

Australian Brush Turkey

Alectura lathami

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Hunter Bird
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An adult male showing the bright red neck and yellow pouch. Photo Jim Smart

Description

This is a large and seemingly unmistakable ground-foraging bird of forested areas in eastern Australia. The birds are mostly blackish, with a bare red head and neck, short black bristles on the forehead and forecrown, yellow neck pouch (mauve in the northern subspecies) and a distinctive tail which is held vertically instead of horizontally. The underparts are grey and white, creating a scalloped effect.

For breeding adult males, the neck pouch is large and bright yellow, and it hangs loosely at the front of the neck (but it is readily distended and retracted). The neck pouches of females and non-breeding males are much reduced in size, and they are dull-yellow in females.

Juveniles are dark brown with paler face, throat and fore-neck. They quickly develop immature plumage (which resembles a “dirtier” version of the adult).

By eight months, they begin to develop breeding colours and they are indistinguishable from adults by nine months. Complete adult plumage is acquired within the first year.

Although Australian Brush-turkeys are clumsy fliers, they roost in trees at night. Most birds are solitary and shy, but they quickly become inured to people and can become a problem at campsites and picnic areas because of their determination to obtain food. Although they mainly eat fruit, seeds, and litter invertebrates, increasingly they have begun to scavenge around humans.

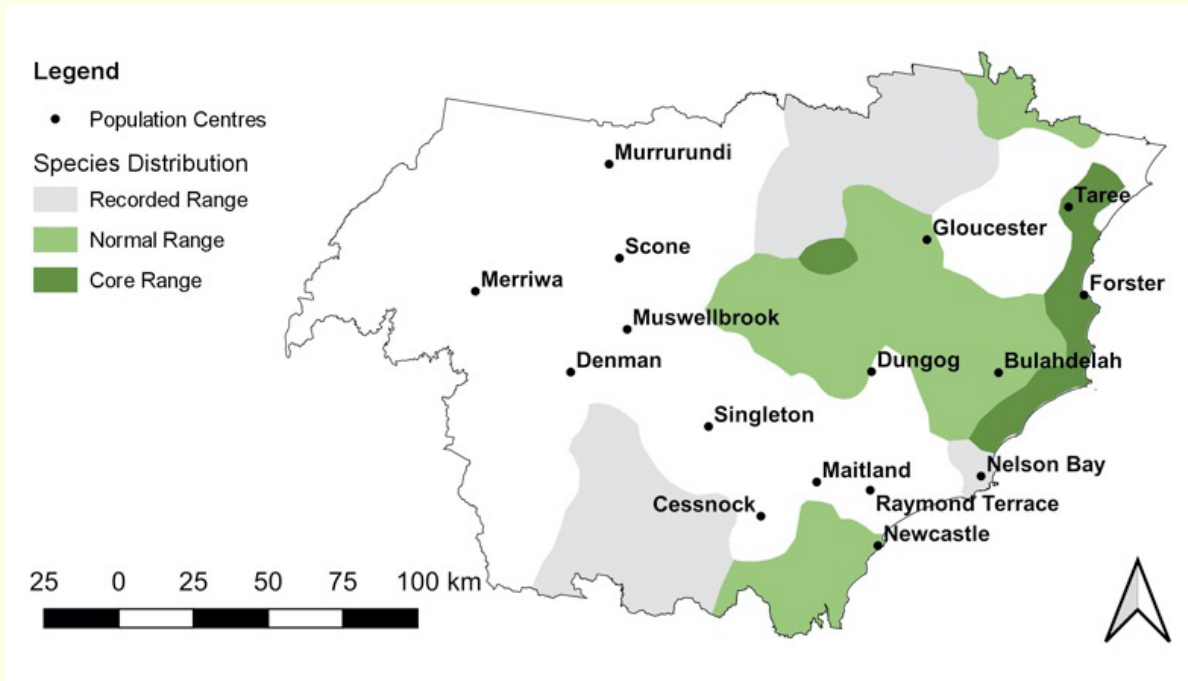


Immature Australian Brush-turkey. Note the inchoate neck pouch and brownish upperparts.
Photo Rebecca Citroni

Regional Status

The Australian Brush-turkey is resident in wet rainforests throughout the east of the region. The population seems to be increasing, associated with a range expansion (or range recovery) in the south of the region. For example, birds are now found in smallish patches of wet rainforest around Newcastle and

many of those birds roam into nearby yards. Similar behaviour is occurring on the Central Coast and in some leafier pockets of Sydney.



The distribution of Australian Brush-turkey in the Hunter Region (map by Dan Williams)

Sub species

There are two sub-species in Australia – *purpureicollis* which is restricted to the northernmost parts of the Cape York area, and *lathamii* (“Southern Australian Brush-turkey”) which occurs across the remainder of the range. The main difference is that the Cape York subspecies has a mauve-coloured neck pouch instead of a yellow one.

Mound Bound

Males build large nests on the ground, made of leaves and other compostable material plus some soil. A successful mound is visited by a series of local females, for mating and egg-laying. The eggs are incubated by the heat of the composting mound; the temperature is controlled in the 33-35°C range by adding or removing material. The male checks the temperature using sensors in its bill. The sex ratio of chicks is equal at incubation temperatures of 34°C; there are more males when cooler and more females when warmer. The eggs are very large and the young are fully fledged on hatching. They can fly within hours, as soon as their feathers are dry.

In the breeding season the male works tirelessly at the mound, constantly adjusting the amount of material in it while at the same time repelling rival

males. The average clutch size is 16-24 eggs but up to 50 eggs laid by several females have been found in a single mound. Usually, the same mound is used year after year, with fresh material added each breeding season. Males can be very persistent with their mound-building activities, which can lead to problems for home-owners when the mound is in a suburban garden.



Female Australian Brush-turkey. Note the pale-yellow neck pouch. Photo Rebecca Citroni

About the name

Australian Brush-turkey

There are many poultry-type names used for Australian birds, based upon the early settlers' looks-like approach to nomenclature. This is but one example of that approach. The term "brush", originally meaning a thicket, was used by settlers in NSW when referring to rainforest. There are several other species of Brush-turkey in New Guinea and associated islands – our bird is endemic to Australia.

Alectura lathamii

Our bird was named in recognition of John Latham, a late eighteenth century English ornithologist. The genus name arises from the Greek words *alektor* ("cock") and *oura* ("tail") and was chosen because the bird's tail resembles

that of a domestic cock i.e. vertically oriented and with feathers one above another.



Non-breeding male Australian Brush-turkey. Note the bright-yellow neck pouch. Photo Ray Burton

Design Rob Kyte at Conservation Matters 0420 821 460 **Text** by Alan Stuart based on information mainly sourced from • HBOC's Hunter Region annual bird report series • Volumes 1-7 of HANZAB (the Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds) • Bird in the Hand (ABSA information sheet series) • Menkhorst et al. (2017). The Australian Bird Guide. • Ian Fraser & Jeannie Gray (2013). Australian Bird Names. A Complete Guide. *Information in this fact sheet is provided exclusively to members of the Hunter Bird Observers Club*

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