

First published in 2019 by Reed New Holland Publishers Pty Ltd
London • Sydney • Auckland

Bentinck House, 3–8 Bolsover Street, London W1W 6AB, UK
1/66 Gibbes Street, Chatswood, NSW 2067, Australia
5/39 Woodside Avenue, Northcote, Auckland 0627, New Zealand

www.newhollandpublishers.com
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ISBN 978 1 92554 630 9

Group Managing Director: Fiona Schultz
Publisher and Project Editor: Simon Papps
Designer: Cyb Elizalde
Production Director: James Mills-Hicks
Printer: Toppan Leefung Printing Limited

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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AUSTRALIAN WILDLIFE ON YOUR DOORSTEP



STEPHANIE JACKSON

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INTRODUCTION

As an adventurous child I had an insatiable passion for wildlife, and I collected every dead creature that I discovered on my rambles through the countryside. Starfish that had been abandoned on the beach by the retreating tide, birds that lay, as though sleeping, in fields and woodlands, and insects that had come to the end of their brief lives were all carried home to my bedroom that was crammed with more active specimens. The spiders, beetles and snails that thrived in a cluster of dusty jars were my childhood companions, and when I unearthed worms and other wriggling creatures that lived within the damp soil of the garden I was as enthralled by these treasures as other people might have been by the discovery of gold or diamonds.

My mother, frustrated by the smell of rotting carcasses that emanated from my room and by my habit of arriving at the dinner table with dirt under my fingernails and a newly discovered beetle in my hand, finally put her foot down and attempted to channel my interests in other directions, but my passion for Mother Nature's astounding diversity of wild creatures remained undiminished.

For the last 40 years I've lived and worked on a rural property in south-eastern Queensland and I share my secluded retreat, with its sprawling gardens that are hemmed with untamed bushland and eucalypt forests, with a community of mammals, birds, reptiles, frogs, insects and spiders. As I glimpse the intimate details of their lives, I'm continually enthralled by the diverse behaviours and unique personalities of my wild, yet welcome neighbours. It's here that I've photographed more than 65 per cent of the species featured in this book, and with the majority of the other wild creatures that are illustrated in the following pages having been encountered in rural and urban reserves within a 50km radius of this wildlife haven, I can honestly boast that a staggering diversity of wildlife thrives at my doorstep.

Almost 90 per cent of Australians live in urban areas, and many explore the natural world only via television documentaries that offer visions of the wondrous creatures of Australia and of distant lands. Who can deny that they've been mesmerized by the antics of Alaskan bears, enthralled by the hunting prowess of the great cats of Africa, and awestruck by the elegance of an eagle's

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chick as it steps courageously from its cliff-top nest and takes its first flight on an unseen breeze? These are glimpses of wildlife that most people will never see at first hand, but amazing events are happening in Australia every day, and some of the most spectacular creatures on the planet are right on the doorstep of each and every one of us, if we take the time to explore our own backyard.

This vast continent has a greater diversity of wildlife than any other developed country, but sadly it has a less enviable claim to fame, for Australia has the worst rate of mammal extinction in the world. Eighteen species of mammals and many species of birds and frogs have become extinct in the last 200 years, and it's the actions of the human race that have played a major role in their demise.

Land clearing has destroyed and fragmented wildlife habitats. Huge populations of feral animals, including rabbits, pigs and camels that rampage across the landscape and damage fragile ecosystems, have also had a dramatic impact on wildlife communities. Several native species are being nudged towards oblivion by feral cats, silent and stealthy assassins that, with a population of up to 6.3 million, slaughter a million birds every day.

It's not all doom and gloom however, for although some species struggle to survive, others have adapted well to the

changing environment and have set up home in suburbia. Possums doze in the dark corners of sheds; gulls and ibis feast at rubbish tips; lorikeets and bats roost in the trees of parklands and scoff the sweet fruits of backyard trees; reptiles sun themselves in quiet gardens; geckos and spiders secrete themselves in the dim corners of houses; and frogs make themselves at home in garden pools. There's no room for complacency, though, for the threats to Australia's unique wildlife have not abated.

The long-term survival of the human race is inextricably linked to the health of the natural environment and the great diversity of creatures, both large and small, with which we coexist on Planet Earth. The task of caring for the environment cannot be left entirely in the hands of governments and organisations dedicated to the cause. It is the responsibility of us all, and although it's often said that one person's actions have no significant impact on a situation of national or global importance, that's not always correct. Like a raindrop that unites with countless others to convert a tranquil stream to a raging river, even the smallest of actions can have an impact on the world around us, and everyone can play a valuable role in protecting the natural environment and ensuring the survival of the remarkable creatures that are right on the doorstep of each and every one of us.

Species names

The species names of the animals used in the book adhere to those found in the following titles:

Anstis, M. 2017. *Tadpoles and Frogs of Australia*. Second Edition. Reed New Holland.

Framenau, V., Baehr, B., and Zborowski, P. 2014. *A Guide to the Spiders of Australia*. Reed New Holland.

Slater, P., Slater, I., and Slater, R. 2009. *The Slater Field Guide to Australian Birds*. Second Edition. Reed New Holland.

van Dyck, S., Gynther, I., and Baker, A. 2016. *Field Companion to the Mammals of Australia*. Reed New Holland.

Wilson, S. and Swann, G. 2017. *A Complete Guide to Reptiles of Australia*. Fifth Edition. Reed New Holland.

Zborowski, P. and Storey, R. 2017. *A Field Guide to Insects in Australia*. Fourth Edition. Reed New Holland.



Eastern Grey Kangaroo mother and joey.



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BIRDS

Australia is a birdwatcher's paradise, for more than 830 species call this great country home, and although some are migrants that come and go with the changing seasons, an estimated 100 species, the majority of which are found nowhere else on Earth, make Australia a permanent home and habitat for many birds that stroll across the nation's varied landscapes.

PARROTS RAINBOW LORIKEET *Trichoglossus haematodus*

Australia has its share of famous characters, but in 1771 it was a Rainbow Lorikeet that earned a place in history when it became the first of Australia's 60 species of parrots to spread its wings over British shores. The bird's epic adventure had begun the previous year when it was captured in Botany Bay and became the pet of a Polynesian man named Tupaia who shared James Cook's voyage on board the *Endeavour*. Sadly, Tupaia died on the return journey to England, but the bird survived and was destined for immortality.

In 1774, Peter Brown, an illustrator who was later appointed as the Botanical Painter to the Prince of Wales, was awestruck by the



Feeding on the flowers of a corkwood tree in the author's garden.



Rainbow Lorikeet at a caravan park at Grassy Head, New South Wales.

northern Tasmania, and thrive in coastal areas as far west as the Yorke Peninsula in South Australia. A relatively small population, the descendants of captive birds that were released into the wild in the 1960s, exists near Perth in Western Australia, where these unwelcome interlopers are classified as pests.

With their raucous chattering and argumentative screeching these gregarious birds, which are often seen in the company of Selys-breasted Lorikeets, are impossible to shoo. Two or three birds, particularly when displaying ownership of a feeding area, can sound like a rampaging crowd, and when immense numbers flutter among the foliage of trees to sip on nectar-laden flowers, any concept of the bush as a place of peace and quiet is immediately obliterated.

bird's beauty, and included a portrait of the avian celebrity in his book *New Illustrations of Zoology*. This guaranteed the Rainbow Lorikeet another claim to fame as the first Australian parrot to be introduced to the world in a coloured illustration within a commercial publication.

Only someone with the vision of a fossilised amoeba could fail to be dazzled by a glimpse of a Rainbow Lorikeet, for its plumage includes all the hues of the brightest of rainbows, with both males and females having a blue head and neck, a vivid orange-red breast, a blue lower body, emerald-green wings, a red bill and piercing red eyes.

They inhabit woodlands and forests in eastern Australia, from Queensland's tropical Cape York to southern Victoria and



Rainbow Lorikeet on a picnic table at Gin Gin, Queensland.



Inspecting a nesting hollow in a gum tree at Tannum Sands, Queensland.



Feeding on a fallen mango at Rosedale, Queensland.

Rainbow Lorikeets, which have a brush-like tip to their tongue to enable them to feed efficiently on nectar, dine on the flowers of a wide range of native trees and shrubs, including eucalypts, grevilleas, banksias and melaleucas, in addition to many introduced plant species. With amazing agility and acrobatic antics they clamber from flower to flower, often hanging upside-down to reach blooms on fragile stems, and erupt into a screeching frenzy when the need to defend their territory from other birds arises. When flowers are scarce they'll eat seeds and insects, but their craving for the sweet treats of life lures them to orchards and gardens where a single bird pecking at soft fruit, such as mangoes, papaws and grapes, is of little concern, but it's a different story when a large flock arrives for a feast. The result can be disastrous, and the battle to protect crops from hordes of Rainbow Lorikeets remains an ongoing dilemma for orchardists.

They're commonly seen in urban parks and in the heart of cities and towns where flowering trees, bus congested roadways, and are often attracted to home gardens with the offer of bread and honey. This provides an opportunity for a close encounter with these beautiful birds, but neither bread nor honey include the essential nutrients that the birds require, and such a diet may be harmful to their long-term health. The better option to encourage nectar-feeding birds to a garden is to plant trees and shrubs that will not only provide them with a natural and healthy source of food, but will also create a welcoming habitat for other native species.

Rainbow Lorikeets, like the majority of Australian parrots, require hollows in old trees for nesting sites, and if these, together with ample sources of food and water are available, these glorious birds will survive and bring pleasure to the human race until the end of time.

BUDGERIGAR

Melopsittacus undulatus

Budgerigars are the most popular pets in the world, after dogs and cats, and anyone who is unfamiliar with the humble budgie must be as rare as an elephant in a rhubarb tree.

They are attractive and amiable little birds, but one of the characteristics that have made them so popular is their ability to mimic the human voice. Many will mutter "Who's a pretty boy?" and other simple phrases, but a budgie named Puck had a lot more to say, and according to the 1995 *Guinness Book of World Records*, this

tiny chatterbox was an avian master of the English language, with a vocabulary of 1,728 words.

Flocks of budgies fluttered across the Australian landscape long before modern humans strode onto the scene, but it was George Shaw, an English zoologist, who officially described the Budgerigar in 1805. In 1840, the renowned naturalist and illustrator John Gould brought live budgies to Britain when he returned from a voyage to Australia, and within a decade a captive-breeding scheme had begun.

The name 'Budgerigar' is thought to be a derivation of the Aboriginal word '*betche-gara*', which refers to something that's good to eat, and although indigenous Australians



Budgies drinking at an outback waterhole.



Above and opposite: Budgerigars around a camping area. These images were taken near Boullia, outback Queensland.

might have regarded the bird as tasty bush tucker, Europeans saw it in a different light. They christened it with the scientific name *Melopsittacus undulatus*, which hinted that the budgie had more than culinary appeal, for the first part of its name comes from a Greek word meaning 'melodious parrot', while the second part is a Latin word that translates as 'like waves', a reference to the ornate pattern on the bird's wings and the back of its head.

Budgies bred in captivity have plumage in a wide range of colours, from white and yellow, to green, mauve and blue, but

their wild relatives are invariably green with bright yellow faces. There's little visible difference between males and females, other than the colour of the cere, the area surrounding the bird's nostrils, which is blue in males, brown or white in females and pink when the birds are immature.

Budgerigars are among the most numerous of all Australian parrots, with an estimated 5 million thriving in the wild. They're usually seen in relatively small flocks, but in good seasons, when there's an abundance of food, it's not uncommon to see hundreds of birds wheeling through

the skies, twisting and turning in perfectly synchronised flight, or fluttering unexpectedly from trees like a deluge of falling leaves tossed into the air by the invisible hand of the wind.

They're most at home in semi-arid and arid inland areas of mainland Australia where they congregate in woodlands and grasslands, and although they inhabit much of the continent, they're not found in the far south-west, in the northern part of the Northern Territory or on the eastern coast.

The main component of the budgerigar's diet is seeds of drought-tolerant grasses such as spinifex and Mitchell grass, and of herbaceous plants such as saltbush that carpet vast areas of the outback. They also dine on succulent foliage and on any fruit that may be available, and will gorge themselves on upcoming crops of grain.

Budgies are nomadic, with their survival during droughts reliant on their instinct to migrate to areas where food and water are more readily available. They never travel far from a source of water however, and it's believed that Aboriginal people and early European settlers followed flocks of budgies and utilised their ability to locate water as part of their own survival strategies in an often arid environment.

Budgerigars are monogamous, and remain faithful to their one and only mate, and when it's time to start a family, the female lays her eggs in a hollow in a tree, or



occasionally in a log on the ground.

Subtle twittering emanating from shading foliage is a clue that budgies are taking it easy, but the best time to see these endearing little birds is at dawn when they flutter down from the skies to the edge of a tranquil waterhole or stream to quench their thirst before, with joyful twittering, heading off to enjoy their first snack of the day.

LITTLE CORELLA

Cacatua sanguinea

There's a clue to the Little Corella's appearance hidden in its scientific name, for *sanguinea* is a reference to the blood-stained appearance of the feathers between the bird's eyes and its bill. This, together with the blue-grey patch of skin around each eye, provide a subtle contrast to the white plumage of the bird's head, its body and its wings. When in flight, the pale yellow plumage lining the underside of the bird's wings and broad tail is revealed.

The Little Corella, which inhabits semi-arid and arid regions across much of

mainland Australia, is a species that elicits either love or hate. Watch it gently cooing with its life-long mate, quietly sipping on the nectar of the golden blooms of a silky oak tree, clambering among clusters of eucalyptus flowers, or nibbling on the seeds of grasses and legumes, and it's hard not to admire this attractive cockatoo. There's a flip side to its life however, and it's one that's not particularly appealing.

Little Corellas frequently congregate in flocks of hundreds of birds, and they're raucous and argumentative mob as they flutter among the foliage of large trees, and squabble over roosting sites as they settle down for the night, and their chattering and screeching doesn't endear them to anyone

who finds these rowdy cockatoos taking up residence on their doorstep. During severe droughts, when immense flocks invade urban areas, it's not only their noise that makes them unwelcome. Thousands of birds defecate on pathways, buildings, and parked cars, and when they're in a destructive mood, they chew the stems and leaves of trees and reduce the foliage to tatters, with some trees eventually dying as a result of the persistent behaviour of these urban terrorists.

The darkness of the night brings a welcome silence, but disputes among Little Corellas resume at dawn, and when they finally head off to find a source of food, the screeching commotion continues as they launch themselves into the air from their lofty perches. Like fragile snowflakes at the mercy of a gale, they take to the skies in a blizzard of white plumage and vocal mayhem to feast, if other food is unavailable, on crops of ripening grain. Their insatiable appetite for cultivated crops ensures that they're far from popular with farmers.

As the breeding season approaches, each pair selects a hollow, usually in a eucalyptus tree that's close to water, where the female will eventually lay her eggs. There's plenty of aggression on display as birds defend their nesting site from others that come too close or threaten to hijack the cosy retreat that a pair may have used for several years. Eventually, with all disputes concluded and their ownership no longer under threat,

birds affectionately preen their mates with little sound other than subdued chattering, and it's then that Little Corellas, with their Jekyll and Hyde personalities, are among the most admired of all Australian parrots.



Feeding on flowers of a silky oak tree in parklands in Gympie, Queensland.



Little Corella at a camping area near Innamincka, outback South Australia.



Little Corellas in parklands in Maryborough, Queensland.

LONG-BILLED CORELLA

Cacatua tenuirostris

An extended bill is not the only distinctive feature of the Long-billed

Corella, for with a dash of red plumage on its forehead and between its eyes and its bill, a similarly coloured collar across the top of its breast, blue-grey eye patches and predominantly white plumage, it's not hard to recognise this attractive bird that, when in flight, reveals yellow plumage beneath its wings.

Long-billed Corellas are found only in the south-eastern corner of the continent, in an area stretching from south-eastern South Australia and western Victoria to southern New South Wales, but other populations, which are believed to have been established as a result of the release of cagebirds, exist in some other parts of eastern Australia and in Western Australia.

These gregarious birds are often seen foraging on the ground, where they use their long bills to probe the soil for succulent insects and edible roots, and to pry fragments of bark from trees to reveal arboreal insects, but it's seeds that form a major part of the bird's diet. While the majority of the flock are feasting, a small number of their mates remain on sentry duty in nearby trees from where they give a raucous warning screech the moment any threat appears on the horizon. As far as farmers are concerned, it's the birds themselves, with their insatiable appetite for grain and sunflower seeds, which pose a very real threat.

The size of flocks is dependant on the availability of food, water and nesting sites,

and in areas where these requirements are met, Long-billed Corellas have made themselves very unpopular, not only with farmers but also with urban residents, particularly those in wheat growing regions in Western Australia.

In recent years, when flocks of up to 10,000 birds invaded both towns and farmlands, the noise they caused, together with their faeces that were routinely plastered on cars, buildings, and footpaths, was more than most people could tolerate, and authorities were forced to consider culling the invading flocks. In their hunger for grain, the birds destroyed tarpaulins covering huge mounds of wheat at grain receival depots and gorged themselves on the treasure they unveiled. They stripped every kernel of vegetation from riverbank gum trees, and commandeered every tree-trunk hollow for their nesting sites, leaving none vacant for other birds.

These attractive cockatoos form monogamous pairs, and when nesting hollows are unavailable, they'll look for alternative accommodation that might be merely a hole in the face of a stony cliff. While populations of Long-billed Corellas are declining in some parts of their range, their numbers have soared in Western Australia, thus ensuring that the species will thrive, to be admired or despised, for many centuries to come.



Feeding on spilt grain at railway yards near Sydney, New South Wales.



Long-billed Corellas in parklands in Maryborough, Queensland.



KING PARROT

Alisterus scapularis

It was 1818 when German zoologist Martin Lichtenstein became the first to describe one of Australia's most beautiful native residents, and he was probably



Male King Parrot. All images taken in the author's garden.

speechless with wonder as he gazed at the vividly coloured bird, for few wild creatures are more spectacular than His Highness the King Parrot.

With his brilliant red breast, head and underparts, emerald-green wings, long dark green tail, red bill and piercing dark eyes surrounded by a golden-yellow ring, the regal male dramatically overshadows his queen whose plumage is predominantly green, with only her lower belly being red.

Despite their gaudy plumage, King Parrots are surprisingly well camouflaged among the foliage of the woodlands and forests that are their primary habitat. The first hint of their presence may be a high-pitched squeak, or a flash of gaudy plumage as a bird flies past, momentarily adding a dash of brilliance to the shadows of the trees among which they forage for fruit, nuts, nectar, flowers and leaf buds, and dine on the seeds of acacias that are high on their list of favoured foods.

King Parrots, which live in pairs or small family groups, are found throughout eastern Australia, from northern Queensland to southern Victoria. They utilise hollows in old trees, primarily eucalypts, as nesting sites, but we humans have little hope of being able to take an inquisitive peek at the nest, at the bird's eggs, or at any developing chicks. The entrance to the hollow is usually several metres above the ground, but the parrot's nest is right at the bottom of the



Male eating a tomato.

garden, and thus well hidden not only from prying eyes, but also from predators, such as feral cats and reptiles.

These are inquisitive and confident birds that frequently visit urban parks and gardens if the food they require is available, as well as large trees in which to roost. They enthusiastically hop across manicured lawns, scoff fallen seeds and fruit, and tuck into tomatoes that are unprotected. It's not uncommon to see one of these dazzling birds, which are among the nation's greatest natural treasures, peering down at the world from a gutter, a clothes line, or a power cable that's right on the doorstep of some human habitation.



Adult male King Parrot.



Adult male and immature male at a bird bath.



Feeding on berries at Rushworth, Victoria.



Crimson Rosella feeding in parklands at Queen Mary Falls near Warwick, Queensland.

CRIMSON ROSELLA *Platycercus elegans*

The Crimson Rosella was first described in 1781 by John Latham who named it the Beautiful Lory, and there can be no disputing the fact that it's worthy of its original common name, for this is undoubtedly one of Australia's most spectacular parrots.

Australia is home to six species of rosellas, which are parrots within the genus *Platycercus*, and a distinctive feature of all six is their cheek-patches, with those of the Crimson Rosella being bright blue – a

dramatic contrast to the vivid red plumage of the bird's head, its back and its breast. The gaudy adult Crimson Rosella certainly stands out from the crowd and is instantly recognisable, but immatures, with their predominantly olive-green plumage, are far less conspicuous in their camouflage dress.

They thrive in the forests and woodlands of eastern Australia, from south-eastern Queensland to south-eastern South Australia and Tasmania. Fruit, nectar, insects and seeds, particularly those of eucalyptus and acacia trees, feature prominently in the diet of Crimson Rosellas that dine both in the forest canopy and on the ground, but when they get their claws on the succulent fruit of commercial orchards, farmers are far from impressed, although few people complain when these attractive birds make themselves at home in urban parks and gardens.

They're monogamous birds that, during the breeding season, forage for food only with their mate. When they eventually decide to set up home together, they'll occasionally nest in a hole in an earthen embankment, but they usually opt for a tree-trunk hollow with an entrance high above the ground. They line the base of the hollow, which is generally well below the entrance, with scraps of wood and bark, aggressively defend their territory from intruders, and vigorously attack other birds that attempt to nest nearby.



Crimson Rosella at a nesting site near Hill End, New South Wales.

Although they're usually seen only in pairs or small groups, there's change in the air at the conclusion of the breeding season when juvenile Crimson Rosellas congregate in large flocks and chatter noisily as they forage together on the ground.

When in the treetops, these eye-catching parrots communicate with a wide range of sounds, from subtle bell-like calls to raucous screeching, but anyone who sees one of these glorious birds is sure to respond with little more than the silence of awestruck wonder.

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Wedge-tailed Eagle at an Aboriginal settlement in outback Queensland.



Wedge-tailed Eagle near Woomera, outback South Australia.

their widespread and varied habitats that range from coastal areas to arid inland regions.

Young eagles have brown plumage with lighter chestnut-brown feathers on their wings and head. Their colouration becomes darker as they age, with adults usually being predominantly dark brown or almost black, and all have a dense covering of feathers on their legs and a long wedge-shaped tail.

This great eagle is a spectacular sight in any situation, but when in flight its display of elegance ensures that anyone fortunate enough to be a spectator will be begging for an encore performance. With a wingspan of up to 2.3m, these magnificent raptors can soar for hours on end and drift and swirl across the sky in aerial displays as, on the invisible hands of breezes, they're carried to 1,800m or more above the Earth for the best bird's eye view imaginable.

They're despised by many farmers and graziers for their crimes of killing lambs, and although Wedge-tailed Eagles are not subtly guilty as charged, it's usually only animals that are weak or injured that fall victim to these highly efficient predators. There's plenty of other food available for these imposing carnivores and they prey on a wide range of native animals, including small kangaroos and wallabies, possums and bandicoots, birds, reptiles and rodents, but in areas where large populations of rabbits thrive, these introduced animals account

for around 70 per cent of a Wedge-tailed Eagle's diet, and that makes them heroes in the continual struggle to reduce populations of these unwelcome feral pests.

Wedge-tailed Eagles offer the environment a helping hand in other ways too, for they routinely take the easy dining option and feast on carrion, and with collisions between wildlife and vehicles, together with repetitive droughts, ensuring that the landscape, particularly in outback regions, is littered with the carcasses of kangaroos and other wild creatures, these great birds never feel the pangs of hunger. From a long distance away they can easily spot the activity of crows or other scavengers that have gathered around a carcass, and with the primary rule at Mother Nature's dinner table being that the largest birds are in charge, the eagles invariably get first peck at the feast. Up to 20 may descend on a single corpse, but with a strict pecking order enforced, only two or three feed, while others wait impatiently for their turn or squabble among themselves to be next in line to gorge themselves at the banquet.

Wedge-tailed Eagles mate for life, and as the breeding season approaches, pairs perform dramatic aerial displays, and eventually settle down to renovate a previously used nest or to create a new platform of sticks in the fork of a tall tree from where they have an uninterrupted view of the surrounding landscape.

Land clearing practices have dramatically



Wedge-tailed Eagle near a camping area in outback Queensland.





Wedge-tailed Eagle feeding on Kangaroo carcass near the outback town of Oodnadatta, South Australia.

reduced the number of nesting sites that are available for these large raptors. Many birds have been shot by landowners who see them as a threat to their livestock, and eagles continue to die as a result of eating poisoned baits that have been widely distributed to

control populations of feral dogs and pigs. The good news is that these awe-inspiring raptors are thriving, and will continue to put on their stunning performances for many years to come.

PACIFIC BAZA

Aviceda subcristata

This glorious raptor's name might sound a little strange, but with the knowledge that *baz*, a word within the Hindi language, refers to a goshawk, there's some rationale behind the bird's name, for it bears a considerably resemblance to the Australian Brown Goshawk.

The Pacific Baza has predominantly grey plumage on its wings, head, neck and upper breast, dark brown back, chestnut-brown rear coverts and a long dark grey tail. It has a hooked bill for tearing at its prey, short legs with long and viciously sharp talons and brilliant golden-yellow eyes, but two other attractive characteristics make it easy to identify: it has a dark grey crest on the back of its head, a feature that gives it the alternative common name of 'Crested Hawk', and its chest is adorned with feathers in wide brown and cream horizontal stripes.

The hunting grounds of Pacific Bazas are generally in the treetops, and although they may spend long periods of time perching silently among the foliage and scanning the area around them for any signs of prey, they're not slow to react when they spot something of interest, and will fly low and silently above or through the forest or woodland canopy, and dive, with talons

extended, to pluck a victim from the trees or from the air. Small mammals, reptiles and the chicks of other birds form part of their diet, as do native fruits, but it's large grasshoppers, stick insects, praying mantids and frogs that they find irresistible.

For much of the year, usually from early winter to the middle of spring, they travel extensively through their range, with the seasonal movement believed to be in



Pacific Baza in the author's garden.



Pacific Baza in the author's garden.

response to the availability of food that, in some sectors of their habitat, may be reduced during the coldest months of the year.

Smaller birds are far from impressed when these imposing raptors move into their territory and, like a mob of vigilantes, some will persistently harass Pacific Bazas and do their best to persuade them to move elsewhere. They're rarely intimidated however, and stoically ignore the aggressive antics of

the neighbourhood watch brigade, and only when, as summer approaches, they have more than food on their minds.

In the breeding season they relocate to riverine woodlands and rainforests where, in the high branches of trees, they build their fragile nests of sticks, lay their eggs, and patiently await the arrival of the next generation of one of Australia's most attractive birds of prey.



Brahminy Kite on the beach at the city of Hervey Bay, Queensland.

BRAHMINY KITE *Buteo badius*

The Brahminy Kite's range extends from South Asia to Australia. It spreads its wings over India where it's revered as the sacred bird that carried the Hindu deity Lord Vishnu to the heavens, but in Indonesia it's a symbol of the modern era, for this majestic bird has been adopted as the official emblem of the city of Jakarta and represents the government's commitment to the protection of wildlife.

If legends are to be believed, the Brahminy Kite was born on the island of Bougainville, and the tale of its birth begins

with a mother who left her baby under a banana tree while working in her garden. The crying infant floated up into the sky and was miraculously transformed into a bird, with the child's necklace becoming the Brahminy Kite's coronal feathers.

It's easy to see why this stunning raptor is so highly revered, for its undeniable beauty casts a momentary spell over all who see it, and in Australia it can be sighted in the northern coastal regions of Western Australia and the Northern Territory, and south through Queensland to northern New South Wales. Although it typically frequents mangrove swamps, tidal mudflats and river estuaries, it's also occasionally seen



Brahminy Kite over the ocean waves at Illuka, New South Wales.



around inland wetlands and waterways.

The Brahminy Kite has a white head and breast, with the plumage on the rest of its body being a golden-brown. It has short pale yellow legs with massive needle-sharp talons, and a pale yellow hooked bill.

This magnificent bird of prey is an unrivalled hunter that glides effortlessly over its territory and dives down to a river or the ocean to skilfully snatch fish from beneath the surface. It will grab small birds from among the trees, and adds reptiles, insects and rodents to its diet whenever they come within its grasp, but the Brahminy Kite is also a scavenger. It feeds on dead fish and crustaceans that may have been washed up on the beach, scoffs scraps discarded by fishermen, and has no qualms about harassing other fish-eating birds to such a degree that they're forced to abandon their meal and flee from the unwelcome attentions of this large and dominant predator.

Brahminy Kites are generally solitary birds, except during the breeding season. Their nests, which are usually in trees close to water, can be massive platforms of sticks that are reused for several years, and after making some renovations, with the addition of a few twigs or pieces of driftwood, all the birds need to do is to line the nest with lichen or seaweed, and lay a clutch of eggs from which a new generation of these glorious birds will eventually emerge into the world.



Whistling Kite at Coongie Lakes National Park, outback South Australia.

WHISTLING KITE

Elanus leucurus

Whistling Kites, which have light brown to cream plumage with darker brown streaks on the head, breast and the under side of the tail, and dark brown wings, can be found throughout Australia, although they're rarely seen in Tasmania.

With their distinctive whistling voice, they're usually heard before they're seen in their prime habitats that include wetlands and both open country and lightly wooded areas that are in close proximity to water. They whistle when perching on the branches of trees, and they whistle when they're

soaring gracefully high above the ground or the water in search of their prey, which includes rabbits, fish, reptiles, the chicks of other birds, small mammals, grasshoppers and crabs, and when live prey is scarce, or if they're feeling rather lethargic, they'll happily dine on carrion.

Whistling Kites congregate in ground areas that are at the mercy of bushfires, and wild creatures that have survived the flames face another fate in the talons of these skilful avian hunters that will savagely harass other predatory birds that have already caught their prey, forcing them to abandon a meal that the kites then steal with no hint of hesitation.



Whistling Kite on the doorstep of a camping area in outback Queensland.

They form large flocks only when there's an abundance of food, with these beautiful raptors preferring to spend their lives alone or with a lifelong mate. Each pair usually creates a nest, which is little more than a platform of sticks covered with a layer of

leaves, in the fork of a high tree that's close to water, and will vigorously defend their nesting site against any intruders. With two or three clutches of eggs laid each year, this majestic kite will be whistling throughout Australia well into the foreseeable future.



Juvenile Barking Owl in the author's garden.

BARKING OWL
Ninox connivens

Anyone who has heard the distinctive call of the Barking Owl needs no imagination to comprehend the reason behind the name of this nocturnal bird of prey, for the repetitive *woof woof* that reverberates across the landscape perfectly mimics the sound of a barking dog.

Early European settlers heard the bird's calls too, and they also heard Aboriginal tales of the legendary bunyip that emerged from its lair in waterholes and swamps to

feast on women, and bloodcurdling screams that occasionally shattered the silence of the night gave some credence to the story. The sound, however, was nothing more than the eerie alarm call of the Barking Owl, which is also known as the 'screaming woman owl.'

The extensive range of the Barking Owl includes eastern, northern and south-western regions of the Australian mainland where it inhabits forests and woodlands that are dominated by either eucalyptus or melaleuca trees. Although they are also found in southern areas of the continent, their population in this region has declined



OTHER MAMMALS

Australia is home to more than 380 species of mammals, many of which are marsupials that give birth to relatively undeveloped young that the mother carries in a pouch as they grow. With approximately 70 per cent of the world's marsupial species found in Australia, this is unquestionably the lucky country.

GREY-HEADED FLYING-FOX *Pteropus poliocephalus*

In recent years an aura of fear has surrounded the Grey-headed Flying-fox, or flying-foxes are carriers of the Hendra virus that made its first appearance in 1994. It's horses that are primarily at risk from this usually fatal disease, and although some 70 horses and four people have died after contracting the disease, there's no evidence of humans having been directly infected by contact with flying-foxes, and there's no genuine reason to fear these creatures of the night.

Grey-headed Flying-foxes inhabit eastern Australia, from Rockhampton in central Queensland to western Victoria, and in recent years they've ventured further west towards Adelaide in South Australia. They make themselves at home wherever there's

a supply of their favoured foods, which include the nectar and pollen of flowering trees, in addition to fruit, and they hang around in forests, woodlands, orchards and urban parks and gardens.

The Grey-headed Flying-fox's name refers to its facial resemblance to a Red Fox, and although its head is covered with grey fur, the fur that coats its chest and its back is of the same chestnut-brown colouration as its terrestrial namesake. With a wingspan of up to a metre, these are the largest bats in Australia and among the largest in the world. They are highly social nocturnal animals that, during the day, hang out together, suspended among the branches of trees, in flocks that can contain several thousand individuals. With their dark grey

Above and opposite: Grey-headed Flying-foxes at Hervey Bay, Queensland.



Grey-headed Flying-foxes at Hervey Bay, Queensland.

wings wrapped tightly around their bodies, it's a time when workers on the night shift should be sleeping, but there's always plenty of argy-bargy going on in a colony of flying-foxes, and peace and quiet is rarely the order of the day as they flutter and squawk in their arboreal roosts.

At dusk, there's an even greater crescendo of noise as they head off to their favoured feeding grounds. They'll travel up to 50km in search of the best place to dine, and will enthusiastically feast on the flowers of native trees, including eucalypts, banksias and melaleucas. They play an important role by pollinating the flowers of each tree that

they visit, but when natural foods are scarce, they have no qualms about feeding on the sweet and succulent fruits of orchards, and consequently make themselves very unpopular.

As the warmth of summer approaches, females give birth to a single young that, for the first few weeks of its life, clings tenaciously to its mother's body, but when it's time for the tiny bat to taste independence, it's left to hang out for the night in a creche with other juveniles while their parents head off to feed.

The population of Grey-headed Flying-foxes has declined dramatically in recent decades, and they're currently listed as a vulnerable species. They once numbered in their millions, but there are now around 600,000, and while that figure may not give everyone cause for concern, the future of these great bats could be grim if the rate of decline that has been seen in recent years continues unabated.

There's no doubt that many people would welcome a reduction in their population, for when they congregate in immense numbers, fouling the ground beneath their roosting sites, creating an overpowering stench, and shattering any hint of tranquillity with their incessant screeching, they make themselves far from welcome, and despite the fact that they play an invaluable role in the environment, no one wants flying-foxes hanging around on their doorstep.



This Greater Glider was discovered in the author's garden after the tree that had been its home crashed to the ground during a storm.

GREATER GLIDER *Petauroides volans*

This stunningly beautiful nocturnal animal is rarely seen by human eyes. It glides silently through the darkness from one tree to another and, if the need arises, it can change direction abruptly while in flight, and it does so with the greatest of ease, thanks to the strong flaps of skin that connect its front and hind legs, and that act

like wings to allow this agile aviator to move secretively through its lofty realm.

The woodlands and eucalypt forests of eastern Australia, from northern Queensland to central Victoria, are the Greater Gliders' domain, and what they require for their survival are large trees with hollows in which they can spend each day in the land of nod.

They are the largest of Australia's arboreal gliders and have thick dark grey or



A Greater Glider in the author's garden.

live a solitary existence, but each is content to share its treetop accommodation with a mate when the breeding season arrives. Females give birth to a single young that travels with its mother, in the comfort and security of her pouch, for the first 3–4 months of its life. As it savours independence, it waits in a treetop hollow or clings to its mother's back while she forages for food, but the youngster draws the line at hanging on tight while its mother flies through the air. At about 10 months of age it takes a great leap of confidence and soars through the forest on its first courageous flight.

In the Greater Gliders' habitat there's keen competition for tree hollows, with other gliders, possums and many species of birds all requiring similar accommodation. They'll fiercely defend their home range and any hollows to which they claim ownership, but there's little they can do other than flee for their lives when a large owl, goanna, snake or other hungry predator arrives on the scene.

In recent decades there's been a substantial reduction in the population of Greater Gliders, and it's a decline that's continuing. With the loss of habitat as a result of bushfires, land clearing and the logging of old-growth forests creating a very real threat to their long-term survival, these wonderful animals are now regarded as a vulnerable species.

brown fur covering much of the body, a light brown face, creamy-white throat and chest, long furry tail and large furry ears.

They feed almost exclusively on the leaves of a few species of eucalyptus trees, but will also eat the flowers and buds, and when they opt for a change of taste they'll nibble on the leaves of acacias and on the parasitic mistletoe that often drapes itself across the limbs of eucalyptus trees.

For much of the year Greater Gliders



Brushtail Possum at a camping area in Bournda National Park, New South Wales.

COMMON BRUSHTAIL POSSUM

Trichosurus vulpecula

Common Brushtail Possums, which are found in all states of Australia, are nocturnal marsupials that live in woodlands and forests where they spend their days sleeping on shaded branches or in hollows in old trees, but they've found a new world to inhabit and have enthusiastically moved into urban environments where humans generously, although often unwittingly, provide everything that possums require

for their survival. When they seek more upmarket accommodation, they'll take up residence in a dark corner of a garden shed or garage, or become squatters in the roof cavity of a house.

In the wild, they supplement their diet of fruit with snacks of leaves and flowers, but in suburbia there's a far wider range of goodies on offer than at Mother Nature's table. Fruit is still at the top of the possums' menu, and they'll happily gorge themselves on any that they find in backyards and commercial orchards. They'll feast on a range of other tasty treats too, including garden vegetables,



Male on rose leaf.

NORTHERN GREEN JUMPING SPIDER

Mopsus mormon

Beauty, someone once insisted, is all in the eye of the beholder, and with this spider's species name *mormon* being a derivative of an ancient Greek word describing a 'she-monster' or 'hobgoblin', the taxonomist who gave this wild creature its scientific name obviously didn't see it as an attractive

creature. The origins of the name of its genus are far less clear however, for *Mopsus* was a mythological Greek hero who was the son of Apollo and a revered seer who could understand the speech of birds, a talent that, as yet, is not known to be one shared by the Northern Green Jumping Spider.

This highly distinctive spider is among the largest of Australia's many species of jumping spiders, but being merely 1.5cm long, it's certainly not a beast of gargantuan

proportions. It's found in Queensland, northern New South Wales, the Northern Territory and Western Australia, and although it inhabits woodlands and forests, it's equally at home in urban parks and gardens.

Like many spiders, it's a master of camouflage, and with its vivid green colouration it's often hard to see when it's hunting for its prey among verdant foliage. The most conspicuous physical characteristics of the female of this species are its variable but generally leaf-green colour, the distinctive brown and white pattern on its face, and the

two black lines along its teardrop-shaped abdomen, while the male has a prominent moustache of white hairs on each side of its face.

The Northern Green Jumping Spider, rather than build a web to catch its prey, simply leaps, with incredible agility, onto its victim and kills it with a bite that injects venom. Although the doomed creature rapidly succumbs to the effects of the poison, humans who are unfortunate enough to be bitten by this strange little spider will suffer no more than a brief period of localised pain.



Female Northern Green Jumping Spider on a bromeliad leaf. The images of this species were taken in the author's garden.



Female Northern Green Jumping Spider with another spider as its prey.



Lynx spider on a flower in the author's garden.

LYNX SPIDER

Oxyopes species

Lynx spiders, which are found throughout eastern Australia, thrive in a wide range of habitats, including forests, woodlands and gardens, where they're discreetly camouflaged among flowers, grasses and the foliage of low shrubs.

They're highly distinctive spiders that measure a mere 1cm or less in length and that have an armoury of long and savage spines on their legs, and long, slender tear-drop shaped abdomens with distinctive

stripes in varying shades of brown.

Lynx spiders don't require a web or other trap in which to catch their prey, for with eight eyes and the ability to run and jump at great speed, these attractive little creatures are extremely efficient and ferocious hunters. They're on the prowl primarily during daylight hours, and hunt like the wild cats to which they owe their common name, for they slowly, stealthily and silently stalk their prey, then pounce with lightning speed. There's no escape for any minute creature that's destined to provide a meal for this prickly predator.

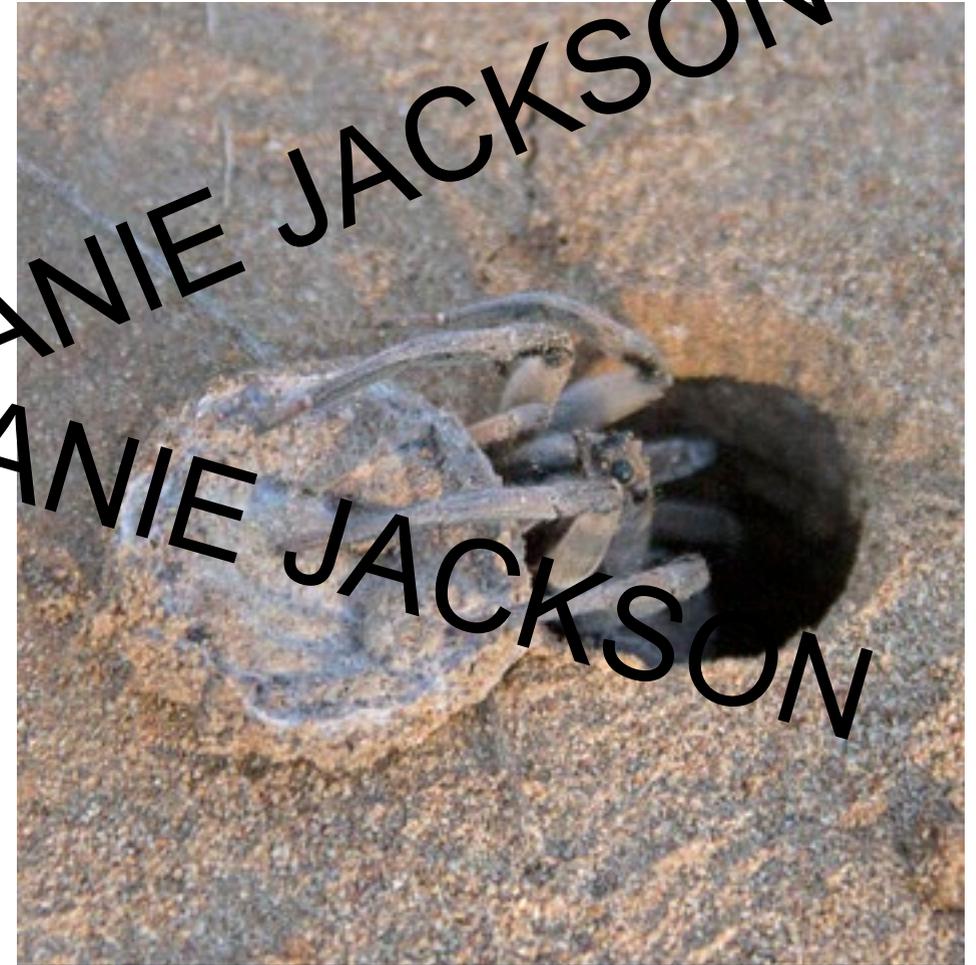
WOLF SPIDER

Family Lycosidae

Early naturalists were convinced that spiders of the family Lycosidae hunted

in packs, like wolves, and it was this assumption that gave them their common name. At most times of their lives, though, wolf spiders are solitary creatures.

More than 130 species of wolf spiders have been identified in Australia, but it's far



Wolf spider closing the lid of its burrow, near Taroom, Queensland.

from easy to distinguish one from another as many are of similar colour and there's considerable variation between the hues and patterns displayed by spiders of the same species. The majority, which are dull grey, brown or black, could never be described as glamorous, but all have one outstanding feature – their eyes.

Every wolf spider has eight eyes, including four small ones, one pair of large eyes that face forwards and another pair of large eyes that face upwards, and this astounding optical array enables these ferocious predators to see in every direction simultaneously.

They thrive in a wide range of habitats, from rainforests, open grasslands and suburban gardens, to arid inland areas of the continent. While many live on the ground where they hunt among leaf litter and low vegetation for their prey. The species shown here has a very different lifestyle to that of its many relatives, for it spends much of its life in a burrow in the ground. It may occasionally emerge and hunt for prey, but it prefers the patient approach, and merely waits at the entrance to its burrow and snatches any insect that wanders within its reach, or takes pot luck and dives on any hapless creature that stumbles into its lair.

A wolf spider can sense the slightest of movements on the soil surrounding its burrow, and if a predator comes too close for comfort, this spider, which is often referred to as a 'trapdoor spider' – a name that is

more commonly applied to members of various other spider families in the ancient infraorder Mygalomorphae – simply grabs the lid that it has created from grass and soil held together with silk, and pulls it down to seal itself inside its sanctuary until the danger has passed.

Female wolf spiders that live in burrows raise their young underground in silken webs, but other species, with dedication rivalling the maternal instinct of any human mother, never let their offspring out of their sight. Even carries her egg-sac with her, fixed to her spinnerets, and when the horde of tiny spiderlings hatch they instinctively clamber onto their mother's back and hold on tightly while she goes about her day-to-day life, but if she's threatened by another of her species, the spiderlings temporarily abandon her. She'll fight to the death to save herself and her young, but spiderlings have no parental loyalties, and when the battle comes to its conclusion, they scramble onto the back of the victor who carries them into their future.

Wolf spiders may demonstrate aggression towards each other, but although they pose no serious threat to humans, their bite can be extremely painful, with victims suffering from a range of unpleasant symptoms that ensure that their close encounters with these wild creatures are memorable ones for all the wrong reasons.

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