

PREFACE

Sighting an Australian bustard for the first time in the wild is a memorable experience for many people. I still vividly recall my own first encounter with these impressive birds. It was in the Lakefield National Park region of northern Queensland. As a southerner I vaguely knew of the bustard, but the large male standing his ground before us as we pulled up in our Toyota struck me by his size and stately appearance. The encounter was brief, but it left an indelible impression and that feeling of excitement one gets when sighting a new species, particularly one of such grandeur and mystery, for the first time. I wasn't to know it at the time, but our paths were to cross again in a decidedly more profound manner.

A few years later the bustard was to become the focus of my PhD research. In choosing a study subject, my intention was to focus on a single species that could be used as a model for examining the complex movement patterns made by many of Australia's birds. The bustard is considered a highly mobile species that undertakes widespread and dispersive movements in relation to highly variable environmental conditions. It also employs an interesting and highly specialised mating system, while its cultural significance to Aboriginal people across the country adds an additional element to its appeal. For such reasons the bustard, if you'll pardon the pun, seemed to fit the bill nicely as a potential study subject. To my surprise, it soon became obvious that very little was known about the species. The Australian bustard had never been formally studied in the field. Much of what was known was based on descriptive or anecdotal accounts by amateur naturalists and casual observers. Max Downes had undertaken some pioneering surveys in parts of the Northern Territory and South Australia, while the only detailed study of the bustard's behaviour was based on a captive population in southern Australia by Kate Fitzherbert in 1978. Much of the information making up this book is based on these pioneering studies and in large part on my own research of the species ecology in the tropical savannas of northern Australia. In the outback, most people know the bustard, where it is more commonly known as the bush or plains turkey. However, the species remains poorly known to most Australians. It is my intention in writing this book to shed some light on the species and convey some of the charm and mystery of this cryptic and lordly icon of the outback.