



Bowerbird

A taste for pomp and pageantry:
the regent bowerbird

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICHAEL SNEDIC

As **regent** of England in the early 1800s, the future George IV redecorated Windsor Castle and Buckingham Palace, built the highly ornamental Royal Pavilion at Brighton and adored pomp and ceremony. One of his alleged namesakes, Australia's majestic black and gold **regent** bowerbird, exhibits somewhat similar inclinations.

I had been bird watching since dawn, my binoculars scouring the rainforest canopy. The morning was serene, the air crisp and clean.

Suddenly a flash of black and gold grabbed my attention. I followed the bright movement until it stopped in a nearby tree. My first ever sighting in the wild of an adult male regent bowerbird (*Sericulus chrysocephalus*)!

I was in a subtropical rainforest remnant known as the Big Scrub Flora Reserve near Rocky Creek Dam in northern New South Wales. The sight of that stunning, colourful bird contrasted against the various shades of green and brown in the canopy is a memory I will always savour.

The other bird has the blues

In much of its habitat the regent bowerbird lives side by side with the more common satin bowerbird (*Ptilonorhynchus violaceus*). The males of both species exhibit the unusual and distinctive behaviour of bower building: creating a special structure solely for the purpose of enticing a female (or females) to mate with them. Glossy black male satin bowerbirds are famous for collecting a sea of blue ornaments – leaves, flowers, snail shells, bottle caps, clothes pegs – to decorate their bowers, which are often quite visible. Over many years of guiding, bushwalking, bird watching, photographing or assisting wildlife documentary makers, I have found dozens of satin bowers, many active, in forests, clearings, near buildings, roads and car parks.

Over that same period, I have only ever found four regent bowerbird bowers. It's not due to a lack of looking.

The regent bowerbird prefers subtropical rainforests on the coasts and hinterlands of Queensland and New South Wales, although it is found in warm temperate rainforests as well. Much of their former range has been destroyed by clearing but fortunately, they can still be found in protected areas including coastal rainforests at Iluka (coastal NSW), the Nightcap and Border Ranges (NSW) and Lamington National Park (Qld). Over years of observation, I have noticed they will readily venture out to the edge of the forest, but most sightings have been within the lushness of the subtropical rainforest.

The birds are predominantly fruit eaters. You can see them foraging on the forest floor amongst shrubs, trees or vines, or in the canopy. Along with native berries, such as lillypillies, quandongs and satinash, they will readily feed on exotic species such as inkweed or lantana. Depending on the availability, regent bowerbirds will also feed on larger fruits such as native fig and quince. Rather than swallowing these fruits whole, as they do with the berries, they will pick at the flesh of the ripened fruit.



One of the most brilliant sights of eastern Australia's subtropical coastal rainforests, the male regent bowerbird takes about seven years to develop his adult colours. Regent bowerbirds are fruit-eaters and spend much of their time foraging in the forest canopy and understorey.

Photo © Michael Smedley/michaelsmedley.com

Dried treats and seasonal fruits

They are also partial to dried fruit such as currants and sultanas. O'Reilly's Rainforest Guesthouse, situated in Lamington National Park, south-east Queensland, is world famous for feeding throngs of wild regent bowerbirds that fly freely around the guesthouse. For nearly five years, part of my job as a nature-based guide was to feed these birds during the early morning bird walks, much to the delight of the guests. Nowhere else in the world can people experience these magnificent birds at such close range. We only ever fed the regent and satin bowerbirds currants and sultanas and I must stress that within Lamington National Park itself (which surrounds the privately owned O'Reilly's), the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service strictly prohibits the feeding of any native animals.

I noticed what appeared to be a regular pattern of regent behaviour at Lamington. They would land in the shrubs and trees of the guesthouse and wait for their daily feed. Once they had eaten, they would invariably fly off into the forest, in search of their natural fruit and berry diet. Around December each year, they would slowly withdraw into the forest, returning to the guesthouse in numbers around April or May. We thought that due to a plentiful supply of native fruit in the forests through summer and early autumn, the birds did not need to supplement their diets. Once fruits start to diminish, they come in search of the extra dried fruit.

Although predominantly frugivorous, the regent female, who raises the chicks on her own, will often catch beetles, moths, cicadas and other insects for her young.

Back to the bower

The male regent's bower is smaller than that of its satin cousin. The bird uses various sized twigs that cross each other in all directions, creating a fairly solid structure. Rather than place decorations around the outside of the bower as the satin does, the regent tends to place an assortment of trinkets and baubles in the centre of his bower. These are neutral in colour and may include different types of snail shells, cicada casings or castings, shiny leaves and berries.

Some earlier literature on regent bowerbirds suggested that the extreme rarity of finding a bower meant the bird was in the process of discarding the practice of bower building altogether. Although this theory has been overturned, finding an active bower remains a rare occurrence. The male will usually choose a thick, scrubby part of the rainforest undergrowth in which to position his bower. It will need to have clear access to the all-important females he is trying to woo but overall, concealing the bower is a priority. One possible reason for the seclusion could be the male's extremely bright colours which could easily attract predators.



When Sir David Attenborough (left) visited Lamington National Park in search of regent bowerbirds, author Michael Snedic (right) was delighted to be able to assist.

One, two, three, four

Of the four bowers I've found, three were covered by dense vegetation – it is easy to see how searching for them can be a difficult task.

One bower lasted only six or seven days before the male completely destroyed and relocated it. Sir David Attenborough's film crew captured footage of the next active bower when they were in Australia in November 1999. Sir David visited Lamington National Park in order to film the behaviours of both the regent and satin bowerbirds as part of a documentary on bowerbirds of Australia. I had the great fortune and privilege of assisting him in finding a regent's bower as well as assisting the film crew.

I found my third bower while bird watching in the Border Ranges National Park in northern New South Wales. I decided to rest on a log, when a flicker of gold in the scrubby undergrowth to my left caught the corner of my eye. I slowly picked up my binoculars. To my surprise and sheer delight, there was a regent bowerbird male adding sticks to his fully constructed bower.

After years of trying to capture some photos of a regent bowerbird working his bower, my opportunity finally arrived



Female regent bowerbirds have good reason for their subtle and subdued colouration: while gaudy males are out attracting more mates, females quietly get on with building nests, incubating eggs and feeding chicks on their own.

when I found my fourth bower. Male regent bowerbirds will usually destroy and move their bowers within a week of construction. This particular male was accustomed to the presence of humans and had apparently decided to stay in one spot for a couple of weeks. Thus, I was able to set up a camouflaged hide only four metres from his bower.

The sight of that stunning, colourful bird contrasted against the various shades of green and brown in the canopy is a memory I will always savour.

He would be gone for hours at a time, then fly in out of nowhere, heading straight for his bower – usually with fresh sticks to add to the structure or new decorations to adorn its centre. He was completely oblivious to my presence and was dedicated to diligently improving or beautifying his 'love shack'. Beak brimming full of berries or greenery, he would position himself inside the bower, mix the berries or greenery with saliva and proceed to paint the inside structure with his beak and tongue. The male's goal is to present the bower in a way that will attract any passing females. I wonder if he consulted with an interior decorator? With patience, I was able to capture some images of this rarely seen or photographed behaviour.



Welcome to the love shack. Regent bowers are often hidden in thick, scrubby rainforest understorey and dismantled after a few days. This male chose to build, paint and decorate in a relatively accessible location and, in his ardent attempts to attract willing females, seemed undisturbed by the patient, camouflaged presence of a photographer.

Song and dance man

The regent, like other bowerbirds, is polygamous rather than monogamous. His aim is to attract as many females as possible to his structure. Once a female arrives, the male puts on a stunning performance. With wings spread, head lowered and, often, some form of decoration or 'gift' in his bill, he will energetically strut and cavort in the most pompous of fashions. At the same time, his chatter and mimicry increases to an all-out frenzy.

If the female is impressed with the bower, its decorations and the high-energy performance, she flies down and enters the bower, signalling her willingness to mate. The male immediately flies to the bower and mounts her. In the blink of an eye, it's all over and the female flies off.

Solo effort

After mating, the female regent fends for herself, building the nest, incubating the eggs and rearing the chicks. Saucer-shaped nests of twigs and rootlets are generally constructed amongst dense rainforest trees. The female normally lays two or three eggs, incubating them for 20 to 21 days and feeding the chicks on a variety of small rainforest fruits and an assortment of insects. They will fledge after another 20 to 21 days.

The male continues to woo as many females as he can throughout the breeding season. This method ensures that females only mate with the healthiest, most energetic males, passing on strong genes to the next generation.

Juvenile regent bowerbirds are subdued and plain: head, throat and neck are a lacklustre mixture of brown and greyish white with sporadic markings throughout; top of the head is a dull black; the mantle and wings are a greenish brown. Females retain a darker version of this colouration as adults, with dark eyes and an all-black bill. Males take around seven years to attain full adult plumage: a rich bluey-black body with a very vivid violet-blue on the breast, neck and rump area. The forehead, crown, neck and upper back are golden yellow, as are the majority of the primary feathers. The eyes are light yellow with a black centre and the bill is a golden yellow. There would be little dispute about naming the male regent bowerbird as the most stunningly coloured of all of Australia's bowerbirds.

MICHAEL SNEDIC shares his time between working as a nature photographer, a part-time Quarantine Officer and as a casual guide in Lamington National Park (where he has recently been re-employed at Binna Burra Mountain Lodge). His aim is to share the wonder and beauty of Australia's natural world with as many people as possible!