

# J. A. Leach's *Australian Bird Book*: at the interface of science and recreation

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## ABSTRACT

*An Australian Bird Book* by J. A. Leach, published in 1911, was the first field guide to Australia's avifauna. Unlike today's field guides, it was not tightly focussed on identification, instead devoting more than half its words to an expansive dissertation on the natural history of birds. This article scrutinises and contextualises Leach's *Bird Book* to illuminate some of the interconnections between science, birdwatching, recreation and conservation in early twentieth-century Australia. It shows how Leach's heavy weighting on natural history was integral to his promotion of birdwatching as an edifying recreation that would lead people not merely to be able to name the birds they saw but also, more importantly, to understand, cherish and protect them.

**Keywords:** Australian nationalism, birdwatching, conservation, field guides, natural history, nature study, ornithology, popular science, recreation.

## Introduction

In 1911, John Leach launched a lasting innovation in Australian bird observation. He published *An Australian Bird Book*, with a subtitle announcing its novelty: *a Pocket Book for Field Use* (Fig. 1). This was the first field guide to Australia's birds. Its publication signalled the advent of birdwatching as a hobby on this continent. Before Leach's book, there were handbooks and keys for identifying Australian birds, but they were not intended for field use and were not particularly useful for identifying live birds. They were meant for birds in the hand, not birds in the bush: for identifying dead specimens rather than fluttering, flighty wild creatures. Leach's *Bird Book* was for the lively ones.

In Australia, as throughout the Western World, the field guide helped drive a crucial shift in birding practice, away from amassing collections of specimens and toward field observation. Beyond that, field guides promoted the pastime of people gaining pleasure from seeing and identifying birds in the wild: from being able, as Leach put it, 'to name the birds they meet.'<sup>1</sup> Technological innovations, especially in optical equipment and cameras, pushed in the same direction, but access to a portable, field-friendly identification aid was essential to the making of the modern pastime of birdwatching.<sup>2</sup> Today, such access is taken for granted not only by dedicated birders but also by the large sector of the public who purchase the myriad field guides now available in print and electronic formats. Yet the advent of the field guide marked a key moment in the interface between human and avian species. As the American environmental historian, Thomas Dunlap, has shown, the history of birding field guides can cast a revealing light not only on the past of a modern pastime, but also on how human appreciations of nature have changed.<sup>3</sup>

While Leach's book was, and was intended to be, a boon to those who delighted in birdwatching as a recreation, it was at the same time overtly scientific in content. Each bird was allocated to its correct taxonomic category, and the information on avian systematics went far beyond anything useful for identification in the field. More strikingly

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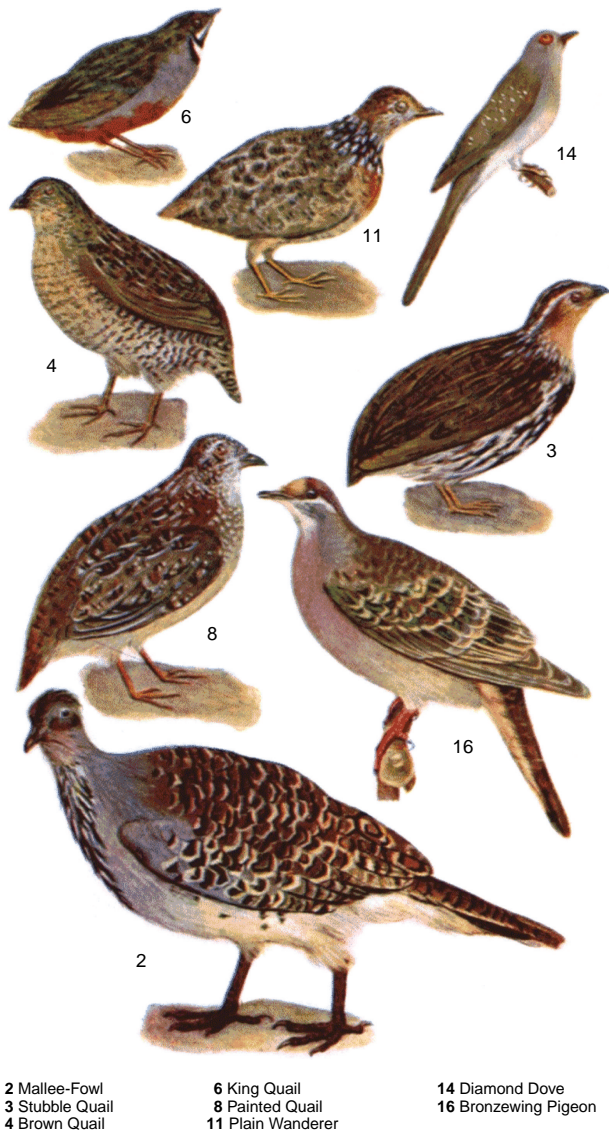
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<sup>1</sup>Leach (1911) p. 7.

<sup>2</sup>Barrow (1998) pp. 154–181; Weidensaul (2007) pp. 145–226; Hickey (1943) pp. 3–21.

<sup>3</sup>Dunlap (2011).



**Fig. 1.** Frontispiece of J. A. Leach, *An Australian Bird Book*, Whitcome & Tombs, Melbourne, 1911.

still, the book contained two adjacent but distinct texts. One text, usually placed at the top of each page, comprised descriptive notes to aid identification. The other, which ran as a cohesive passage of prose from the beginning of the book to its end and was usually placed in the lower half of each page, was a dissertation on the natural history of birds. Leach called it, aptly, 'A lecture'. Consuming approximately half the book's page space and more than half its words, the lecture encompassed a remarkable miscellany of topics, including speculations on the configuration of Earth's continents, discussion of the ideas of Alfred Russel Wallace and

Charles Darwin, assessments of the size of the mutton-bird harvest on Cape Barren Island, musings on the purpose of the double-storied nest of the Yellow-rumped Thornbill, comparison of the musical talents of British and Australian songbirds, and reflections on the evolutionary significance of coloured wing-patches.

Birdwatching evolved from the popular natural history of the Victorian era and carried an evident legacy from its progenitor. This was the case everywhere, but, as Dunlap explains, the degree of retention of the natural history legacy varied between nations. In the United States of America, the natural history component was quickly overtaken by the recreational aspects of birding, such that by the 1910s birdwatching was described as a 'game' and a 'sport,' and competitions for the biggest tallies of sightings were already coming to the fore. In Australia, Britain and New Zealand, the natural history component was more enduring and more salient.<sup>4</sup> Leach's *Bird Book* certainly bears this out in Australia's case. It went through nine editions, the last published in 1958, remained in print until the 1970s, and in all editions the natural history exposition occupied as many pages as it had in the first. It seems to have been considered an indispensable part of Leach's book and its retention perpetuated a conception of birdwatching as a species of edifying recreation.

Leach was among the very few early-twentieth-century Australian ornithologists with formal scientific qualifications. When his *Bird Book* was published, he held a Master of Science degree with First Class Honours in biology from the University of Melbourne and was studying for the degree of Doctor of Science at the same university. The doctorate was awarded in 1912 for a two-part thesis, one on the myology and classification of *Strepera* (Currawongs), the other a revision of the lampreys of Victoria.<sup>5</sup> His academic studies had a strong focus on taxonomy and systematics, then at the forefront of ornithological science. Ironically, though, the author of Australia's first field guide had limited expertise in field ornithology. 'Scarcely a field ornithologist' was how Leach was characterised by Tom Iredale, himself a leading systematist.<sup>6</sup> Fellow ornithologist Charles Bryant described Leach as 'largely a cabinet man, concerned with systematic and taxonomic ornithology.'<sup>7</sup>

Although exceptionally scientifically credentialed by the standards of the day, Leach was not a professional ornithologist. He was a former schoolteacher who by 1911 had risen to the rank of inspector in the Victorian Education Department. Yet while not a professional ornithologist, the term 'amateur' scarcely fits either, for his employment was primarily in the domain of nature studies, with strong and evident connections with both his academic qualifications

<sup>4</sup>Dunlap (2011) pp. 3–7, 57–89, 203–204.

<sup>5</sup>Kloot (1986). Croll (1930).

<sup>6</sup>Iredale (1930) p. 177.

<sup>7</sup>Bryant (1958) p. vi.

and his ornithological interests. He can be seen as straddling an amateur/professional divide, which at the time was neither deep nor unbridgeable. Such straddling may have been quite common, for historians who have appraised the relationships between amateur and professional forms of ornithology have found high levels of mutual interdependence, at least until after the Second World War, to the extent that the boundary between them was fuzzy.<sup>8</sup>

Despite his scientific qualifications and reputation for a somewhat stiff 'academic' manner,<sup>9</sup> Leach's lasting achievements were as a populariser and propagandist. In 1909, he had been among the founders of the Gould League of Bird Lovers, which, first in Victoria, later in other states, proselytised on the need to cherish and protect Australia's native birds, especially among schoolchildren. As its first honorary secretary, Leach played a prominent role in the league's activities until his death in 1929, after which his crucial contribution was commemorated in the annual award of the Leach Memorial Prize.<sup>10</sup> A tireless promoter of nature studies in Victorian schools, in 1922 he published a 500-page book that was among Australia's leading works in that field.<sup>11</sup> Leach was a long-standing member of Australia's premier ornithological body, the Royal Australasian Ornithologists' Union (RAOU), its president from 1922 to 1924 and editor of its journal, *The Emu*, from 1914 to 1924. From the mid-1920s, he broadcasted a weekly natural history program over Radio 3LO in Melbourne. However, his *Australian Bird Book* was his most popular and enduring legacy. Using it as a foundation, this article will illuminate some of the interconnections between science, birdwatching, recreation and conservation in early twentieth-century Australia.

## Before Leach's Bird Book

A tradition of finely illustrated books on Australia's avian natural history began in the early nineteenth century and reached its apogee in John Gould's exquisite publications of the 1840s to 1860s. These books, essentially art in the service of science, were not meant for the field nor was identification their objective, although Silvester Diggles implied that readers might consult his 1877 *Companion to Gould's Handbook* to identify birds.<sup>12</sup> With two volumes, each measuring 280 by 370 by 38 mm, Diggles' *Companion* was certainly not one for field excursions.

The first books with identification as their primary objective were keys for use on dead specimens. Robert Hall's

*A Key to the Birds of Australia and Tasmania with Their Geographical Distribution in Australia*, first published in 1899 with a second edition in 1906, can be taken as exemplary. It was a highly technical work, which set out the faunal sub-regions of Australia (Torresian, Bassian, Eyrean, first elaborated by Baldwin Spencer in 1896), divided each into several 'areas' and specified the number of genera and species to be found in each area as well as the number of such taxa not found in a particular area but found in adjacent and nearby areas.<sup>13</sup> Even so, Hall's Key was much more tightly focussed on identification and had less general natural history content than Leach's field guide.

Hall's descriptions were detailed and, being angled at identifying hand-held specimens, included minutiae of plumage imperceptible to the field observer of the day. He described what is now known as the Spotted Quail-thrush as follows:

GENUS CINCLUSOMA. Tarsus one-fourth the length of tail.

212. *C. punctatum*, Lath., Spotted Babbling-Thrush (Ground-Thrush). Adult male, forehead and chest ashy-grey; crown of head, back, rump, and middle tail feathers rufous-brown; each feather of back striped with black; shoulders and wing coverts steel black, each feather with white spot at tip; throat and narrow band across chest steel-black. Female has throat greyish-white instead of black; spot on neck rufous instead of white, and has no black breast band.<sup>14</sup>

There were no descriptions of calls or behaviour since specimen birds neither sang nor moved.

In 1905, A. G. Campbell published *A Dichotomous Key to the Birds of Australia* as a supplement to volume 5 of *The Emu*. This did not provide full descriptions of species, but rather specified, in a numbered list, certain attributes that when compared and correlated would lead to the accurate identification of a bird. Matching bird with name was its sole purpose, but it was a cumbersome key and could achieve that purpose only for birds in the hand. However, Campbell ended his introduction by appealing to fellow ornithologists to 'give any advice that may improve the Key, especially with the view of making it *applicable to work in the open*, without the destruction of bird life.'<sup>15</sup> Campbell evidently liked the idea of a field guide and hoped his own *Dichotomous Key* might advance the development of one. It seems that growing sensitivities over the slaughter of birds

<sup>8</sup>Weidensaul (2007). Barrow (1998). On the amateur/professional distinction in Australian ornithology see Robin (2001).

<sup>9</sup>Bryant (1958) p. vi.

<sup>10</sup>Robin (2001) pp. 81–82; Beck (1953–1954) pp. 19–20.

<sup>11</sup>Leach (1922); Kass (2018) p. 114.

<sup>12</sup>Diggles (1877).

<sup>13</sup>Hall (1899) pp. v–viii.

<sup>14</sup>Hall (1899) p. 27.

<sup>15</sup>Campbell (1905) p. 4. Italics in original.

for ornithological study were pushing Australian birders toward devising means of identification that did not involve killing the subjects of study.

Creating a field guide was also stimulated by the relative stabilisation of Australian ornithology after the turn of the twentieth century. The European discovery and naming of Australian birds, which had proceeded at dizzying pace in the previous century, was slowing. New discoveries were still to be made, but Australian ornithology was entering a phase whereby imposing order on a body of scientific knowledge was taking precedence over discovering new species. A field guide was feasible only when ornithological science had reached such a level of sophistication.

Three years before his *Bird Book*, Leach published a predecessor work, *A Descriptive List of the Birds Native to Victoria*. It was a supplement to the *Education Gazette* and Leach explained that its purpose was ‘to assist teachers in recognising, in the living state, some of the birds of their school district, and so enabling them more fully to interest their pupils in one of the best branches of nature-study.’<sup>16</sup> So it was a field guide of sorts, but one not intended for use by the general public. It had no illustrations and perhaps to compensate for that lack, the written descriptions were fuller than those in the *Bird Book*.

Indicative of the fact that killing birds to identify them was still common practice, Leach felt obliged to explicitly censure it:

It is earnestly hoped that no bird will be killed for the purpose of identification, but that teachers will note the approximate size, class of country the bird lives in, any particular markings on it, and any peculiar habits it possesses. Then turn to these notes .... In most cases, in the field, a ready identification can be made, and frequent observation will enable one to pick out the white eyebrow, the tiny red spot, or the faintly-streaked chest, &c., which enables the skilled observer to be sure of the identity of our feathered friends.<sup>17</sup>

By contrast and around the same time, Charles Belcher, a foundation member of both the RAOU and the Bird Observers Club, endorsed killing birds—in limited numbers—for identification purposes and maintained that certain species were impossible to distinguish in the field. He added that he was ‘very loth to suggest [shooting] in the case of rare birds.’<sup>18</sup> It took decades of argument, plus the ever-increasing sophistication of field guides and optical equipment, to sever the link between killing and identifying.<sup>19</sup>

Leach’s *Descriptive List of the Birds Native to Victoria* provided the foundations for his 1911 book, but also gave rise to one of the latter’s major shortcomings. Despite the promise of its title, *An Australian Bird Book* was not Australia-wide in coverage. It was a field guide to the birds of Victoria, a fact acknowledged in the preface, although in a round-about way. ‘This little book,’ it specified, covered ‘100% of the birds found in Victoria,’ 92.5% of those in South Australia and a diminishing percentage of the birds in other states, down to the lowest, 78.15% of Queensland’s birds.<sup>20</sup> The coverage of birds from outside Victoria followed simply from the fact that most species’ distributions transcended state boundaries. Not until the fifth edition of 1923 were non-Victorian species added to the book, and then it was done in perfunctory fashion: a 31-page ‘Supplement’ was tacked onto the end, listing 301 species from outside Victoria, with minimal descriptions, few illustrations and a separate index.

Whereas Leach’s *Descriptive List* was explicitly a reference work for schoolteachers, his *Bird Book* reached out to a much wider audience. The latter book was intended partly for use in schools (as well as by the general public) though not primarily by teachers but rather by their pupils. It was adopted as a textbook in the nature study classes that took a prominent place in the Victorian school curriculum in the early twentieth century and it was actively promoted by another primarily school-based organisation, the Gould League of Bird Lovers. Although school children were among the *Bird Book*’s intended audience, it demanded of its readers a substantial level of scientific literacy, as the following section shows.

## Information and identification

When Leach published his *Bird Book*, the field guide was a new genre, not only in Australia but globally. Which guide was the first is contestable, but a good case can be made for *Birds Through an Opera Glass* by the American naturalist Florence Merriam, published in 1889.<sup>21</sup> By 1911, North Americans had several field guides to choose from, including another by Florence Merriam, *Birds of Village and Field* (1898), a quite sophisticated guide by Frank Chapman, *Colour Key to North American Birds* (1903) and two pocket-sized books by Chester Reed (1906). Britain lagged somewhat, with Americans arguably leading the field in innovating the bird guide.<sup>22</sup> However, as Dunlap explains, for at least the first several decades of the genre’s

<sup>16</sup>Leach (1908) p. 3.

<sup>17</sup>Leach (1908) p. 4.

<sup>18</sup>Belcher (1914) pp. 19, 80, 213, 272.

<sup>19</sup>Barrow (1998) pp. 175–181. Moss (2004) pp. 91–93, 135. Weidensaul (2007) pp. 176–186.

<sup>20</sup>Leach (1911) p. 7.

<sup>21</sup>Dunlap (2011) pp. 17–18. Barrow (1998) pp. 156–157. Weidensaul (2007) pp. 134–135.

<sup>22</sup>Moss (2004) p. 136.

development, authors of guides were still feeling their way, unsure of what information to include, what to exclude, how to depict birds to facilitate field identification and how best to correlate words with illustrations.<sup>23</sup> Getting the right balance between the detail needed for identification and information of broader interest was a delicate task and many of the early American guides still included substantial material of little relevance to identifying a bird. Leach's weighting of natural history was at the far end of the spectrum.

Leach's fascination with taxonomy and systematics, then among the foremost issues in bird study, is evident in his *Bird Book*. In the preface, he announced his adherence to the classification system of the distinguished British ornithologist, Richard Bowdler Sharpe, and through the text made occasional references to this scientist's authority. Indeed, Leach held Sharpe's authority in such high esteem that he put it beyond dispute. At the beginning of his discussion of the passerines, he expressed some reservations about Sharpe's classification of the families within this order, but cut short his own questioning by flatly stating: 'However, Sharpe's classification represents the latest thought of scientists on this difficult matter, so it must be adopted here.'<sup>24</sup>

Not all ornithologists were so deferential to authority. In fact, in the early twentieth century, taxonomy and systematics were arenas of fierce dispute, and Leach happened to publish his *Bird Book* at a moment when those disputes in Australian ornithology were about to break into open war. Leading the rebellion was Gregory Mathews, who around 1912 abandoned his earlier adherence to Sharpe's system, and became a vocal advocate of trinomial nomenclature and an enthusiastic splitter, not only of species but also of genera. For decades thereafter, Mathews' forever-changing classifications were at the centre of taxonomic discord among Australian ornithologists.<sup>25</sup> Leach was well aware of the taxonomic fracas: he was a participant on the anti-Mathews side.<sup>26</sup> However, in the many editions of his *Bird Book* that were issued while those disputes raged, he gave no hint of their existence, other than an occasional gentle gibe against ornithologists 'manufacturing species.'<sup>27</sup> Instead, he continued to proffer Sharpe's classifications as if they were the last word in systematics. Rigorous scientist though he was, this book was intended to encourage people to love and understand birds, not to inform them of the bickering that bedevilled bird-study.

While Leach realised that taxonomic battles were not suitable topics for a popular book, he apparently considered a solid dose of systematics entirely appropriate. His bird list began with the upper-case and bolded heading

'CLASS. – AVES. – BIRDS.' followed by 'Sub-Class I – Palaeognathae. Ratitae and Tinamidae', under which two families were named, 'Rheidae' and 'Struthionidae,' with the information that these contain, respectively, three and four species. None of those species occur in Australia, so the only further information Leach provided was an indication of the biogeographical region to which they belong. Next came the order Casuariiformes, which included a family, Dromaeidae, containing a species, *Dromaius novae-hollandiae* (Emu) which is found in Australia and so became the first for which an illustration and description were provided.

So Leach proceeded throughout the book, specifying subclasses and orders and the number of families in each, even when (as was often the case) that family had no representative in Australia. In the latter instance, the only further information provided was the biogeographical region where its members can be found, whereas for any with Australian (actually Victorian) species, identification material and illustrations were provided. Such comprehensive listing at the order and family level may have been intended to reinforce the book's scientific credentials, although it was a topic that would have interested contemporary birders and it clearly positioned the birds of Australia in global context to an extent that modern field guides, with their resolute focus on identification, do not. Leach was explicit about providing a global perspective, stating that: 'The families of the birds of the world have been included, so that the observer can see where the bird he is observing is placed amongst the world's birds.'<sup>28</sup>

While Leach's *Bird Book* provided far more detail on avian systematics than today's field guides do, the identification component of Leach's book was more rudimentary. The illustrations were based on mounted museum specimens; most were black and white; many were not well executed; some were downright dreadful (Fig. 2). The textual descriptions of species were brief, and while helpful to the field observer, they provided minimal information on plumage, habits and habitat. Even more minimal was information on bird calls and songs.

For non-passerines, Leach seldom gave any indication of a species' call. On the few occasions he did, the information was unhelpful for identification. For example, he gave a single-word descriptor for the call of the Rainbow Lorikeet—'Screech'—and applied the same descriptor to all the lorikeets. For passerines, he gave an indication of the call more frequently, though inconsistently, so that for perhaps half the passerines, no call or song was described. Often, the descriptions were unhelpful as identification aids and lacking in

<sup>23</sup>Dunlap (2011) pp. 7–8, 15–63.

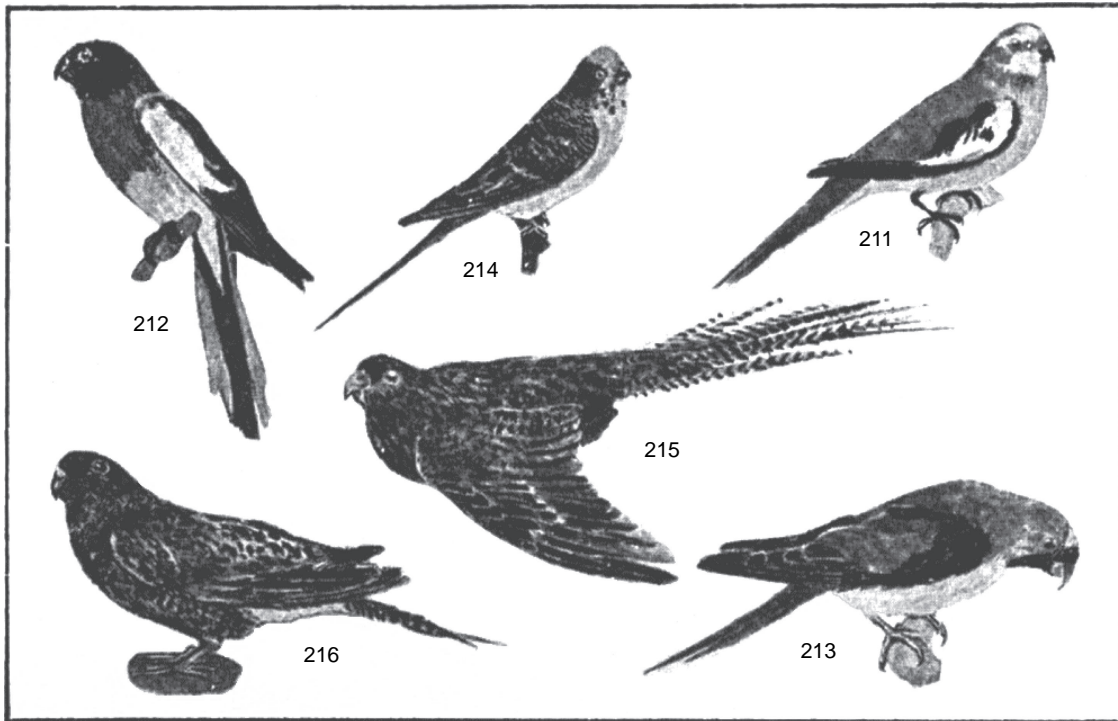
<sup>24</sup>Leach (1911) p. 119.

<sup>25</sup>Serventy (1950). Robin (2001) pp. 49–70.

<sup>26</sup>See for example Leach (1928).

<sup>27</sup>Leach (1911) p. 85.

<sup>28</sup>Leach (1911) p. 7.



**Fig. 2.** Monochrome illustrations of Red-shouldered Grass-parrot (now Turquoise Parrot) 211, Scarlet-chested Grass-parrot 212, Swift Parrot 213, Warbling Grass-parrot (now Budgerigar) 214, Ground Parrot 215 and Night Parrot 216 from Leach (1911) p. 103.

detail. The White-throated Flyeater (now White-throated Gerygone) was dubbed ‘Musician’ but that single word was the only indication he gave of the silvery melody of this exceptionally gifted songster. On the calls of the Noisy Miner, he simply stated ‘Noisy.’ Some passerine’s calls were better described. That of the White-cheeked Honeyeater, for example, was given as ‘Clear double whistling note.’ But most of the slim information he gave on bird calls was of dubious helpfulness as an identification aid.

Leach commented on bird calls and songs more often in his lecture than in his descriptive notes. His commentary was usually in praise of the beauty of Australian birdsong, sometimes comparing (favourably) this country’s songbirds with those of Britain and Europe. He waxed lyrical about the musicality of some Australian birds, such as the Magpie and Grey Shrike-thrush, but that was to extol the worth of birds, not to identify them.

While scientific nomenclature was among Leach’s primary interests, he also took a keen interest in vernacular names. In particular, he insisted that vernacular names should foster feelings for birds, encouraging people to love and cherish the feathered fauna around them. ‘We need good descriptive names for our varied and beautiful birds—more children’s and poets’ names, and less of the

deadly formal “Yellow-vented Parrakeet,” “Blue-bellied Lorikeet,” and “Warty-faced Honeyeater” for some of the most glorious of the world’s birds.<sup>29</sup> In the introduction he wrote for Leach’s book, Frank Tate, Victoria’s Director of Education, also urged the adoption of ‘names a poet or child can use.’<sup>30</sup> Such pleas were common among bird-lovers of the day, on the understanding that attractive names encouraged emotional attachments to the birds and thereby promoted their preservation.<sup>31</sup>

## Nature and nation

Leach began his lecture in *An Australian Bird Book* with a recitation of the then-commonplace idea that Australia was biologically an evolutionary backwater, which had been ‘shut off from the severe competition experienced by the animals of northern lands.’ Using imagery that was already clichéd, he explained that Australia had become ‘a great living “museum,” stocked with marvels of many kinds, including so-called “living fossils,” the sole survivors of otherwise extinct groups of animals.’ But this generalisation, he cautioned, ‘was based mainly on the study of mammals’ and was only partially applicable to Australia’s avifauna.

<sup>29</sup>Leach (1911) p. 74.

<sup>30</sup>Tate (1911) p. 4.

<sup>31</sup>McGregor (2019) pp. 56–58.

Leach acknowledged that Australia possessed some ‘unique archaic forms of [bird] life, such as the Emu, Cassowary, Mound-Builders, and Lyre-Birds,’ but ‘with regards to birds, the term “fossil continent” applied to Australia is not appropriate.’

Further, many well-known birds, such as Pigeons, Parrots, and Kingfishers, reach their highest development in the Australian region, and, more important still, the whole bird world seems to reach its culminating point in this wonderland. It is a factor adding to the interest of Australia’s fauna that three of the four families placed at the head of the bird world in the natural system of classification adopted by ornithologists ... should be absolutely confined to the Australian Continent and adjacent islands. Thus Australia can justly claim to be the most highly developed of regions, so far as birds are concerned, for Bower-Birds, Birds of Paradise, and Bell-Magpies (*Streperas*) are peculiar, while the penultimate family—the Crow family—is shared with the other regions of the world.<sup>32</sup>

There is a note of nationalism here, as if Australia’s ‘highly developed’ birdlife lifted the status of the country’s fauna—and implicitly the country itself—in a way its ‘primitive’ marsupials could not (Fig. 3).

Later, he boasted of the number of families of song-birds Australia possessed, compared to Britain, India, North America and South America. Getting down to the species level, he observed that:

while only 89 Song-Birds have been recorded as permanent residents of, or regular visitors to, Britain, almost 500 species of Song-Birds have, so far, been recorded from Australia and Tasmania. Of these, 157 have been recorded from Victoria, and are illustrated in this volume. And yet, we are told, this is a land of songless birds.<sup>33</sup>

Rebutting the ‘songless birds’ slur, famously made by the poet Adam Lindsay Gordon in 1870, was by the early twentieth century a stock-in-trade of nationalist naturalists in Australia.<sup>34</sup>

Nationalism permeates the pages of Leach’s *Bird Book*, sometimes more overtly than in the passages quoted above. Often, nationalism was yoked to a conservationist message, as in Leach’s following his affirmation of the ‘highly developed’ status of Australia’s avifauna with the declaration that: ‘Since the birds native to Australia are so interesting in themselves,



384 Spangled Drongo      386 Spotted Bower-Bird      392 Pied Bell-Magpie  
385 Satin Bower-Bird      390 Apostle-Bird      394 Gray Bell-Magpie  
385A „ „ (Female)      391 White-winged Chough

**Fig. 3.** Some of Australia’s ‘highly developed’ birdlife from Leach (1911) p. 183.

and are so varied in kind, Australians should know, love, and jealously protect these beautiful creatures.’<sup>35</sup> Indeed, nationalism and conservationism were intimately tied together, in this book and in much contemporary Australian nature writing.<sup>36</sup>

While Leach’s lecture was suffused with a nationalist-flavoured conservationism, the book’s introduction by Frank Tate was even more so. As Victoria’s Director of Education, Tate had been a leading figure in introducing nature study classes into the state’s schools. He began his

<sup>32</sup>Leach (1911) pp. 11–12. There was sometimes slippage in Leach’s use of the term ‘Australia’. Usually, it designated the territory of the Commonwealth of Australia, but sometimes he used it in the sense of the biogeographical ‘Australian Region,’ encompassing the South Pacific and islands lying south-east of Wallace’s Line.

<sup>33</sup>Leach (1911) pp. 119–120.

<sup>34</sup>McGregor (2019) p. 84.

<sup>35</sup>Leach (1911) p. 12.

<sup>36</sup>McGregor (2021).

introduction with high praise for the cultural consequences of his own innovation:

Nature-study in our schools is fast producing a generation of Australians trained to look upon the characteristic beauties of our Australian skies, our trees, our flowers, our birds with a passionate appreciation almost unknown to our pioneering fathers and mothers.<sup>37</sup>

Throughout the introduction, he hammered the point that the Australian colonists had once been alienated from this continent's nature, but more recently—substantially under the influence of school nature studies—they were coming to appreciate the natural world around them and thereby coming to feel at home in this country.

Much of Tate's rhetoric is reminiscent of that of the Australian Natives' Association (ANA), a nationalist association celebrating the native-born. Like the ANA, Tate emphasised the importance of generational change:

To our parents, Australia was a stranger land, and they were sojourners here. Though they lived here, they did not get close enough to it to appreciate fully its natural beauty and its charm. To us, and especially to our children, children of Australian-born parents, children whose bones were made in Australia, the place is home. To them Nature makes a direct appeal, strengthened by those most powerful of all associations, those gathered in childhood, when the foundations of their minds were laid.

A little later, he railed against the 'generally received opinion that the dominant note of our scenery is weird melancholy.' This was the view of 'those who were bred elsewhere .... It will not be the opinion of the native-born when they find appropriate speech.'<sup>38</sup>

To help them find 'appropriate speech,' he urged they find evocative and attractive names for the birds. Aesthetics were a vital part of bird study and appreciation, Tate argued, pointing out that nature and culture were not disjoint domains but fused together in human experience. Appealing for emotional and aesthetic responses to the birds around us, Tate insisted that:

we must get to know and to love our feathered friends. Mr. Leach in his lecture has dwelt sufficiently on the economic and scientific value of bird-study. Let me enter a plea for bird-study as a source of æsthetic pleasure.

Before our Australian birds can be to us what the Thrush and the Blackbird and the Linnet and the Lark and the Nightingale are to the British boy, we must have a wealth of association around them from song and story. And this association must grow up with us from childhood if it is to make the strongest appeal to us. It can rarely be acquired in later life.<sup>39</sup>

In fact, while Leach did dwell on 'the economic and scientific value of bird-study,' he did not ignore the emotional and aesthetic elements.

Leach's conservationist advocacy, nonetheless, put greatest weight on the economic value of birds, particularly their usefulness as destroyers of insect pests. This accorded with a great deal of contemporary conservationism.<sup>40</sup> Within that utilitarian calculus, few birds ranked higher than ibises, and Leach agreed with his fellow conservationists in rating the members of this family 'a valuable asset to Australia' for their 'insatiable appetite for grasshoppers and other insects.'<sup>41</sup> Ibises were then classified as members of the order Ardeiformes, along with egrets, herons, spoonbills and bitterns. In Leach's judgement, all members of the order were beneficial to human enterprise and therefore worthy of preservation: 'Eating grasshoppers and other insects in great numbers, they are friends of the farmer and grazier. Destroying yabbies and other burrowing water animals, they are valuable allies of the irrigationist, and it is decidedly bad policy to shoot one.'<sup>42</sup>

The shooting of members of one family of Ardeiformes had been a target of global protest since the turn of the twentieth century. Leach joined his voice to the campaign against the trade in egret plumes, then used in ladies' millinery. Deploying the emotive rhetoric and imagery that had become entrenched in the anti-plume-trade protests, he fulminated against the slaughter of egrets:

Man's cupidity and selfishness, and woman's desire for ornament, seem to have doomed these birds to total extermination, for the plume trade, which is responsible for some of the 'most abominable cruelty practised in the animal world,' is a war of extermination. Egrets are shy, and are approachable only in the breeding season .... It is just then that the plume-hunters visit the rookeries and shoot the parents, leaving the helpless, almost fully-fledged, young to die in the nest, so high overhead. And all for what? Could anyone who has seen the devastated nests, with the famished bodies of the fledglings

<sup>37</sup>Tate (1911) p. 1.

<sup>38</sup>Tate (1911) pp. 2, 3.

<sup>39</sup>Tate (1911) p. 5.

<sup>40</sup>See for example Hall (1907). Froggatt (1921). A few contemporary naturalists disagreed. Charles Belcher, for example, stated that 'the argument that we should study and protect our native birds because of their economic utility leaves me rather cold' and that their aesthetic attractiveness provided more compelling reasons; Belcher (1914) pp. vii–viii.

<sup>41</sup>Leach (1911) p. 54.

<sup>42</sup>Leach (1911) p. 59.



rotting in the sun, ever take pleasure in Egret plumes decking the head of a sister or wife? Women of refinement and tender heart will refuse to wear the proceeds of human cruelty.<sup>43</sup>

Like other opponents of the plume trade, Leach was appalled by the cruelty it entailed; he valued egrets for aesthetic reasons, calling them ‘those beautiful birds’; but he sealed their case on the grounds of usefulness, for the egret was ‘a valuable insect destroyer.’<sup>44</sup>

Several times, Leach made the point that birds’ value as pest controllers far outweighed their worth for the table. A quail, for example, ‘may be worth a few pence as a table bird; [but] it is worth many shillings as a pest destroyer.’<sup>45</sup> Similarly, he wrote of the Australian Bustard that: ‘As it is a good table bird, it is generally shot on sight. This is a mistake, as it is worth many times its table value as an insect destroyer.’<sup>46</sup> Sometimes, however, Leach commented on a species’ culinary quality without the saving proviso. This was the case for the Australian Teal (now Chestnut Teal) which he ranked ‘a good table bird.’<sup>47</sup> Perhaps he failed to add a cautionary comment because teal are not insect eaters. That reason, too, probably accounts for his assessment that the Australian Shelduck should be conserved for aesthetic rather than utilitarian purposes: ‘As it is unfit for the table, it should be spared as an ornament to the landscape.’<sup>48</sup> In any event, Leach remarked fairly often, though briefly, on birds’ table quality, in ways that suggest he was not averse to people eating them. Commentary on the table quality of various bird species was quite common in other ornithological writings around this time.<sup>49</sup>

Consistent with the utilitarian conservationism he foregrounded, Leach censured the indiscriminate killing of birds but acknowledged that there were circumstances when birds should be culled:

It is open to serious doubt if it pays commercially to kill indiscriminately any kind of bird found on this continent. It may, of course, happen that one individual bird has learnt where to get an easy food supply at the expense of a farmer or orchardist. Such a bird could be kept away. To kill birds at all times, because of the damage done by a few at a particular time, is foolish.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>43</sup>Leach (1911) p. 54.

<sup>44</sup>Leach (1911) p. 59.

<sup>45</sup>Leach (1911) p. 17.

<sup>46</sup>Leach (1911) p. 51.

<sup>47</sup>Leach (1911) p. 64.

<sup>48</sup>Leach (1911) p. 63.

<sup>49</sup>See for example Lucas and Le Souëf (1911) pp. 16, 228. Belcher (1914) pp. 94, 126, 132. Berney (1907) pp. 156–158.

<sup>50</sup>Leach (1911) p. 114.

<sup>51</sup>Johnson (2004) pp. 527–540. Robin (1997) pp. 68–70.

<sup>52</sup>Leach (1911) pp. 74, 81.

<sup>53</sup>Leach (1911) pp. 119, 141.

<sup>54</sup>Leach (1911) pp. 187, 190.

Such passages also point to the fact that Leach’s conservation advocacy tended to be directed against specific actions by people, particularly shooting but also trapping, felling trees and so forth. In 1911, ecology was only beginning to be noticed by ornithologists, and conservationists tended more to censure specific destructive acts than to assert the need to safeguard the integrity of ecosystems.<sup>51</sup>

In any event, Leach’s strictures against shooting birds were not misplaced. Shooting was then commonplace. After describing the Wedge-tailed Eagle as a bold and elegant bird of which Australians should be proud, he lamented that instead: ‘Let our noble bird appear near a house, and there is a rush for a gun.’ Other raptors were shot with equal alacrity.<sup>52</sup> He intimated, however, that bird-shooting and nest-robbing as youthful pastimes were in decline, desirable developments for which he gave much credit to institutions he was instrumental in creating, the Gould League of Bird Lovers and its associated Bird Day. Small boys armed with pea-rifles were ‘probably the worst’ enemies of the Superb-Warbler (Superb Fairy-wren), he chided, adding that: ‘However, Bird Day in the schools did much good, and the next generation of boy will probably have less of the savage in him.’<sup>53</sup>

In the concluding paragraphs, Leach essayed a rousing and instructional combination of conservation and nationalism:

Australians! Realise that you live in a land favoured far beyond most as regards birds, and that you have a duty to perform in preserving as many as possible of these unique, interesting, and valuable forms for posterity. Teachers! Your influence is more potent than all the legislation. Bird lovers already freely acknowledge the fundamental change that has come over the schoolboy since the introduction of nature-study, and they look to you with confidence to extend greatly the good work of cultivating an interest and a pride in things Australian, for this interest will eradicate the once almost-universal, but now rapidly-disappearing, desire for slaughter of anything wearing a feather.<sup>54</sup>

## Reception and legacy

‘This is the book that we have all been waiting for,’ the eminent naturalist and conservationist David Stead declared

when Leach's field guide first appeared. Praising its text, layout, illustrations and affordability, he added that it 'will go far towards making that true patriotism ... which finds its origins in a love of the wild things of our land.'<sup>55</sup> The reviewer in *The Emu* was equally enthusiastic, asserting that this 'little "bird book" is probably the best of its kind extant.'<sup>56</sup> It was considered sufficiently important to be reviewed in the premier American ornithological journal, *The Auk*, by one of America's leading ornithologists, Frank Chapman.<sup>57</sup> The review was positive, but, unlike its Australian counterparts, brief and bland—understandably so, since Chapman had earlier (in 1903) published a guide to North American birds that Thomas Dunlap judges to have been a milestone in the evolution of the field guide as a genre.<sup>58</sup> Innovative though it was in the Australian context, Leach's book could not lay claim to such eminence. It was, however, a publishing success, with its frequent new editions and reprints welcomed by public and reviewers alike.<sup>59</sup>

By the time of Leach's death in October 1929, seven editions of his *Bird Book* had been published, with sales totalling over 30 000—'surely a record for nature-study books' according to fellow naturalist Dr Brooke Nicholls.<sup>60</sup> Even death did not staunch the flow of new editions, an eighth edition coming out under the editorship of Charles Barrett in 1939,<sup>61</sup> and a ninth in 1958 under Crosbie Morrison's editorship. All editions except the ninth continued to include the full text of Leach's lecture, with only slight amendments.

Shortly before the eighth edition was issued, Australia acquired another field guide, this one with genuinely nation-wide coverage (Fig. 4). Neville Cayley's *What Bird Is That?* was first published in 1931 and went on to attain an even more illustrious profile than its predecessor. More tightly focussed on identification than Leach's book, Cayley's contains far less detail on natural history and almost nothing on taxonomy. In *What Bird Is That?* the birds were not even listed in taxonomic order, but by habitat.<sup>62</sup> By mid-century, there were other guides, too, to the birds of specific parts of Australia, such as Dom Serventy and Hubert Whittell's *Handbook of the Birds of Western Australia* (1948) and Keith Hindwood and Arnold McGill's *The Birds of Sydney* (1958). These were orientated to identification, and although they included some natural history content, the proportion of words devoted to the latter topic was much lower than in Leach's book. A later generation of field guides, such as those by Peter Slater in 1970 and 1974 and by Graham Pizzey and Roy Doyle in 1980, tightened further



**Fig. 4.** Pioneers of the Australian field guide: J. A. Leach in foreground, Neville W. Cayley behind. Detail from a photograph of the Sydney session of the Royal Australasian Ornithologists' Union, 1921, PIC BOX PIC/7586 #PIC/7586/176, National Library of Australia, Canberra.

the focus on identification and dispensed almost entirely with general natural history material. All the later editions of Leach's *Bird Book*, however, kept up the natural history content.

Barrett made some significant changes to the eighth edition, but Leach's lecture was retained, albeit under a new title, 'Australian Bird Life,' and positioned as a separate text at the end of the book instead of as a sub-text beneath

<sup>55</sup>Stead (1912).

<sup>56</sup>Anonymous (1911).

<sup>57</sup>Chapman (1911).

<sup>58</sup>Dunlap (2011) pp. 38–49.

<sup>59</sup>See for example Anonymous (1923).

<sup>60</sup>Nicholls (1930) p. 232.

<sup>61</sup>Leach (1939).

<sup>62</sup>Cayley (1931).

descriptions as in earlier editions. But the contents of the lecture remained virtually identical with what they had been in 1911. Barrett replaced the original introduction by Frank Tate, which had been retained in all previous editions, with a short memoir celebrating Leach's life and attainments. Perhaps most detrimentally, he omitted all the original black and white illustrations, retaining only the colour plates. Some monochrome photographs were added to the concluding 'Australian Bird Life' section but, being mostly of birds at nest, they were not particularly useful for identification purposes. In any event, Barrett's change meant that many fewer birds than previously were illustrated: hardly an improvement for a field guide. On the positive side, the contents of the supplement were, for the first time, integrated into the main species list. But even this improvement was done clumsily, with species listed under a confusing combination of numerals and letters. Leach's *Bird Book* had never been a particularly user-friendly guide. Under Barrett's editorship, it arguably became less so.

Charles Bryant, who reviewed the eighth edition for *The Emu*, was unimpressed. It 'is largely a re-arrangement' of the content of previous editions, he complained, adding that jettisoning the monochrome illustrations detracted from the book's value as an identification guide and the retention of dated ornithological science was out of step with Leach's own ideals. Such changes as Barrett made, Bryant intimated, were not improvements, although he specified that his criticisms were 'limited to the revision' and were not intended as a slight on Leach's original book.<sup>63</sup>

Crosbie Morrison's revisions for the ninth edition were the most substantial. Morrison was among Australia's most popular naturalists of the mid twentieth century, with a mastery of mass communication over the radio unequalled by any of his peers.<sup>64</sup> However, he failed to see his new edition of Leach in print because he died on 1 March 1958, shortly before completing his revisions.<sup>65</sup>

Under Morrison's hand, the non-Victorian species were at last fully integrated into a single numerical sequence, from 1 (Emu) to 708 (White-winged Chough), dispensing with Barrett's cumbersome combination of letters and numerals. Species' descriptions were renovated, although they remained brief and seldom included details on calls that might aid identification. Old illustrations were replaced with new paintings by Anne Lissenden, which were better than the original plates but still had many shortcomings. Not all birds were illustrated. For those that were, colouring was sometimes inaccurate. Plumage variations between males, females, immatures and so forth were seldom illustrated. Most illustrations

were separated by one or more pages from the descriptive text on the relevant species. Such shortcomings notwithstanding, the revisions seem to have been intended to make the book more useful as a field guide. However, compared to overseas advances in the field guide genre, such as those in America under the inspiration of Roger Tory Peterson, the ninth edition of Leach's *Bird Book* looks sadly unsophisticated.

Unlike the American field guides of that time, which had long held an exclusive focus on identification, the ninth edition also perpetuated Leach's devotion to natural history. For the new edition, Morrison comprehensively rewrote the natural history component (except on the Passeriformes, the revision of which was cut short by his death, so an amended version of Leach's notes on this order was published). Reversing one of Barrett's revisions, Morrison reintegrated the natural history text into the body of the book, so the reader encountered identification and science simultaneously on the same page, as had been the case in Leach's original editions. This underlined the importance of the natural history component. Morrison reduced the attention given to taxonomy and classification; he wrote in a breezier style than had school inspector Leach; but the natural history component continued to occupy about half the contents of a book whose preface still presented it as 'a guide to identification' which would allow people to 'name the birds they meet.'<sup>66</sup>

Charles Bryant gave Morrison's ninth edition of Leach's book a much more positive review than he had of Barrett's eighth. Writing in *The Auk*, he stated that 'this revision will again make available to Australian bush-walkers and bird observers what Leach intended—a handy field guide,' while for 'American visitors ... the new Leach will be useful and instructive.'<sup>67</sup> Some were more critical. Dudley Dickison, a prominent birder and honorary librarian for the RAOU, complained to naturalist Vince Serventy that the new edition 'has been most disappointing,' especially for its 'inaccurate' illustrations.<sup>68</sup> However, at least until Peter Slater inaugurated a new era in Australian field guides in 1970, Leach's *Bird Book* commanded a high level of respect among birders. When the ninth edition was reissued in 1969, it still earned an enthusiastic review from Lawrence Courtney Haines, secretary of the Sydney-based Gould League Birdwatchers. 'The new edition is beautifully produced,' he declared, its size and format making it ideal for field use. Morrison's revisions had been extensive, Haines acknowledged, but 'the enthusiastic spirit of Dr Leach still seems to pervade the pages of the new revised edition.'<sup>69</sup>

<sup>63</sup>Bryant (1939).

<sup>64</sup>Pizzey (1992).

<sup>65</sup>Leach (1958) p. 125.

<sup>66</sup>Leach (1958) p. xiii.

<sup>67</sup>Bryant (1959).

<sup>68</sup>Letter, D. Dickison to Vince Serventy, 5 November 1958, NLA MS 4655, Serventy, box 1, fld 3, National Library of Australia, Canberra.

<sup>69</sup>Haines (1969).

## Conclusion

Leach's *Bird Book* of 1911 was in some ways a quirky publication. Australia's first birding field guide, it was also a dissertation on natural history, a conservationist polemic, a nationalist homily and a digest of popular science. The heavy natural history component doubtless owed something to Leach's own scientific predilections, but the book's longevity suggests that far more was involved: that its aims and approach appealed to a significant segment of the Australian populace. Leach wanted people not only to be able to match a bird with a name but also to understand, appreciate and love the birdlife of this country. Many of his compatriots apparently wanted to do so too.

Birdwatching was—and is—a means for people to interact intimately with nature as part of their everyday lives. Leach's *Bird Book* aimed to encourage this pastime, not as a frivolous diversion but rather as an edifying recreation in the mould of Victorian popular natural history. Its heavy leavening of scientific exposition was included to serve that end. Although it foregrounded identification in certain respects, it presented naming as merely part of a bundle of modes of apprehending birds which together would boost their public appreciation. Ultimately, the goal was conservation, and in that vein the main text of every edition, including Morrison's substantially revised ninth of 1958, concluded with the lines Leach had used to end his book in 1911. They entreated Australians to: 'Be proud of your heritage and pass it on uninjured. Though that, alas! is not possible, yet you may pass on at least the remnant that still survives the blessings and advance of civilisation.'<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>70</sup>Leach (1958) p. 201.

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