



Fiona Lumsden and her partner John at Vogelkop Bowerbird bower, West Papua.

ART FROM THE BOWERBIRDS

From her bushland home in the Blue Mountains, NSW, to the deserts of the Red Centre; from the savannahs at the tip of Cape York to the wild and remote jungles of the Vogelkop Peninsular in western New Guinea, Fiona Lumsden's birding adventures have brought her into intimate contact with the fascinating artworks of those most creative of the world's birds, the Australasian bowerbirds.

In the process of translating these artistic endeavours to paper, Fiona has discovered an empathy with the bowerbirds' trials and tribulations as they practise their skills, fuss over their arrangements and strive for perfection with their artworks.



Bowerbirds are true artists.

They paint, they decorate, they arrange, they agonise over their artworks.

The decorated courtship 'avenues, maypoles and huts' of Australasian bowerbirds are 'avian art creations', built with great attention to detail and individual flair by male suitors to impress visiting females with displays of wealth and aesthetic grandeur.

The males spend inordinate amounts of time building and decorating their bowers, or love arbours. Each bower owner collects and parades the most valuable objects he can find—rarities of special colour or shape. Like jewellery, sports cars or fancy real estate in the human world, the richest male bowerbird seeks to impress the most females.

Each bowerbird species builds a different style of bower, rather like a little theatre set made from twigs, and decorated with selected colour schemes and favoured

objects. Here he sings, dances, performs and even paints. The small bowerbird family is only found in New Guinea and Australia. There is nothing like them anywhere else on Earth. They take artistic talent to amazing heights in the bird world. They are intelligent and skilful. We are blessed to have them in our backyards.

SATIN BOWERBIRD and BRUSH MUTTONWOOD
Beauty is in the eye of the beholder and in this case it's blue. Satin Bowerbird males choose blue as the primary colour decoration at their bowers. It echoes the beautiful sapphire blue of the eyes of both sexes of Satins and the satiny blue of the fully mature male bird. They also have yellow as a popular colour, but blue is a rare colour in nature and therefore favoured. Rarity is the key to value in material objects for their decorations—just as it with humans. They symbolise wealth and aesthetic flair. In natural bush areas, away from people, their decorations are blue or yellow feathers, flowers, berries or leaves. Also, hard-to-find natural objects, like cicada shells



or snail shells, make an appearance on the bower stage.

Closer to civilisation, bowerbirds have access to a greater diversity of objects in their favourite colour blue, so it's hard to find a bower without lots of plastic straws, bottle tops, pegs and plastic rings. Our trash is their treasure. Therein lies a danger, however. Durable plastic milk bottle rings can flip and lodge in the gape of displaying bowerbirds—preventing them from eating and drinking.

Satin Bowerbirds are artists in a number of ways. Not only are their bowers decorated with prized possessions carefully arranged and rearranged to their best advantage, the bower walls are painted with berry

paste mixed and applied in the male's bill. They even hold a wad of bark in the bill to help the paint flow. The gently arched bower architecture itself, made from hundreds of trimmed twigs, is carefully designed to be a frame through which the female may view the male's performance. He uses the frame to surprise the female with choice items from stage left or right as he fluffs himself up and dances. On top of all this, he also provides a music soundtrack for his performance with complex fast-paced songs and mimicry to impress.

GOLDEN BOWERBIRD and MAYPOLE BOWER
This painting (above), in my search for subjects for this current theme, I have recreated from old fieldwork.

The Wet Tropics is a fabulous place for birdwatching—it has the most bird species of anywhere in Australia—so I have been there a number of times. The warmth and the wet supports abundant life. The humid heat of Cairns can be too extreme for a soft southerner like myself so often I head up to the Atherton Tablelands where the cooler conditions bring a different suite of birds.

One of the glowing treasures of the tropical mountains is the Golden Bowerbird. This little beauty is our smallest bowerbird, but builds our biggest bower. It is a maypole bower builder, in common with some New Guinea bowerbirds; but unique for Australia where most are avenue builders.

It constructs a double tower of sticks around saplings, to 2m high, connected by a horizontal display perch. This it decorates with copious beards of pale lichen and bunches of pale yellow flower-like seed capsules. Such big bowers are traditional pieces—they take a long time to build so they are maintained for years. Birders in the know find out where the bowers are so they can see these beautiful birds in situ.

I have been to two bowers over the years. You know when you're getting close to a bower by the bird's strange rattling, zinging call, like a spinning gold coin shuddering to a rest on a glass table. Then... the real piece of gold: gleaming in the gloomy forest, the small golden bird attending his treasure trove—like a tiny Midas who has turned himself to gold. A breathtaking reward for a bird lover. My visits were one or two decades ago and my slide photo references are dark and poor, but the memory of such beauty remains etched in my memory.

VOGELKOP BOWERBIRD BUILDING A BOWER

If you don't have the looks, perhaps wealth and artistic skill will impress!

The Vogelkop Bowerbird (opposite page), from the far western Bird's Head Peninsula of West Papua, is the drabest bowerbird in appearance. But wow, does he shine in artistic creativity and presentation!

His bower is developed from the maypole type bower favoured by a small group of Australian/Papuan bowerbirds. The tower of sticks he builds around a sapling expands horizontally a few feet up and gracefully arches down to reach the ground on three sides to make a wigwam-style hut with a front entrance. Taking months to build, thousands of stems are carefully inserted and positioned to create a fabulous theatre set for his artistic performances.

The large structure has a clean moss-planted stage floor in front of it to display the bowerbird's arduously gleaned and artfully presented placements of rare



and beautiful forest objects. The feathered set-designer places, pauses, contemplates and rearranges. Is it just so? Does it look better from this angle? Maybe I'll try it over here!

The dark recesses of the hut, with its circular runway around a central pole, are used for a cloak and dagger routine of surprise song and dance routines. When a female arrives, the male hides himself inside, emitting strange buzzing calls and complex mimicry, and every now and then dashing out in strange poses with arched neck and caped wings.

The performance is highlighted with the stage footlights of dazzling riches: orange berries, hot-pink rhododendron flowers, colourful fungi and, sometimes, more bizarrely, piles of black beetle carapaces or dung. Each male tries a different suite of novel objects to woo the female, and bower structure can vary a lot as well.

Doubtless, highly individualistic innovation in this species has evolved over time into these amazingly elaborate stage performances, art displays and architecture. Their sense of aesthetics and creativity is a wonder of the bird world.

Fiona Lumsden

These bowerbird works were featured in Fiona Lumsden's latest solo art exhibition 'Art from the Birds - Nests and Bowers' at the Blue Mountains Botanic Garden, Mt. Tomah, June-July 2017. She will be the feature artist at the Mt Wilson Spring Blossom Festival, her childhood village, 23-24 September 2017. She will also be exhibiting as part of the Blue Mountains Botanic Garden's 30th birthday 'The Garden of Earthly Delights' Botanica and Birds exhibition, 1-30 November 2017, and during the 2017 Australasian Bird Fair and Wildlife Expo at Sydney Olympic Park, 3-5 November.

www.fionalumsden.com



Fiona Lumsden draws on 40 years' experience in the field, observing and drawing birds in situ, to delve into the world of birds and bring it to others through her paintings and stories.

