

Book Review

Enchantment by Birds: A history of birdwatching in 22 species

by Russell McGregor

Scribe Publications, Melbourne, 2024. Softcover, 310 pp., 16 pp. of colour illustrations.

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Historian and birdwatcher Russell McGregor has produced a literary equivalent to sighting a Gouldian Finch – a gem that is rarely encountered but greatly enjoyed when it is. A highlight of the book is its broad coverage of diverse subjects relating to the development of recreational birdwatching and amateur bird study in Australia, both of which began in the last decades of the 19th century. The author hopes to “illuminate what has impelled birding in the past and still impels it today” and to “explore historical connections between birds and people” in Australia (p. 5).

McGregor’s sweeping familiarity with Australia’s birding literature and birding organisations is immediately apparent, reflecting both his experiences as a birder and his historian’s research skills. Unusually, McGregor’s research includes delving into the informal literature such

as *The Bird Observer*, the monthly newsletter of the Bird Observers Club, the Gould League’s magazine *Bird Lover* and the privately published *Wildlife Magazine*, as well as the more usual sources. Details of all referenced material are provided for each chapter – essential for those wanting to investigate further.

The structure of the book is particularly clever, and when combined with the relaxed writing style, makes for an engaging read. The title of each chapter (and the preamble) is the name of an Australian bird species (the 22 species referred to in the book’s subtitle) followed by a single word that hints at the focus of the broad-ranging discussion that follows. Initially, the link between species and topic may be mysterious, until McGregor deftly weaves his tale. For example, the Tooth-billed Bowerbird introduces a discussion of the long-running tension between those who privately collected eggs or bird-skins (by shooting birds) versus those who considered amateur collecting to be barbaric. Why the Tooth-billed Bowerbird? Well, its nests are very difficult to find and are often inaccessible in the rainforest canopy. Its eggs were a gap in the prodigious oological collection of wealthy grazier H. L. White, so, in 1908, White sent expert nest finder and fearless tree-climber Sid Jackson (1873–1946) to north Queensland to rectify the situation. Jackson succeeded, but it took him and his Indigenous helpers more than two months of hard work, discomfort and bouts of fever before a clutch of eggs was safely brought to ground.

The Rock Warbler is used to introduce discussion of restricted distributions, habitat specialisation and the importance of a sense of place in birdwatching – travelling to a specific place and searching a specific habitat for a particular species is one of the most satisfying aspects of birdwatching. This then leads to a discussion of ‘twitching’ which McGregor defends, suggesting that most birders have at least a little twitcher in them, and that even the most ardent twitchers gain pleasure from observing common birds and contribute usefully to citizen science projects and databases. This chapter, titled ‘Rock Warbler: Belonging’, highlights one of McGregor’s strengths as a writer – the easy intermingling of science and aesthetics.

Rightly, the contribution of birders to conservation is highlighted. The chapter heading ‘Paradise Parrot: Tragedy’ introduces a discussion of population decline and extinction, and the value of observations gathered by birdwatchers and lodged in appropriate databases. Unfortunately, in the case of the Paradise Parrot, the available information was not acted upon by the State

authorities. Thankfully, the Paradise Parrot's congener, the Golden-shouldered Parrot, survived until more enlightened times and McGregor describes the current, science-based recovery program that makes full use of the latest technologies while also recognising the value of collaboration with Traditional Owners to harness their timeless knowledge and commitment ('Golden-shouldered Parrot: Saving').

Other chapters deal with topics such as bird song (titled 'White-throated Gerygone: Melody'), bird tourism ('Regent Bowerbird: Holidays'), feeding birds in your garden ('Rainbow Lorikeet: Feeding'), the economic value of birds ('Straw-necked Ibis: Reputation') and our changing attitudes to introduced species ('Common Myna: Foreigners'). The final chapter is an elegant statement about the importance of birds to human wellbeing, with a focus on our relationships with familiar local birds ('Superb Fairy-wren: The Wild Near Home').

Across all 22 chapters McGregor documents many of the major developments, events and issues in the 150 years of Australian birding. These include:

- The evolution of birding from largely a gentleman's pastime to a mass-participation hobby.
- The demise of 'shotgun ornithology' and its replacement with observational studies using ever-more-sophisticated and available optical equipment to provide "a bloodless form of hunting" (p. 58) ('Crested Tern: Photography', 'Crested Shrike-tit: Amity').
- The evolution of increasingly detailed and beautifully illustrated field guides ('Laughing Kookaburra: Identifying', 'Collared Sparrowhawk: Innovating').
- The consequent upsurge in birding tourism and 'species ticking' ('Blue-faced Parrot-Finch: Twitching').
- Continuing dilemmas over recommended English names for Australian birds ('Jacky Winter: Names').
- The pivotal role of Arthur Mattingley's early-20th-century photographs showing the slaughter of Plumed Egrets at Murray River breeding colonies in the worldwide outlawing of the use of wild bird feathers for millinery ('Plumed Egret: Protecting').
- The rediscovery of the Noisy Scrub-bird in 1961, providing hope that other 'missing' species would also be rediscovered. The subsequent abandonment of plans to clear its remnant habitat for a new town was a pivotal case in the rise of wildlife conservation in Australia ('Noisy Scrub-bird: Hope').
- The 1967 discovery of the Sarus Crane as an Australian breeding resident ('Sarus Crane: Discovery').
- The centrality of lobbying for species conservation in the priorities of Australian birding organisations from their beginnings at the turn of the 20th century to the present ('Plumed Egret: Protecting').

A notable omission is discussion of the mysterious Night Parrot and its central place in Australian birding mythology, perhaps because this has been well covered elsewhere (e.g. Olsen 2018).

McGregor's excellent book joins a flock of high-quality, popular science books published this century about birdwatching and birdwatchers in Australia, as distinct from treatises on the ecology of bird species or groups, and pragmatic guides to field identification or birding sites. They range from the light-hearted but informative works of Dooley (2005, 2007), to the scholarly popular science of Olsen (2007, 2013); Low (2014); Jones (2019, 2022); Robin (2023) and the book reviewed here. There are also detailed biographies of key players in the popularisation of birdwatching in Australia (Olsen 2018; McGregor 2019). Because these books help to broaden our appreciation of Australia's wonderful avifauna, the people who pioneered its study and the pleasures of birdwatching, they all make valuable contributions to the development of the hobby and bird conservation in Australia. This recent flurry of publications about birding and birders, rather than the birds themselves, reflects a broadening and maturation of public interest in birds and birdwatching within Australian society. It is to be celebrated as a distinctive new genre of writing on Australian natural history, one that is yet to develop for other classes of Australian wildlife – reflecting the greater degree to which we are 'enchanted by birds'.

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