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TAXONOMY, DISTRIBUTION AND HABITAT

On the mainland of Australia and the islands to the north lives a family of rather dull-looking black or brown birds about the size of domestic fowl. Called megapodes after their big feet, they rarely fly, have raucous calls and are seldom seen by man. They are of interest because they do not brood their eggs as other birds do. (H. Frith 1959: 52)¹

Burying eggs in piles of warm soil or sand is a rather unusual practice for a bird. In fact, it is very similar to incubation in crocodiles and some turtles, who either gather together large piles of rotting vegetation on the banks of rivers, or burrow into sun-exposed sand. Indeed, megapodes have a number of other reptilian features including the relatively low incubation temperatures, the long development time of the eggs before hatching, the high proportion of yolk in the egg and the well-developed state of the young upon hatching. These apparently primitive features lead some naturalists to suggest that megapodes must be directly descendent from their reptilian ancestors, possibly even representing the most primitive