

Australian Endemic Bird Families

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EMU (*Dromaiidae*)

Flightless birds: huge except for the kiwis - loosely called 'ratites' from the Latin *raft* after their raft like sternum - without a keel. There are five living families - Ostrich, Rheas, Cassowaries, Emus and Kiwis. Three of the five are confined to the Australasian region. Ostrich introduced to Australia. Considered likely that all originated in Gondwanaland.

Emus stand 1.6 - 1.9 metres tall and weigh between 30 - 45 kgs. Now regarded as a monotypic family. Smaller island forms in Tasmania, King and Kangaroo Islands exterminated soon after European settlement were formerly regarded as separate species. Inhabit most of the continent, but rare in very arid areas and now absent from heavily populated areas. Feathers on barbs so widely spaced they give the bird a loose, hairy appearance. Wings are vestigial, with no muscular control, no quills and not used in display.

Not gregarious except when confined. During pair-formation females dominate males. Females make the single resonant boom; males mostly grunt. There are also bubbling calls. Clutches 5 - 15 eggs, laid at 2 to 4 day intervals. Males alone incubate and don't normally eat, drink, defecate or leave the nest for about 55 days. Young feed themselves and leave nest when 2 - 7 days old. Keep close to male and to each other for 4 months, don't disperse until about 6 months old. Sexually mature from second year.

The name Emu is a variant of *emeu*; perhaps derived from the Arabic *na'ama* or *na'emu* - perhaps the name used by natives of Banda and neighbouring Islands. Gesner (1555) said it was the Portuguese word (*ema*) for the Crane and was transferred to the Ostrich and perhaps other ratites.

PLAINS-WANDERER (*Pedionomidae*)

Monotypic family - unusual quail-like. Once treated as a gruiform (cranes, crakes, rails and gallinules). Now regarded as a charadriiforme (19 diverse species - including sandpipers, snipes, jacanas, stone curlews, avocets, plovers and lapwings, gulls and terns).

The male is smaller and plainer than the female, e.g. 40-80 grams (male) and 55-95 grams (female). Similar in size to the Stubble Quail but with finer bill and much longer legs. The generic name *Pedionomus* directly transcribes from the Greek and means "haunting the fields". The specific name obviously refers to the female since *torquatus* means "collared or necklaced" and the extremely plain male displays neither of these characteristics.

Probably the first indication that you are seeing something special is the long-legged erect stance and stretched out neck, rather like someone on tiptoe looking over a fence. The female is very attractive with a broad black neck collar, heavily streaked or spotted white and a broad russet gorget. In flight easily distinguished from quail and button-quail by the distinctive pattern of the upperwing, especially the white primary patch and broad pale trailing edge. Has a direct but rather ponderous flight with the tips of the feet trailing beyond tail.

Distribution is sparse and scattered. Endemic to eastern and southern Australia – from Queensland to Victoria and South Australia. Most common in west NSW and small areas in northern Victoria. It is regarded as vulnerable nationally with an estimated population of 11,000 birds (1990). The limiting factor in distribution and abundance is habitat degradation through pasture improvement. Generally sedentary unless displaced by habitat change.

LYREBIRDS (*Menuridae*)

Large pheasant-sized, ground-dwelling birds with long elaborate tails. They are endemic to eastern Australia and there are two species in a single genus. The generic name *Menura* is accepted as coming from the Greek: *mene* – moon and *oura* – the tail, although Wolstenholme claimed it was derived from *memos* – might and *oura* – the tail. Plumage is sexually dimorphic. Body plumage on both a rather plain brown, but the males have elaborate patterning and structure to tail.

Primarily terrestrial, foraging and generally nesting on the ground but roost and shelter in trees. Will also nest well above ground in trees, and on ledges of cliffs. Clutch size generally one, but in Superb Lyrebird can occasionally be two. Incubation is by the female only. The sexual encounter is brief and there doesn't seem to be any pair-bonding. Fledging is possibly affected by location of the nest. Young in nests on the ground fledge at about 5 weeks old, whereas birds in tree nests are still there at 8 weeks.

The Superb Lyrebird has been quite extensively studied, Albert's much less, and in some cases there is a general tendency to regard features of behaviour as being similar but this is yet to be proven. Both species are shy, but Albert's more so. They both walk and run well but are clumsy fliers. Sedentary throughout range and tend not to disperse far. The maximum recorded movement is only about 10kms. Birds without long tails are called "plain tails" regardless of sex.

SCRUB-BIRDS (*Atrichornithidae*)

Small to medium sized and rather non-descript ground-dwelling oscine passerines. Two species in a single genus separated virtually by the width of the continent. Both species are rare, localised and secretive. Primarily terrestrial, foraging, roosting and nesting close to the ground. Poor fliers that depend on the densely covered understorey for protection. Are sedentary and seldom move far from natal territory. Reluctant to cross areas of open habitat, making them vulnerable to habitat fragmentation and fires. Dispersal of young is poorly known. Noisy Scrub-birds are capable of moving about 10kms from natal areas, and there is one record of a Rufous Scrub-bird moving about 20km from the nearest suitable breeding habitat.

It is generally accepted that scrub-birds are most closely related to the lyrebirds. The male Noisy Scrub-bird has a display where he drops his wings, fans and raises his tail over his back and vibrates his tail and body as he gives his territorial song. This display also apparently occurs in the Rufous Scrub-bird and appears similar to that of the lyrebird.

Both birds have had their habitat affected by clearance for agriculture, changes in fire regimes and the draining and clearing of swamp vegetation.

BRISTLEBIRDS (*Dasyornithidae*)

The bristlebirds consist of three species. The Rufous Bristlebird is the largest, followed by the Eastern, with the Western the smallest. The Western sub-species of the Rufous Bristlebird appeared only briefly - being first recorded in 1901 and last reported in 1906 or 1908. There have been three unconfirmed sightings since then in 1940, 1977 and 1980.

They are called bristlebirds because of the bristles that spring from the front of the forehead above the bill. Sturdy, but drab-looking birds that dwell on the ground. They have short rounded wings and a rather long, graduated and often ragged tail. All difficult to sight because of their skulking habits. Prefer to run, which they do with a drooping tail - unless alarmed when they raise and often fan their tails. The Eastern is considered the plainest, but none of them are especially striking.

All species are poor fliers and have suffered greatly from habitat loss, often due to fire regimes but also clearing for agriculture. The Eastern Bristlebird is confined to extreme SE Qld; scattered sites in NSW from the eastern slopes of the Great Dividing Range to the coast. Most records from Barren Grounds in NSW. Their status is endangered. The Western Bristlebird used to be called the Long-billed because it has a longer and more slender bill than the Eastern in spite of its smaller size. Its status is vulnerable, possibly endangered. Has declined over much of its original range. The largest bristlebird, the Rufous Bristlebird is confined to coastal Victoria and SE South Australia. Regarded as vulnerable and numbers roughly equal to the other species - approximately 2000 birds or breeding species in each.

PARDALOTES (*Pardalotidae*)

Pardalotes, along with the Mistletoebird, used to be regarded as *Dicaeidae* (flowerpeckers) but have been shifted into their own family *Pardalotidae*. The four species within the genus are entirely Australian and widespread over most of Australia. Almost entirely arboreal, specialising in feeding on lerps and the larvae of psyllid insects. Occasionally feed on nectar and even tiny reptiles, and rarely, feed on the ground.

They are brightly coloured birds with the male more colourful than the female. They nest in excavated holes in banks or tiny holes in trees in my experience, building a domed nest within the hollow. Can be both sedentary and highly mobile, sometimes gathering in loose flocks after breeding to roam widely in search of psyllid infestations.

Only the Forty-spotted Pardalote has an extremely limited distribution - found only in Tasmania and mainly on the south-east coast and Flinders Island in the Bass Strait. It is also the plainest of the four species. The Spotted is unquestionably the most beautiful and the smallest pardalote. There are three sub-species and widespread intergradation between the wider spread *punctatus* and *xanthopygia*. The Red-browed Pardalote is largely a northern and central species and the spotted head and red eyebrow make it different from the Striated Pardalote with which it is often mistakenly identified. The Striated Pardalote has six sub-species and is the most widespread, being found in every state. It is also the largest and has arguably the loudest and most easily recognised song. It also has the only black-headed sub-species and the crowns of the others within the genus are streaked rather than spotted.

WHITE-WINGED CHOUGH & APOSTLEBIRD (*Corcoracidae*)

Although these two species look very different from each other they are placed in the small family *Corcoracidae* based on DNA-DNA hybridisation studies. The Magpie-lark and the Torrent -lark from New Guinea used to be placed in the same grouping but are regarded as related but different.

The Apostlebird is medium large at 30cm long, weighing c. 130 grams. The White-winged Chough is much larger - 46cm long and weighing c. 360 grams. Plumages differ greatly. The White-winged Chough has mostly black plumage and bold wing patches on their wings. It also has a distinct sclerotic ring round the edge of the iris that becomes engorged with blood when the bird is agitated or aroused. The Apostlebird is drab greyish with short glossy hackles on the head and neck and a glossy bluish tinge to the tail. They are loud and raucous. K Langloh Parker gives an apt description - "Such a noisy, assertive tone.

Very homespun looking birds, dim grey, with light brown touches on the wings, boot-button eyes, and raucous voices, which as they are always in flocks are rather deafening." White-winged Choughs are also raucous and, if disturbed, display by fanning the tail and wings out and moving up and down. Ian Rowley calls this "the wing-wave, tail-wag display."

Both build substantial mud nests, communally gathering bark, grasses and mud. All birds participate but first year birds tend to accompany older birds, probably as a learning activity. Both species are sometimes called "Happy Family" as are the babblers on occasion. Apostlebirds are also called either "Happy Jacks" or "Lousy Jacks", according to individual perception. White-winged Choughs on the other hand have more prosaic names: "Black Magpie or Jay" and "Chatterer".

Group sizes range from about five to twenty. Single pairs don't seem to be able to breed successfully and the larger the group the more successful they are raising young. Work, play and combine successfully together. Always in a somewhat frantic, noisy manner. White-winged Choughs are omnivorous - Apostlebirds take more seeds. They use their bills to search for food - digging and shifting vegetation, but they don't seem to use their claws to scratch. Sometimes feed together where they overlap and will also feed harmoniously with babblers.