

# Feather Fascination!

with local Birdwatcher, Jim Butler

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## THE LONG GRASS STEM AS RITUAL



I thought I knew the meaning of what I was watching! I was standing on the Gap Creek track with my binoculars focused on a small bird doing something that appeared to be a small step in the building of a large nest. I know a lot about bird's nests, I have been observing nests since I was a boy. My eyes are attuned to nest building behaviour and to nest identification.

The bird I was watching was a Red-browed Finch (l = 11cm) and it was in amongst a patch of long grass. The bird bit off a long green grass stem, about 20cm long, picked it up at its centre of mass so it balanced and flew strongly up into the high canopy with it. I was sure that I was about to see where this bird was building a nest. I was wrong! This bird perched on a horizontal branch in the canopy next to another Red-browed

Finch. After a few moments the finch I was following dropped the grass stem and proceeded to mate with the bird beside it. The stem was a prop in a courting ritual, I was amazed!

Other birds have similar mating rituals involving the presentation of plant materials to would-be mates. Male Variegated Fairy-wrens (l = 13cm) have been observed presenting yellow petals to potential mates. These are all wondrous events, magic to observe. These two species, the finch and the fairy-wren are common in the bush in the western suburbs, and they usually forage in groups of ten or so below eye level, so they are easy to observe and appreciate.

Happy Birding!

– Jim

Image: Red-Browed Finch by Mike Ford ©