

Superb Lyrebird

Menura novaehollandiae

#5 MAY 2020



Hunter Bird
Observers Club

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Adult male Northern Superb Lyrebird (photo: Alan Stuart)

Description

A large pheasant-like brownish bird with a prominent tail, which is very elaborate for adult males, less so for females and immatures. The tail of males is spectacular, comprising two long wire-like central feathers surrounded by six pairs of filamentary feathers, and two outermost (“lyrate”) broad dark club-shaped feathers, boldly marked with yellow-white crescents.

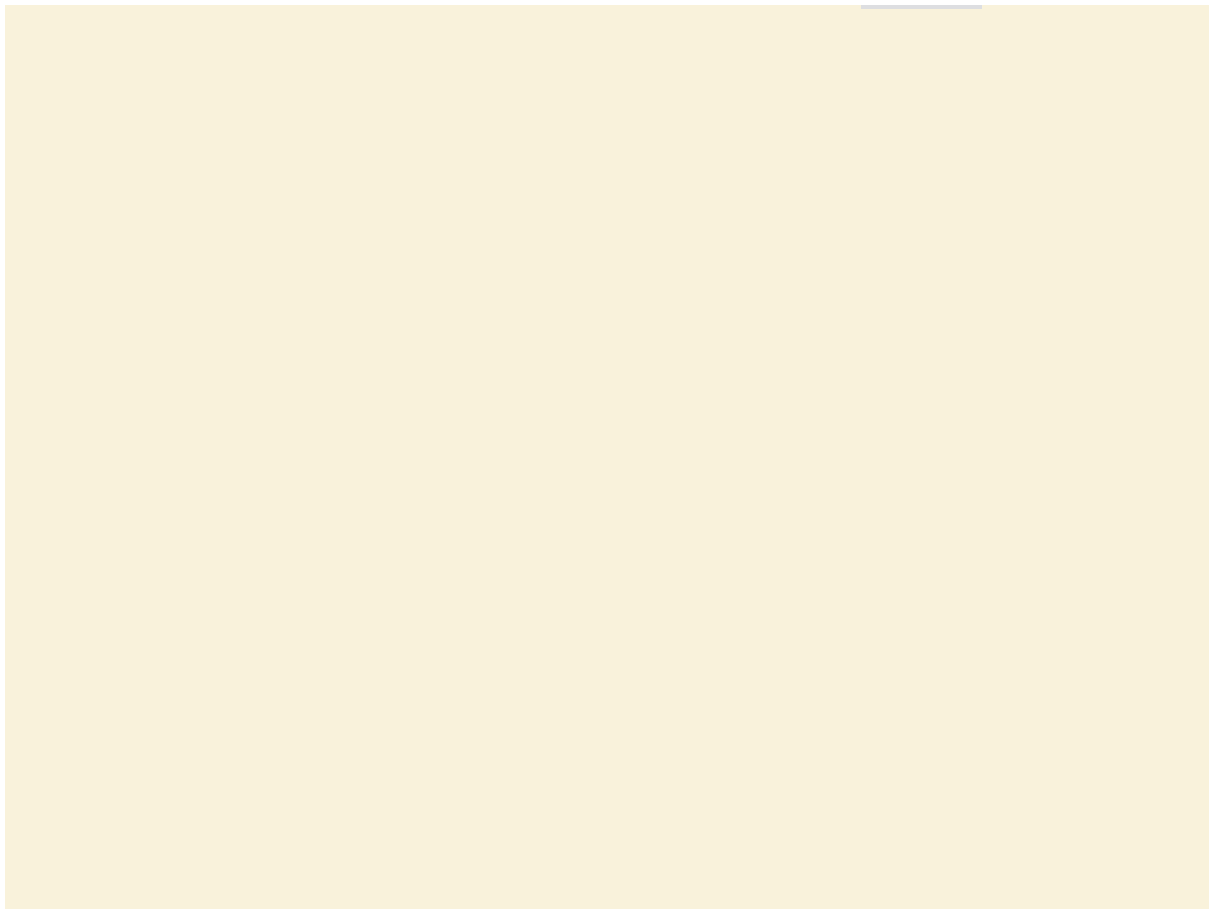
Males and females are similar in appearance, apart from their tails (more details below). Juveniles resemble females but have rufous-brown chin and throat and overall ruddier tones, and their tail is less developed especially the lyrate feathers. Immature birds progressively become less ruddy; females reach adult plumage in their fifth year.

Lyrebirds are predominantly ground-dwelling birds, scratching vigorously for worms and insects. As they have no breastbone, and relatively small wings, they are poor flyers; however they roost in trees at night, bough-hopping until they reach the safety of high branches. Leading into the winter breeding season, both males and females establish and vigorously defend separate territories. Nest

building and incubation is exclusively by females, producing a single young each year (*see video below*).



Video Alan Stuart



Tale of a tail

Males can be reliably separated from females on tail feather shapes and structure from their third year onwards. It takes 4-5 years for males to attain full adult body plumage and 6-8 years for a fully adult tail. Over its second to sixth years, the male's tail changes with every moult, the lyrate feathers in particular. The diagram from HANZAB and the ABSA information sheet shows how the tail feathers change with time.

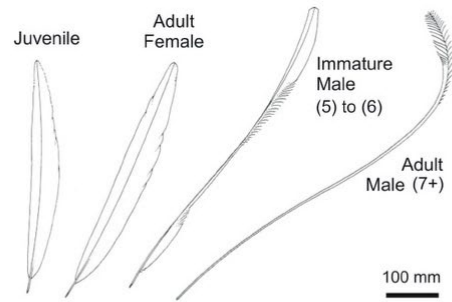


Figure 1 - Medians (t1)

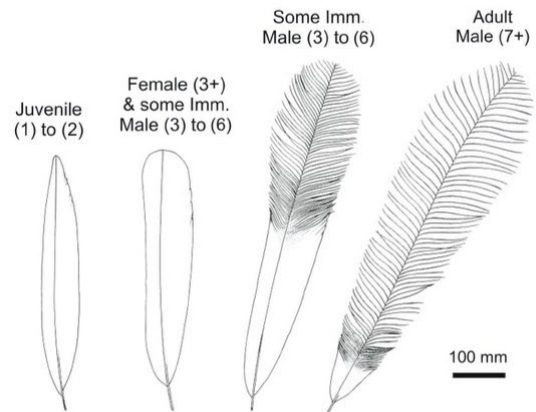


Figure 2 - Filamentaries (t2 - t7)

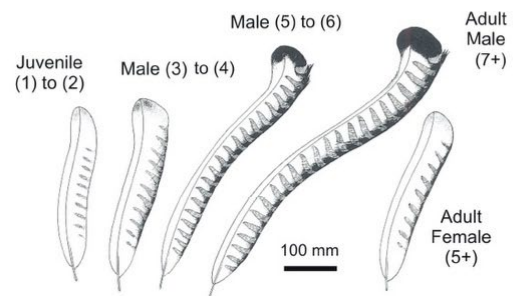


Figure 3 - Lyrates (t8)

Vocalisations and displays

Females rarely call and it mostly involves mimicry, but male Superb Lyrebirds are well known for their vocalisations. These have been much studied, at several locations, and are reported to be audible over distances of up to 1 km. Very accurate mimicry forms an important component of the male's singing, comprising 70-80% of all its vocalisations. The repertoire includes many bird species plus other forest sounds. Wild birds apparently do not mimic sounds associated with human activity (Corella 2019 p1-7).

Although males are vocal year-round, in April-May they construct several 1-2m diameter display mounds within their territory, from where they sing each morning pre-dawn to attract females. In these displays, males fold their tails

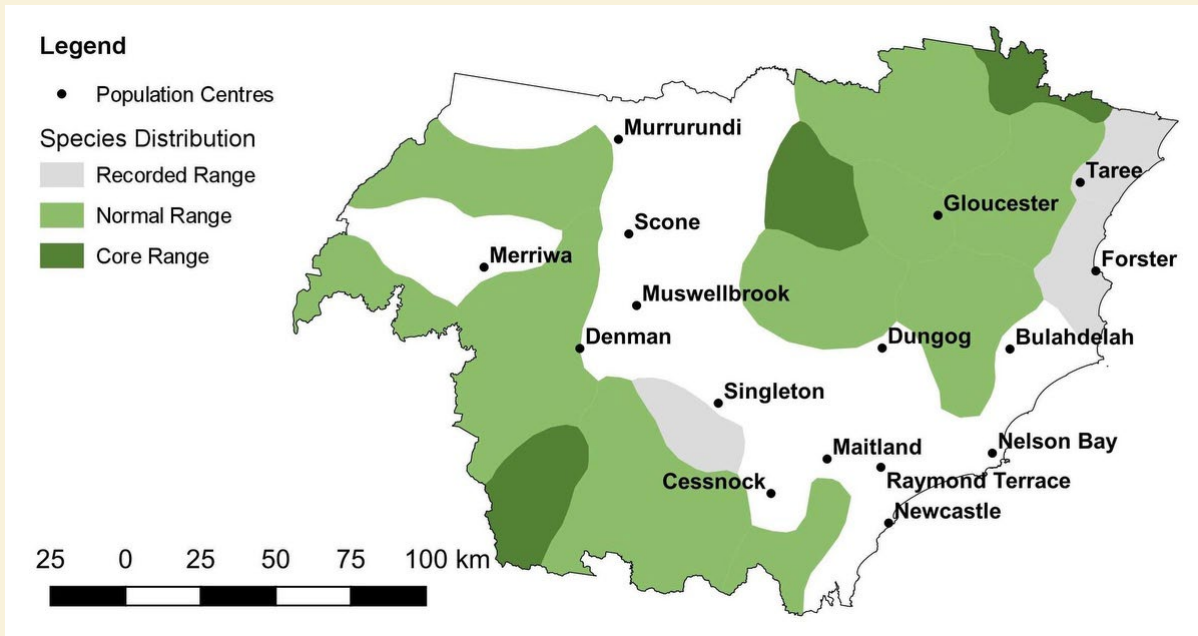
forward and fan it out so that it covers their entire body, all the while calling vigorously (*see video below*). During the day territorial males also sing from other locations, such as from fallen logs. The tail display is usually not possible when singing at these other locations.



Video UWS/Alan Stuart

Regional Status

The Superb Lyrebird is a common breeding resident in our mid- and high-altitude forests. The long-term trend suggests a stable population, although the fires of summer 2019-2020 will have taken a severe toll, especially of the region's southern population.



Distribution map for Superb Lyrebird (map prepared by Dan Williams).

Sub-species

There are three sub-species overall, two of which occur in our Region. The Hunter River is the divide for the two populations (as the distribution map very clearly shows). The nominate sub-species *novaehollandiae* (Central Superb Lyrebird) is in the south of the region while *edwardi* (Northern Superb Lyrebird) is in the north. The differences between the two sub-species are subtle. For example, the lyrate tail feathers in *edwardi* are only slightly curved and they just touch when the tail is not on display whereas in *novaehollandiae* they are widely curved and overlap each other.

About the name

Superb Lyrebird

Early settlers had a large variety of names for this easily-noticed species. Perhaps unfortunately, lyrebird became the accepted name – no live lyrebird can or does hold its tail erect like a lyre and the name arose from inspection of museum specimens. The species name derives from the briefly bestowed scientific name *Menura superba*.

Menura novaehollandiae

The genus name means “moon-tail”, from the Greek words *mene* moon and *oura* tail. This refers to the crescents (called *lunulis* in Latin) in the lyrate tail feathers. The species name derives from the Modern Latin *Nova Hollandia* i.e. New Holland, an early name for Australia.

Design Rob Kyte at Conservation Matters 0420 821 460 **Text** by Alan Stuart based on information 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) • Ian Fraser & Jeannie Gray (2013). Australian Bird Names. A Complete Guide • Richard Schodde and Ian Mason (1999). A Directory of Australian Birds (Passerines). Information in this fact sheet is provided exclusively to members of the Hunter Bird Observers Club

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