

The Superb Lyrebird (*Menura novaehollandiae*)

One of the many joys of living where I do is to wake up and hear (most mornings) the lyrebird(s) singing down in the gully on my place. The Lyrebird, I think, rates as one of Australia's most unique birds. Not only because of the amazing tail plumage of the male bird but also its ability to mimic so many sounds.

The Lyrebird has been around for millions of years. Fossils of Lyrebirds have been found dating back 15 million years.

Lyrebirds live in dense forest areas and are more prevalent in damp or rainforest areas. The dense forest provides plenty of leaf and mulch from rotting vegetation that harbours their food source. It also provides them with good shelter from predators. They can also be seen foraging in open areas adjacent to the forest.

Although not an extremely large bodied bird when taking into consideration their long tail, the male Superb Lyrebird is the third longest songbird in the world with lengths up to 980 mm being recorded. The female is slightly shorter, up to 840 mm overall length.

Both the female and male bird look alike with exception of the tail feathers. The male does not develop his distinguishing tail until after he has reached the age of 2 years. Hence it is difficult to differentiate between the female and male birds under the age of 2 years old. The bird's body colouration can vary considerably but generally the upper body is brown with a lighter brown underside and head, which turns grey as the bird matures. They also display some orange-red feathers on the underside of their upper neck.



Male Lyrebird calling from a mound.

The male bird's magnificent tail consists of 16 feathers. The outer 2 feathers are dense and coloured creamy white with light and dark brown alternating stripes across the feathers. The inner feathers are fine, white and wispy. When the male displays, he arches his tail over his back and spreads the feathers outwards. This forms a canopy over his entire body extending well beyond his head. It is in this pose that his tail resembles the ancient Grecian musical instrument, the lyre, which is how the Lyrebird got its name.

Lyrebirds are territorial covering a radius of several kilometres. The male bird builds 10 to 15 mounds in his territory. These are made from soil and are about 1 metre in diameter and about 150 mm high. These mounds are used as his performance area on which he displays his tail and performs his repertoire of mimicry calls interspersed with his own natural call. During his performance he will shake his tail to display a shimmering effect, he will bob his body up and down and turn around from time to time. The longest performance I have witnessed is 25 minutes. It was a beautiful performance to watch even if it did not gain the bird a suitor on that occasion!

Many references state that the male display is to attract the female for mating purposes. Their breeding season is between June and September (generally June /July) however I have seen males display in all months of the year – maybe nobody told them about the limited breeding season!

From my experience lyrebirds do not always perform their repertoire from mounds as the majority of performances I have witnessed have been performed on the natural forest floor.



It has been recorded that females visit several males during the breeding season but it is not known if she mates with more than one male. Following mating the male takes no further part in the procreation, nesting or chick-raising process. The female will build a nest low to the ground (up to 1 metre above ground,) located on a tree stump, log or even in a dense collection of vines. The nest is constructed of twigs, leaves, ferns, grasses and moss and lined with fibrous bark and feathers. The entrance is located on one side. Only one egg per hen is laid each year. The incubation period for the egg is 50 days and the chick will remain in the nest for 6 to 10 weeks.

Lyrebird nest on a tree stump.
Photograph - Kaye Proudley

This fluffy ball with a head is a young lyrebird found in the above nest. A rare sighting indeed. Photographed by Kaye Proudley in the Hedley Range area.



The lyrebird has very large toes with long claws, up to 50mm long, enabling them to quickly move large quantities of forest floor litter through which they scavenge to find food. Their diet consists of small insect, spiders, worms and will sometimes eat some seeds. As you walk along forest tracks their diggings are often quite noticeable with loose dirt, sticks, etc. being spread across the track. This action is all part of the forest ecosystem in that it assists in the spreading and breaking down of the forest floor litter. However they can sometimes be considered a bit of a nuisance when they scavenge in non forested areas utilised by humans for other purposes such as ones front lawn or vegetable garden as their diggings can be easily 100 mm deep and even deeper depending upon the ground condition.

The Lyrebird bird is the world's best impersonator. It can mimic the sound and songs of other birds quite accurately often fooling people into the misapprehension that they are hearing the actual bird being mimicked. I am not sure if they fool the actual bird species they mimic. In addition to birds they also mimic other man made sounds that exist in their area. These include sounds such as chainsaws, dogs barking, babies crying, musical instruments and even the clicking of camera shutters.

The conservation status of the Superb Lyrebird is currently secure. This status is however threatened by several predators most of which are unfortunately introduced. Goannas are known to eat their eggs. However as goannas are generally inactive during the winter breeding season they are probably a very low threat. There have been recorded deaths from quolls and large birds such as eagles. Unfortunately the majority of deaths are human related via introduced animals such as cats, dogs and foxes and destruction of their forested areas.

The lyrebird is generally a ground dwelling bird, as it is not a very good flyer. They are capable of flying only short distances and only gaining heights in small increments. At night they roost in trees usually quite high up. To get to the top of a tree they will often fly onto a small tree or shrub adjacent to a tree from where they can launch themselves onto the lower branches of the tree. From here they will fly up and around the tree reaching the next upper branch. They continue this process until they reach the top of the tree where they roost for the night. On the way up they will often sit and call for several minutes before moving further up the tree. I have witnessed such

ascensions taking up to 20 minutes. Next morning coming down is quite a bit easier as they are quite good gliders and will often glide from the top of a tree to a low shrub or tree before flying to ground level.

The Superb lyrebird is found along the eastern coast of NSW and the south-eastern coast of Victoria. In the 1930's and 1940's due to the threat to the lyrebird from foxes, lyrebirds were introduced into southern Tasmania to ensure continuance of the species. Foxes did not exist in Tasmania at that time.

And of course the Lyrebird is also found on the reverse of our 10 cent coin.

The superb lyrebird is, as are the majority of our native birds, a protected species.

There is another species of Lyrebird found in Australia, which is the Albert's Lyrebird (*Menura alberti*), named in honour of Queen Victoria's husband Prince Albert. This species is found in a small area of coastal southern Queensland. The conservation status of the Albert's Lyrebird is endangered.

Even though they dig up our tracks and maybe our lawns and gardens I believe their beautiful displays and often heard calls far outweigh any such inconvenience. I hope you believe the same.

Landcare is about protecting and restoring our environment to allow all forms of nature (fauna and flora) to survive in harmony and balance. I do not claim to be an expert on Flora and Fauna but have based this article on my own experiences and readings on the subject.

So as part of the Bingi Landcare newsletter, with each publication, I aim to contribute an article on a species of either fauna or flora which is indigenous to our area to stimulate interest in our native flora and fauna.

In addition I also invite everyone to forward their own experiences and photographs so these can be shared with other members by including them in the newsletter.

Your contributions can be emailed direct to me at jd@incitegraphics.com.au or to Kaye Proudley at katbingi@harboursat.com.au

(Author John McClumpha, Hedley Range Road, April 2014)