



BACKYARD GINA CRANSTON

TWEET CRED

My perception of the birds in our backyard delves not much deeper than the bleeding obvious: peacock, scrub turkey, cockatoos, king parrots, crimson rosellas, eastern rosellas, lorikeets, noisy miners, magpies, ravens, doves, and our pet chickens.

However, my neighbour Alan Stuart – I introduced the ardent birdwatcher to you last week – tells me of a myriad others in the neighbourhood such as eastern spinebills, lewin's honeyeaters, scarlet honeyeaters, olive-backed orioles, fan-tailed cuckoos, yellow robins, pied butcherbirds and whipbirds.

And when we spoke a few weeks back about such things Alan was expecting the dollarbird to turn up from Queensland and Papua New Guinea at any moment. Sure enough, I've since spotted one on the power lines out front, in pretty much the same place it preferred to perch last year.

The channel-billed cuckoo is another migratory bird that I hear this time of year but until my chat with Alan, I didn't quite realise that their *modus operandi* is as hideous as their raucous call. They let other birds, such as Australian magpies, pied currawongs and ravens, slave over their nests then move on in without invitation.

The cuckoos arrive in pairs, the

male distracting the host while the female lays the eggs, and they play no part in raising their young, leaving the host to do all the hard work. Ever read Dr Seuss's *Horton Hatches the Egg*, about a kindly elephant called Horton who is convinced by Mayzie (a lazy, irresponsible bird) to sit on her egg while she puts her feet up in Palm Beach? Well, Mayzie and the channel-billed cuckoo are playing the same game.

Alan puts the koel (pictured) in the same category. It's another one that wears out its welcome pretty quick, with that incessant whiney mating call and the fact that it, too, takes advantage of ravens' and magpies' gullibility to take over their nests.

At this point, I brought up with Alan the troublesome scrub turkey that's been unsettling our girls and destroying their eggs. It is difficult to keep it out of the coop because it flies up and over the fence, at first to infiltrate and then to escape when I run down there with a broom and a scowl.

Alan gave me a *Whistler* magazine which told me that scrub turkeys had been building in numbers in this area over the past decade. They have been bothering the

neighbourhood with their tendency to build mounds out of people's gardens. Alan tells me they are smashing our chook eggs to eradicate perceived competition, that they are territorial and that we've got little chance of getting rid of them, especially during the mating season.

And on the subject of big black birds, Alan tells me that the variety I regularly refer to as crows, are in fact ravens. In Australia there are three species of ravens and two types of crows. We get four out of five here in the Hunter but it is the Australian raven, forest raven and little raven we tend to see the most. The Torresian crow is more common north of Port Stephens and inland although it has been spotted around Shortland in recent years and seems to be extending its range southwards.

Crows and ravens are of the same genus, closely related but bearing subtle differences. All ravens have a throat hackle, that of the Australian raven – which is most common here – is particularly pronounced. At the base of crows' feathers is white (who knew?) and at the base of ravens' feathers is grey. So remember, if your golf balls or chook eggs are disappearing, don't curse the crows, blame it on a raven.

Talk of pinching things segued to the incredibly quirky satin bowerbird, but that will have to wait till next week.

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PICTURE: JIM SMART