



THE PLAYBOY OF THE FOREST

*The male Satin Bowerbird works hard
to maintain his reputation*

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY MICHAEL SNEDIC

Above: This male Satin Bowerbird has exceeded himself, building a row of three semi-detached bowers. In a unique form of sexual competition, he will raid other bowers to destroy them and steal material. The better the bower, the less likely it will be raided.

AUSTRALIA IS HOME to eight different bowerbirds, spread around the country—the Tooth-billed, Golden, Regent, Spotted, Western, Great, Fawn-breasted and Satin Bowerbirds. Of these, the Satin Bowerbird is one of the best known.

Satin Bowerbirds are found throughout eastern Australia, ranging from the Atherton Tablelands in northern Queensland to as far south as the Otway Ranges in Victoria. Most are found from south-eastern Queensland to Victoria, with a much smaller, isolated population in north-eastern Queensland. They inhabit

rainforest, wetter eucalypt forests and woodlands, as well as the edges of the forests, and are often seen in suburban gardens in places such as Sydney and Blue Mountains in New South Wales.

The adult male and female have completely different plumage. The adult male has glossy blue-black feathers that shimmer like satin in the sunlight, hence the species' name. It takes six to seven years for a male Satin Bowerbird to gain full adult plumage. Until that time, he looks quite similar to an adult female—olive-green above and creamy white below. Indeed, from a distance, it's easy to mistake an immature male for an adult female. In his fifth and sixth year, the male Satin Bowerbird starts to show some of his blue-black feathers and will often be seen practising his display to other young males. Until he is fully coloured, no self-respecting female will be interested in his advances.

As the name suggests, the male bowerbird builds a display bower on the ground. This he adorns with trinkets and 'jewels'—all in the hope of attracting the interest of females. People often say that they have seen a Satin Bowerbird's 'nest'. What they are referring to is the bird's display bower and not the actual nest.

The male Satin Bowerbird usually constructs his bower in an open area, close to the same spot each year, and where there is a high likelihood of attracting a passing female. He starts by pushing a series of twigs into the ground as a foundation, then creates an avenue using sticks and twigs woven together to form a solid structure. Interestingly,

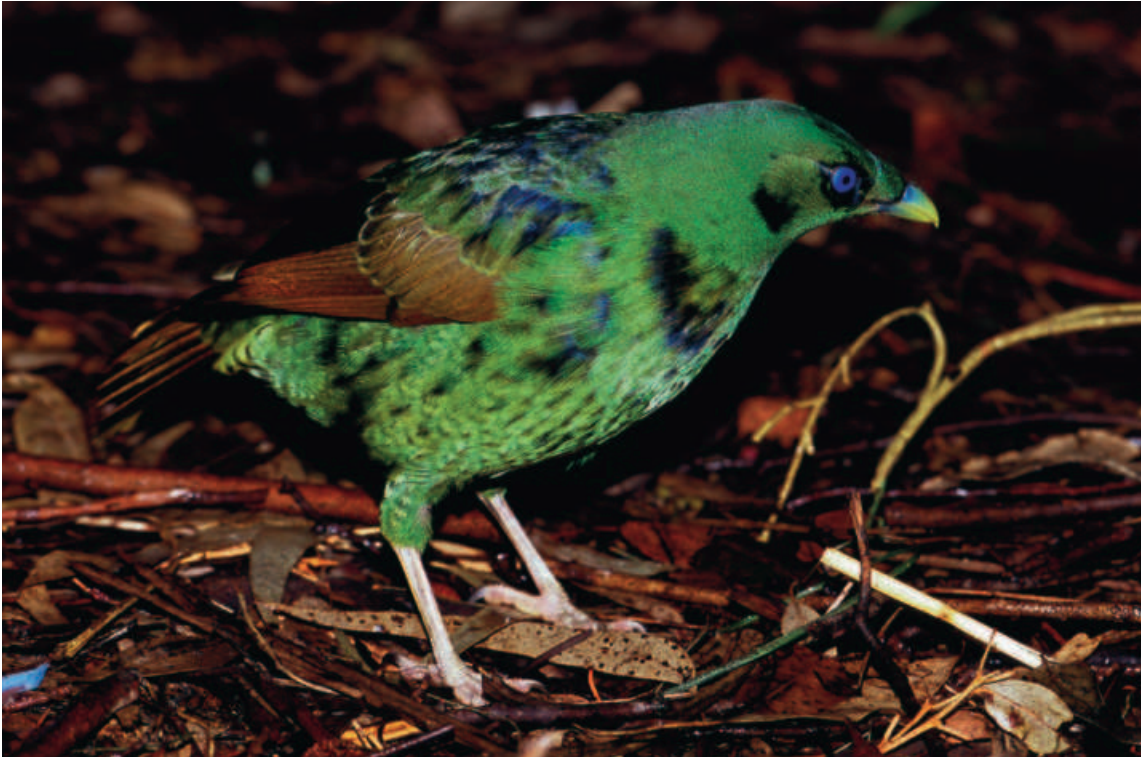


Clockwise from top:

The male Satin Bowerbird spends much time building and decorating his bower—all to attract females and form a backdrop to his courtship display. As Charles Darwin wrote in 1871: 'the male will chase the female all over...then go to the bower, pick up a gay feather or a large leaf, utter a curious kind of note, set all his feathers erect, run round the bower and become so excited that his eyes appear ready to start from his head.'

Typical Satin Bowerbird habitat.

An adult female: she raises her nestling without help from its father.



Left: An immature male showing some signs of change into full adult plumage, which isn't achieved till about 5 years of age.

Below: The ultimate purpose of all that fuss: a newly fledged chick.

he always builds his bower so that it faces a north-south direction to best catch the light. Once the bower is completed, he will often find ripe berries and mix these with saliva to create a paste to coat the inside of the bower.

He also searches for blue and mauve/purple objects, which he places at the entrance of the bower. He may even pilfer the shiniest or most dramatic-looking ornaments from a neighbour's bower when he isn't around, although bowers are spaced a fair distance apart from each other to avoid conflict. Away from human habitation, he selects items such as berries, flowers, leaves, parrot feathers, cicada shells and snail shells. Near human habitation, plastic sweet wrappers, pen lids, pegs, straws, package strapping, plastic milk bottle tops and the like are much more popular, as they are easier to find, retain their colour and are much shinier (and, supposedly, more attractive to the females!).

Many years ago, when I was working as a bird-keeper at Sydney's Taronga Zoo, there was a concerted effort to ban the use of the blue plastic milk bottle tops that separated on opening: once the lid was removed from the bottle, a loose circular plastic ring was left. Being a bright blue, the tops are favoured items for male Satin Bowerbirds to adorn their bowers. Unfortunately, some of the rings got caught around the bird's heads and caused slow, painful strangulation. The pressure was on the dairy company to address this serious concern. To their credit, the company changed the colour of their plastic caps and circular rings to orange and the problem was immediately solved. Other companies that use blue caps and rings have developed a system where the cap separates from the ring, but the ring now stays firmly on the bottle.

Over the years I have witnessed many displays of male Satin Bowerbirds. I have often laughed at their desperate performance, all in aid of wooing any nearby females. At the first sight of a female, a male starts his display by firstly picking up a leaf or flower in his beak. He then droops his wings, raises the feathers on the back of his head and starts a series of rhythmic whirring and buzzing sounds. If the female approaches for a closer look at his performance, he becomes positively possessed. He bobs up and down, struts around manically from side to side, lifts and drops his wings repeatedly and jumps back and forth in front of the bower's entrance. When this ritual is over, if the female is still interested she solicits mating by crouching down in front of the bower's avenue or enters the bower from the back. She spreads her wings wide open, quivering them slightly. The



male sees this as acceptance and proceeds to mate with her. After mating, she vigorously flaps her wings and then flies away, leaving the male to try to attract another female.

The female chooses a nest site in amongst the foliage of a nearby tree or bush, up to 35 m above the ground. There she builds her nest using small twigs and lines it with leaves. It is completely open and saucer shaped. Some time ago, I used a hide on top of a tower in order to photograph a nest. The particular female had no fear of the hide whatsoever and sat on her two eggs quite happily. Incubation lasted around three weeks and the chicks remained in the nest for a further three weeks. Adults predominantly eat fruit, but also some insects and a few leaves, but they mainly feed their chicks insects, such as scarab beetles and cicadas, and bring them only a small amount of fruit.

The Satin Bowerbird's breeding season is from September to February and the male spends many months of each year building and maintaining his bower and courting females for possible mating. He doesn't help in any way with nest building or rearing of the chicks. Glen Threlfo, a well-respected nature documentary maker, named one of his BBC-commissioned documentaries 'Bowerbird—Playboy Prince of the Forest' for good reason.

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