

# WHAT FRUIT-DOVE IS THAT?

Queensland's vibrantly coloured fruit-doves can be a challenge for birders, but they are worth the effort

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY MICHAEL SNEDIC

THREE FRUIT-DOVES ARE endemic to my home State, Queensland: the Superb, Rose-crowned and Wompoo. Although this article focuses on Queensland—the core of their distributions—all three extend down into New South Wales, and the Rose-crowned Fruit-Dove also occurs across the Top End and Kimberley. Outside Australia, they are found in New Guinea and the islands of Torres Strait. The Rose-crowned and Superb Fruit-Doves are also found in Indonesia, and the latter in the Solomon Islands.

These are coastal, forest birds, which only occasionally move out to denser gardens and woodlands in search of ripening fruit. In Queensland, they are found in subtropical and tropical rainforests. They also visit temperate Antarctic Beech rainforests along the east coast, especially at higher altitudes, but don't stay any length of time, mainly due to the scarcity of fruit. By contrast, in lowland rainforests, they are quite abundant. Here the fruits of their favoured trees,

palms and vines are more common, especially where the understorey is thick and moist. Due to the excessive land clearing of the past, there are many rainforest remnants surrounded by mangroves and eucalypt forests, and it is not uncommon for fruit-doves to nest in these small, isolated rainforest patches.

The Wompoo is by far the biggest of the trio, measuring 35–50 cm in length, smallest in the north and largest in the south. The Rose-crowned and Superb Fruit-Doves are a more petite 22–24 cm. For comparison, a Feral Pigeon is 33–36 cm. But statistics don't do these glowing, rainbow-hued birds justice. The late, great Graham Pizzey used very few superlatives in his descriptions of nearly 800 species in *Field Guide to the Birds of Australia*, but describes these three fruit-doves as 'magnificent big' and 'gorgeous small', respectively.

## Wompoo: bollocks are blue!

The Wompoo Fruit-Dove must be one of Australia's most strikingly beautiful birds. With its plum-purple throat and breast, pale lavender-grey nape and head, bright yellow belly and undertail, emerald back and tail, decorative golden line crossing its shoulder, and grey legs, it is unmistakable. And when it takes to the air, its distinctive golden yellow wing lining, matched to its belly, is exposed. Males, females and juveniles are similar but the plum breast of the juvenile is broken by green.

There have been numerous descriptions of the Wompoo's call, all of which in some way resemble it. 'Pock-pock-oo' followed by 'whompoo' or 'whollock-a-whoop' are quite apt, but my favourite is from Graham Pizzey, who interprets it as 'bollocks are blue!'

The call is repeated a number of times, which aids in detecting the bird. Once found, especially if it is lower down from the canopy, the Wompoo stands out vividly amongst the greens and browns of the rainforest. Perched higher it disappears into the foliage.

Within Australia, the Wompoo is found mainly in undisturbed pockets of subtropical and tropical rainforests. I first encountered this bird many years ago while birding in a subtropical rainforest remnant known as the 'Big Scrub Flora Reserve' near Rocky Creek Dam, Northern New South Wales. Some 99.7 per cent of sub-tropical rainforest in the area was logged in the mid to late 1800s and early 1900s, for timber or to create cattle pastures, so that only a few hundred hectares remain. Such clearing has been a problem for the Wompoo in southern Australia, where it once reached as far south as Port Kembla but is now rarely seen south of Sydney.

Below: The Rose-crowned Fruit-Dove feeds crop milk to its squab. Both sexes produce highly nutritious 'crop milk', by a sloughing of fluid-filled cells from the lining of the crop (a modified section of the esophagus where food is stored), to feed to their young.



The Wompoo is long-tailed, rather heavy in flight and weaves through the trees at speed. The other two species are more compact, with short rounded wings and short tail, and fly fast (often with wings audibly whistling) and directly through the canopy and rarely above it.

## Rose-crowned and Superb Fruit-Doves: peas in a pod

The Rose-crowned and Superb Fruit-Doves are as distinctive as the Wompoo in colour, but difficult to distinguish from each other. During the years that I was employed as a nature-based guide and birder at both Binna Burra Mountain Lodge and O'Reilly's Rainforest Guesthouse in Lamington National Park, south-east Queensland, I overheard amateur birders misidentifying both. The birds are often spotted high up in the rainforest canopy, where it is dark and contrasty, and the sighting may last only seconds. Add to this the fact that the Superb Fruit-Dove is often called the Purple-crowned Fruit-Dove and it's easy to see why confusion reigns.

Both species are sexually dichromatic, that is, the female differs in colour from the male. The male Superb Fruit-Dove male is the most colourful. He has a rich purple crown, pale green face and fiery orange/chestnut collar and hind neck. All this is handsomely set off by a blue-black breast-band—which separates his blue-grey breast from cream-white belly, barred on the flanks with green—and bright orange legs. His back is green, spotted with black. The female lacks the black band on the breast, orange/chestnut on neck and

has a smaller, duller blue 'crown'. The juvenile is mostly green, pale on the belly, with pale yellow legs and without the purple crown.

The male Rose-crowned Fruit-Dove has a rose-coloured crown, with a slight yellow edge to it. His face, nape and breast are pale lavender/blue, interspersed with indistinct white spots. His back is green with black and golden flecks, his belly is bright orange and the legs are grey-green. Some females are similar to the males, but most are a tad duller in colour and greener around the face, breast and nape. Juveniles are mostly green, without rose-coloured crown.

According to Pizzey, the apricot-yellow belly and yellow-tipped tail of the Rose-crowned Fruit-Pigeon and patchy white and green belly and tail of the Superb Fruit-Dove are useful distinguishing features.

Each species also has a distinctive call. The Superb Fruit-Dove is often recognised by the series of repetitive 'whoop, whoop, whoop, whoop, whoop' advertising calls, each call superseded by another higher pitched one. Another familiar call, a gentle 'coo', is often heard during courtship or display. The Rose-crowned Fruit-Dove's advertising call, however, consists of a very deep, loud 'coo-coo-coo-coo' that starts off slowly, then accelerates and is repeated up to 20 times. Its display call comprises of a drawn out 'woo' that the male makes while ruffling his feathers and lowering his head.

## Fruit-Dove similarities and differences

The fruit-doves' breeding seasons are similar and coincide with those of many other frugivorous birds in their regions which time their breeding according



Top: A pair of Rose-crowned Fruit-Doves snuggle up.

Above: The beautiful rainforest of Lamington National Park, heavy with mist.



## PEREGRINE BIRD TOURS

23 years of experience in every tour.  
**YEAR 2007 PROGRAM**

**MOROCCO** January – A birding tour which explores the deserts, marshes, oases and the high Atlas Mountains of Morocco.

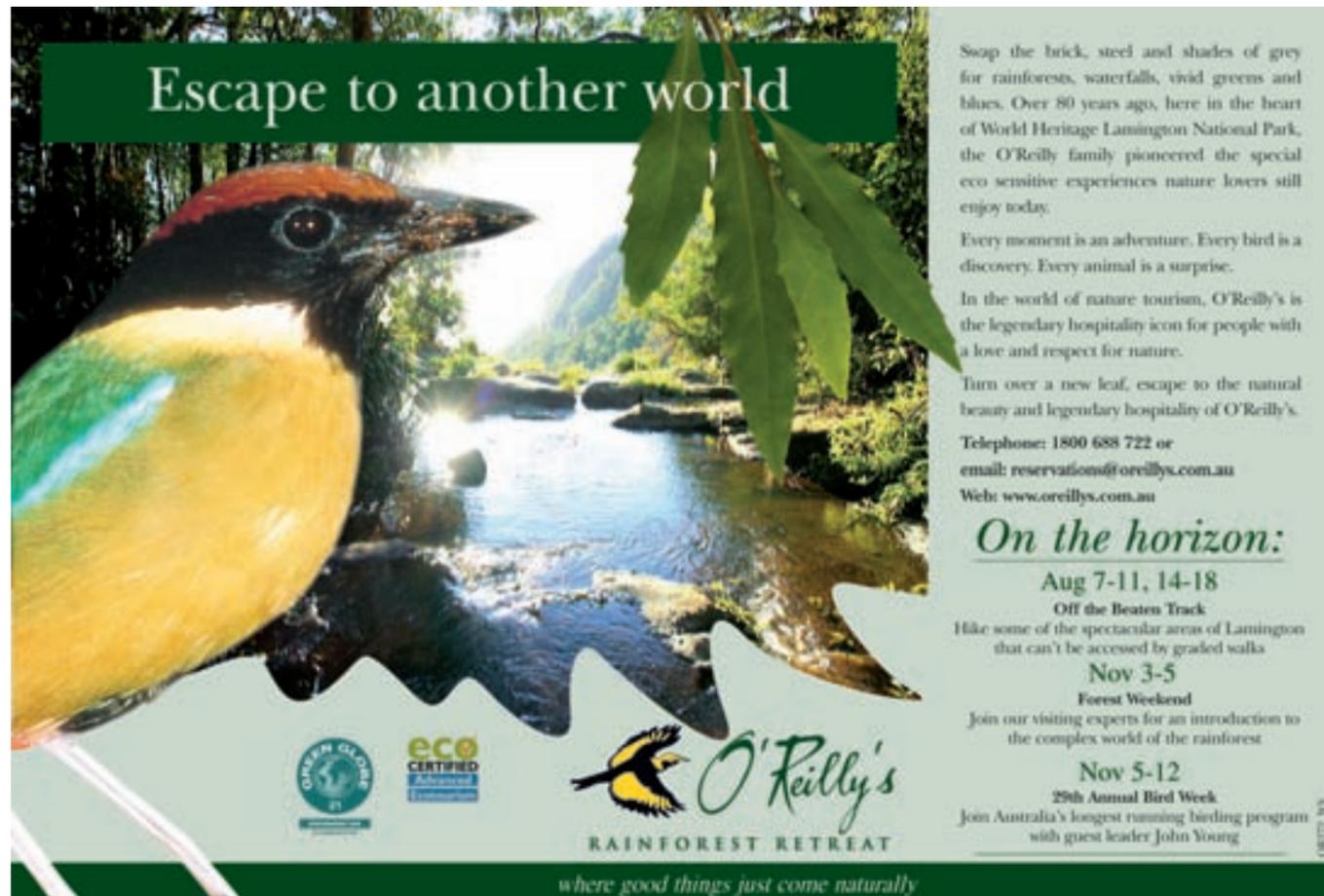
**MYANMAR** February – Search for three of the world's rarest birds; White-bellied Heron, White-winged Wood Duck and Pink-headed Duck.

**COLORADO, USA** April – Explore the scenic splendour of the Rocky Mountains, as we search for 7 different species of grouse.

**PERU** June – Birding in the high Andes, Machu Picchu and the Manu Biosphere Reserve, in Amazonia.

**SOUTH AFRICA** November/December – Kruger, the Drakensberg Mountains and the Cape; birding and game viewing at its very best.

Phone or write for free brochure: **PEREGRINE BIRD TOURS**  
2 Drysdale Place Mooroolbark, Victoria 3138  
Tel: 03 9726 8471 Fax: 03 9727 1545 Email: [birding@peregrinebirdtours.com](mailto:birding@peregrinebirdtours.com)



## Escape to another world

Swap the brick, steel and shades of grey for rainforests, waterfalls, vivid greens and blues. Over 80 years ago, here in the heart of World Heritage Lamington National Park, the O'Reilly family pioneered the special eco sensitive experiences nature lovers still enjoy today.

Every moment is an adventure. Every bird is a discovery. Every animal is a surprise.

In the world of nature tourism, O'Reilly's is the legendary hospitality icon for people with a love and respect for nature.

Turn over a new leaf, escape to the natural beauty and legendary hospitality of O'Reilly's.

Telephone: 1800 688 722 or email: [reservations@oreillys.com.au](mailto:reservations@oreillys.com.au)  
Web: [www.oreillys.com.au](http://www.oreillys.com.au)

### On the horizon:

**Aug 7-11, 14-18**  
Off the Beaten Track  
Hike some of the spectacular areas of Lamington that can't be accessed by graded walks

**Nov 3-5**  
Forest Weekend  
Join our visiting experts for an introduction to the complex world of the rainforest

**Nov 5-12**  
29th Annual Bird Week  
Join Australia's longest running birding program with guest leader John Young

**O'Reilly's**  
RAINFOREST RETREAT  
where good things just come naturally

GREEN STAR  
eco CERTIFIED  
O'REILLY'S

to local availability of ripe fruit. Most pairs raise their young during spring and summer, although nests have been recorded in other seasons.

Typically, all three species build an insubstantial nest platform of twigs and sticks in thick understorey, up to ten metres above ground. Both males and females share in nest building, and break off live branchlets with their beaks. Their single white egg is often visible through the flimsy nest. However, most nests consist of forked twigs and it is thought that these are interwoven to create a sturdier structure than appearances suggest. One difference between the species is that the Wompoo regularly builds its nest over a creek or stream.

Another common feature is that their nests are raided regularly. During my five years as a guide and birder at Lamington National Park, many pairs had their egg or chick taken by a predator such as the Green Catbird. Nests would often be lost when high winds or storms lashed the Park. It was always a disappointment to revisit a nest which previously held an egg or chick, only to discover that the whole structure had blown away.

The Wompoo is probably largely sedentary though it moves locally with changes in fruiting. The other two species seem to be at least partially migratory, moving along the east coast at night, travelling north for the winter, perhaps as far as New Guinea and beyond in their quest for ripening fruit.

The three fruit-doves scour the rainforest for food and many of the fruits they eat are similar, though the Wompoo can take larger fruit. They swallow the fruit whole and their diet varies greatly depending on the fruiting schedules of trees, shrubs, vines and palms. Some of the favoured tree types include Laurel, Basswood, Bollywood, Quandong (especially by Wompoos), various types of native fig, Bangalow (also known as Piccabeen) and Cabbage Palm. All three are thought to prefer black-purple fruit above other colours, and the Wompoo also likes blue-lilac. They also use ultraviolet colour cues to assess ripeness and suitability.

The two smaller species sip dew from leaves in the canopy but the Wompoo will come to the ground to drink. As with many rainforest-dwelling frugivores,



the three are most active early in the morning and late in the afternoon, and avoid the heat of the day. Perched immobile in the canopy, they can be hard to see. But bustling, noisy groups have alerted me a number of times to their presence high in the canopy. They can be heard most easily when feeding, especially early in the morning, particularly from the sounds of fruit dropping to the forest floor.

Most often fruit-doves are seen individually or in pairs, but when there is a good crop of fruit they gather in large numbers. While guiding a number of years ago, I was sitting with guests on top of Cainbale Falls (Lamington National Park). From across the valley, I heard echoes of the distinct call of Wompoo. Looking up, I saw ten to 12 mature birds feeding in native fig trees, clambering around the ripened fruits. So many brilliantly coloured Wompoos together, calling and cooing, were a sight to behold.

I encourage birders living in or travelling to Queensland to take some time to search for these delightful birds.

MICHAEL SNEDIC recently completed his environmental studies at the University of Queensland. He divides his time between working as a Quarantine Officer and photographing our natural world. His aim is to promote wildlife and the environment through photography and writing.

Above: The magnificent Wompoo Fruit-Dove rivals the Topknot Pigeon as Australia's largest pigeon

Left: A Superb Fruit-Dove, similar in size to the Rose-crowned Fruit-Dove, but quite different in colouration when close comparison is possible. The dark blue breast band identifies this as a male. In the dense rainforest a glimpse may be all that is possible.

Thanks to Barbara Allan, Canberra Ornithologists Group, for suggesting the topic.