

Feather Fascination!

with local Birdwatcher,
Jim Butler



BIRD OUT OF WATER!

The easily identifiable and inimitable Bush Stone-curlew (550mm) lives alongside us in the suburbs and just makes you gasp "What are you doing here?". Its genetics and its long legs classify it as a "wader"; a large group of birds with origins about 80 Million Years ago that feed by wading in shallow water along the shores of lakes, rivers and the sea. Remarkably, the Bush Stone-curlew now has almost no need of water and lives in native grasslands and woodlands and, bizarrely, suburban carparks and gardens. The earliest related Australian fossil is 28 Million Years old.

The distribution of the Bush Stone-curlew was originally Australia-wide but it is now only common in Northern Australia. It's a big bird which feeds and nests on the ground so the introduced foxes and feral cats have feasted handsomely. Perhaps in response

to this danger the Bush Stone-curlew over the last 200 years has learnt to adapt to urban landscapes and has thrived in some northern cities, notably Brisbane. No one predicted this extraordinary response that contradicts its origins and adaptations!

The Bush Stone-curlew is heard more than seen. Its nocturnal call evokes "humanness" sounding like a wail or a frightened scream. It is a nocturnal feeder with large yellow eyes and specialises in hunting frogs, spiders, insects and lizards. Pre-dawn risers in Brisbane can encounter them walking sedately on the roads. During the day, they remain remarkably still, sheltering amongst low shrubs and relying on their cryptic plumage to protect them from predators. When threatened they freeze, often in funny postures. For visual predators this works well; but not with foxes and cats that hunt by scent.

Ethno-ornithological studies reveal that the Bush Stone-curlew is the only nocturnal bird featured in Australian Indigenous "water stories" which is another wondrous twist to relish in this story!

Be careful of them in the night!



Image: Bush Stone-Curlew by Ed Frazer at Brookfield

~ Jim

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