

Longing for lyrebirds

It takes dedication to witness the stunning courtship display of one of Australia's most elusive birds. **MICHAEL SNEDIC** shares the highs and lows of his 11-year quest to photograph the male Albert's lyrebird's finest hour.

BONES ACHING, I TOOK MY SEAT

inside the cramped bird hide in the dark Queensland rainforest that had been my home for the past seven weeks. It was the middle of winter, not yet daylight, and bitterly cold. I had been coming here every day in the hope of photographing the stunning courtship display of the rare Albert's lyrebird. Only three people had succeeded before me and I was determined to be the fourth. But the lyrebird's display season was coming to an end and I was exhausted.

There are two species of lyrebird – the superb and the Albert's – and both occur only in Australia. The more common of the two, the superb *Menura novaehollandiae*, has a range that stretches a few thousand kilometres along Australia's east coast. The Albert's lyrebird *Menura alberti*, on the other hand, is restricted to an area within a 100km radius of Lamington National Park in south-eastern Queensland. Here, the rich volcanic soil and higher than average rainfall have given rise to lush subtropical rainforest, of which only a fragment remains

today. Many rare species cling on here, including the Albert's lyrebird, which favours areas of Antarctic beech and vine forest where it scratches for insects in the soil. Its rarity, shyness and choice of impenetrable vegetation as home mean that relatively little is known of its life beyond the male's courtship display.

DID YOU KNOW?

The male Albert's lyrebird is named after Prince Albert, the Prince Consort of Queen Victoria. According to BirdLife International, just 800 pairs remain in Australia.

He performs during Australia's cooler months, from the end of May until August. His main aim, of course, is to attract a female to mate with. But the display is also a means of defending his territory from other males, and the calls of his rivals rebound tantalisingly around the forest. This display is seldom seen by humans, which is a great waste.

The male Albert's lyrebird begins his performance with a vocal outburst that lasts up to 30 minutes. With uncanny accuracy, he mimics the calls of other local bird species (see p70), interspersing these impersonations with his own resonant cries. He then throws his long tail up and spreads it over his body to create a shimmering, lace-

like dome. His display often culminates in a frenzied finale that sounds remarkably like an Aboriginal corroboree dance as he pulls vigorously at vines and sticks on the ground with his strong claws.

If the male is successful and attracts a female, he will mate with her – something I've yet to see. She will then disappear alone, deep into the forest to build a nest and rear her young. The male is then free to mate with as many females as he can seduce with his dance-floor moves.

TAKING UP THE CHALLENGE

My attempts to photograph an Albert's lyrebird displaying began 11 years ago when I was working as a rainforest guide in Lamington National Park. I would get up at 4.30am every day and illuminate my way through the dark rainforest with a headlamp. My friend Glen Threlfo, a nature documentary maker, had constructed a hide made of chicken wire covered with camouflage netting close to a spot that a male lyrebird was using as his display site. Luckily for me, the males have favourite 'stages', which they return to time and again. ▶

MOVING AND SHAKING: A GUIDE TO THE LYREBIRD'S DANCE ROUTINE



After mimicking other birds' calls, the male lyrebird pulls his tail over his head and shakes two aerial-like streamers.



He spins suddenly to face the direction of another male's call, shaking his tail and streamers in defiance.



For the finale, he shows off a rufous tuft at the base of his tail. Seconds later, he vanishes into the undergrowth.



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Looking like a showgirl from the Moulin Rouge, the male Albert's lyrebird struts and ruffles his feathers in the hope of impressing a mate.

MIMICKING THE NEIGHBOURS

As part of his display, the male Albert's lyrebird impersonates other forest birds:



1 SATIN BOWERBIRD The male of this species has a harsh chattering courtship call. He also constructs a spectacular bower decorated with blue trinkets to attract females.



3 KING PARROT Emitting piping, bell-like notes from a prominent perch, the male king parrot possesses stunning red plumage that makes him stand out perfectly against the green forest.



2 EASTERN YELLOW ROBIN These inquisitive birds are common on rainforest trails. Their repetitive but attractive piping call is mimicked perfectly by the lyrebird.



4 LAUGHING KOOKABURRA The kookaburra's 'koo-koo-koo-koo-kaa-kaa-kaa' call is more usually heard out in the bush, but the forest-dwelling lyrebird has somehow learned to copy it.

FACTFILE

- » **SCIENTIFIC NAME** *Menura alberti*
- » **WEIGHT** Approximately 930g.
- » **WINGSPAN** 76–79cm.
- » **DIET** Mainly insects and their larvae, as well as other soil-dwelling invertebrates.
- » **BREEDING** The male mates with different females from mid-May until the end of August. The egg is incubated by the female who raises the chick alone.
- » **HABITAT** Moist forest, particularly areas with deep leaf litter.
- » **DISTRIBUTION** Endemic to Australia. Found in a small area of rainforest in far north-east New South Wales and south-east Queensland.
- » **STATUS** Classed by IUCN as Vulnerable.



FIND OUT MORE

Australian cinematographer David Warth's *Rainforest: The Secret of Life* has footage of dancing Albert's lyrebirds and may be shown on tv in the UK soon.

I had to work quickly to set up my camera before daybreak. Most of the time I stared at empty forest, but one day a male lyrebird appeared and began his performance directly in front of me. I moved my camera, accidentally made a noise and he shot off into the undergrowth. When he came back several days later, I was more careful and everything came together. The lyrebird positioned himself in full view and put on a spectacular show. My dream was realised – or so I thought.

THE SECOND QUEST

In the years that followed, I continued to check up on the local Albert's lyrebirds. But since taking those photos in 1997,

photographic equipment has improved to such an extent that I began to wish I could try again for even better images.

In late May 2008, Glen Threlfo and I began observing the daily routine of the local lyrebirds again. A male was favouring one particular display arena so we set up a hide in that spot. I soon realised that 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 in the bushes, the lyrebird suddenly turned up. I didn't want to scare him off so I hid behind a large tree. He launched into his display routine directly in front of my camera, but I was some way, unable to press the shutter.

It was torture. There were also times when the lyrebird walked up to the hide and stopped, seeming to peer at me through the material – I'm sure he knew I was there.

By the end of my time in Lamington National Park, I didn't have any new photos of the lyrebird display and left greatly demoralised. I couldn't stop thinking about how close I had come to achieving my goal

DID YOU KNOW?

The male lyrebird is an expert mimic, but his own call is a distinctive, powerful and far-carrying 'caw-cree-craw-craw-wheat'.

and I didn't want to give up. Against my better judgement, I decided to go back.

After many more days camped out in the hide, the lyrebird returned to his stage. I sat perfectly still while he went through a long repertoire of calls and mimicry, this time including

the sounds of fighting pademelons (local rainforest wallabies) and the beating of birds' wings. It was an impressive performance. My heart was racing, there was sweat on my brow and one foot was painfully cramped, but I didn't care. Nothing was going to stop me now. At last, he began dancing with all the showmanship of a Broadway entertainer. After 11 long years, I was able to take a series of shots without him scampering off. It was as if he was rewarding me for my perseverance.

It had all been worth it. As I sat in the hide totally elated, the lyrebird slowly gave up and wandered off into the undergrowth. Before long, he would be displaying in another area, hoping to woo the local girls. After what I had witnessed, how could they fail to be impressed?



MICHAEL SNEDIC is an Australian natural history writer and nature photographer. He doesn't recommend spending seven weeks sitting in a cold, cramped hide.

PHOTO CREDITS



Though Michael's lyrebird worked hard on his moves, he didn't attract any female attention.