

ALBERT'S LYREBIRD:

SHOWMAN EXTRAORDINAIRE

The rarely seen display of the Albert's Lyrebird is one of nature's greatest performances. One determined photographer made it his mission to get a front-row seat.

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY MICHAEL SNEDIC

Sitting in a cramped bird hide in a dark Queensland, rainforest, I was starting to question my sanity. It was the middle of winter, not yet daylight, and bitterly cold. I had been coming here every day now for seven weeks in the hope of professionally photographing the stunning courtship display of the rare Albert's Lyrebird. Only three people had managed to do so before me and I was determined to be the fourth. But the lyrebird's display season was coming to an end and I was thoroughly exhausted and losing hope of ever achieving my goal.

There are two species of lyrebird—the Superb and the Albert's, both occurring only in Australia. The Superb, the more common of the two, naturally occurs from along the Great Dividing Range near Melbourne to the Queensland border, while the Albert's is restricted to an area within a 100 km radius of World Heritage-listed Lamington National Park in south-eastern Queensland. Here, rich volcanic soil and higher than average rainfall have resulted in a rare remnant of subtropical rainforest. Many rare species of fauna live in this rainforest, including the Albert's Lyrebird, which is classed as vulnerable on the IUCN Red List Category and is found nowhere in captivity in the world.

The male Albert's Lyrebird displays during the cooler months of late May through to August. His main aim is to attract a female to mate with. Each male defends his own territory from other males, and has specific areas that he uses to display at. With uncanny accuracy he mimics the calls of local birds such as Satin Bowerbird, King Parrot, Eastern Yellow Robin and Laughing

Kookaburra. Interspersed with his own loud, resonant call, this amazing vocal display can last up to 30 minutes. Then he throws his long tail up and spreads it over his body to create a shimmering, lace-like dome. This often culminates in a frenzied finale that sounds remarkably like a traditional Aboriginal Corroboree dance (known as "gronking") while he pulls vigorously at vines and sticks on the ground with his strong claws.

My attempts to photograph the displaying Albert's Lyrebird began 13 years ago, when I was living in Lamington National Park and working as a rainforest guide. I left my accommodation at 4.30 am each morning in the cold using a head-lamp to illuminate my way through the pitch-black rainforest. My friend Glen Threlfo, a nature documentary maker and renowned birder, had constructed a hide made of chicken wire and camouflage material close to a spot that a male lyrebird was favouring as a display site. I had to work quickly to set up multiple flashes around the display area and my camera inside the hide, before daybreak and the possible appearance of the lyrebird. Once confined inside the hide I would sit patiently and wait. There were often long stretches of time during which the bird didn't show up at all. Another time he began his display directly in front of me, but as soon as I moved my camera he shot off into the undergrowth. When he eventually came back—several days later—I was so careful not to be noticed... then my equipment failed. Finally, after seven long weeks, everything came together. The lyrebird turned up,

Photos: After keeping its audience waiting, the Albert's Lyrebird finally gives a bravura performance.





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positioned himself right in front of me, and put on a show. My equipment worked perfectly and my dream was realised.

In the ensuing years I continued to observe this lyrebird. Since taking those initial shots in 1997, photographic equipment has improved to such an extent that I decided to again try and photograph his courtship display and obtain even higher quality photos.

At the end of May 2008, Glen and I began observing the daily routine of the lyrebird. Once again he was favouring one particular display area so we set up a hide in that spot. Over the next week, I discovered that just because I had done this before, it wasn't going to be any easier the second time around. One particular morning I was running late. I set up my camera inside the hide, but while I was positioning the flashes he suddenly turned up. I didn't want to scare him off so I hid behind a big tree. He launched into his display routine directly in front of my camera and here I was 10 m away, unable to press the shutter. Other mishaps occurred, including remote flashes that refused to work. There were also times when the lyrebird walked up to the hide and stopped, seemingly peering at me through the material—I'm sure he knew I was there!

My time ran out and I didn't have any new photos. I left greatly demoralised and feeling a sense of failure. But I couldn't stop thinking about how close I had come to achieving my goal so I decided to go back and have another go at it. After many more days sitting in the hide, the lyrebird finally approached the display area. I sat perfectly still while he went through a long repertoire of calls and mimicry, this time including the sounds of fighting Red-necked Pademelons (local rainforest wallabies) and the beating of birds' wings. My heart was racing, there was sweat on my brow and my foot was painfully cramped. I didn't care. Nothing was going to stop my mission. At last he began performing with all the showmanship of a Broadway entertainer.



Again, after 11 years, I was able to take a series of shots without him scampering off before I pressed my camera's shutter button. It was as if he was rewarding me for my perseverance.

The long hours, setbacks and cramped conditions had all been worth it. I sat in the hide totally elated. When the lyrebird finished his display, he slowly wandered off into the rainforest undergrowth. After what I had just witnessed, how could future subjects of his attention fail to be impressed?

MICHAEL SNEDIC is a Brisbane-based nature photographer, writer and presenter of "in-the-field" photography workshops.

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Above: He throws his long tail up and spreads it over his body to create a shimmering, lace-like dome.

Below: The rare Albert's Lyrebird is found in subtropical rainforest in Queensland's Lamington National Park.

