

Book reviews

AN EYE FOR NATURE: THE LIFE AND ART OF WILLIAM T. COOPER

By Penny Olsen

2014. Published by National Library of Australia, Canberra, Australia. 288 pp., colour illustrations, colour photographs. Hardback, AU\$50, ISBN: 9780642278463.

A dramatic tropical Australian landscape featuring colourful Rainbow Lorikeets feeding on Xanthorea flower spikes splashes across the cover of the biography of one of Australia's greatest natural history artists. William T. Cooper is described by Sir David Attenborough as 'the best ornithological illustrator alive' and his paintings of birds in their natural habitat are part of what defines him as such an extraordinary artist.

An Eye for Nature: the Life and Art of William T. Cooper includes hundreds of images of Cooper's remarkable artworks, many reproduced as full-page colour plates throughout this book. These images span the development of Cooper's artistic career and depict many extraordinary renditions of rarely seen birds from remote areas of Australia, Papua New Guinea and many other countries.

As a wildlife artist and naturalist myself, I have long admired the work of Bill Cooper. Australia's unique natural heritage is a valuable source of inspiration for artists, and Cooper's exemplary observational skills and artistic talent is widely acknowledged. Art and science play a critical role in promoting awareness of the natural world and the importance of its preservation. From a cultural and environmental perspective, natural history art provides an enduring record of the diversity of flora and fauna, capturing the moment for generations to come.

An Eye for Nature is the story of a largely self-educated Australian man from a regional town in New South Wales who becomes one of the world's greatest bird portraitists, taking up the tradition of Gould and other famous illustrators. Over many decades, Cooper has illustrated all of the living species of birds of paradise, parrots, cockatoos, turacos, kingfishers and hornbills, as well as other wildlife species of Africa, India, Papua New Guinea and Australia.

Cooper invited Dr Penny Olsen to write this biography, and as an experienced natural history art writer, she is well qualified to do so. Her narrative details the early influences on Cooper's life by setting the scene of Newcastle in the 1930s and describing the social and physical challenges typical of this time. It is not difficult to understand how Cooper's early need for self-sufficiency and rich childhood full of freedom to explore the Australian bush translated into a lifelong love of natural history.

Olsen draws connections between Cooper's life and his achievements as an artist. Cooper's parents encouraged an appreciation of art from an early age and instilled in him a sense of 'intimate knowledge and respect for nature' (p. 2). Early influences also include famous books such as John Gould's *Birds of Australia* and Cooper's father's collection of cigarette cards of Australasian birds. Young Cooper saved his pocket money to buy bird books from the age of 8 years, and at 13 bought a reproduction copy of John James Audubon's

much-lauded and dramatic compositions in *The Birds of America*, which appealed immediately to his growing artistic senses.

Opportune moments with people and places also shaped and changed Cooper's career directions and interests. Olsen provides details of Cooper's early interest in local zoos, his development of taxidermy skills from the age of 14 and his work as a volunteer museum guide with a collection of specimens. Cooper's meetings with Sir Edward Halstrom of the Taronga Zoo included visits to Halstrom's private aviaries containing rare bird species such as Stephanie's and Ribbon-tailed Astrapias and Blue Birds of Paradise; these events strengthened his interest in wildlife and the magnificent birds of Papua New Guinea.

The biography details Cooper's early frustration with formal education, his interests in motorbikes and girlfriends, and his disillusionment with years of work in retail outlets and the national service. It also presents Cooper's ever-constant interest in art, nature and the science behind the wildlife. Olsen presents an image of a man who was not overly comfortable with other people, and who avoided urban settings, preferring to be immersed in the natural world.

Two early influential artists in Cooper's life were Livio Suci and award-winning artist Sir William Dobell. Both men provided tuition and encouragement in art technique, enjoyed philosophical discussions with Cooper and provided introductions to contacts in the fine-art world, some of whom represented the most prominent Australian artists of the day. Interestingly, Cooper and Dobell had parallels in life with their early working-class connections in Newcastle, early departures from school, and early retail and commercial art careers. Dobell's encouragement of Cooper to pursue an artistic career was pivotal, and from 1965 Cooper became a freelance artist selling Australian landscape works in solo exhibitions for galleries in Melbourne and Canberra. These early landscape paintings incorporated a conservation theme – with ringbarked trees and overgrazed paddocks, which, from Cooper's perspective, were 'perhaps trying to show the result of man on nature' (p. 26).

A further important milestone in Cooper's career was his 1966 meeting at the Australian Museum in Sydney with Keith Hindwood, a successful Sydney businessman and amateur ornithologist. Cooper was able to show Hindwood two of his watercolour works featuring an Emerald Dove and Eastern Rosella; this led to the production of his first bird publication, *A Portfolio of Australian Birds*. Cooper enjoyed working with Hindwood on bird illustrations and it was at this point that he began to consider a career as a bird portraitist. *A Portfolio of Australian Birds* established Cooper's reputation as an artist, with his work described in book reviews at the time as 'in the class of Audubon and Broinowski' (p. 32). The rest is history, and well documented in this biography.

The biography includes mention of a notable experience in Cooper's artistic journey with a visit to Bluey Ilkerr in the Northern Territory. Cooper 'felt a sort of kinship with the elder's reverence for nature, his need for quiet to work and his thoughtful approach to painting' (p. 106). This is important from an Australian arts perspective and I would have enjoyed reading more about how this encounter may have influenced Cooper's perspectives on his own wildlife art. The significance

and uniqueness of Australia's Indigenous art, with its substantial inspiration from Australian wildlife, is an important part of any Australian art publication.

Cooper's many collaborations with scientists have been described as 'modern monuments to art and science' (p. 158). Working with significant Australian scientists has given him the opportunity to study the birds of paradise, parrots, bowerbirds and other exquisite wildlife in the field. The unusual courtship behaviours and brilliant plumage of birds are beautifully rendered in the resulting artworks – many of which are included in this biography.

Observing birds in the field is not for the faint-hearted. Field expeditions took Cooper to many remote areas of the world with challenging and, at times, dangerous journeys requiring much perseverance and skill. Cooper's wife, Wendy, who shares his interest in the natural world, was another key collaborator. Wendy has researched and produced formative publications on the fruits of the Australian rainforests, beautifully illustrated by Cooper. Together they have shared many memorable zoological expeditions, detailed in this biography.

Cooper's accolades include a gold medal from the Academy of Natural Sciences, Philadelphia for 'an artist whose artistic

endeavours and life's work have contributed to man's better understanding and appreciation of living things' (p. 158). Cooper is also the recipient of an Officer of the Order of Australia (AO) in recognition of his 'service to art and to ornithology as a natural history artist' (p. 162). According to Olsen, Bill Cooper is only one of six visual artists to receive such a high Australian honour and of these he is the only natural history artist.

An Eye for Nature is an inspiring book about an extraordinary Australian man who has learned and contributed significantly from his lifetime of observation and research into the natural history world. Artists and avian experts, conservationists and natural history enthusiasts will appreciate the exquisite images of Bill Cooper's artwork throughout this book, and will learn a great deal about the dedication and endurance required to produce such magnificent artwork.

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BIRDS OF NEW GUINEA: SECOND EDITION

By Thane K. Pratt and Bruce M. Beehler

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Field guides invite comparison. Readers scan range maps to see how regions differ in their avifaunas and pore over illustrations to learn the field marks that differentiate similar species. Thus, it is only fitting to compare the new edition of *Birds of New Guinea* to the first edition published nearly three decades ago.

The second edition covers the same geography as the first – the main island of New Guinea, nearby islands on the continental shelf and oceanic islands in Geelvink Bay. However, in many respects, this is a completely new book. Most obviously, the second edition follows a new format. The first half is a modern field guide with plates and succinct facing text while the second half is a handbook with extended species accounts. The number of plates in the guide has doubled, providing space for a handful of species not illustrated in the first edition. More importantly, many distinct subspecies are illustrated for the first time. New Guinea is home to subspecies galore and their addition facilitates the identification of the many New Guinean taxa that differ dramatically in plumage from region to region, from (unsurprisingly) the Southern Variable Pitohui, *Pitohui uropygialis*, to (more surprisingly) the Goldenface, *Pachycare flavogriseum*. The artwork is of high quality, with most plates painted in a pleasantly loose, gestural style. Each species is described briefly in the facing text and its distribution is illustrated clearly with range maps – an especially welcome addition.

The introduction includes a helpful section defining the bird regions of New Guinea and a discussion of bird conservation,

including a list of environmental threats (a rapidly growing human population, energy development, mining and logging) and a list of New Guinea's threatened birds. In the handbook, the authors summarise the basic attributes of each avian family found in New Guinea, then provide detailed descriptions in individual species accounts that also include notes on similar species, habits, voice, range and taxonomy. The large majority of the text is new but the authors retain some of the first edition's most evocative turns of phrase: although verbal descriptors of birdsong are notoriously unhelpful, readers are likely to remember that the New Guinean Harpy Eagle's (*Harpyopsis novaeguineae*) low-frequency vocalisations evoke 'the sound produced by releasing a taut bowstring' (p. 299), the flight calls of distant Blue-collared Parrots (*Geoffroyus simplex*) are like 'the sound of sleigh bells' (p. 361) and the unmistakable screech of the Vulturine Parrot (*Psitttrichas fulgidus*) recalls 'a sheet of canvas being torn' (p. 350).

While the second edition incorporates three decades of new information, it is initially surprising that the meat and potatoes of field guides – What species are found in the region? Where do they live? – is largely unchanged from the first edition. To be clear, there are changes. The taxonomy has been updated: for example, the Giant Wattled Honeyeater (*Macgregoria pulchra*) was previously considered a bird of paradise and the *Monarcha* monarchs are now placed in the genus *Symposiachrus*. Also included are a handful of new splits (e.g., the Huon Peninsula population of the Macgregor's Bowerbird (*Amblyornis macgregoriae*) is elevated to species status as the Huon Bowerbird (*Amblyornis germana*)), and some species are renamed (e.g., the Mottled Whistler becomes the Mottled Berryhunter, *Rhagologus leucostigma*). However, in comparison with other diverse tropical avifaunas such as those in the Neotropics, the pace of taxonomic change in New Guinea

has been sedate. Similarly, bird distributions remain uncertain in many regions. Reflecting these knowledge gaps, species' range maps in the second edition often feature question marks, indicating that a species may (or may not) be present in a given region. These question marks are a useful addition; they document the many regions where ornithological exploration is needed and spur interesting biogeographic questions: Why is the Common Paradise-Kingfisher (*Tanysiptera galatea*) apparently absent from much of the southern watershed? Why do species such as the White-rumped Robin (*Peneothello bimaculata*) and Barred Cuckooshrike (*Coracina lineata*) inhabit such patchy distributions?

The book demonstrates clearly that the slow pace of taxonomic and distributional knowledge is not the result of a lack of interest in New Guinean ornithology. On the contrary, the island is home to a dizzying array of species exhibiting globally unique behaviours, and is a natural laboratory for the study of biogeography and speciation. Instead, many difficulties combine to hamper ornithological knowledge within New Guinea; most regions are unsafe, poor infrastructure limits access to the majority of the island, costs are exorbitant (especially in Papua New Guinea) and research permits are difficult to nearly impossible to secure (particularly in Papua, the Indonesian half of the island). Put simply, the island of New Guinea is a much more difficult place to visit than other developing tropical regions. Independent travel is generally not recommended and only a handful of New Guineans are ornithologists or make bird-guiding their business. It is thus no surprise that biological research is minimal and most birdwatchers visit New Guinea on organised tours that patronise the few established lodges.

However, this book is about the birds – and what birds they are! A discussion of New Guinea's avian riches must start with the contortionists of the bird world, the fabulous birds of paradise (or 'BOPs'). New illustrations of displaying males show how Parotias (*Parotia* sp.) morph into dancing ballerinas, the Superb Bird of Paradise (*Lophorina superba*) becomes a blue-eyed alien and Sicklebills (*Epimachus* sp.) hang sideways from snags like giant windsocks. New Guinea boasts the finest avian architects on Earth, and the bowers of the island's bowerbirds are newly illustrated (the text states, 'to locate a bowerbird, locate its bower first' – p. 172). However, the weird and wonderful birds of New Guinea extend beyond the BOPs and bowerbirds that dominate nature documentaries, and include several species of poisonous birds, such as the Hooded Pitohui (*Pitohui dichrous*), the Blue-capped Ifrid (*Ifrita kowaldi*) (a passerine that lives in underground caves), the Greater Melampitta (*Melampitta gigantea*) and yellow-faced honeyeaters (*Melipotes* sp.) that flush bright red when excited – living mood rings.

Any book this large will suffer from some mistakes, although typographic errors are few. The illustrations are largely excellent, including for difficult-to-identify groups such as the Meliphaga sp. and scrubwrens (*Sericornis* sp.). A few quibbles: the Great Cuckoo-Dove (*Reinwardtoena reinwardti*) is much whiter than illustrated and the Slaty-headed Longbill (*Toxorhamphus poliopterus*) is mistakenly painted with a

bright yellow throat bordered by a green breast (it is not the underparts but rather the grey face and grey wings that differentiate this species from its lowland congener). The authors organise plates based on identification, grouping species by similarity rather than taxonomy in many instances. Thus, the ground-dwelling mouse-warblers (*Crateroscelis* sp.) and ground-robins (*Amalocichla* sp.) share a plate far removed from their respective relatives. While helpful to the novice, this strategy could lead to readers thinking that, for example, catbirds (*Ailuroedus* sp.) are allied with orioles (*Oriolus* sp.). There are also inconsistencies in applying new English names. Recent molecular analyses have demonstrated that the five 'pitohui' species do not form a single grouping. Thus, the Crested Pitohui becomes the Piping Bellbird (*Ornorectes cristatus*; 'Piping' to avoid confusion with the Crested Bellbird found in Australia). Yet the Rusty (*Pseudorectes ferrugineus*) and the Black Pitohui (*Melanorectes migrans*) retain their English names in the second edition, despite their closer relation to shrike-thrushes than the 'true pitohuis'.

The authors' decision to include a handbook in addition to a field guide swells the page count and increases the bulk – this book is too large and heavy to be carried in a pocket. On the positive side, the additional information is an invaluable contribution to the ornithological literature. For example, the authors provide the first published nest and egg descriptions for many species. Moreover, Pratt and Beehler seek to improve the systematics of New Guinean birds by repeatedly pointing out species complexes ripe for thorough analysis: among others, the Mountain Mouse-Warbler (*Crateroscelis robusta*) 'likely constitutes more than one species' (p. 424), the Little Shrike-thrush (*Colluricincla megarrhyncha*) is 'sorely in need of taxonomic revision' (p. 451) and the New Guinean White-eye is 'noteworthy for its puzzling distribution ... and perhaps ... represents a convenient grouping of ... phylogenetically distinct forms' (p. 500). The authors call repeatedly for genetic analyses to help answer such questions of species delimitation. Given recent advances in sequencing DNA from museum specimens and existing museum collections of New Guinean birds, this is one avenue of research that avoids the problems of conducting fieldwork in New Guinea. Such analyses will be especially helpful for subspecies with geographic overlap (e.g., lowland taxa such as the Black Berrybecker (*Melanochoris nigrus*) in the southern watershed, or the Yellow-browed/Belford's Melidectes (*Melidectes belfordi*/*M. rufocrissalis*) complex in the Central Ranges), as evidence of genetic breaks within geographically connected populations constitutes strong evidence for the existence of multiple biological species.

The second edition of *Birds of New Guinea* has been a long time in the making, but it is worth the wait. Birdwatchers and ornithologists alike will snap up this excellent book.

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