

## Aboriginal Stories: The Riches and Colour of Australian Birds

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Australian Aboriginal stories abound with depictions of birds. In more than 400 stories across 106 language groups, 116 species of birds could be identified, some more easily than others depending on the ornithological awareness of the recorder. The information in some of these stories reveals that Aborigines had knowledge of bird behaviour long before it was 'discovered' by ornithologists. Stories are a part of the fabric of Aboriginal culture, often indicating expected cultural behaviour, but also account for plumage characteristics, calls, habitat, food, the relationships between Earth and extraterrestrial objects, and inter-specific behaviour of birds. Rarely is the Aboriginal knowledge linked with 'scientific' studies that would be the richer for embracing the ecological inter-relationships that are a natural part of the holism of Aboriginal stories.

Introduction

Stories make up the fabric of the lives of Australian Aborigines and are portrayed in dance, painting and song, as well as being handed down as oral history. The relationship between Northern Territory Aborigines and Macassan traders who once visited Australia from Indonesia, the importance of water in Aboriginal life and how it is depicted in stories, and stories about fire have been discussed elsewhere (Tidemann, 2001, 2003, 2009; Tidemann and Whiteside, 2007). More than 400 stories have been documented about birds alone, and, in keeping with the oral traditions of Aborigines, undoubtedly many more exist that have not yet been written in public documents and more again may have been lost to time without being handed down or recorded. Those stories in the public realm, and that have been written down, form the basis of this chapter. Using the term 'stories' suggests that they are tales of fiction or fantasy, but nothing could be further from the truth. They tell about social proprieties, morals, relationships, the landscape and law. In the past, they have been referred to as myths, folklore and legends, sometimes with a suggestion that they have no cultural value and the owners of the stories are simpletons. For example:

*Under the heading of 'Aboriginal mythology and folklore' will be recounted a few of the fabulous or romantic stories current among the aborigines of New South Wales and Victoria, which have been written down by me from the mouths of the old men and women from time to time.*

*The folklore of any primitive people is always valuable, as showing the bent of the human mind in its earliest development, in accordance with the different surroundings and conditions of life. Many native stories are a mixture of legend, folklore and superstitious belief, and could perhaps be classed under one or other of these designations. (Mathews 1904)*

Because, contemporarily, the Aboriginal owners of the stories refer to them as such, that term will be used in this chapter. In addition, some of the stories summarized below demonstrate that knowledge about certain birds preceded that 'discovered' by Western scientists. Ornithologists may have benefited (and may still benefit) from making themselves familiar with the indigenous body of knowledge in preparation for their own studies. If this chapter does nothing else, it will have succeeded if it stimulates Western ornithologists, even a little, to inform their own studies by delving into that older body of knowledge. The stories change a little over time but the recorders rarely acknowledge the person/people from whom they've collected the story, and so, without this and the relationship between the storytellers, it is not valid to try to measure change over time.

Story owners and birds of importance

The distribution of the bird stories, collected by a variety of people for over a century, reflect the many language groups that existed in Australia before the coming of the white man. The shape of the mainland of the Australian continent can almost be depicted by the tribal and language contributions of the bird stories: 447 stories in total; but because some groups have more than one bird story, fewer dots appear on the map (see Figure 12.1). Some stories appear in language groups separated widely in a geographic sense; in other cases, more than one story about a particular species can exist in more than one language group (Tidemann and Whiteside, 2007).

Opportunities to collect the stories arose from the generosity of their Aboriginal owners to share them with missionaries, anthropologists, naturalists and ornithologists. The number of stories collected for a language group is a reflection of time spent learning about them rather than the number that may exist or have existed. Not all stories are public knowledge and some exist only for certain people within a group. The number of language groups and tribes who shared their bird stories is immense, numbering at least 106 (see Table 12.1). Sometimes a locality was identifiable rather than a language group, and

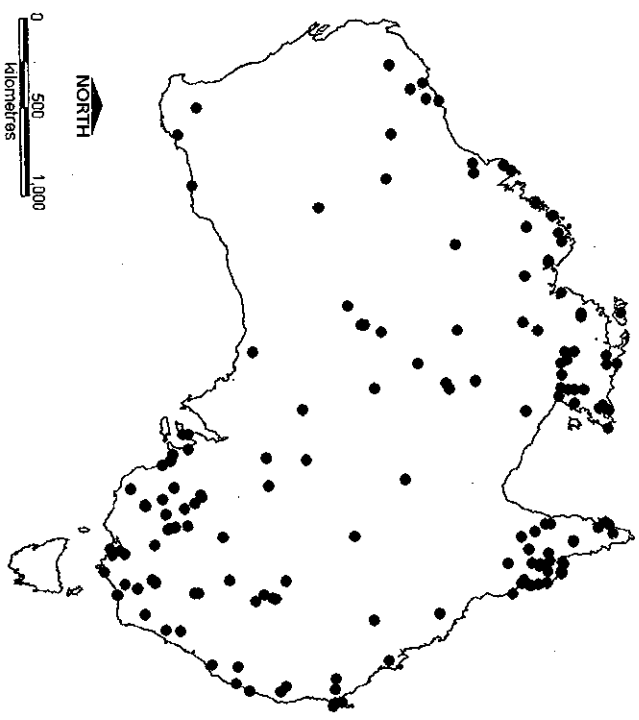


Figure 12.1 Distribution of the tribes and language groups who have contributed a total of 447 bird stories

Table 12.1 Representation of language groups, tribes and geographic regions from which bird stories have been collected

Number of stories	Language group, tribe or geographic region from which stories were drawn
1 (n = 30)	Banbija, Bilingera, Binbinga, Binigura, Bururong, Daingati, Daranba, Diaberadijibera, Djingani, Duwal, Gumbaynggi, Jaitrathang, Jitajita, Kariara, Kaurra, Kukajja, Mangarai, Mardu, Milingimbi, Mornington I, Ngadadajara, Ngarinjini, Njurnjui, Nibbali, Pibelman, Tangankeld, Wakaman, Weikwan, Wurambal, Yir-yirroni
2 (n = 22)	Anangu, Armaijera, Arabana, Brabialung, Bungandji, Carson R, Dalabon, Duwala, Gandangara, Kaitija, Kokominni, L Tyers, Muthmuthi, Narakanga, Ngalakani, Ngarinman, Thangarti, Ualalai, Walipi, Wandandian, Warkawarka, Worriwi
3 (n = 10)	Esperance B, Forest R, Fraser I, Gandju, Gidabal, Gwini, Jupagalk, Maung, Murrigin, Watiwati
4 (n = 13)	Drysdale R, Indjibarndi, Kabikabi, Kulini, Mapoon, Maraura, Ngarluma, Ngolowangga, Ngarluma, Ngolokwangga, Twi, Waramanga, Wradjuri
5 (n = 5)	Boula, Nungubuju, Princess Charlotte B, Wikmunkan, Wongaloon
6 (n = 10)	Bagu, Bloomfield R, Dieri, Kokojawa, Kokowara, Mirwung, Murinbata, Murray R, Wakawaka, Wurundjeri
7 (n = 2)	Gurwunggu (= Kunwinjku), Pitjandjara
8	Mara
9	Jaridekald
10 (n = 3)	Djauan (= Jawoyn), Kamilaroi, Kokokulungur
11	Kurnai
13 (n = 3)	Karadjari, Waipiri, Wojtobaluk
15 (n = 2)	Adnymathanba, Aranda
17	Wylliman
25	Worora
28	Narran R

Notes: R = river; B = bay; I = island; L = lake.

Source: Spelling of names is taken from Tindale (1974) and Berndt and Berndt (1988)

so, on a few occasions, localities are given. Often, people identify themselves as coming from a certain place, so place names, indicative of 'country', are used respectfully here rather than the disrespect often associated with the 'dominant' 'white fella' culture.

Recorders of Aboriginal stories varied in their expertise at recognizing birds. For example, Robert Love, a missionary, was also a skilled linguist and a highly respected naturalist who, in the world of mainstream ornithology, even had a bird species named after him – Gibberbird, *Ashbyia loveensis*. At the other extreme, some descriptions were of 'brown birds' and so cannot be included in the data. Combining common names, known distributions of species and descriptions given in the stories enabled some species to be delineated. In all the stories considered, 116 species of Australian mainland birds could be identified to species level. Some groupings were made – for example, 'crows' were only classed as one and appeared in 84 stories, only two of which were identifiably Torresian Crows (see Table 12.2 for scientific names). Similarly, raptors appeared in 138 stories, in 36 of which they could be identified to species level and 102 to categories such as eaglehawk and fish hawk.

Table 12.2 Prevalence of bird species occurring in Australian mainland Aboriginal stories

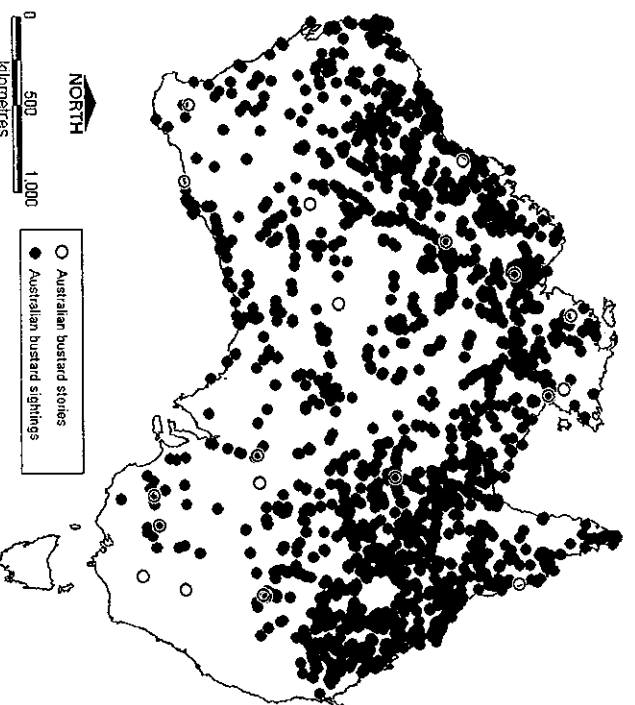
Number of mentions of species (spp.)	Species or species 'groups'
1 (n = 51 spp.)	Australian Brush-turkey ( <i>Alectura lathami</i> ); Australasian Grebe ( <i>Acthybaptes novaehollandiae</i> ); Australian Raven ( <i>Corvus coronoides</i> ); Australian Shelduck ( <i>Fadorna tadornoides</i> ); Australian Wood Duck ( <i>Chenonetta jubata</i> ); Barking Owl ( <i>Ninox connexus</i> ); Black-shouldered Kite ( <i>Elanus axillaris</i> ); Blue-faced Honeyeater ( <i>Entomyzon cyanotis</i> ); Brown Goshawk ( <i>Accipiter fasciatus</i> ); Brown Falcon ( <i>Falco berigora</i> ); Cockatiel ( <i>Nymphicus hollandicus</i> ); cockatoo; Comb-crested Jacana ( <i>Troglodytes gallinacea</i> ); Crimson Chat ( <i>Epthianura tricolor</i> ); cuckoo; Diamond Dove ( <i>Geopelia cuneata</i> ); Dollarbird ( <i>Eurystomus orientalis</i> ); Double-banded Finch ( <i>Zaenopygia bicolor</i> ); Dusky Moorhen ( <i>Galinula tenebrosa</i> ); Eurasian Coot ( <i>Fulica atra</i> ); falcon; Finch; fishhawk; Great Cormorant ( <i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i> ); Great Frigatebird ( <i>Fregata minor</i> ); Ground Parrot ( <i>Pezoporus occidentalis</i> ); honeyeater; King Quail ( <i>Coturnix chinensis</i> ); Lewin's Honeyeater ( <i>Meliphaga lewinii</i> ); Little Corella ( <i>Cacatua sanguinea</i> ); Little Eagle ( <i>Hireaeetus morphnoides</i> ); Little Egret ( <i>Egretta garzetta</i> ); Magpie-lark ( <i>Grallina cyanoleuca</i> ); Malleefowl ( <i>Leipoa ocellata</i> ); Mulga Parrot ( <i>Psephotus varius</i> ); Painted Finch ( <i>Emblema pictum</i> ); Pale-headed Rosella ( <i>Platycercus adscitus</i> ); Pallid Cuckoo ( <i>Cuculus pallidus</i> ); Pied Cormorant ( <i>Phalacrocorax varius</i> ); Plumbed Whistling-Duck ( <i>Dendrocygna eyroni</i> ); Purple Swamphen ( <i>Porphyrio porphyrio</i> ); quail; Rainbow Lorikeet ( <i>Trichoglossus haematodus</i> ); Red Wattlebird ( <i>Anthochaera carunculata</i> ); Richard's Ptilinx ( <i>Ptilinopus novaehollandiae</i> ); Rufous Whistler ( <i>Pachycephala rufiventris</i> ); Silver-crowned Friarbird ( <i>Philemon argenticeps</i> ); Spinifex Pigeon ( <i>Geophaps plumifera</i> ); Spotted Bowerbird ( <i>Chlamydera guttata</i> ); Swamp Harrier ( <i>Circus approximans</i> ); Scarlet Robin ( <i>Petroica mulicollis</i> ); Welcome Swallow ( <i>Hirundo neoxena</i> ); Western Rosella ( <i>Platycercus icterotis</i> ); Western Yellow Robin ( <i>Eopsaltria griseogularis</i> ); White-gaped Honeyeater ( <i>Lichenostomus uiricolor</i> ); White-winged Fairy-wren ( <i>Malurus leucops</i> ); Wonga Pigeon ( <i>Leucosarcia melanoleuca</i> ); Zebra Finch ( <i>Taeniopygia guttata</i> )
2 (n = 23 spp.)	Barn Owl ( <i>Tyto alba</i> ); Beach Stone-curlew ( <i>Esacus neglectus</i> ); Black Swan ( <i>Gygis atratus</i> ); blue wren ( <i>Malurus</i> sp.); bowerbird; butcherbird; Channel-billed Cuckoo ( <i>Scythrops novaehollandiae</i> ); Great Bowerbird ( <i>Chlamydera nuchalis</i> ); Grey Fantail ( <i>Rhipidura fuliginosa</i> ); Little Wattlebird ( <i>Anthochaera chrysopatera</i> ); Magpie Goose ( <i>Anseranas semipalmata</i> ); Major Mitchell's Cockatoo ( <i>Cacatua leadbeateri</i> ); Mistletoebird ( <i>Dicaeum hirundinaceum</i> ); Musk Duck ( <i>Biziura lobata</i> ); Nanken Night-Heron ( <i>Nycticorax caldonicus</i> ); Osprey ( <i>Pandora haliaeetus</i> ); Pacific Dove ( <i>Geopelia striata</i> ); Pied Imperial-pigeon ( <i>Ducula bicolor</i> ); rosella parrot; sandpiper; Scarlet Robin; seahawk; seagull; Short-billed Black-cockatoo ( <i>Calyptrornis latirostris</i> ); Spangled Drongo; Superb Lyrebird ( <i>Menerua novaehollandiae</i> ); swallows; Torresian Crow ( <i>Corvus orru</i> ); wattlebird; Western Ringneck ( <i>Barnardius zonarius</i> ); whistling-duck; White-faced Heron ( <i>Egretta novaehollandiae</i> )
3 (n = 6 spp.)	Crested Bellbird ( <i>Oreocra gutturalis</i> ); hawk; Budgerigar ( <i>Melopsittacus undulatus</i> ); Collared Sparrowhawk ( <i>Accipiter cirrocephalus</i> ); duck; eaglehawk; heron; green parrot; Rainbow Bee-eater ( <i>Aerops ornatus</i> ); Rainbow Lorikeet ( <i>Trichoglossus haematodus</i> ); Red-backed Kingfisher ( <i>Todiramphus ptilorhynchus</i> ); robin

Table 12.2 continued

Number of mentions of species (spp.)	Species or species 'groups'
4 (n = 10 spp.)	Black Kite ( <i>Milvus migrans</i> ); Brown Quail ( <i>Coturnix ypsilophora</i> ); Brown Treecreeper ( <i>Climacteris picumnus</i> ); Crested Pigeon ( <i>Ocyrops loquax</i> ); Darter ( <i>Archinga melanogaster</i> ); Northern Rosella ( <i>Platycercus venustus</i> ); Masked Lapwing ( <i>Vanellus miles</i> ); Sacred Kingfisher ( <i>Todiramphus sanctus</i> ); Silver Gull ( <i>Larus novaehollandiae</i> ); Tawny Frogmouth ( <i>Podargus strigoides</i> ); treecreeper
5 (n = 6 spp.)	Australian Oriole-Nighthar ( <i>Aegotheles cristatus</i> ); Blue-winged Kookaburra ( <i>Dacelo leachii</i> ); Pacific Black Duck ( <i>Anas superciliosa</i> ); Red-backed Fairy-wren ( <i>Malurus melanocephalus</i> ); Spotted Nighthar ( <i>Eurostopodus argus</i> ); White-bellied Sea-Eagle ( <i>Haliaeetus leucogaster</i> )
6 (n = 3 spp.)	Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike ( <i>Corचना novaehollandiae</i> ); Diamond Firetail ( <i>Stagonopleura guttata</i> ); Nankeen Kestrel ( <i>Falco cenchroides</i> ); parrot; pigeon
7 (n = 1 sp.)	Large-tailed Nighthar ( <i>Caprimulgus macurus</i> ); nighthar
8 (n = 3 spp.)	Bronzewing (Phaps sp.); chickenhawk; Galah ( <i>Cacatua roseicapilla</i> ); Laughing Kookaburra ( <i>Dacelo novaeguineae</i> ); Pheasant Coucal ( <i>Centropus phasianus</i> )
9 (n = 2 spp.)	Kingfisher; Red-tailed Black-Cockatoo ( <i>Calyptrorhynchus banksii</i> ); Red-winged Parrot ( <i>Aprosmictus erythropterus</i> )
10	Shag
11	Black-necked Stork ( <i>Ephippiorhynchus asiaticus</i> ); grebe; owl
12 (n = 2 spp.)	Bush Stone-curlew ( <i>Burhinus grallarius</i> ); sparrowhawk; Wedge-tailed Eagle ( <i>Aquila audax</i> )
14	Australian Magpie ( <i>Gymnorhina tibicen</i> )
15	Southern Boobook ( <i>Ninox novaeseelandiae</i> )
18	Hawk
21	Australian Pelican ( <i>Pelecanus conspicillatus</i> )
22 (n = 2 spp.)	Sulphur-crested Cockatoo ( <i>Cacatua galerita</i> ); Willie Wagtail ( <i>Rhipidura leucophrys</i> )
24	Eagle
27	Brolga ( <i>Gruus rubicundus</i> )
33	Australian Bustard ( <i>Ardeotis australis</i> ); eaglehawk
77	Emu ( <i>Dromaius novaehollandiae</i> )
82	Crow(s) ( <i>Corvus</i> sp.)

Note: Prevalence of bird species occurring in Australian mainland Aboriginal stories.

The most common species in stories were Emu (77), Australian Bustard (33), Brolga (27), Sulphur-crested Cockatoo, Willie Wagtail (each 22) and Australian Pelican (21) (see Table 12.2). The groupings of species may have depended on the cultural significance of birds or even their food value because in some language groups there is only a single name for a group – for example, *Nimi* for finches across the Kimberley in north-western Australia. Frequently, the names given to birds reflect their calls and so are phonetic or onomatopoeic names – for example, *Wirriwirriyayak* (Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike) and *Wak wak* (Torresian Crow) in Kunwinjku (Nganjmitra and Tidemann, 2005); *Darrk* (Emu) and *Jitidjikitidij* (Willie Wagtail) in Jawoyn (Wynjorro et al.,

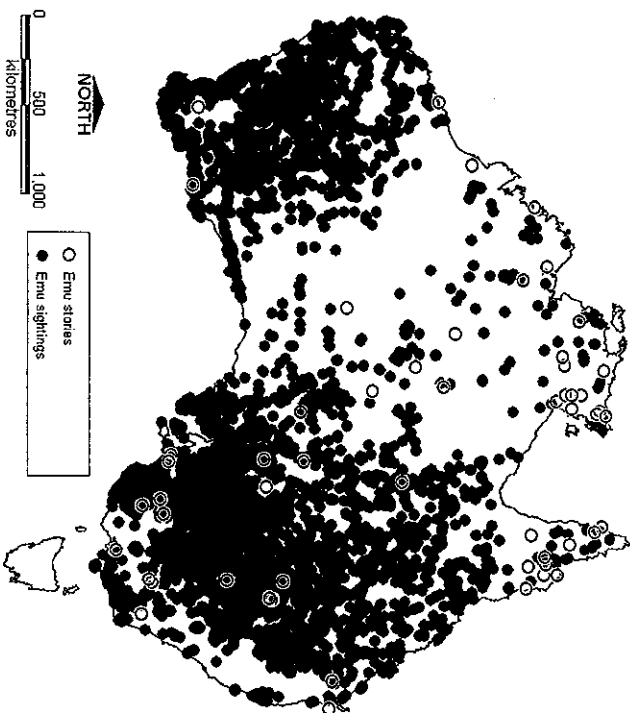


Source: Barrett et al (2003)

Figure 12.2 Records of the occurrence of the Australian Bustard from The New Atlas of Australian Birds (black dots) and Aboriginal stories (white dots) 2001); and *Parpallala* (Crested Bellbird) to the *Anangu* (Tidemann and Wright, 2005).

The records of bird species in Aboriginal stories can be compared with those collected in *The New Atlas of Australian Birds* (Barrett et al, 2003) and an ongoing project ([www.birds.com.au](http://www.birds.com.au)), although the latter will be far more numerous because current records are reported as latitudes and longitudes, whereas the areas occupied by language groups are far more expansive. With this limitation in mind, it can be seen that the historic distribution of the Australian Bustard is more extensive than that represented by the Atlas data, most notably in the south-eastern portion of the continent.

In contrast, the atlas data for the Emu and the records from Aboriginal stories indicate that the distribution of the Emu has not changed since the origins of the stories. Because these stories were never recorded in written form, it is impossible to know when these stories originated; but, without doubt, they are older than even the oldest atlas data.



Source: Barrett et al (2003)

Figure 12.3 Records of the occurrence of the Emu from The New Atlas of Australian Birds (black dots) and Aboriginal stories (white dots)

### Some Aboriginal stories of ornithological significance

Looking at the stories themselves, there is variety in the information that they convey to biologists, particularly ornithologists, giving certain prowess to species from an Aboriginal perspective – for example, in the formation of landscape, teaching appropriate cultural behaviour, influencing the weather and tool-making. Others are about the timing of egg-laying, plumage coloration, behaviour, habitat separation, cooperative breeding, nest parasitism, species characteristics, visual acuity and morphology. Some of the many stories that abound are summarized below to demonstrate the knowledge and the way in which it is passed on between generations.

*For Aborigines, there is a close relationship between biological events that they use to inform themselves about the readiness of food resources. For example, 'When spear grass (Sorghum plumosum/S. laxiflorum) has ripened, it's time the Magpie Geese laid their eggs' (Alpher, 1987).*

There are a large number of stories that explain the origins of plumage coloration as well as some other behavioural characteristics – for example, food selected, inter-specific interactions and habitat:

*A crow and a hawk had a fight. The hawk succeeded in knocking his adversary over and rolling him in the ashes, when he acquired his black plumage. Hawk got punished, however, by being made to eat putrid meat. (Roth, 1903)*

*Brown Falcon and his wife, the crow, were living at a certain place. Every day this husband would go out hunting. He would take all his spears and go out and hunt while the wife took her dogs with her, her basket and her digging sticks, and she would go off to the scrub. One day Brown Falcon thought he would play some tricks with his wife. When he had found a little creek he went and sat there all day on the creek bed. His wife was out digging yams. In the afternoon she came back and started to roast the yams and cook up the meat that her dogs had got. Then she watched out for her husband to come home. At last he happened to come in sight. He was coming home and he was limping too. He had blood all over his head, on his legs. 'I have been fighting with some men who tried to kill me', he said. His wife quickly put urine on his wounds and then covered them with hot ashes. Next day the same thing happened.*

*The next day his wife decided to follow him. She knew if the men were really there they would finish him off. So he went off first, reached the creek bed and began to cut himself. Following his footprints, his wife crept up behind him, making sure she kept very quiet when she neared the creek bed. She could see the bamboos of his spears. Brown Falcon saw one of her dogs. He knew she was around. He saw her peep, and he ran along the creek bed and flew up, and she too. She tried to stop him and she cried: 'Caw, caw, caw.' She couldn't stop him although she knew he wouldn't tell the truth even if she asked him. That is why we see today the crow chasing after the hawks. (Lucich, 1969)*

Cooperative breeding, nest parasitism, groups of hen-plumaged birds in each family group and the hint of extra-pair copulations were described as early as 1934:

*Long ago there were many Ter ter (blue wrens, Malurus sp.) living along the riverbanks and each one had only two wives. The two wives shared their labours in nest building and in hatching and feeding the young and the husband took care of them. Each family knew its boundaries and kept to its own territory. They all*

lived happily until one became more venturesome and started to visit his neighbours. Sometimes he took his wives with him, but often he went alone. None of the other Ter ter objected as long as he kept to his own tribe. They said nothing until he began to visit all kinds of other birds. They then remonstrated for he was not content to bring these strangers to his own hut but also began to take them to the huts of others. When he began to fraternize with Woor (cuckoo), the other Ter ter did not like it at all because the Woor could not be rebutted. They came to visit at the most unreasonable times, particularly at nesting time. Their presence was bad enough, but the Woor did not seem to be content with just visiting. They began to lay eggs in the Ter ter nests whenever they got a chance. This was greatly resented, for these eggs could not be turned out; that would be against bird law. But, at the same time, the Ter ter did not want a lot of strange babies to bring up.

At last this Ter ter made friends with Cootup (sparrowhawk) and gradually the male Ter ter disappeared one by one. Finally two Ter ter, who had lost their husbands, decided to trail Cootup and saw him eating a little Ter ter. Filled with dismay, they flew home and told the other Ter ter. When Cootup returned to the camp they all set upon him and beat him until he was driven away. By this time, the number of males had been so decimated that it was found that there were five females to each male.

Since then, each family stays on its own territory and never intrudes on another's property unless briefly, to tell of the coming of strangers. They have never been able to get rid of the Woor, who seem to have a knack of laying eggs in their nests when they are not looking, so it is not uncommon to find Woor eggs in their nests. (Hassell, 1934)

Some stories describe the origin of certain unique behavioural characteristics such as laughter in the case of the Laughing Kookaburra:

When Yindigie (the messenger of the god in the sky) was making the birds, his task had not been an easy one. The mammals, fish and insects had been very obedient and willing to learn; but the birds seemed to be very hard to please. One of these was Kookaburra. Although he was a good-looking bird with a very strong beak and wonderful eyesight, he was not happy because Yindigie had given him laughter. He said: 'What have I got to laugh about? I would rather have a song like Butcherbird's or Magpie's.'

Now this was the time when some of the bush creatures were beginning to misbehave. Snake, for instance, had decided that a

frog would be good to eat and found little green Tree Frog sitting on a log. Tree Frog could not believe it when Snake said he was going to eat him and hopped away as fast as he could. 'Help!' cried Tree Frog. 'Please help me, someone. Snake is going to eat me!' Tree Frog hopped into the clearing where Kookaburra was sitting in a tree. As he watched, Kookaburra could see that Snake really meant to eat the little Tree Frog. Then he saw Tree Frog hop towards a big stump and disappear behind it. Snake saw this and said: 'Ah! Now I've got you.' Stealthily he slid through the grass and circled the base of the stump. Seeing a movement in the grass in front of him, Snake pounced and held on! And that was when Kookaburra burst out laughing! He laughed and laughed and soon the bushland was filled with the merry sound. The rest of his family flew up and when they heard the tale they too burst into laughter. Kookaburra had seen the little Tree Frog hop up on top of the stump and then down a hole in it. All Snake had caught was his own tail. (Miller, 1994)

The next four stories account for bird behaviour with which we are familiar and that we now associate with particular species, but was known to Aboriginal people long before white settlement of Australia – for example, the fishing prowess of (Australian) pelicans, cormorants and Darters, the aggressive behaviour of magpies, the nocturnal behaviour of owls, the mournful cries of stone-curlews, the delight of the dance of the Broilga and the mound-building of Australian Brush-turkeys with their monitoring of the temperature of the nest chamber:

The brothers Tentiamul, two Silver Gulls, recommitted for better fishing grounds and the whole flock then migrated towards Lake Alexandrina where they made nets from the reeds growing along the shore. The pelican was in charge of the fishing, the pied cormorants and the Darters went ahead of the main flock, locating fish and heading them off by diving into the water ahead of the shoal. The Silver Gulls and the terns dived into the water and drove the fish inwards towards the shore where they would be within reach of the nets manned by the pelicans. The smaller birds, such as the (Eurasian) coots, assisted at the nets, keeping the fish caught within the mesh.

After the first draw of the nets, the groups rested for a while. The catch consisted of perch and bony bream. The birds then continued to fish until the pelicans, whose hands were numb with cold, said to the (Australian) magpie: 'Stop and have a camp and make a fire'; but the magpie refused to build a fire. So angry were the fishermen with the magpie that all the small birds who had been in charge of the fish in the nets would give this man nothing

but the bony bream they'd rejected. All the rest of the birds taunted the magpie, saying: 'What, carrying a bream. So that's all you have.'

The magpie, becoming angry, began to belabour the other birds with the fish he had been given and so arose the magpie's characteristic action of chasing the smaller birds. He hit the crow's eyes with his freestick and gave him his 'smoky' eyes. The pelicans, previously coal black, became splashed with white where the scales of the bony bream, wielded by the irate magpie, stuck to their bodies.

All the fishing people then turned into birds. The pelican dived into the water carrying his drum nets with him. He is now the greatest fisherman of the lakes and the nets which he carried, he still wears in the shape of the well-defined pouches under the beak. The coots ran into the reeds where they live to this day. The last was the magpie who remained looking out over the lake and, thence, arose his characteristic attitude of perching on a high place. (Harvey, 1943)

In ancestral times there lived an owl who possessed two big dogs. Each day he went hunting with them. One day, Beach Stone-curlews, who lived nearby, went out to hunt, leaving their children playing at home. The owl, seeing that they had gone, came down from the cliffs and, pointing out the young curlews said: 'There is meat for you, my dogs.' Immediately the dogs sprang forward, killed and ate the children.

Arriving back from their hunting expedition, the two parents saw their home deserted and the remains of the children. Dropping what they carried, they both started to cry most bitterly. They collected the remains of their children and buried them. The husband said: 'Never mind. I will have that owl man and his two dogs.' So off he went into the scrub where he came upon a kangaroo and speaking to it said: 'You go and feed in front of owl's cave so that he can see you. He will then send a dog after you but you will be quick and run through the dense scrub. I will be hidden at a certain place and there you will pass me.' The man then showed him where he would stand so that he could kill the dog. The next day, they repeated the plan and killed the second dog.

Stone-curlew went home and told his wife, adding: 'I am now going to kill Winda [owl].' Climbing the cliff, he arrived at the entrance. Standing in front of it he called to him to come out and fight, but the owl would not answer or come out. After waiting some time, the stone-curlew cursed him: 'Nobody will ever like you, you will never go out in the day-time to get food. You will

only get food at night; you will not be able to see at any other time. You will not be able to see the sun; stay there, stay there.'

So, even to this day, the owl lives in caves and dark places and, to this day, the Beach Stone-curlews still mourn their young. (Bendit, 1940)

A long time ago, the Brolga found a ground chilli and, not knowing that it was hot, ate it, the results being not only that his head took on a scarlet colour, but that he became 'all the same drunk'. It was during this predicament that he learnt his steps and these he taught to all the other animals, each one owing to some physical peculiarity developing a variation in the dance. (Roth, 1903)

One day, Brush-turkey saw turtle make a hole and lay her eggs in it. When the last was laid, she was carefully covering them when she looked up and saw Brush-turkey, who said: 'Why do you cover your eggs up?' 'That the sand and sun may hatch them.' 'But won't you sit on them yourself?' 'No indeed! Why should I do that? They will be warm where they are and come out, even as I came out, in the right time. If I sat on them I might break them. And who would get me food? I should die and them too.'

Brush-turkey went back to where her mate was feeding and told him what she had seen. She said she would like to try that plan instead of sitting on the eggs week after week. They could not dig a hole to lay them in, but scratched up a heap of mixed debris, earth, sand, leaves and sticks. Then the mother Brush-turkey, every second day, laid an egg in the mound until there were 15, all apart from each other, with the thin end downwards. When all this was done the parents waited anxiously for the result.

As time went on the mother bird grew restless. What if she had killed all her young just to save herself? She fussed round the big mound which stood some feet high. She put her head in to feel if it was warm, drew it out quickly, delighted to find the nest was absolutely hot. Then she began to fear it would be too hot. Full of anxiety, she scratched away the earth and leaves. Then she heard a noise, called to her mate and he came and scratched away until, to their joy, out came the finest chicks they had ever seen, quite independent and strong, with feet and wings more advanced than any seen on their chicks before. (Parker, 1898)

In a story about two pigeons, the origin of the red skin around the eyes of the Diamond Dove and of the clattering sound of the Crested Pigeon's wings when it takes flight are described:

A long time ago, the Diamond Dove (*Kurukuku*) had some nice grinding stones. Every day, she would go out to collect seeds and bring them back to grind to make damper. Crested Pigeon (*Muambada*) used to watch Diamond Dove grinding her food and often wished he had some stones like that. One day, when the little dove was away looking for seed, Crested Pigeon stole her large stones and flew away with them. Poor Diamond Dove had lost her large grinding stones and she was really unhappy. She cried so much that her eyes are red even to this day.

And Crested Pigeon, whenever he starts to fly, he makes a sharp clattering noise with his wings. This is the sound of the grinding stones rattling together – the same stones that he stole from poor little Diamond Dove. (Tunbridge, 1988)

There are stories that account for the habitat separation of birds – for example, the one about Emus and Australian Pelicans, although in Western science they are not closely related species:

*In the days when pelican and Emu occupied the same tract of country, the former was being continually worried by the latter always persisting in camping alongside. Pelican was a good worker and used to get plenty of firewood. Emu, on the other hand, was lazy and always burning his companion's timber. From growling they got to quarrelling; but, being the smaller bird, pelican had to exercise all his wits to get the advantage. So he told Emu that if he put his arms (wings) in the fire they would burn much better than the wood. The foolish bird did so, only to find that his wings had become singed, burnt and shortened. His legs, however, being still available, helped to kick his adviser into the water. It thus happens that the Emu does not get interferred with in hunting for berries and nuts on the dry land, while the pelican fishes unmolested in the saltwater. They now have nothing in common, not even firewood. (Roth, 1903)*

All language groups have stories about the formation of features in the landscape, some on a grand scale from the coast line of the Australian continent, coastal islands and desert, to river systems (desert as well as coastal), even features on a particular mountain:

*In the beginning there was nothing but fresh water everywhere until Marimari, a gigantic Emu man, arose near Whistler's Creek [Western Australia]. He was so large that the sea reached only to his ankles. Some earth came out of his feet and made rocks. Wherever he stepped, islands appeared and, when he sat down, the mainland (which is really a large island) arose. Marimari*

*went right round this island making the coast, but leaving water in the middle. Having completed his tour he made the latter into desert. (Piddington, 1932)*

*In the beginning there was only sky and the Earth; and the Earth was formless and empty of life, a void level waste waiting for the awakening of the ancestors from their eternal sleep underneath the sheltering crust... When it was a full-grown hideous monster, the great water serpent of Eminia, was summoned back from the Finke River [central Australia] to its old home by its aunt who had assumed the shape of a Willie Wagtail. The snake moved along slowly; its writhing body cleft deep furrows everywhere in the form of creeks and rocky gutters. (Strahlow, 1947)*

*As the canoe travelled north, Shivree (Silver Gull) left wongai trees: he had left all the black plum wongai south of Weipa [Queensland]; after Weipa he left all the red plum wongai. Shivree kept on making rivers with his boomerang. (Trezise, 1965)*

*A long time ago, the blue wren (White-winged Fairy-wren) (Yuduyudalya) set out on a journey and came out on the ridge of a low hill. He went along the ridge for a little way. Standing on the ridge and facing Mount Chambers (South Australia), with his left hand blue wren threw a comeback boomerang... This boomerang went right through the mountain making a big gap in it. It went on southward and blue wren waited for it to turn around and come back to him. It spun around towards the west; but, on the way back, it hit the mountain and stopped there. You can still see it sitting up there on the top. (Tunbridge, 1988)*

There are stories that lead to destruction; but these also have a moral – for example, the first is a warning to children not to stray from camp, while the second is told to girls to depict what may happen if they don't accept their promised husband and is an example of a story demonstrating one of many social customs:

*Jikridjikiriditi (Willie Wagtail) is cheeky because he calls out to people, including children: 'Follow up, follow up.' If anyone does follow him, he leads the person towards a cave, calling all the way: 'Follow up, follow up.' When the Jikridjikiriditi and the person get close to the cave, Mimis, the spirits of the ancestors who live in the cave, come out and grab the person who is dragged into the cave. The Mimis take the person's memory away from him. He is given food; but all of it must be raw: raw kangaroo, raw ganna, fish,*



goose, echidna. The person must stay in the cave forever unless the Gudang (Aboriginal Magic Man) can intervene. He gets some ironwood or other tree and takes it inside the cave and burns it. He tells some stories to the Mimis and the boss Mimi will let the person go. Parents tell their children not to follow that jikritjikeridij. (Wynjorroc et al, 2001)

There was a man who was promised to a young girl; but the young girl didn't want to marry him because he was too old. Her parents told her to sleep with him but she wouldn't and cried. Each day the man would go out to get food. He would bring back sugar bag and kangaroo. The girl's parents told her that she should eat the sugar bag the man brought back for her; but she wouldn't and just cried because she was frightened.

One day when the man came back from hunting he saw the young girl with a young boy and it was clear that he was her boyfriend. One time when all the clan was asleep in a cave, he went outside and got some kunjak (white clay that has all kinds of sicknesses in it). He put that kunjak on the fire and poisons started coming out of it. With the help of a feather, the man directed the smoke into the cave. All the people started coughing and then all the people died. At that moment, the man turned into a Torresian Crow and started flying south, saying: 'Wak, wak, wak.' (Nganimirra and Tidemann, 2005)

Amongst all the stories found so far, there is only one that talks about immortality; but perhaps this was only a concept after the arrival and influence of missionaries:

One day, a young cockatoo (Kathuwarr) fell from a high tree and broke his neck. There he lay, dead. All the animals gathered around him to try and wake him. They touched him with a spear, but he could not feel. They opened his eyes, but he could not see. The animals were completely mystified for they did not understand death. Then all the Medicine Men tried to awaken the cockatoo, but they failed.

A great meeting was called to discuss the mystery of the dead cockatoo. First of all, the owl, [uho] with his great big eyes was supposed to be very wise, was called upon to explain this mystery; but owl (Kroalthumie) was silent. Then the eagle hawk, the great chief of the birds, was asked to explain this great mystery of death. The eagle hawk took a pebble, threw it out into the river and all the huge gathering saw the pebble strike the water and sink out of sight. 'There is the explanation of the mystery; as that pebble has entered another existence, so has the cockatoo.'

However, this answer did not satisfy the gathering; so they next asked the wicked but knowledgeable crow to explain. The crow stepped forward, took up a small hunting weapon and threw it out into the river. It sank and then gradually returned to the surface again. 'There', said the crow. 'We all go through another world of experience and then return again.'

This explanation impressed all the tribes and the great eagle hawk asked: 'Who will volunteer to go through this other experience to test it and see if it is possible to return again?' The hibernating animals offered; but when they returned after winter, the eagle hawk said: 'You have all returned in the same form as you went out, although the snake has half changed his skin. You have failed to solve the mystery.'

At last the insect tribes – the moths, grubs and caterpillars – volunteered to solve the experience and mystery of death. All the other tribes, especially the Kookaburra, laughed at this because the insects had always been looked upon as ignorant and inferior. The insects, however, persisted, so the eagle hawk gave them permission to try. The tribes then dispersed until the following spring.

The day before the time fixed for the return of the insects, the eagle hawk sent notice for all the animals to gather. At daybreak, all the animals were out to witness the pageant of new forms arrive. The wattle put forth all its wonderful yellow, the waratah its brilliant red and all the other flowers their glorious shades. Just as the sun rose over the tops of the hills, the dragonflies came, leading an army of gorgeous-coloured butterflies. Each colour and species of butterfly came in order. First the yellow came up and showed themselves to everybody. They flew about and rested upon the trees, the wattle and the flowers. Then came the red, the blue, the green, and right through all the families of butterflies.

The animals were delighted. They gave great cries of praise and admiration. The birds were so pleased that, for the first time, they all broke into song. All nature looked its best. When the last of the butterflies had entered, they asked the great gathering: 'Have we solved the mystery of death? Have we returned in another form?'

All nature answered back: 'You have!' (Unaipon, 1926)

Despite the importance of tools, there is only one account of a bird involved in tool-making. Interestingly, there was no naturally occurring stone suitable for tools where this story originated, nor were the axe heads (that were found on the ground) known to have been acquired by trade:

The Large-tailed Nightjar is the maker of stone axe-heads. The bird puts it on the ground and it keeps the axe right there. Then a person finds it and takes it away and puts it into a handle. That bird calls at night time. It calls like chopping a tree. It chops (tok tok tok). At night time one hears it. It's making an axe-head, a stone axe. (Alpher, 1987)

A number of bird species are known to be messengers – for example:

A Grey Fantail came to a man sitting on a log and was saying: 'Guri djugi, guri djugi.' The man took no notice of him, so the Grey Fantail said: 'Ts-ts-ts-ts ... guri djugi, guri djugi.' The man turned around and said: 'A man is coming from the west, a man is coming soon? I understand. I understand what you mean.' The Grey Fantail can talk language and comes with messages if anything special is going to happen and warns of dangers. (Holmer and Holmer, 1969)

There are many stories from across the continent that describe the origins of morphological features as well as plumage that we recognize as being diagnostic characteristics for the species concerned:

A long time ago, there lived an Emu and a little native rat who camped side by side and always travelled around together. Emu had no family and rat had one little baby. One evening a big storm came up just as they were going to camp for the night. Rat quickly made a good waterproof wurley for herself and her baby and they were soon warm and dry. The Emu tried, but she couldn't make a camp that would keep out the rain and couldn't get a good fire going. Just as she was about to have one more go at making herself a good camp she saw rat leave hers, with her baby in her pouch, to go across the creek to pick up some more wood. She waited until rat was out of sight, then went straight into rat's camp, determined to stay there.

When rat came back she complained and asked the Emu to move out. But the Emu had no intention of going anywhere. She was bigger than rat so wasn't afraid of her. 'You shouldn't be in my camp', said rat. 'Let me in, my baby's getting wet.' 'Oh, don't worry', said Emu. 'It's not going to rain much.'

When the little rat saw how it was, she asked the Emu for her wooden dish. She went away and made a big fire. Then she filled her dish with red hot coals, went back to the Emu, who, by now, was fast asleep, and emptied the coals on Emu's chest. The Emu woke up and chased the rat, who had to run for her life. At last she was saved by crawling into a little cave. Emu was determined

to get rat. She scratched madly at the rocks to try to reach the rat, but only cut her own feet on the sharp flint stones. Before that, Emus had feet like us, but now they have two large cuts which split their feet into three parts. (Tunbridge, 1988)

In the Dreamtime came a great war. It is said that the brown snake began the war and that there was much fighting. One day, the creatures that were not fighting on the side of the brown snake held a solemn conclave to discover some way of getting rid of him, for they realised that if he were killed, the war would soon come to an end.

'But how are we to be rid of such a great warrior as the brown snake?' said the creatures. 'Who will spear him to death?' 'I will spear him to death', said the (Nankeen) kestrel. He picked up his spear and went out to kill the brown snake. The kestrel could fly very swiftly and could hover over his enemy, as well as fly above his reach.

The war soon became a duel between the brown snake and the kestrel and great was the joy of creatures when the kestrel killed the brown snake. But then the question arose: 'Who will carry the brown snake back to his tribal grounds for burial?' The only one who could do this was the little black wren. To this day, you can see the red feathers on the wings of the Red-backed Fairywren. They were stained with blood from wounds the brown snake received when it was killed. (Norledge, 1968)

The crane (White-faced Heron) was a great fisherman. He used to hunt out the fish, with his feet, from underneath the logs in the creek. One day, when he had a great many on the bank of the creek, a crow, who was white at that time, came up and asked for some fish. 'Wait a while', said the crane, 'until they are cooked.' But the crow was hungry and impatient and would not cease bothering the crane.

Presently the crane turned his back. The crow sneaked up and was going to steal a fish. The crane turned round, seized a fish and bit the crow right across the eyes with it. The crow felt blinded for a few minutes. He fell on the burnt black grass round the fire and rolled over and over in his pain. When he got up to go away his eyes were white and the rest of him black as crows have been every since.

The crow was determined to pay back the crane, so one day, when he saw the crane fast asleep, he crept quietly up to him holding a fish-bone. This he stuck right across the roof of the crane's tongue. Then he went off as quietly as he had come, careful, for once, to make no noise.

The crane woke up at last and, when he opened his mouth to yawn, he felt like choking. He tried to get the obstruction out of his throat. In the effort, he made a queer scraping noise, which was all he could give utterance to. The bone stuck fast. And to this day, the only noise a crane can make is 'gab-rab-gab, gab-rab-gab'! (Parker, 1898)

The Ngindyal was a bird-like animal having the shape and feathers of an Emu but of enormous proportions and was, moreover, a great magician. She had a nest containing only one egg on which she sat. She used to kill and eat all the people she could catch.

One day a crow came prying about and the Ngindyal ran after him in a furious manner, but the crow escaped.

Shortly afterwards, the crow chanced to meet the Brambambut brothers, whom he told about his adventures with the Ngindyal. They begged him to come and show them the place and the three of them started off. They travelled until they saw what they thought was a bright star shining. The crow said: 'That is her eye. She is there, sitting on her nest.' The brothers left the crow and advanced on the foe. The elder brother was quite close and hurled a spear, which caught the Ngindyal in the breast. She immediately turned round and rushed at him, giving the younger brother an opportunity of throwing a spear. They kept throwing spears alternately until the Ngindyal was considerably subdued by pain and loss of blood. The lark came out, hiding behind a bough he carried in front of himself, and cast a spear with all his force, striking the Ngindyal in the chest and killed her.

The Brambambuts then split each feather of the Ngindyal down the middle, casting one half on the left, making two heaps. One of these heaps of feathers was converted into a male and the other heap into a female, of the present race of Emus, which are incomparably smaller than the Ngindyal. It was also arranged by the sorcery of the Brambambuts that all future Emus should lay a number of eggs instead of only one. The splitting of the feathers is still easily observable in the feathers of all Emus; they consist of two independent shafts. (Mathews, 1904)

The Emu and the crow were man and wife and lived in a hut. One very wet day, they remained indoors and the Emu, who was addicted to kicking his legs about, lay on his back on the floor to pass the time and kept kicking at the roof. After a while, he struck a weak spot and made a hole through which the rain beat in. He was too lazy to go and repair the damage, but sent the crow out in the wet to patch the breach in the roof. The Emu continued his play of kicking upward and, presently, made

another hole which the crow had likewise to go out and repair. This continued for some time till the crow became exasperated and, taking a piece of bark, scooped up some hot coals from the fire and threw them on Emu's chest as he lay on his back, disporting himself by kicking at the roof. This burnt his breast so severely that even to the present time there is a callous dark patch on the breast of the male Emu. Moreover, Emus continue the old habit of kicking upward with their legs when they are rolling themselves in the sand or elsewhere to clean their feathers. (Mathews, 1908)

Jawayak-wayak (Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike) had a sore foot because it had a boil on it. Wakuak (Torresian Crow) went and burst the boil and, as he did so, pus flew up and into his eyes so that now Wakuak has white eyes. After that, Jawayak-wayak went and killed a kangaroo; but the other birds carried it because he still had a sore foot. They took it back home and set up a roast to cook it. Jawayak-wayak told Deldet (Rainbow Lorikeet) to take a slice of meat from the kangaroo and then fly away. He put a big slice of meat still hot and a bit raw on his back. Juices from the meat ran around onto his chest which became a reddish colour and is still like that to this day. He also told Waley (Red-winged Parrot) to take a piece and put it on his wing, which became reddish and stayed red until even now.

When old lady Durrk (Emu) came back she was cranky about the kangaroo being eaten. She had collected mumin grass that she was planning to make into soup for everyone. She was so cranky that she made the mumin grass into her feathers and said that from then on she would never fly again. She put the digging stick into her mouth and down her neck: that's how she came to have a long neck. She also swallowed a big stone that got stuck in her throat near her heart and when she fluffs those feathers out you can still see that stone. (Wynjorroc et al, 2001)

An Emu was hatching her eggs in close proximity to Dusky Moorhen. By and by, both birds proceeded to walk along the grass in search of something to eat and, in the evening, returned to their respective nests. But on the following morning, the moorhen got up somewhat earlier than usual and went her way. The Emu, seeing her neighbour's eggs, shifted from her own nest and sat upon them. As the afternoon drew on, the moorhen returned home and saw the Emu appropriating her eggs but, being so much smaller, she could not burn her away. So she built a large fire and threw the ashes over her opponent, who thus got all her feathers browned; in retaliation, the Emu threw the moorhen

into the flames and burned her legs, which resulted in their turning red. (Roh, 1903)

The Southern Boobook came across a bed of sweet lilies and, being a greedy fellow, ate them all himself. He never said a word about it to his wife, Magpie Goose. She, however, found out about it and set about discovering the place where the lilies grew. She at last succeeded in locating the spot. The boobook happened to be in close vicinity when his wife got there and, picking up a piece of quartz, threw it at her, hitting her on the head and killing her. Where the goose was struck, a bruised swelling developed and persists to this day. Her mates decided to avenge her death and shortly after, came to the camp where the boobook was resting. Close by were some hot ashes on which the lily roots were being roasted. The geese disarmed all suspicion by offering to pick the fleas off his beard. Delighted at this, the boobook sat back calmly with his eyes closed and opened his mouth to receive each flea as it was caught. His demeanour suddenly changed to one of astonishment and rage when the geese put into his mouth a piping hot lily, surreptitiously taken from the ashes. This caused his mouth to burn and swell, and accounts for his appearance today. (Roh, 1903)

Emu saw that two women had fire. He thought he would steal it to warm himself. He came up, stole the fire and returned to the river, the fire hidden beneath his wings, for Emu then had big wings and could fly. Chickenhawk was coming along and saw Emu making fire. Down he flew, snatched the fire and burned the grass. Emu was burned too, which is why Emus now have small wings and are black, brown and grey. (Maddock, 1969)

Old Black Kite was down at the waterhole catching fish. He saw the two young magpie men coming along on a hunting trip. Before the young men came near, old Black Kite hid the fish that he had caught in his paperbark basket. The young magpie men asked kite for some food and he gave them a goanna tail to eat, but did not say anything about the fish. The goanna tail smelled bad, it was rotten; so as soon as old kite looked away, the magpie brothers covered it over with sand. After talking for a while, the young men went on their way hunting.

Kite was preparing to cook his fish in a ground oven when he saw his dog digging something out of the sand. He went over and found the goanna tail that he had given to his grandsons. Kite was very angry with the young men because he could see nothing wrong with the goanna tail, although it smelled a bit. He decided to put a curse on the magpie men who, at that time, were all

black and had no white in their hair or beards. 'From now on all men will get white hair and beards as they grow old.' Thus the magpie has now got a lot of white among his fathers and all men grow white hair as they age. Because of his meanness in not sharing his fish with his grandsons, all the other birds said: 'All right, from now on, old kite, you will not be able to catch fish and you will have to find and eat dead flesh that smells.' Since that time, Black Kites have been eaters of dead flesh following bushfires to find it. (Trezise, 1965)

Australian Aborigines have known of the visual acuity of raptors for a long time. For example:

The hawk volunteered to perform the work of procuring fire alone and unaided. He flew up so high into the air that, being small but possessed of extraordinary powers of vision, he could see what was going on down below without being seen himself. (Cameron, 1903)

Stories about the weather, including earth tremors, thunder, rain as well as forecasting and the roles of birds abound:

When Burbuk's (Pheasant Coucal) mate lays eggs, no one goes and touches her eggs. If anyone touches the eggs, Burbuk makes rain like a monsoon. If the eggs are taken away, the monsoon continues until the eggs are returned. (Nganjimira and Tidemann, 2005)

Long, long ago Waitch (Emu) was blown up into the sky by a great wind; but when she got there she found no place to rest. She went to the moon and tried to rest between its horns, but in a few days it became fat and round and squeezed her out. She then went to the sun, but the natives in the sun told her that they did not want her because she talked too much. She next went to the stars and asked them to give her a camping place.

Now the stars have the duty of holding up the Earth. They have to stay very close together and cannot move about to hunt or play for fear that the Earth may fall. They had become tired of staying in the same positions for so long and decided that if Waitch would assume part of their load they would provide camping space for her. Waitch agreed to this and the stars spread out at the place where they were thickest and gave her a place to settle down between them.

After a while, the stars became cunning and moved a little farther apart, thus giving Waitch a greater share of the Earth's

weight. Waitch was afraid to grumble too much for she had no other place to live. When the stars found that Waitch was able to bear more of the load, they moved farther apart and, little by little, shifted the entire weight of the Earth to her back. Sometimes Waitch becomes so tired that she drops a little bit and it looks like a star falling down, but she is afraid to do this too often. When she becomes very, very tired, she groans and moves a part of her load from one wing to the other. She does that when the weather is hot and that is the time when one hears her groaning. Sometimes when she moves her load, she does it with a jerk and then the whole Earth trembles. She is frightened to move this way too often, so usually she shifts it gently and grumbles and growls while so doing, making thunder. If she makes too much of a fuss the natives in the sun become angry and make everything dark or send out flashes of light to frighten her and to make her quiet. When Waitch becomes scared, she begins to cry because her load is so heavy and her tears come to the Earth in the form of rain. After a crying spell, she usually settles down for a time. Occasionally the stars cluster together and take a little of the load off her back; but they do not do this often for they are afraid that if they get too close together, Waitch might make a jerk and transfer the Earth entirely to them again. (Hassell, 1934)

The arrival of the migratory Gurrururan (Channel-billed Cuckoo), a very noticeable bird with a raucous cry, heralds not only the imminent wet season, but also the time when 'sugar leaf', a type of manna found on the leaves of some species of eucalypt, may be gathered. (Kofod, 1985-1986)

Across cultures, owls are regarded as wise and the following story describes how the owl obtained that wisdom:

The sun was down and Yindingie had finally finished making the animals. He had told them what to eat, how to hunt and in which areas to live. They had gone excitedly off to their new homes and it seemed that they were all satisfied, except the birds, who had squabbled and argued all day. Some were jealous of another's feathers or song or type of nest. Yindingie was very tired, but he noticed a bird sitting quietly just beyond his fire.

'Come over here', he invited. 'Have I forgotten to give you something? I do not remember you', said Yindingie thoughtfully. 'What did I call you?'

'You have not called me anything yet, sire,' replied the bird shyly. 'All the other birds were making such a fuss, I thought I would not bother you', explained the bird.

Yindingie answered: 'You have been so patient; I will fix you up now.'

So Yindingie went over to the tree where he had hung up his dilly bags and brought them back to the fire. He looked through the bags for a time and then he said: 'Well, I'm afraid there does not seem to be much of anything left. Firstly, you will have to be a night bird because all the places for day birds have been taken.'

'Oh that does not matter', said the bird. 'I will not mind being a night bird.'

'I'm afraid that there are no pretty feathers left - just brown and grey and black'. So Yindingie fitted the bird out with what was left in his dilly bags. While he was telling the bird how to build his nest and what kind of food to eat and how many eggs to lay, he suddenly said: 'Wait a minute. There is another bag somewhere.' He returned with another dilly bag, which seemed to have more in it than the others.

'This', he said, 'is the bag of intelligence. Some of the birds were interested in it but most were so anxious to be off they took only a small amount. If you like, because you are the last one, you can have all the intelligence that is left in the bag. And your name is "Goongingore" (owl). And that is why the owl is the wisest bird in the bush. (Miller, 1994)

These stories show the great importance of birds to Australian Aborigines because stories about them are numerous, so numerous that they outnumber those of any other group of animals. All language groups had stories about birds, and these were used for a variety of purposes, some for entertainment, but many for conveying a message to the listeners. These messages were about social mores such as a girl accepting her promised husband, the respective roles of men and women, or the inter-relationship between birds and food availability, such as the link between the Channel-billed Cuckoo and the availability of manna. The stories contain biological information, albeit in a different form from that expressed in Western bodies of knowledge, which can complement that collected during more formal scientific studies, and it is certainly worth the effort to explore this old knowledge to ascertain what might be revealed to enhance current studies in ornithology. Moreover, it might be well worth the effort for ornithologists to assist in the preservation of such knowledge that may not have yet been recorded before it is lost to the host language groups. It is not known how much of this old knowledge has already disappeared across the continent prior to being handed down or transcribed.

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