

The Bird Way
By Jennifer Ackerman
Penguin Press, New York, 2020
332 pages

By Renee Levesque

One of the most fascinating bird books I have read is *The Bird Way* by Jennifer Ackerman. There is so much information in this book about bird behaviour, how birds talk, work, play, parent and think that it is worth reading again and again. Most of the birds mentioned are in Australia, but there are some North American birds, such as the Brown-headed Cowbird, the Mallard and the Common Raven.

But don't let the lack of North American birds throw you off. Although you may never see the birds the author writes about, you will find many of their behaviours quite riveting.

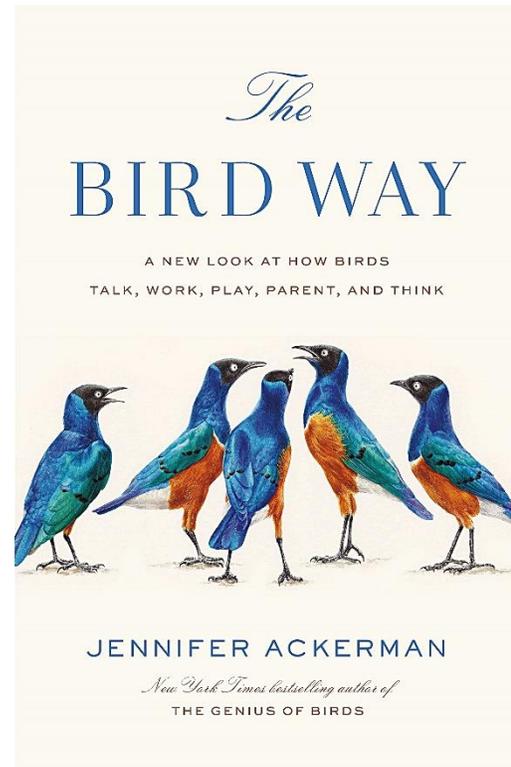
To illustrate, I will use the Brush Turkey of Australia, without a doubt one very unusual bird.

It was once a bird of the rainforests of Papua New Guinea, and after it made its way to Australia, it hung about on the fringes of the forest. However, it has now made its way into almost every suburb across southeast Queensland, even into the suburbs of cities like Brisbane and Sidney, where it now thrives as an urban bird, much to the dismay of some homeowners. In the past 20 years its urban population has increased 700%.

Amazing for a rainforest bird!

It is a big bird, looking much like our Wild Turkey, although not related to it. It belongs to the megapode family, so called because the 22 species in this family use their large feet for digging.

The male Brush Turkey builds an enormous mound, mounds that can be found in



Jim Bendon, Wikipedia

backyards, parks, gardens and even driveways! If he builds one in a backyard, it could leave the yard bare. He digs up grass and plants and leaf litter and even entire vegetable patches.

He spends nearly three months building this mound using up to 2 to 4 tons of leaf litter and soil to create a conical structure roughly 3 to 4 feet high and up to 22 feet in diameter. This much digging takes its toll on his body and he can lose up to 20% of his body weight. And it is not as if he uses the same mound again and again; rarely does he use the same one two years in a row.



Pratyeka, Wikipedia

The purpose of all this effort – and possible destruction of your yard if he decides to build there – is to create an incubator for the eggs. Heat in the mound is generated by fermenting vegetation, but that heat needs to be maintained. To maintain it, every morning the Brush Turkey “excavates a narrow hole at the base of the mound and thrusts his head into the warm material to take its temperature.” This way he is able to determine if the temperature is at its optimum temperature, around 91 degrees Fahrenheit (32.8 C.), and if he discerns even the slightest shift in the temperature, he will add or remove vegetation. This ability to determine the mound temperature is an amazing feat in and of itself.

The mound he builds must entice the female and once she chooses a mate and a mound, the pair copulate on top of the mound, after which the female slowly excavates a hole in the centre of the mound to lay her eggs. On the average, she lays around 12 eggs, large eggs that weigh more than half a pound, but could lay as many as 20, one egg every 5 to 7 days. When she finishes laying all her eggs, the male chases her off the mound and fills in the hole. After being chased away, she does not have anything to do with the eggs again and absolutely nothing to do with the young. The male stays to protect and tend to his mound.

After 45 days or so, when the chicks are ready to hatch, they use their backs and feet to burst through their shells only to find themselves “in a dark, damp, suffocating world, entombed under tons of dirt, with little oxygen and plenty of toxic carbon dioxide.”

Then a miracle of sorts takes place. To escape this toxic world, each chick lies on its back and kicks at the material above it, digging upward little by little for as long as 2.5 days until it finally breaks through into the light of day, able to fend for itself, run, feed and fly. It is no wonder the chicks are so advanced when they emerge – they have no parental care of any sort!

In fact, the father is actually a threat to the chicks as they emerge from the mound. He thinks the chicks are intruders that got into his mound and he boots them off into the bush. They survive this, but they don't usually survive predators. They have no idea what a predator looks like, what to avoid and what is appropriate behaviour should they come upon one, and so some 97% of chicks don't make it through their first week.

This is just one example of many astounding bird behaviours the author writes about. Do consider buying the book. It is well worth the read and written in a way that is accessible to everyone, not just birders.

About the author: “Jennifer Ackerman has been writing about science and nature for three decades. She is the author of eight books, including the New York Times bestseller, *The Genius of Birds*, which has been translated into more than twenty languages. Her articles and essays have appeared in Scientific American, National Geographic, The New York Times, and many other publications.”



Doug Beckers, Wikipedia

Listen to Jennifer talk about birds with David Sibley:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RC_HLKhXE7k