

## ■ INTRODUCTION

Australia is a vast country with more than 700 regular bird species, most of which are found nowhere else. Cassowaries, chowchillas, sittellas, and other names are unfamiliar to many visitors from North America or Europe, and this can make bird identification seem daunting. This guide, with its easy-to-understand writing style, detailed photos, and clear distribution maps, is designed to help you identify the birds you see—and make your experience of the Australian bush much more fulfilling.

The goal of this book is to make birding and bird identification accessible to the vast majority of people, while still providing a resource to more experienced birders. To achieve this, the text is written in a casual style, in the way one birder would likely describe a bird to another birder; the most important feature first, be it the plumage, a restricted range, a habitat requirement, or a bizarre habit. Then a general description is given, along with the bird's distribution, and how and where to find it. The key to birding in Australia is in understanding the habitats, so to really get the most out of this book, it is very important to read 'The Habitats of Australia' section.

There are a few different checklists and taxonomic treatments of Australian birds. This guide almost always follows the International Ornithological Congress taxonomy (*IOC World Bird List*, version 3.3), as it is the most advanced in dealing with the Australian bird families. There are a few notable deviations from the IOC taxonomy, essentially predictive in nature, where it is expected that certain birds will be described as separate species in the near future. These extra splits include Naretha Parrot (from Bluebonnet), Golden-backed Honeyeater (from Black-chinned Honeyeater), Mallee Whipbird (from Western Whipbird), Western and Northern Shrikekitts (formerly lumped with Eastern Shrikekitt as Crested Shrikekitt), and Silver-backed Butcherbird (from Grey Butcherbird). The sequence is mostly taxonomic, but we made exceptions when putting similar-looking birds together (e.g., stork, pelican, and cranes on the same plate) makes for greater ease of identification.

Birds are rarely encountered at a standard distance or in perfect lighting, so although we are using photos for comparison of birds, the species do not appear in similar positions. The photos show the diagnostic features, but the birds are in a variety of positions, because you will be watching birds that are constantly moving. The presentation in most field guides looks very static, so we have put the chaos of nature into the book. The sizes of the images and the relative sizes of the birds within them have no relation and should not be used as an indication of species' sizes. Photos that appear on left-hand pages are for artistic as much as identification purposes, and sometimes are used to show a bird in its habitat.

Bird calls and songs are very important for identification of a range of species and are well worth learning. We think that onomatopoeic descriptions do not do these vocalisations justice, and a birder is far better served learning the calls through recordings. We have elected not to devote much text to describing bird vocalisations, which do little to aid practical identification of the species.

The geographical range covered includes all of mainland Australia and Tasmania (TAS). The Cocos (Keeling) Islands, which are much closer to Java than to the Australian mainland; Lord Howe Island, 600km (375mi) east of the mainland; and Norfolk Island, which is closer to New Zealand than to Australia, are excluded, as they are very different from mainland Australia and better covered in individual volumes. The book deliberately excludes rare vagrants to the country; for the vast majority of users these would add confusion to the birding experience. The general rule is that unless recorded a few times a year, such a visitor is skipped. Most of these vagrants are hard to identify shorebirds or seabirds, and there are some very good resources for identifying them.



We generated the maps by using trip reports from birding tours, commercial private surveys, and records from *The Atlas of Australian Birds* from BirdLife Australia. Any survey or sighting is limited to accessible areas, which can be very erratic in remote regions. Large tracts of aboriginal, private, and government lands are off-limits to most people and have not been represented in any survey. There is also a very strong bias of records to more populated centres of the country and places that are birded frequently. We have tried to overcome this bias and lack of records from remote locations by extrapolating from known areas across the blank areas where the suitable habitat occurs. We use a mapping system in which the map does not show absolute population abundance of the bird, but rather shows relative abundance throughout its Australian range; faint shading shows where the bird is less common and darker shading shows where the bird is relatively more common. Some species, such as Australian Masked Owl, have such a sporadic distribution over a vast region that a standard type of map becomes almost useless, and distribution would be better represented by spots showing recent sightings. For a few species, such as the Australian Ringneck, we have mapped ranges of the individual subspecies. This is because the subspecies of this species look very different from one another, have overlapping ranges, and may be split out as separate species in the future.

Bird descriptions have been made as simple as possible; for easy groups such as honeyeaters the descriptions can be easily understood by even the novice birder. Some groups, such as shorebirds and especially seabirds, are notoriously difficult to identify even to the most experienced birder; here the terminology required to describe the birds becomes far more complex, and many words used will be new and unintelligible to casual birders. We have avoided overly complicated or convoluted descriptions where possible, but for those birds that require them, the glossary covers all terms used. A casual birder is highly unlikely to find him- or herself 100km (60mi) offshore in the Southern Ocean pouring through prion flocks, or in similar extreme conditions, so the simplified descriptions will suffice in most situations.

*Grassland fires are common in inland Australia*

