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BOOK REVIEW

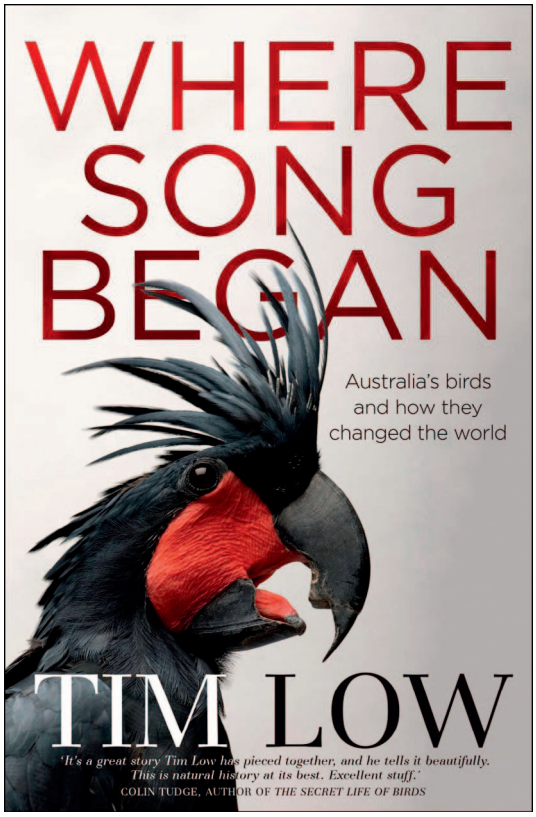
Where Song Began: Australia's Birds and How They Changed the World

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Where Song Began: Australia's Birds and How They Changed the World by Tim Low. 2016. Yale University Press, New Haven, CT, USA. xi + 406 pp., 36 color photographs, 28 text figures and photographs, bibliography, and index. $23.93 (hardcover). ISBN 978-0-300-22166-4.



This is a well-written, detailed account of Australia's unique avifauna and the factors that make it unique. While the book focuses on Australia's birds and how they influenced both the natural world and our human culture, the main theme that Low continually returns to is the importance of breaking down human biases that prevent the discovery of scientific truths. The main bias he discusses is the idea that "the best of everything came from the north" (i.e. the Northern Hemisphere). He mentions that early Australian settlers viewed Australian mammals and birds as inferior and primitive compared to those in the north. This bias prevented the revolutionary and significant discovery that songbirds and parrots actually evolved in Australia and invaded other continents, giving the world the most popular and beloved bird groups. Today there is little doubt about the veracity of this concept, but only a few years ago it was considered unthinkable by many revered scientists.

This new U.S. edition (the book was first published in 2014 in Australia) includes a Preface, which is a helpful addition, as several new and exciting papers have come out between 2014 and 2016. Low does a fine job of correcting certain statements in the 2014 edition, based on new findings in the literature. The Introduction provides a broad overview of all the concepts discussed in the remaining chapters and could be thought of as a pre-synthesis, after which the author delves into more detail in the individual chapters. I appreciate his transparency at the end of the Introduction when he clarifies and defines very precisely what he means by certain terms he uses throughout the text and explains which avian taxonomic scheme he prefers to use.

In each chapter, Low paints vivid pictures about the species he describes and how humans viewed Australian wildlife and interacted with it. In the first chapter he explains that the abundance of sugar produced by several Australian plants is unique to Australia, which has driven changes in its birds, also making them unique. While incredibly interesting, this chapter lacks a continuity that Low has mastered in the other chapters, making it potentially difficult to follow.

Chapter 2 will likely be of great interest to those who have never traveled to Australia or who know little about Australian wildlife. Low continues his discussion of trees that produce sugar and how the animals and people of Australia utilize this resource. He ends by mentioning one of the dominating Australian songbird groups, the

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honeyeaters (family Meliphagidae), which ruthlessly defend sugar territories from smaller birds and sometimes, through their aggressive defense strategies, can cause habitat degradation and reduce local biodiversity.

In Chapter 3, Low provides evidence that songbirds and parrots originated in Australia, and he includes detailed discussions of the most ancient songbirds. He ends the chapter with a comparison of life-history characteristics between birds of the Northern and Southern hemispheres, which should be very helpful for readers who are not already familiar with these differences. This is important, given that many scientists once assumed that characteristics such as migratory behavior and male-only singing were the "normal" songbird characteristics because most songbirds in the Northern Hemisphere exhibit these traits. However, it is now understood that these are derived characteristics and adaptations to living in environments with harsher winters. In Chapter 4, Low pays tribute to the birds of New Guinea, and in Chapters 5 and 6 he discusses non-passerine Australian birds (parrots and ratites) that help make Australia's avifauna so unique and distinctive. He then discusses other non-passerine birds in Chapter 7 (waterfowl, landfowl, pigeons, and hummingbirds), within the context of biogeography and where these groups may have originated. Chapters 8–10 are about different habitats in Australia that passerines and non-passerines occupy, including forests, grasslands, savannas, and oceans.

Chapter 11 is a synthesis of concepts from previous chapters that I believe might have better served as a final chapter. It is a well-composed summary in which Low compares Australian birds with avifaunas in other parts of the world. He concludes that, while Australia may not have the largest diversity of birds, Australian birds reveal far more about the continent's past because they evolved within Australia, rather than migrating there. These birds have been isolated and under selective pressures unique to Australia, which explains why the oldest and most distinctive songbird lineages are found on this southern island-continent.

I thoroughly enjoyed Chapter 12, the final chapter, about how the relationship between Australia's people and its birds has changed over the years. Anyone interested in conserving birds will likely find this final section emotionally engaging, especially because of Low's discussion of the naiveté and arrogance associated with mankind's exploitation of these animals, thinking of them mainly as renewable natural resources. This chapter is valuable and could be used for promoting efforts to conserve Australian birds, which is incredibly important.

This book is easy to read and engaging, with vivid descriptions, but I do have two main criticisms. First, several beautiful color photos are included in the center of the book, with well-written captions, but these are hardly referenced in the text. Therefore, I was not always aware when a photo of a species was provided, as it was hidden in the center of the book, away from the text it was meant to be near. Figure numbers and captions (including page references) under the photos would have made navigating between the text and the color photographs easier. Second, as noted above, this book was originally published in Australia, and it appears to have mainly been written for an Australian audience, specifically those with some background in ornithology (whether an amateur birdwatcher or an academic). However, this book has worldwide significance and should be shared internationally. Thus, I wish Low had given a bit more explanation about some of the species he mentions and for which no photos or figures are provided. He also seems to assume that readers will be familiar with Australian geography, which is not always the case, so a map at the front or back of the book would have been helpful. As an American citizen who has lived in Australia for three-and-a-half years, studying and learning its different bird and plant species, I can say I thoroughly enjoyed the book and feel I had a full appreciation and understanding of the species Low described. However, while readers without previous knowledge of Australia and its birds will likely learn much from this book, they may not have the same special insight as an Australian who has lived there. I feel this could be remedied if some more detailed explanations or photos about certain terms, places, or species were included.

Criticisms aside, this book is definitely worth reading, especially for bird lovers interested in biogeography, bird evolutionary histories, and Australian birds in general. The book is special because it fills a unique role, providing a much-needed contribution to information on Australian birds, plants, and human–bird–plant interactions. I am unaware of another book that delves into so much detail about the different Australian bird groups, why they are important and distinctive, and how they influenced bird groups in other parts of the world as well as human culture. For too long, Australian bird life has been underappreciated and has received little attention. This book will help reverse that. Thus, I highly recommend it for university and personal libraries, and especially for those who love Australian birds.

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