

BOOK
OF
CURIOUS
BIRDS



JENNIFER COSSINS



INTRODUCTION

Birds are curious creatures. Some are dazzlingly beautiful and others just plain weird looking. Some are common; others are endangered and need our protection to survive. Some are so shy they are rarely seen and little is known about them, while others show no fear of humans and can recognise individual faces. Some are sneaky, some are artistic, some make and use tools, some can learn to talk and some are even poisonous!

I wrote this book because I've long been fascinated by the numerous strange birds in our world. Birds are my favourite animals to draw and I am thrilled to be able to dedicate a whole book to drawing such remarkable creatures. As an artist, I am attracted to the most unusual looking birds – the ugly ones as well as the bizarrely beautiful. But beyond their looks, I wanted to find out which birds are the biggest, which fly the fastest, which ones have the longest feathers, the longest beak, the longest legs. I knew of several birds I wanted to include, but the process of researching led me down many new paths and so I have included a few I hadn't even heard of before.

In this book you'll find colourful feathers alongside peculiar beaks, beady eyes and funny-coloured feet. You'll read of dangerous birds, clever birds, fast birds, awkward birds, silly birds, massive birds and tiny birds. You'll laugh at their odd hairdos, marvel at their remarkable hunting skills and admire their wild mating dances. Most of all, you'll learn that birds are awesome and deserve our love, care and respect.

This is a book for bird lovers. If you are not one already, I hope that after reading this you'll join me in my love of curious birds.

SOUTHERN CASSOWARY

The most dangerous bird alive

Location: Tropical forests and wetlands of northern Australia

Lifespan: 19 years

Height: 1.5-2 m

Conservation status:
Endangered

There are three species of cassowary and the southern cassowary is the largest, making it the second heaviest bird in the world after the ostrich.

Cassowaries are flightless and one of the closest living species to dinosaurs, with a serious reputation as the world's most dangerous bird. They are reclusive and shy, but become territorial when threatened – especially the females, which are larger, more brightly coloured and more aggressive than the males. The kick of a cassowary is what makes it so dangerous. Each foot has a dagger-like middle claw that can grow up to ten centimetres long and can slice open a potential predator with one swift kick. Cassowaries are also excellent swimmers and fast runners, their powerful legs helping them run at 50 kilometres an hour and jump two metres in the air.

Cassowaries communicate using many sounds – they hiss, whistle, clap their bills and make a deep, rumbling boom that is the lowest known call of any living bird. The call is so low that it can barely be heard by humans.

Cassowaries are generally solitary creatures, only coming together to breed. Once she lays her eggs, the female cassowary leaves and it is the male who incubates them. He stays with the eggs for 50 days, rarely eating or drinking. After they hatch, the male raises the chicks until they are almost fully grown, at around ten months old.



RIBBON-TAILED ASTRAPIA

The ribbon twirler

Location: Central highlands of
Papua New Guinea

Weight: 102-165 g

Length: 30-35 cm
(not including the male's tail)

Conservation status:
Near threatened

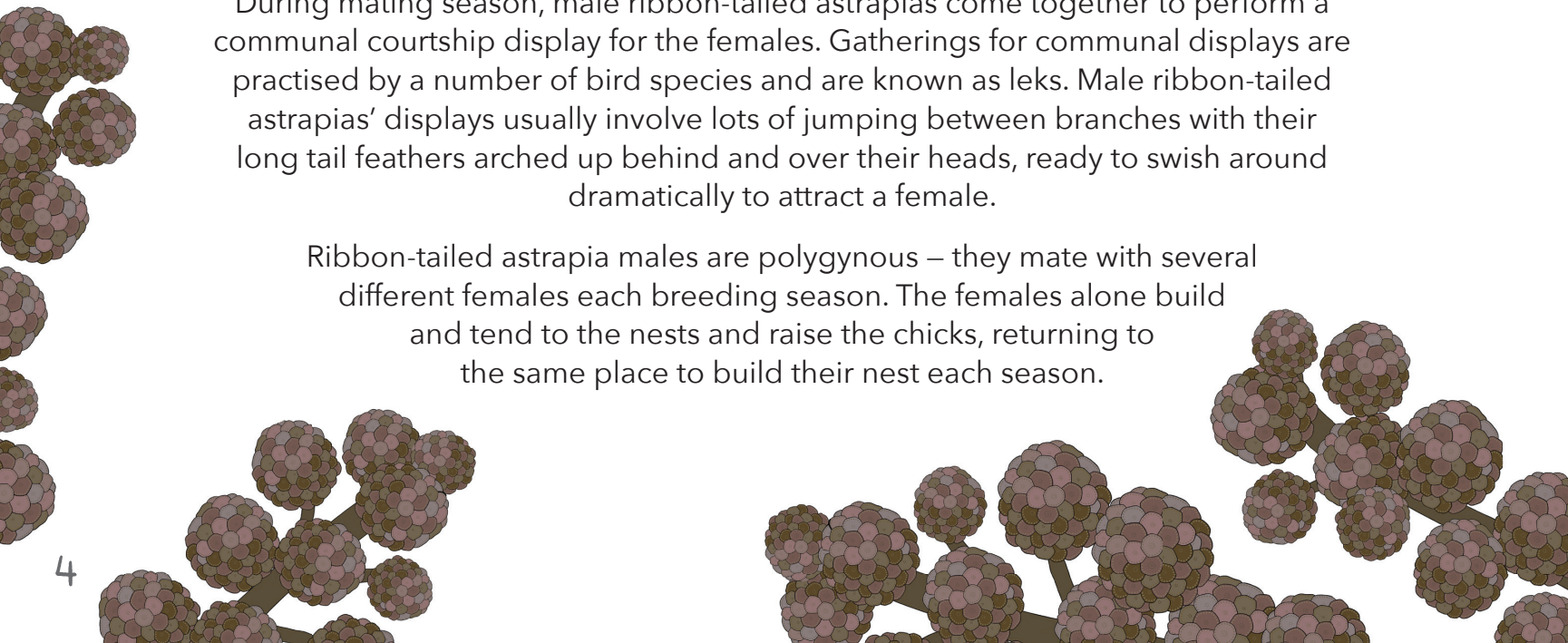
The ribbon-tailed astrapia is one of the most spectacular birds-of-paradise, named after the males' long white tail feathers.

They have some of the longest tail feathers, in relation to body size, in the bird kingdom – the feathers can be over a metre long!

Given their bodies are only about 30 centimetres in length, the males' feathers create a truly dramatic appearance. These feathers can cause problems, though. They sometimes get tangled up in the dense rainforest foliage while the male is foraging, and can slow him down if a predator is near and he needs to make a quick escape.

During mating season, male ribbon-tailed astrapias come together to perform a communal courtship display for the females. Gatherings for communal displays are practised by a number of bird species and are known as leks. Male ribbon-tailed astrapias' displays usually involve lots of jumping between branches with their long tail feathers arched up behind and over their heads, ready to swish around dramatically to attract a female.

Ribbon-tailed astrapia males are polygynous – they mate with several different females each breeding season. The females alone build and tend to the nests and raise the chicks, returning to the same place to build their nest each season.





KAGU

The ghost of the forest

Location: Forests of
New Caledonia

Wingspan: About 80 cm

Length: 55 cm

Conservation status:
Endangered

The kagu is only found in the mountain forests of New Caledonia. It is endemic to that specific area because it can't be found anywhere else in the world. Unlike other forest birds that are dark and mottled to help them camouflage, kagus stand out with their bright white and light grey feathers.

Although flightless, kagus have full-sized wings that they use to glide when escaping danger. These wings are also an important part of their distinctive displays. Underneath a kagu's wings are dramatic black and white striped feathers, which they show off both in courtship and in territorial disputes. On these occasions, kagus will also erect their long crests and strut around each other in a slow circle.

The kagu is the only bird that has nasal corns – small structures covering its nostrils.

It is thought these corns evolved to protect their nostrils from dust and dirt, as kagus spend so much time rooting around on the forest floor for food. Kagus are carnivorous – most birds eat a combination of insects and plant matter, but kagus are meat eaters only, with their favourite foods being worms, snails, lizards and spiders.

Kagus are monogamous (meaning they have only one mate) and form long-term pairs. While they tend to forage alone during the day, mated pairs begin each morning with a unique 15-minute duet. The male and female sound distinctly different and the song, which can be heard up to two kilometres away, has been likened to the sound of a barking puppy. Kagu parents share responsibility for incubating their single egg, taking turns every 24 hours.



SECRETARY BIRD

The snake hunter

Location: Savannah of sub-Saharan Africa

Wingspan: 2.1 m

Height: 1.2-1.5 m

Conservation status:
Endangered

No one really knows how these African birds got their strange name, and that's not the only curious thing about them.

Secretary birds have the longest legs of all raptors (birds of prey). They are one of only two raptors that hunt on the ground instead of in the air, spending most of their time strolling through the savannah and grasslands of southern Africa. Despite their preference for land, they can fly extremely well, soaring through the sky and trailing their long legs behind them.

Secretary birds eat rodents, frogs and insects, but they have a fierce reputation as snake killers. Their impulse to kill snakes is so strong they will attack anything that looks like a snake, even an inanimate object.

When attacking, secretary birds will raise their wings and head feathers, then strike with their hooked beaks or stomp with their claws until their prey is either dead or stunned enough to swallow whole!

Secretary birds are monogamous and lay their eggs in large nests high up in acacia trees. They are usually quiet birds, but if a predator is threatening the nestlings the parent birds will make low croaks or roaring groans to scare it off.





ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jennifer Cossins is a CBCA award-winning artist and writer with a passion for nature, the animal kingdom and all things bright and colourful. A born and bred Tasmanian, Jennifer also designs homewares, textiles and stationery, which she stocks in her store in Hobart, Red Parka. Jennifer's other books include *A-Z of Endangered Animals*, *101 Collective Nouns*, *The Baby Animal Book*, *A-Z of Australian Animals*, *The Ultimate Animal Counting Book*, *A Flamboyance of Flamingos*, *The Mummy Animal Book*, *The Daddy Animal Book* and *The Ultimate Animal Alphabet Book*.