queensland lyrebird enthusiast, analysed the territorial songs of both lyrebirds by region. Astonishingly, the song of Tasmanian lyrebirds, introduced from Toolangi in Victoria still resembled that of their counterparts north of Bass Strait. They maintained their precise dialect over generations for more than fifty years.<sup>13</sup>

Lyrebirds provide an excellent motivation for ornithological excursions, at least in the eastern states, because they are active in late autumn and winter, a time of year when other birds tend to be at their least active. Sydney, Melbourne and Canberra all have Superb Lyrebirds within an hour’s drive of the city, and since they were introduced into Tasmania, the Superb Lyrebird is an attraction of Mt Field National Park, near Hobart.<sup>14</sup> They are not found in South Australia, the Northern Territory or Western Australia. Attempts to introduce them to the Karri forests of southwestern Australia in the 1920s, something discussed at length at the time of the RAOU campout at Nornalup in 1927, came to nothing.

Lyrebird conservation has been a particular concern because of the proximity of much of their habitat to large and sprawling cities. Harold Bradley, the octogenarian secretary of the Sherbrooke Survey Group, is typical of the many voluntary enthusiasts who have supported the conservation work through banding and observing over the years. In 1998, the group of a dozen or so spent 1000 hours surveying lyrebirds and their habitat in 377 visits to the forest, and produced 233 written reports of sightings located with compass bearings. This group is ‘the eyes and ears of the forest’ for Parks Victoria. Their work and that of Len Smith, and Parks Victoria, is collectively having some conservation success through predator control programs directed at foxes and feral cats. Lyrebird numbers are at least stabilising now after many years of decline, and the signs are that their survival rate is increasing in Sherbrooke.

Brisbane’s population must drive a little further to the forests in the mountains on the southern border country and search a little harder for the rare, rich chestnut Albert’s Lyrebird *Menura alberti*, which is a little smaller than the Superb. Albert’s is now the only other species of *Menura*, distinguished by Gregory Mathews from *M. novaehollandiae* because its tail lacked ‘the long curved out rectrix’ (Roberts 243). Queensland’s Albert River was part of its home territory, but echoes of its royal name also appear in the historic subspecies, the Victoria Lyrebird, *M. novaehollandiae victoriae*, a darker Superb, so called because *Menura superba* was the name given to the bird collected in 1798.<sup>15</sup>

Albert’s Lyrebird is much less studied and more threatened than the Superb. It is more secretive and less inclined to mimic. With a very limited range and precise habitat needs — forest floor with thick leaf-litter and deep soil in high rainfall areas — and possibly as few as 1500 pairs left, they are not yet on the official ‘near threatened’ list, but moving rapidly that way.<sup>16</sup> Knowledge of the optimal habitat needs of the Albert’s Lyrebird is scant. A new study conducted by Sandy Gilmore between 1996 and 1998, suggested that, if all else is equal, the birds prefer Eucalypt rather than ‘rainforest’ habitat. Eucalypts growing on deep soil in high rainfall areas are very productive and attractive to the timber industry, especially if they are accessible. The latest Regional Forest Agreement for example, has resulted in logging concessions being granted in Whian Whian forest in the Nightcap Range, New South Wales, in exactly the place which Gilmore’s study shows may potentially contain the best habitat for the bird.<sup>17</sup>

\* \* \* \* \*

Spotty was not just Spotty for our family. He was a Melbourne institution of the 1940s, 50s and 60s. His dates are recorded: 1942–64. Like his predecessor, Timmy (1927–53), he was a reason to visit Sherbrooke Forest for generations of parents and children.<sup>18</sup> Spotty starred in a television documentary ‘Dancing Orpheus’ in 1963 (Reilly 80). He was the last of the ‘famous’, personally-named lyrebirds. The proximity of his haunts to a growing major city made him famous, but also

vulnerable. In 1964, Spotty disappeared. Although he was very old (possibly nearly 22 years), there were suspicious circumstances. My father muttered about vandals and shots being heard in the area. Like much of Melbourne, my family went into mourning about his disappearance. I was seven years old when I heard of his death. It was the end of an era. We didn't seek out lyrebirds much after that. The poet, Judith Wright didn't either:

*Some things ought to be left secret, alone;  
some things — birds like walking fables —  
ought to inhabit nowhere but the reverence of the heart*  
(‘Lyrebirds’).

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> This caption accompanied a drawing by T.R. Brown in an unpublished manuscript by Skottowe held at the Mitchell Library, and documented by Tom Iredale, ‘Thomas Skottowe- Naturalist’, *Emu* 33(4), 2 April 1934, 273–74.
- <sup>2</sup> Cook also reports a ‘control’ experiment whereby he trained the birds on his property not to build on the ground by removing the eggs himself as soon as they were laid there.
- <sup>3</sup> ‘Knapping’ is reported by Edwin Ashby from Cowra Creek, New South Wales, pp. 94–95. Chainsaw and cross-cut saw stories abound. The six blast story appears in *Australian Geographic* 5 Jan-March 1987, p. 3.
- <sup>4</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 June 1909, reported in *Emu*, 9(1), 12 July 1909, p. 45.
- <sup>5</sup> The lyrebird featured on a New South Wales postage stamp as early as 1888.
- <sup>6</sup> Elizabeth Willis, ‘The beauty and strength of the deep mountain valleys’ in Tom Griffiths, *Forests of Ash*, Melbourne, 2001.
- <sup>7</sup> *The Romance of the Lyrebird* first appeared as a reprint from the *Journal and Proceedings of the Royal Australian Historical Society*. 43 (4), October 1957, then as a separate book published in Sydney by Angus and Robertson in 1960.
- <sup>8</sup> The film was edited by David Cooke, and reviewed by Stephen Davies in *RN* 71, March 1987, p. 12.
- <sup>9</sup> Order XX in Bowdler Sharpe’s list, as reported by Leach in 1911.
- <sup>10</sup> In Australia, the Pittas are the chief representative of the less complex syrinx or ‘suboscine’ group, though some suggested that lyrebirds and scrub-birds belong there too. See Reilly, *The Lyrebird*, p. 74.
- <sup>11</sup> The Black Swan (Western Australia) is clearly another exception, as was the Magpie Goose chosen for the International Ornithological Congress.
- <sup>12</sup> Michelle L Hall and Robert D Magrath, ‘Duetting in magpie-larks: territorial defence or mate-guarding?’, See Lee B Astheimer and Michael F Clarke *Second Southern Hemisphere Ornithological Congress*, Birds Australia Report 9, Hawthorn East: BA 2000, p. 69.
- <sup>13</sup> I am grateful to Eleanor Russell for drawing my attention to this fascinating study.
- <sup>14</sup> The first suggestion that lyrebirds be introduced into Tasmania was made at the Hobart Congress of the RAOU in 1906, and supported by letters from the Tasmanian Field Naturalists’ Club to the Chief Secretary in Hobart. Fear of the growing threat of mainland foxes was the chief driving force behind the initiative. *Emu* 8(2), 1 October

- 1908, pp. 111–12. See also M S R Sharland, ‘The Lyrebird in Tasmania’, pp. 64–71.
- <sup>15</sup> As well as Victoria Lyrebird there was another subspecies, the Edward Lyrebird, lighter in colour than what was described as *M. n. novaehollandiae* and simply called ‘Lyrebird’ in the era before the 1926 Checklist. See A J Campbell, ‘The Lyre-Bird, *Menura novae-hollandiae*, Latham: a Key to Varieties, or Sub-species’, *Emu* 21(4), p. 241. In Richard Schodde and Ian Mason’s 1999 *Directory of Australian Birds*, this older division has been returned, with ‘Edwards’ being north of Sydney, and ‘Victorias’ south. The question of whether David Collins’ species name (*superba*) or Latham’s (*novaehollandiae*) had priority has been extensively debated. Both were published in 1802, but convention now favours Latham.
- <sup>16</sup> The estimate of 1500 pairs is made on the basis of 600 known male territories for a total estimate of 1000 territories in New South Wales, and extrapolated from that to take into account Queensland, where territories have not been counted. Sandy Gilmore, *pers. com.*, 25 November 2000.
- <sup>17</sup> The relevant concession is approximately 3,000 hectares. Alex (Sandy) Gilmore, ‘Distributional ecology of the Albert’s Lyrebird *M. alberti* in North-east New South Wales’, presented at Southern Hemisphere Ornithological Congress, 29 June 2000. See Astheimer and Clarke *Second Southern Hemisphere Ornithological Congress*, p. 69.
- <sup>18</sup> Dates from Tom Griffiths, *Forests of Ash*, Melbourne (2001). These lyrebirds appear in a chapter on the ‘Theatre of Nature’ shown to me by the author.

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