

Satin Bowerbird

Ptilonorhynchus violaceus

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Hunter Bird
Observers Club

Affiliated with BirdLife Australia



An adult male Satin Bowerbird (photo: Paul Fuller)

General Comments

Adult male Satin Bowerbirds, aged 7+ years, are unmistakable – they are large stocky birds with dark glossy indigo-blue plumage and a white/pale bill and legs. Often, the first impression is that it is a black bird. Adult females are greenish above with contrasting brown flight feathers and tail, and they have creamy white underparts with considerable scalloping, particularly on the belly. They have a dark bill. Their purple/deep blue iris (which the males also have) distinguishes them from female bowerbirds of all other species.

In broad terms, young Satin Bowerbirds resemble adult females but with some notable differences. Juveniles have brown upperparts (with white streaks), a pale bill and grey legs, and their forehead, crown and nape are dull olive-grey or bluish-grey. At around 12 months they moult into first immature plumage – with dark olive-green upperparts instead of the dull bluish-green of adult

females, and dark brown ear coverts streaked with off-white. Their bill becomes dark brown or blackish, but they retain grey legs.

At around four years of age females attain full adult plumage, but males still have another three years of transition to go – during which time their bill and legs progressively lighten in colour. There is a progression of plumage changes: initially the underparts turn pale creamy-yellow with dense chevrons, then cream with faint chevrons and scattered blue-black feathers, then finally indigo; the upperparts gradually turn indigo but not uniformly and in six year olds the hindneck turns cream, which contrasts strongly against the mostly-indigo crown and head.

Males are promiscuous, mating at their bower with any willing female. Females, which build their nest (an untidy shallow bowl lined with leaves) and raise their young alone, show a preference for males which have well-built and well-decorated bowers.

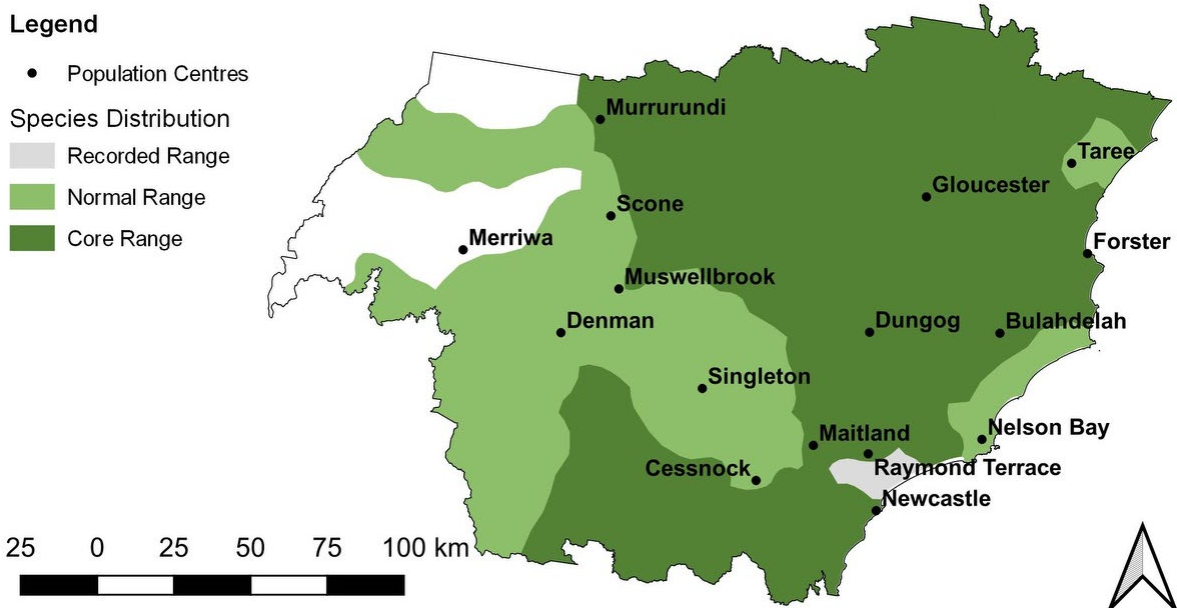
For a short series of cartoons that summarises Satin Bowerbirds, click here: <https://www.paperbarkwriter.com/the-satin-bowerbird/>



An adult female Satin Bowerbird (photo: Lorna Mee)

Regional Status

The Satin Bowerbird is a widespread breeding resident of our region, occurring wherever there are well-wooded areas and nearby parks and gardens (but preferring rainforest and wetter forests).



Distribution of the Satin Bowerbird in the Hunter Region (map by Dan Williams).

Subspecies

The main and nominate subspecies is *violaceous*, the Southern Satin Bowerbird. A smaller subspecies *minor*, the Wet Tropics Satin Bowerbird, occurs as an isolated population on Cape York.

Bowers

To attract females, male bowerbirds build, decorate, and maintain elaborate structures, called bowers. Although males spend little time at the bower they spend much time near it (60-70% of daylight hours during the breeding season), and defend the bower-site from other males. Visiting females prefer to mate with males with the best bowers – hence, just one local male might dominate the matings, with the other males having limited or no success.

A male Satin Bowerbird's bower is two walls of sticks (the two walls curve gently towards each other) placed into a platform of sticks on ground, with an extensive platform at one end. They paint the inside walls of the bower, using chewed fruit that stains the sticks black or that induces growth of black mould on them. They decorate the area around the platform with flowers, fruits, snail shells, bones and artificial objects, and many other natural items, with strong preference for blue decorations.

Older males build, decorate, paint, and exclusively maintain and defend larger and better formed bowers than younger, less-experienced or less-dominant males. Bower-owning adult males visit bowers of rivals and attempt to damage them or steal decorations, with destructive acts varying from complete levelling of bower to removal of a few sticks. Bower-owning adult males also regularly raid rudimentary bowers of younger males to destroy them or steal decorations.



A Satin Bowerbird bower, with decorations. The main display platform is at the far end (photo: Telesha Ferguson)

About the name Satin Bowerbird

“Satin” is descriptive, although it only applies for the plumage of adult males. Before John Gould intervened, the two most commonly encountered members of this guild were called the Satin-bird and the Regent-bird by early European settlers. Gould introduced the concept of “a bower-like structure”, and at the same time the modern name, although he did not recognise the purpose of the male’s bower. He thought it might be an assembly hall or a playing-ground.

Ptilonorhynchus violaceus

The genus name means “feather-bill”, from the Greek words *ptilon*, feather, and *rhunkhos*, bill. Satin Bowerbirds have a small patch of feathers extending from their forehead to the root of their bill. The species name is from the Latin word *viola*, a violet (the flower) and, by extension, violet-coloured – this is a clear reference to the male’s stunning plumage.



An immature male Satin Bowerbird, aged about 5 years old, with pale bill and pale legs (photo: Mick Roderick)

Design by 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
- Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds.

[Text before updates sourced from: Marchant, S. et al (eds) 1990-2006]

- Volumes 1-3 of the NSW Field Atlassers’ Atlas of the Birds of NSW and the ACT
- 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.
- Richard Schodde and Ian Mason (1999). A Directory of Australian Birds (Passerines).
- James Jobling (2010). The Helm Dictionary of Scientific Names. Christopher Helm, London.

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