

## Birds Australia Member Profile

# THE CALL OF THE WILD

*David Stewart has spent a half a lifetime recording the birds of Australia*

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY MICHAEL SNEDIC

IN A FOREST inland from the New South Wales coastal town of Moruya, David Stewart recalls: 'I had been listening to the recorded sounds of a male Superb Lyrebird through my headphones, when one suddenly appeared before me on the track. The bird immediately burst into song in response to the sound it heard coming from my headphones, as if to say 'I can do better than that'. Stewart was able to record in stereo a magnificent range of the lyrebird's songs, including its mimicry of many other rainforest birds.

Stewart has been recording wildlife sounds since 1981 and has so far recorded over 620 species of bird, as well as 125 frog and 50 mammal species. Originally, he recorded in analogue—almost 500 bird species—and in 1989 changed to recording digitally. 'I was one of the first,' he says. His travels have taken him across the width and breadth of our diverse country many times. 'I have probably seen more of Australia than anyone else,' he claims. Judging by the number of species he has recorded, and the different parts of Australia these species inhabit, this is easy to believe.

Stewart's fascination with wildlife, in particular birds, started when he was a teenager in the 1950s. He spent most of the 1960s in desert areas of the Northern Territory working with Aboriginal people. While he was living in these remote areas he rekindled his interest in birds as a way of keeping himself occupied. From the late 1960s until the early 1980s, he developed a passionate interest in what is known as twitching or ticking (attempting to see and tick as many species of bird as possible off a list). 'During that period I was a twitcher with the second highest number of bird species seen in Australia,' he declares.

From decades of birdwatching and recording wildlife sounds, Stewart has seen many interesting places and experienced numerous memorable moments. While searching for the Scarlet-chested Parrot in the Great Victorian Desert in north-western South Australia, he encountered a flock of over 250 of these birds. 'Can you



imagine being in the desert and seeing a flock of these delightful, colourful birds all in one place? It was just spectacular'.

People might think that Stewart has lived a charmed life, travelling the length and breadth of our country, recording wildlife sounds. But it hasn't always been that easy. Many a night spent attempting to record nocturnal birds has been foiled by torrential rain. 'Trying to keep my recording equipment dry while trudging through mud and covered in leeches, has certainly been a challenge at times'. One of Stewart's toughest experiences in the field occurred in Broome in Western Australia while he was recording single species flocks of shorebirds as they left on their northern migration. 'The tides at Broome are up to 10 m and when they come in, you virtually have to run in with them,' he recalls. The recording conditions were quite harsh and at times involved being 500 m or more from the shore, standing knee-deep in mud in temperatures of 36° C or more. 'To top this off, there were two cyclones nearby and the birds weren't active in migration, so I just had to wait patiently'. It took an energy-sapping six weeks before Stewart was able to record most of the shorebird species he had targeted. Bushflies and dust storms, all part of the

outback experience, added to the problems associated with recording sound.

Stewart's sound collection, under the name of 'Nature Sound', has been lodged with the CSIRO Australian National Wildlife Collection in Canberra and the British Library's National Sound Archive in London. His recordings have been featured in many documentaries by the BBC, ABC, Channels 7 and 9, as well as the works of freelance film-makers. Stewart's collection of commercially available CDs numbers 11 and includes birds, frogs and soundscapes from different parts of Australia. He has also produced a considerable number of fauna survey CDs for State and local government authorities.

Stewart is still a twitcher at heart. His ambition is to record as many species and subspecies of birds as possible. But his obsession is also a gift to posterity. Some of our bird species may become extinct or endangered and Stewart believes that his years of recording wildlife sounds will preserve their calls for future generations to hear, even though people may never have the opportunity to see the species in real life.

MICHAEL SNEDIC aims to show the beauty of native birds through photographs, text and a pair of binoculars.