



Where Song Began: Australia's Birds and How They Changed the World

Tim Low

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Tim Low, award-winning author of *Feral Future*, in an eye-opening book on the unique nature of Australian birds and their role in ecology and global evolution.

Renowned for its unusual mammals, Australia is a land of birds that are just as unusual, just as striking, a result of the continent's tens of millions of years of isolation. Compared with birds elsewhere, ours are more likely to be intelligent, aggressive and loud, to live in complex societies, and are long-lived. They're also ecologically more powerful, exerting more influences on forests than other birds.

But unlike the mammals, the birds did not keep to Australia; they spread around the globe. Australia provided the world with its songbirds and parrots, the most intelligent of all bird groups. It was thought in Darwin's time that species generated in the Southern Hemisphere could not succeed in the Northern, an idea that was proven wrong in respect of birds in the 1980s but not properly accepted by the world's scientists until 2004 – because, says Tim Low, most ornithologists live in the Northern Hemisphere. As a result, few Australians are aware of the ramifications, something which prompted the writing of this book.

Tim Low has a rare gift for illuminating complex ideas in highly readable prose, and making of the whole a dynamic story. Here he brilliantly explains how our birds came to be so extraordinary, including the large role played by the foods they consume (birds, too, are what they eat), and by our climate, soil, fire, and Australia's legacy as a part of Gondwana. The story of its birds, it turns out, is inseparable from the story of Australia itself, and one that continues to unfold, so much having changed in the last decade about what we know of our ancient past. *Where Song Began* also shines a light on New Guinea as a biological region of Australia, as much a part of the continent as Tasmania. This is a work that goes far beyond the birds themselves to explore the relationships between Australia's birds and its people, and the ways in which scientific prejudice have hindered our understanding.

Where Song Began: Australia's Birds and How They Changed the World Details

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From Reader Review Where Song Began: Australia's Birds and How They Changed the World for online ebook

Jacky says

I have this book only 3 stars mainly due to the heavy scientific nature of the subject. Having said that I did read the whole book and I learnt a lot about the subjects of Australian Birds that have given me a new perspective on all things avian. If you have an interest in birds then this is a good read.

Steve Donoghue says

A superb work of bird-centered natural history! My review is here:

<http://www.openlettersmonthly.com/boo...>

Pat says

With its focus on birds of Australia and New Guinea (and Tasmania), the author informs us of the beginnings of the continent and how and where its birds originated. It is refreshing, in a way, to read a book which is not North America-centric. There is actually very little mention of the birds of North America. South America, Asia, Europe, and Africa are all brought into the discussion, however. There are only a dozen page of color photographs, supplemented with a few black-and-white drawings.

I learned that Australia is mainly flat desert now, although rainforest covered the continent millions of years ago. New Guinea now has more rainforest and birds endemic to rainforests than all of Australia.

Parrots, kookaburras, emus, honeyeaters, miners, cassowaries, butcherbirds, and many other species are discussed. Since Australia developed as an island, many species found there are not found elsewhere, or they are not found in such numbers.

Low includes over 30 pages of references as well as a several-page bibliography.

Recommended for all birders who want to learn about birds of the world.

Amanda Witt says

A good read, describing the birds from before white settlement to modern times in cities and backyards. Goes through topics like how songbirds came about, grassy landscapes and comparing with birds in the UK.

Victoria Collins says

I learned something fascinating, interesting or surprising (or devastating) on every page of this book. I'm no biologist but I couldn't go past this beautifully titled book and Tim Low has written in lay language and manages a pace that makes this nonfiction very readable. I read cover-to-cover and thoroughly enjoyed. Congratulations on a great read and a very meaningful contribution that I hope many more people take up. It may just have changed me a little.

Holcombea says

Not a page-turner, but lots of insights into the ecology of Australia's birds. And their relationship to trees, humans, etc.

Vannessa says

Lots of great gems in this book, Tim Low is very knowledgeable on birds, but the book is disjointed and the material needs to be more systematically organised so it's easier for the reader to follow.

Vera Campli says

Loved this book. Full of fascinating facts about Australia - and not just to do with birds.

Matt Kelly says

There were a few dense chapters to get through in this book, but on the whole this was an enjoyable and enlightening read. I look forward to reading more Tim Low books.

Emilia says

I apologise to all my friends and family who will be hearing all about the bird facts I now know.

I also think I'm ready to become a twitcher!

Lyn Elliott says

<http://www.timlow.com/books/bird-book>

Wrote a review, went to check a URL, came back and the whole review is lost! Will have to do it again.

It deserves to be a classic, in print for ever.

Frumenty says

I have a plane to catch this afternoon so I won't have time to do justice to this interesting book, and my knowledge of the subject-matter is quite limited anyway. It is claimed that we live in interesting times with regard to our understanding of the origins of birds. This old continent of ours (Australia) is thought to be the birthplace of songbirds. The best songster of them all is the oldest. The lyrebird began singing in a time when no other bird sang. The birds that followed had to make themselves known to a potential mate in the great din of birdsong, so each species was obliged to stick to a small but distinctive repertoire.

This is a rambling but fascinating overview of current debates surrounding Australian (including New Guinea and New Caledonia) avian fauna. Australia's ancient and mineral-depleted soils have evolved a flora that cannot metabolise, for lack of minerals, the greater part of the sugars they produce by photosynthesis; consequently there is a bonanza of sugars available for Australian fauna, particularly birds. This has produced a great many nectar (and other sugar) specialists which, for reasons created by sugar economies, are among some of the most aggressive birds in the world. Many Australian birds rear their young communally and make territorial defence a communal matter. Pity the poor bird that wanders into a strange territory. Larger species are frequently savagely mobbed, and smaller birds are in some cases driven towards extinction by such territorial behaviour. As a cat-owner I drew comfort from this statement: "Cats attract blame for bird loss around cities when noisy miners [a native species] are a more tangible explanation" (p.50). It is something of a red-letter day when a small bird such as a blue-wren or a crescent honeyeater is seen in our garden.

If you have an interest in Australian birds then this is a very good read. If you know birds but don't know Australia's birds then you should visit Australia. There are only a couple of species that habitually attack humans, and only one out of the nesting season. And don't pay any attention to all that talk about poisonous and dangerous wildlife either. For every person bitten by a snake there are over 20 million people who will never be bitten by a snake, stung by a box-jellyfish, poisoned by a funnel-web spider or mauled by a shark. Over 700 species of bird have been recorded in Australia, many exotic but mostly endemic and cosmopolitan species. It really is a wonderful place to see birds, especially big brash noisy ones.

Gillian says

Who'd have thought a non-fiction book on birds would be a page-turner! Turns out this one is. Tim Low has a pacy style of writing, and he's not shy about putting forward his opinions. It's great to find serious non-fiction with a popular pull. The last book I read like this was 'The Hidden Life of Trees' by Peter Wohlleben, a best-seller around the world but with a definite Northern Hemisphere focus. Putting Australian birds at the centre of the bird world might not be popular in the Northern Hemisphere, but for a fellow antipodean this was refreshing. I loved the scope of this book, starting with the intriguing business of sugar feeding birds, the book spanned bird evolution, ecology, and conservation issues. I was left gasping for breath at the end. There are plenty of mentions of New Zealand birds and those interested in finding out more would find a good companion read in the recently revised 'Ghosts of Gondwana' by George Gibbs. There are a few photos in the book but those not familiar with Australian birds might be disappointed there aren't more. Still it's easy to

look up birds in a field guide or App as you read along. I'll definitely be packing this book on my next trip to Australia, it'll be a perfect re-read while I'm listening to raucous cockatoos and honeyeaters.

Joanie says

I have always been interested in birds, particularly Australian birds - this wonderful book took the level of my knowledge to new heights.

Michael Livingston says

Australia is justly famous for its weird and wonderful monotremes and marsupials, but here Tim Low argues convincingly that its bird life is even more fascinating and distinctive. I had expected the book to mostly tell the story of Australia as the evolutionary starting place of songbirds, but it's a much more ambitious story, covering basically the whole evolutionary history of birds in Australia. Low takes a careful, scientific approach - clearly acknowledging the numerous uncertainties in the science and outlining the arguments and counter-arguments where theories are contested. It's a wonderful learning experience, both in terms of the over-arching evolutionary-geographical story and in terms of the neat factoids dotted throughout (e.g. in temperate conditions, budgies and zebra finches can live indefinitely without water, relying solely on the tiny amounts of moisture found in seeds).

Jess says

I've just finished this magnificent book - finally! If you enjoy reading non-fiction, especially about birds, I implore you to grab a copy. I feel as though I've just graduated from bird school; I've accumulated a wealth of knowledge about bird evolution, ecology, biology, relationships (between species, and also with plants in particular), biogeography, conservation and more.

Tim writes in a style that is easy to digest for a non-ecologist/biologist (although I do have an environmental/earth sciences background) by being comprehensive, but conversational and limiting scientific jargon. So whilst it took me a while to read, it wasn't because it was too 'heavy' in content.

I have discovered so many things I didn't know before, such as how copious nectar drives aggression in Australian birds, and gave us honeyeaters of varying shapes and sizes (consider the large yellow wattlebird as compared to much smaller New Holland honeyeaters). I saw rainbow lorikeets feeding on 'lerp' on the large eucalypts outside my house recently, and got very excited because I finally knew what the little white dots on the leaves were, thanks to this book!

The evolutionary history of birds in Australia I found the most fascinating - because essentially, Australia gave the world its songbirds/perching birds, and that gives me immense pride! I also like that Tim places New Guinea into the Australian equation. As he states: "To include Tasmania but not New Guinea is to let nationalism distort ecological thinking. [...] New Guinea's birds are part of the Australian bird fauna." It makes perfect sense.

Now, I'm going to end this now otherwise I will go on and on, singing its praises, but "Where Song Began" is a must read for Australian bird enthusiasts. You will not regret it.

Anthony Panegyres says

Read this if you are:

Interested in Australian history (I am)
Interested in bird intelligence and why Australian birds are flying Einsteins (I am)
Interested in why Australian birds are so long-lived and evolved (I am)
Interested in the history of Australian birds (I am a little)
Interested in the changing bird territories in Australia (I am)
Interested in how birds affect the Australian landscape and plant life (I am a little)
Interested in botany (only a bit)

Parts are page turners, and parts not, it's dependent on your passions, but regardless, Low's research and anecdotes here are so impressive they had me soaring up to Cloud Nine. A must read for lovers of natural history. I'm twitching already.

Margaret Small says

A great read, and not too difficult for a non-biologist at all. I rather like the little personal asides as they break up the scientific stuff a little, giving my brain a chance to catch up. Tailed off a little at the end. Lovely pictures of some of our birds as well.

Jente Ottenburghs says

I struggled through some of the chapters. Tim Low has certainly done his research, but large parts of the book lack a coherent structure. I quickly drowned in the details and lost the big picture. Certainly interesting, but the writing could be improved.

Eleanor says

Extremely interesting and well written, accessible but with a lot of research, reading and field knowledge underpinning the book. A must read for anyone interested in birds and their development.
