

## Louisa Waters

### Abstract

My creative practice research over the past four years has critiqued the transformation of Gunnai land since colonisation, through narratives of fire, critiquing European anthropogenic fire regimes.

As a white coloniser who has lived on Gunnai land most of her life, I am familiar with dominant fire narratives within popular discourse. Drawing on teachings from Wayne Thorpe, Gunnai Custodian, Storyteller, linguist and teacher, assisted in destabilising these narratives and augmented my understanding of the significance of the-more-than human world and other “players” within the ecosystems we are contingent upon.

One of the most significant players who emerged from our conversations was the lyrebird. The lyrebird story exposed me to rich textual material and new bodies of knowledge that spanned archival, scientific and critical enquiry. By exploring narratives of fire through the lyrebird story, I imagined a voice outside the anthropocentric lens, one which could bear witness and be a counter voice to dominant coloniser – moreover a voice which could urge us to consider the-more-than human world so critically afflicted by the colonial project and the Anthropocene.

**Keywords:** Anthropocene, anthropogenic fire, lyrebird, colonisation.

### Enter the Lyrebird: Playing their Part

*They miss out on the natural land managers, the birds and animals. Gippsland was known as “the land of the lyrebird.” The lyrebird’s job is to rake up so many tonnes per year of leaf litter, clearing the undergrowth from growing too much. So, you’ve got canopies that keeps the coolness and protects it from drying out. All the birds and animals have got their jobs to do. The plants have their jobs to do, but once they’re cleared and the odds are against them, well then the place dries out and you create a fire-prone country.*

Wayne Thorpe (2018)

### Playing the Part

Wayne Thorpe, Gunnai Custodian, Storyteller, linguist and teacher directed me toward a particular study of the lyrebird (*Menura novaehollandiae*). The study by Nugent et al. (2014) revealed the ecological significance of the lyrebird: reducing forest fuel loads by twenty-five percent through foraging, significantly mitigating wildfire capacity. Lyrebird foraging also contributes to the nutrient cycling of the forest floor by turning it over every twenty months and breaking down the leaf litter faster (Ashton & Bassett, 1997). Known as the “ecosystem engineer,” this is one player “playing its part.” As Donna Haraway (2016) has explained in her conception of the Chthulucene, playing your part speaks to tentacular webs, nets and networks integral to *all* lives and stories. While the lyrebird is “saving human lives” through forest fuel reduction, it’s also interfaced with the stories and lives of the-more-than human world, by literally (albeit slowly) moving the largest of mountains, to generating the smallest of microbial activities. Furthermore, the lyrebird has played its part in deep timescales, traversing the earth for at least fifteen million years (Callahan, 2014). The lyrebird draws us away from the anthropocentric story into the world of multispecies studies, mutualities and symbiosis. Where,

as Tom van Dooren et al. (2016) observe, connectivity between all biological lives and even “non-living” entities (rivers, mountains, rocks) are considered within the matrices of histories and of things becoming, coevolving and being entangled.

## The Lyrebird and the Archive

Like so many other animals of the Antipodes, the lyrebird featured prominently in the archives. Photographs, drawings, zoological descriptions, poetry, sporting advice on hunting and methods for cooking the lyrebird emerged. Indeed, from the fashions of London to the camp kitchens in the mountain ranges, the shy lyrebird was omnipresent. As the lyrebird story began to unfold in the archives, it instilled a deeper understanding in me, of the colonisers’ role in razing these matrices through their homogenisation and mono-culturising of these complex and diverse webs, by desiring their pastures and plantations. As I followed the lyrebird line of enquiry, I became immersed in rich textual material and new bodies of knowledge that spanned archival, scientific and critical enquiry. In an antique shop I encountered *The Land of the Lyre Bird*, first published in 1920 (South Gippsland Development League, 1966). With Wayne Thorpe’s words in mind, I skimmed the pages of this newly treasured object. Profuse with recollections from Gippsland the impenetrable scrub and awe-inspiring forests were being usurped by the colonial hand and their hostile tool, as Mr J. Western writes as he reflects on his “settlement” 1883:

I shall never forget my first impressions of this great forest as we went on that day. The trees towered up till their tops seemed lost in space. The dense jungle scrub underneath, and here and there fern gullies of exquisite beauty, and over it all there reigned a strange and oppressive stillness, broken only by the notes of the lyre bird. ... In after years, when we had been brought to fully realise the stupendous task undertaken in reducing this forest, one is amazed at the light-hearted way it was entered upon. Never in any part of the world have I seen a forest of such magnificent proportions – tier after tier of growth from tangled of wiregrass and swordgrass, to fern-tree and scrub, and on to towering gumtree, giving a perpetual twilight by day and black darkness at night...

Though it was an abnormally wet Summer, we got some fine weather in February, and near the end of the month scored a very good burn. What a great fire it seemed to our new chum eyes, and how it seemed to lick up the great tangle of scrub. One cannot easily forget the joy and excitement of for the first time scampering across that 100-acre clearing. Hot foot indeed! for we were all over it while the ground was still covered with the burning embers and the air full of smoke. What a change two hours of fire had wrought! We were forest dwellers no longer (pp. 268-271).

The often-limerick reminiscences were in a strange way beautiful in their modes of memory speech, but the content was deeply melancholic, as their words were mediated to me one-hundred years later. I felt a deep sense of loss in the pages as I began to recall so many colonial paintings in which the artist might paint one fallen tree alongside its frontier hero, or capture the gentleman’s park or the “splendorous” bush, but why never a field of scorched earth? Western describes their gaiety traversing the razed landscape with childlike enthusiasm, but in some respects, like so many of the colonial journals, the nostalgic tones of the coloniser apprehends the whispers of regret. It was here with *The Land of the Lyre Bird* in hand, that I mused over the ways in which a story told from the perspective of the lyrebird could offer a counter voice to the colonial archive. To subvert the dominant discourse of the coloniser, to “witness” these encounters with the land and resituate them within the histories of disavowal.

## The Lyrebird as Linguist

While storying I had been thinking of the lyrebird as a mimic (as it is commonly referred), but when I was talking to Wayne Thorpe about my work, he said that the lyrebird is not a mimic or a stupid animal, rather it is a linguist, and by citing various recordings that had been conducted across different lands he revealed how the lyrebird speaks the language specific to the lands it is on. This completely de-stabilised my own mind/matter, human/nature dualisms, a critical flaw of the Eurocentric, Enlightened subject, a flaw I had not really identified as present or encoded in my thinking until this point (Plumwood, 2005). I wondered if indeed what I was doing was unlearning and disentangling the anthropocentric, mind/matter nature/culture dualism, by mediating such shifts within myself in ways that I could understand through my creative practice.

The lyrebird's role as a linguist places it in position to bear witness. If we listen carefully the lyrebird will tell us the story of the bush. If a tree has been cut down (hear the chainsaw roar), if other humans have passed (hear the camera click), or if predators have entered (hear the dog howl). The lyrebird speaks the stories of the bush and is witness to the comings and goings of other players. As much as some humans might situate themselves as the only researchers of living things and the only storytellers of other lives, the lyrebird gently reminds us that we are not and points us away from the myth of the anthropocentric.

Over the course of my research, the lyrebird became a symbol of hope and despair. Initially hope, because the lyrebird survived colonisation, even with the swift deforestation and the colonisers' desire to hunt the prized bird. Despair, with the recent bushfires in Australia (2019–2020), which has now cast doubts once again on its survival. The lyrebird was a means for me to “stay with the trouble” and acknowledge the immense contribution of other players in the lands that I inhabit (Haraway, 2016).

First, perhaps, you will hear, not one, but a whole mob of king parrots, or lorries, in full corroboree, the noise of their wings in flight being at the same moment imitated with the greatest exactness; then, probably, comes the smack of the whip bird, then the harsh cry of the black cockatoo, together with the grating sounds he makes with his bill in excoriating the bark of the tree in search of grubs. All this, together with many another cry of bird or beast, even to then howling of the wild dog, I have heard proceed from one and the same lyre bird in a very short space of time. Should there be wood-cutting, or any other extraneous noise going on in his neighborhood, he quickly makes himself master of the sound, and adds it to his budget.

INTELLECTUAL OBSERVER - 1865

We have heard it said, nay, we have seen the assertion in print, that the woods and meadows of Australia are destitute of singing birds. No assertion can be more erroneous. All who have lived in "the bush," and have been accustomed to rise with the sun, can bear testimony to the fact that we have a full and fair supply of those feathered choristers whose presence gives life and cheerfulness to the wilderness. There is a small brown bird, one of the class called warblers, which has a note equal, if not superior, to that of the English nightingale. Unhappily it is scarce, but there are many kinds of songsters which may be more frequently met with. Of these, the Lyre Bird stands in the first rank. Its own note is good, but its chief excellence is in its extraordinary powers of imitation. There is scarcely a sound which this bird will not imitate to perfection, and some imagine that the little mimic takes a pride in the exercise of its deceptive powers. While performing a journey from Western Port to Gipps Land, in 1844, had an opportunity of closely examining



this shy and curious bird. He says, "I was awakened at sunrise by the singing of numerous pheasants. These are the mocking-birds of Australia, imitating all sounds that are heard in the bush in great perfection... Hearing one scratching in the scrub, close to the dray, I crawled out, gun in hand, intending to provide a fresh meal for breakfast. The sun having just risen, inclined it to commence its morning song; but the natural note (bleu bleu) was almost lost among the multitude of imitative sounds through which it ran-croaking like a crow, then screaming like a cockatoo, chattering like a parrot, and howling like the native dog, until a stranger might have fancied that he was in the midst of them all... Their song is not often heard during rain, or when the sun is obscured.

MR. HAWDON 1872

Very little anatomical work has been done on the Lyrebird. His conformation and his many peculiar physical capacities suggest that he occupies a class apart from the rest of the feathered tribes. His powers of mimicry, moreover, indicate the possession of auditory and vocal organs, absolutely sui generis. He is able at will to isolate a single sound from a tempest of harmony, and to reproduce it faithfully, and to reproduce simultaneously an entire concert of sounds without blurring the individuality of any constituent note. When he sings, his beak is opened wide and the music pours forth with liquid and effortless ease. Most of his songs are beautiful; all of them, are gay, and, by some magic of which he is master, he communicates gaiety to the hearts of those who listen. It is impossible to hear a Lyrebird singing and to remember, while he sings, that there is such a thing as sadness in the world.

AMBROSE PRATT 1933

*All changing species. Should my song recede;  
Before I cease, would change day to night.  
Nature be my theme, and thou muses my song,  
Amid the wood and its enchanting throng.  
Our mimics are pleasing for all to hear,  
Cheering your heart, and soothing your ear.*



Settlement in Gipps Land - Two things are frequently seen and heard. The cloud resting on the hills, and the voice of the lyre bird in the valleys.  
OLD FARMER - 1883

To pierce such solitudes as these, before the sun has risen, straggling up to the waist through a thick undergrowth of grass and fern, saturated with everlasting dew, at the imminent risk of breaking either neck or shins in stumbling over some of the numberless fallen logs that intercept your path, and where every step you take necessarily brings you into collision with an overhanging bough, which discharges a copious shower-bath over your head and shoulders, is, to say the least of it, not pleasant, and not likely often to be attempted by anyone.  
INTELLECTUAL OBSERVER 1865

Preparing the way - We, who remember the tea-tree thicket and scrub on the banks of every creek, river or morass, the entangle of undergrowth, almost impenetrable, the stately forests clothing our hillsides and mountains, dotting plains, sheltering the opossum, the native cat, the native bear and the dingo.  
JESSIE B HARRISON n/d

Some slight delay was caused by one of the horses kicking off its pack, and as we lost sight of the driver, owing to the density of the scrub through which we were forcing our way, we were compelled to halt. Cooley followed after Cooley, and gun report after gun report, but for a long time no answer was given, and we anticipated an early camp, but Mr. Howitt went in search, and soon discovered the straggler. In travelling through scrub we are obliged to keep to one line, so that if anything happens to the last horse, and alarm is not given, in all probability the driver does not overtake us for some time, unless his absence is noticed, and the cavalcade halts. A mountain like Steve, of an altitude of 3,500 feet, or thereabouts, is, I can assure you, no easy road to travel. Thick scrub and climbing up steep inclines, which here invariably are covered with loose stones, combine to make it most wearisome work, whilst all expectations of meeting with a few yards of level ground are futile, as similar ones have so often proved un-founded. On, on you go, mounting higher from earth, as it were; the air becoming different, the trees of a character unknown in the lowlands; even the grass is altered. Sometimes a slight descent invites to the belief that at last the up-ward march is over, but a still higher peak than that you have just left shows its stony-covered head in front of you. When, at last, you do descend, what a descent it is! A constant tacking to obtain footing for the horses and for yourself-stones giving way and rolling down the steep incline which yawns below, crashing against large trees, and bounding with renewed force as they gain speed, till at length they are stopped in the distant gully.  
SPECIAL REPORTER 1860



*Then, nobly spurns the ground, and upward, springs,  
And cuts the liquid air, with flightless wings.  
Through woods, pathless wilds and mountain vale,  
Through unpieced verdure I shall prevail,  
And amid the sounding of the forest throng,  
Step boldly forth and commence my song.*



What an endless variety of colour is there in the rolling, tumbling, surging and seething masses of smoke; and what a diversity of sound, with the roar of the wind developed by the fire!

The roar of the fire itself, the incessant crackling of the wire and sword-grass, the fizz and splutter of the gas in the green twigs, the occasional loud report of a bursting sandstone boulder, the prolonged crashing of a big green falling tree, the heavy thud of a huge dry stump, the belching roar of a great hollow dry tree that is pumping volumes of flame and smoke from a dozen or more portholes between its root and the topmost limit—and over all and everything, as far as the eye can reach, that weird, eerie, livid, yellowish-green hue, giving all around a most unearthly appearance, the face of the sun appearing like a great dull copper disc—would suggest to the uninitiated that the last days were at hand.

W.H.C. Holmes - 1920

If the season has been favourable for drying, the result is splendid. The denser the scrub has been, the more thorough is the consumption. The lower layer helps to ignite the massive trunks and limbs, and, with the exception of the larger stumps and huge boles, the whole is converted into a stratum of ashes, themselves a fine fertilizer.

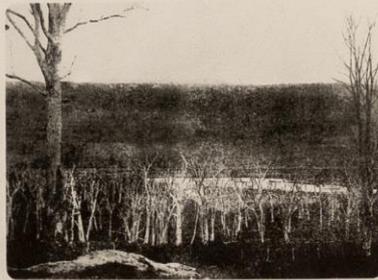
A QUEENLY COLONY - 1901



I heard a din in the valley below which completely astonished me. As I approached the terrible noise the din became intolerable, and I wondered what it all meant. Knowing the shyness of bush scrub animals, I sneaked nearer the scene of such noise, and I came in view of as grand a sight as I have seen in all my life. About as near as I could guess, 150 lyre-cocks were ranged in order of battle, fighting with indescribable fury. So astonished was I, that I forgot to place my gun on full cock, and in less than a second of time they took the alarm and disappeared, leaving me greatly disappointed.

PATHFINDER 1864

*Fury and flame, as rolling thunder it surrounds  
 Hissing, howling and roaring, chaos profound  
 By wind the great flames augment and rise  
 Then over the scrub and mountain flies  
 Through deep glens up mountain side rageth  
 Blazing fire, and the deep forest burneth.*



The clearing that is done is simply scrubbing. The scrub is cut down during the winter and spring, and left there until February or March. Some selectors cut down all the saplings up to 18 inches, others to 12 inches, and they in many cases ring the trees. Taking the advantage of a north wind they set fire to the scrub, and with what is called a good burn very little is left. This is generally done at a cost of £2 an acre, and the land is ready for sowing grass. If the burn is not a good one, the cost of "picking up" may exceed the amount mentioned.  
 OLD FARMER - 1883

Those who are new to getting their blocks in shape for the mistake of ring-barking the big timber and cutting the scrub at the same time. The proper method is to begin with ring barking all useless timber, leaving a sufficient number of useful trees for shade, building and fencing, and the scrub should not be burnt till after the big trees are dead. The bark and twigs will be laid down then, and the effect of killing the larger timber (all over 15 inches in diameter not otherwise required should be ringbarked) is to cause a more prolific undergrowth. Consequently, when cut down, a much better burn is obtained. Ring barking is best done in January or February. It may be more convenient to do it at another time, but the months mentioned are the best. Scrub cutting should be continued not later than the middle of December. Too early and too late are equally bad. In South Gippsland November 13 is quite early enough. If cut too early a strong second growth often overgrows the dry scrub, with the result, that a bad burn is obtained. If cut too late the scrub is often too green to burn well in the most suitable weather. From the middle of January to the beginning of March there are generally good burning days.  
 OUR CORRESPONDENT 1909

The cost of a rough clearing is estimated to average £5 per acre. Sheer muscle and tools could not effect the work for four times the amount. But the forces of Nature are enlisted. The method of clearing "vine scrub" is almost invariable. First the smaller shrubbery and creepers are prostrated with axe and billhooks, a time of the year when a few months of dry weather may be expected being chosen for the operation. When the stuff thus levelled is pretty thoroughly sun varied, the trees of magnitude are now attacked with axe and, for the bulkiest, cross-cut saw, and are thus brought crashing down upon the layer of brush. When, in their turn, the large trees are ascertained to be well dried, a windy day is chosen and fire applied. If the season has been favourable for drying, the result is splendid. The denser the scrub has been, the more thorough is the consumption.

The lower layer helps to ignite the massive trunks and limbs, and, with the exception of the larger stumps and huge boles, the whole is converted into a stratum of ashes, themselves a fine fertilizer.  
 WILLIAM HENRY TRAILL 1901

The First difficulty that presented itself was how to get an opening into which to fall the first trees. The usual method was to start in a gully or creek, and begin by lopping, or cutting, the heads of the tree ferns, then any small scrub such as hazel, musk, or dogwood. These would probably fall around larger trees such as blackwood, wattles and gums, and would create a tangle that would have to be cleared away to get at the trees themselves, but an opening had to be made...

To the casual observer the occupation of scrub cutting might easily appear a most prosaic and uninteresting business, but in the pioneering stage of South Gippsland's history, every day spent in opening up the bush, indeed every hour meant the opening up of a new page of natural history; every fresh step exposed to the intelligent axeman an area that had never before come under the observation of civilized man, and perhaps that for hundreds of years had not been penetrated even by primitive man...  
 W.H.C. Holmes 1920



*Screaming like a thousand souls, un mourned they fall  
 Crushed are the young, whilst grieving mothers wait and call*

The first specimen of the Australian lyre bird (Menura superba), which has been brought alive to England, is now to be seen in the new aviary at the gardens of the Zoological Society of London, in Regent's-park. It has not yet, we believe, found itself in a condition to erect the spreading tail, resembling in shape an ancient Greek lyre, from which its name is derived. Without this magnificent appendage, it has rather a mean and ordinary aspect. It is between the size of a barn-door fowl and that of a pheasant; in colour a smutty dark brown on the back, and in the lower part of its body a dingy grey. The tail-feathers are described as brown, white, and black, very prettily arranged, forming graceful curves to the right and left.

Zoological Society's Gardens.  
1867

The lyre-bird's curving tail-feathers are some of the most graceful ornaments which a taxidermist's window can display; but owing to the shyness of the bulla bulla, those feathers are rarely seen in the bush by the human eye.

SCOTSMAN 1865

Sir.— Allow me to draw attention to the number of lyre birds' tails exhibited for sale in city shop windows. The Game Act is supposed to protect these birds all the year. Why do the authorities not enforce the law, and save from utter extinction one of our most beautiful songsters?

NATIVE 1896

Lipman Pearl, furrier, of Collins-street, was charged under the Game Act at the District Court yesterday with the above offence. The act renders, liable to punishment any person buying, selling or having in possession the flesh, skin or feathers of protected native game. Information having reached the Customs department that the tails of lyre birds were being offered for sale in the city, Detective Christie visited the shop of defendant, who frankly admitted the offence, and said he was not aware that he was breaking the law. A small penalty was asked for, and defendant was fined 10s., with 10s. 6d. costs. It is probable that other prosecutions will follow.

CUSTOMS PROSECUTION 1897



The lyrebird is very strictly protected, yet great numbers of its unique and beautiful tails are sold in European markets. The beautiful lyre-like tail of the male bird does not appear before the bird is four years old. An appeal to women might help us in the protection of our native birds, for surely they wear these, beautiful feathers in their head dress in ignorance from whence they came and the cost of their beauty. Do they think that a useful and happy life is destroyed so that they may adorn their hats, to be admired? Of course we all know women like too, they are soft-hearted, and pretty things, but then, would not willingly destroy life that they may obtain the feathers. But it really amounts to the same thing as if they were to take the life of the feathers' rightful owner themselves. Some feathers, of course, may be obtained without the sacrifice of life, but for the vast majority of wild feathers the bird must be killed.

D.B. 1912

Although the lyre bird, is absolutely protected throughout Australia, the tail feathers, which cannot well be obtained without killing the bird, still find a place in the catalogues of the London markets. This is a matter that might well be inquired into by the authorities here. Some might reasonably contend that the lyre bird could be well rid of his tail, because of its ungainly size and apparent uselessness. The male lyre bird, however, would strongly object. He is of no particular beauty, and relies absolutely on the exhibition of his most graceful appendage

to charm the heart of the female, while she walks about apparently indifferent to his blandishments. It is a case of the turkey gobbler and the hen over again. The lyre bird tells his tale with his tail.

CAMMARAY 1914

In the police court at Trafalgar (Victoria), Samuel Edward Charles Parkinson was charged with having been in possession of the tail feathers of a lyre bird. Parkinson pleaded guilty. He said that he had never seen a lyre bird before, and he got his companion to shoot it. Parkinson was fined £5, with costs. In the Children's Court, a boy who accompanied him was fined £3. The firearms in the possession of the accused were confiscated.

REPORTER 1934

*Lyre lost, now goes my will, my dance, my song.*



by sharpening a cross-cut saw, and howling like a dingo, will suddenly spring on to a large fallen tree—that is, your chance, but you must be quickness and decision itself, for he does not remain a second without sighting you, and then vanishes like a shadow. On one occasion I had tracked a male bird for nearly a mile by his song pausing when he ceased, and again advancing when he recommenced his performances; he was running rapidly along when, of a sudden, he sprang on to a fallen tree, I fired at the instant without success, but as I lowered my gun with the despair known only to the deer-stalker and the chamois hunter after a fruitless shot, a voice came from the brush - "Killed? Have you killed?" My unknown companion had been stalking the same bird for upwards of an hour without my having the slightest idea of his vicinity, nor he of mine, so noiselessly had we sped along. Shy as the bird is there have been occasions when I have come suddenly upon them — which, without a gun, at some angle of the road, and then they have eyed me as carelessly as barn-door fowls.

H. C. RAWNSLEY, Esq., - 1863.

Some years ago, having idle times upon my hands, I felt a yearning for some healthful exercise, and hearing that there were pheasants (lyre-birds) abounding amidst the dense scrub upon the coast ranges, I at once made up my mind to have a week's ramble in that direction... I was very unlucky the first evening. Although I could see glimpses of the bird passing rapidly through the scrub, its swiftness not giving me sufficient time for an aim, and being without dinner or supper, I prepared to camp by the side of a stream on the border of the scrub, in a rather melancholy mood. After having made a fire, I laid down, wrapped up in my rug; but I was scarcely down when a female lyre-bird sprang from the brush upon the limb of a tree within thirty yards of me. This tree appeared to be her nightly roost, and without moving from where I lay I shot her down. She was plump and fat, and made me an excellent supper. The flesh of the lyre-bird tastes exactly like that of the grouse or blackcock of Scotland, being juicy and as white as curds. Indeed the habits of the two species approximate. The next day I shot merely as many as made sufficient sustenance for me. The female, being less swift in running

and more timid than the cock, at the least alarm usually springs on the bough of a tree. The cock seldom takes to a tree unless sorely pressed. The tiger cats and native dogs, being constantly hunting them, keep them upon the alert; and they are startled at the least noise. Although they cannot fly beyond a few yards it takes a smart dog to close with them in the scrub, and I found that without a dog I had little chance of shooting one of the cocks. I however hit on a plan that appeared to offer some chance of success. In a situation where the lyre-bird was most plentiful I selected a long log lying upon the ground, with a view along its whole length. I secreted myself at one end, with my gun pointed along it. I was not long waiting when several hens made their appearance upon it for a few seconds, but these I did not want. My perseverance was at length rewarded, for a large cock sprang upon the log, at ten yards distance from me. It had a beautiful tail of more than three feet in length. I momentarily trembled with delight, but having fired, I nearly separated his head from his body, and I was now content to return home with my trophy.

Of late years I have been very often among the lyre-bird, and whenever followed by a smart dog found no great difficulty in securing some of the cocks. Their tails are highly ornamental, and they are without doubt the most splendid birds, as to elegance as well as vocal abilities, we have in the Australian colonies.

PATHFINDER - 1864

The great scarcity of game, which has of late depressed our sportsmen, has driven some of the more enterprising to seek new fields for their operations. Three gentlemen started from here on Friday afternoon for the brushes, the retreat of the magnificent but now rare *menura superba*, or lyre-bird the "pheasant" of the settlers and cedar cutters... About twelve o'clock a stentorian "cooey" recalled all hands to camp, where an abundant and well selected dinner awaited them. The gastronomic feats then performed deserved a Homer to record them, for the astonishment of the degenerate sons of succeeding ages. One lyre bird, six of the splendid Wonga Wonga pigeons, and numerous specimens of the lovely satin, or bower bird, with three paddy melons, were a tolerably fair recompense for the toils of the party.

SCONE 1869

*I stand (within your) reach, weakened (with fear,  
I hear your sounding tread and know you to be near.*

I had never seen one alive — never hunted one before ; but I was quite aware of their extreme shyness, and of the great importance of moving without a sound — an accomplishment only gained by practice but essential to scrub shooting. For all is still in the dark recesses where the menura has his home. You hear at times of early morning the note of the Satin bird from the vines, the king parrot calls plaintively at intervals from overhead, or a flight of screaming cockatoos pass by, making for water, but the crackling of a twig, the chance displacement of a stone, or the rustle of a bush, sound loudly in the general hush ; farewell when this happens, to your morning chance. The day was just breaking, and I had left the cedar cutters' half obliterated track, and was hanging by a vine to the face of a cliff looking down on a sea of cabbage palms, tree ferns, vines, and climbers of endless variety, and watching for the appearance of the sun from beneath the far off horizon of the still ocean beyond, when just as his first rays fell upon the rocks around me I heard what I supposed to be the rich, clear, bold note of the Satin bird : anxious to procure a good specimen, I for the moment, forgot the special object of my chase and cautiously climbed the cliff, again the call was repeated but was immediately followed by the voice of the white cockatoo — then the mocking power of the menura were remembered and I stood riveted to the spot, proceed I could not, for having swung myself to the top of the cliff, I found a platform of broken rocks about an acre, without a particle of cover and in the centre a few huge trees and a mass of tangled vines, the growth of centuries, from which the sounds proceeded. I crawled like a cat, and with like stillness, but without success. Cheered by finding myself in the vicinity of my game, I proceeded cautiously along the mountain, and in a little while caught the note of the bird far off. With great toil and patience, I got within gun shot, but so dense was the cover I could see nothing beyond my gun ; fearing I should lose my chance, I determined to advance, and in half a dozen paces, found myself almost within pistol shot of a male bird, a female, and a half-grown young one. Of the male, I got but a glance, with a note of alarm and one or two wonderful bounds he was in a second or two half way down the mountain. The young bird screeching ran into a hole in the rocks, where I caught it and the mother then attracted by its tones of distress rushed to my feet, and was shot. The thought then struck me that if I fastened the young bird to the ground, and hid myself in the fern



that its cries might draw the male to its assistance. I did so, his call was incessant, and at the expiration of half an hour I saw, not the male, but a female steal cautiously out from the fern not five yards from me. I remained as silent as the rocks around me for several seconds. The pheasant did not move but kept staring, at the fettered young one, when, slightly moving my gun which I had brought to my shoulder, she saw me, and vanished. Once more during the day I got within five or six yards of a cock ; but so dense were the stems of the brushwood that I could not find the slightest opening to give me a chance. I could make out something moving as behind a close blind, but nothing more. I fired, but although so near the torn bark of the brushwood was the only result. The young bird I had left behind me, and picked it up on my way home. I fed it with every care but it died in four or five days.

About a week afterwards I again found myself in the mountains. I was in the act of climbing the hill when, under the brushwood within gun-shot, I saw a hen pheasant feeding. I leant forward to fire, against a pile of dead wood when a violent screech came from the interior. To my great delight I found the pile of dead sticks to be the nest of the Lyrebird. In it was a young one, two thirds of the size of the female, quite fledged ; but wanting the handsome tail. The hen at the cry of distress of the young bird started forward, but was killed at the

instant. The nest was on the ground, at the foot of an old tree, and partly in a recess in the trunk ; it was domed and lined with fine fibres and very thin vines, but no feathers, about the size of a tea-chest.

It is impossible to give an idea of the great difficulty of obtaining this bird by the amateur sportsman. Apart from its extreme shyness it is incessantly on the move — perhaps after hours of patient following the note of the bird (for you do not see it except to kill or lose it), over rocks and fallen timber, through all but impenetrable masses of vines and thorns holding you fast at every step ; now up the wall like face of the mountain, and now back on your track, five or six hundred feet precipitously down — now over prostrate trees, piled one on another, green with slime and moss dripping with moisture shrouded in gloom by giant fern trees of forty feet in height, whose feathery tops shut out the glaring sunlight, which penetrates every-where else, you find yourself within gunshot, but can see nothing, for the bird after imitating every note in the bush, which it does in a matchless manner, varied at times, I am told,

*I ready for the next unwilling pace,  
Now left between us but a narrow space  
Here I lagged, unable to sustain,  
The labour longer than I can maintain.*

That wonderful mimic of the sequestered glen, the lyre-bird, is fast disappearing from its native habitat. Like the curlew, it lives its life in close attachment to the ground. It makes its rugged nest within easy reach of the fox, which accounts for its eggs and any surviving offspring, nor is the parent safe from attack. Of recent years bushmen have noticed that the lyre-birds have been trying to build higher from the ground, but without effectual result, as the fox is a steady climber. The complete extinction of this beautiful and distinctive Australian bird is only a matter of time, unless the fox is ousted. Many people claim that the fox is a mesmerist, but in the opinion of really competent observers, it is not the case. The animal inspires acute fear in the creatures that constitute its prey. So intense is the feeling of fear in the poultry bird upon his elevated roost that he will collapse and fall into the maw of the fox below, after the latter has been padding round in a restricted circle for a time with its terrible eyes fixed constantly on those of its victim. Many a perched bird, high and dry, and safely out of reach of the marauder, seeing death in the sinister eyes of its natural enemy, swoons and falls to its doom. The snake exercises the same power over lizards, birds, and bush mice.

N/N 1937

Since the advent of the fox and the spread of the plume-hunter, the lyre-bird is sorely pressed in order to find a spot of even moderate security for the hatching of its young one. Formerly the hollow trunk or a fallen tree was utilised, and pledges of rock a few feet from the ground held many a nest; but now the eye of the plunderer must be evaded, or his scaling propensities outclassed. For this purpose, the dark recesses of rocky caverns and the steep faces of high cliffs have to be resorted to. The writer has recently met with, and secured photographs of, nests where much care and skill had been taken in choosing a site that would outwit the pursuer. It is not an uncommon sight in these depths of the rocky scrub land to come upon



a nest of this beautiful creature with its solitary egg in a semi-decayed state — a silent witness against the hand of the vandal.  
ORAMA 1912

Notice more and more the lyre bird's habit of getting well up a tree or on some elevated perch to sing or dress his feathers. Frequently of late in trying to get close to a bird, in one of his mimicry turns, the first sight — and generally the last sight — of the artist was when he dropped from his perch stole quietly through the underwood.

Passing down a mountain track in the early morning lately I turned a corner and came right upon a pair of birds. What interested me was that on the sudden alarm neither bird attempted to run, but with a sudden high leap and a flap of their wings, both had in an instant reached a tree perch ten feet or so from the ground, where they sat crooning like a startled turkey, no longer much concerned about getting out of the way. My impression is that this is the lyre bird's way of escaping the rush of a fox, his most dangerous enemy. His natural habit in retreat is to use his legs, not his wings, but that may not serve with a fox, and the change of plan is at any rate suggestive.

This wonderful bird, and many other of the species which mostly live and nest near or on the ground will have to change their habits very quickly if they are to survive. Ground-living birds have suffered seriously from the raids of the fox on their eggs and their young. In fact, adult birds are also frequently captured by the wily quadruped while brooding on the nests. Being very intelligent the lyre-bird seems to have already successfully adapted itself to the changed conditions of life brought about by the predatory practices of this imported pest, and it is to be hoped that numbers of other birds which live and nest on the ground will do the same.  
Donald Macdonald 1920

*Harbingers of death, give rise to panic and despair,  
The ground they walk marked by bloodied nightmare,  
Bleeding bodies done, in the dust tender victims lie,  
And saved are the few not fated to die,  
How Shakou was my soul, how deflated my heart,  
The terror seized on every trembling part,  
Thus when the fox about the mountain prowls,  
His prey always listening for his horrid howls.*



After pitching our camp on the second lagoon, I left with Mr Robinson to explore the scrub in front of us, and found it a most difficult matter to get through it, even on foot. It was like forcing a way through a quick set hedge. With addition of large saplings and full grown trees springing up in every direction.

G. H. HAYDON 1844

We had a dray, eight bullocks, several horses, and provisions for three weeks. The provisions we did not spare, imagining we should do our work in about a fortnight; but the sequel proved otherwise. Stores ran very short, we went through, great privations, and at last we had to kill one of the working bullocks for food; a horse also died of starvation. However, we succeeded in cutting a road for the cattle and dray through the dense scrubs, and on the 25th of May we accomplished the object of our journey and reached the Albert River, Gippsland, where now stands the town of Alberton. We were the first to open a practicable road for cattle, and within three weeks 1300 head were driven down upon our tracks and more continued to follow. This was the first road into Gippsland opened. We followed no tracks, in fact, there were none to follow; but, on the contrary, fairly and squarely cut our way through many miles of very formidable scrubs, selecting the most promising site for the road as we proceeded.

I know this road was the only one in use when I left the colony, in 1845, and I have always congratulated myself on having left a permanent mark behind me - I regarded my road as the road.

G. H. HAYDON 1870

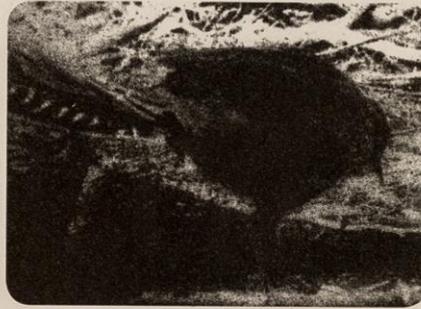
The party entered an almost impenetrable country, thickly covered with timber and small brushwood, became so thick and strong the horses could not get through it, and they were abandoned...

BRODRIBB 1841

As the parties proceeded on their route along the dividing range between the two rivers, they cut through thick scrub, that near the head of the tributaries, and for a considerable distance along the range, positively swarmed with leeches. The party at length emerged after some miles of cutting, into a more open country, where the range widens out into a succession of table-topped open plains, fringed in places with belts of stunted snow gums, that for some distance stand round the edge of timberless openings with the utmost regularity, as though they had been placed there by art.

McMILLAN 1864

*Blazing tracks, after you prostrate forests lay,  
Stretched in long ruin and exposed to day,  
Whips crack and creatures go forth, obedient to your reign,  
With hardened soles beneath, you pour onto the plains.*



The effects of foraging by the superb lyrebird (*menura novaehollandiae*) in eucalyptus regnans forests at beenak, victoria.

In an early spar-stage stand of *Eucalyptus regnans* at Beenak, Victoria, foraging by lyrebirds in bare floor areas on steep slopes results in a complex microtopography of excavations, accumulations and terraces. About 2001 ha<sup>2</sup> of litter and top soil may be displaced an average of 70 cm downhill per year. Magnetic ferruginous pisolite was used as a marker to monitor progressive soil movement over 3 years. **Very little disturbance occurred in areas of dense ground fern, but in bare areas the whole forest floor may be turned over every 20 months.** In the site studied, foraging activity by lyrebirds varied seasonally and topographically. Disturbance by other biotic agents was minimal. **The mean depth of soil cultivation was about 10cm and litter was frequently buried or mixed intimately with soil. Since buried leaf litter decays more quickly than that on the surface, lyrebird foraging is likely to increase the rate of nutrient cycling.**

D. H. ASHTON AND O. D. BASSETT -1997

Interactions between the superb lyrebird (*menura novaehollandiae*) and fire in south-eastern australia

Context: The superb lyrebird *Menura novaehollandiae* is thought to be an important ecosystem engineer that, through its foraging, accelerates the decomposition of litter in *Eucalyptus* forests. Lyrebird foraging is therefore likely to affect forest fuel loads and hence fire behaviour in these fire-prone forests. In turn, fire is likely to reduce

the abundance and influence the distribution of lyrebirds.

Aims: Our goal was to determine the impacts of a major bushfire on the habitat and food sources for the superb lyrebird and the effects of foraging activities of lyrebirds on litter fuel and potential fire behaviour in gullies of herb-rich foothill forests.

Key results: At the landscape scale, lyrebirds were present in both unburnt and ground-burnt sites, but not in canopy-burnt sites. Within patchily burnt sites, lyrebirds favoured foraging in unburnt patches. On average, lyrebird foraging reduced litter fuel loads by 25% (1.66 t ha<sup>-1</sup>) in plots in which they were free to forage, compared with plots from which they were excluded, over a 9-month period. Fire-behaviour modelling showed that lyrebird foraging led to a lower likelihood of fire occurring and less intense fire.

Conclusions: Distinctly different vegetation structure and composition between burnt and unburnt patches appears to influence both the foraging patterns and distribution of lyrebirds. Additionally, foraging by lyrebirds reduces surface fuel loads and fuel connectivity such that fire spread is likely to be inhibited.

Implications: We propose that alternative stable states may emerge in *Eucalyptus* forests as a result of feedback mechanisms among lyrebirds, vegetation and fuel accumulation. **Therefore, the ecological role of lyrebirds is an important consideration in forest fuel management and conservation in these extensive, fire-prone forests in south-eastern Australia.**

DANIEL T. NUGENT STEVEN W. J. LEONARD AND MICHAEL E. CLARKE. 2014

*With each cycle of the moon I turn the forest floor.*

Owing to the direction of the great valleys being at right angles to the coast line, the climate, even on the sea coast, is generally cool and agreeable, and the moisture-laden winds, which have uninterrupted course along the valleys, are cast upwards into colder air when they encounter the Dividing Range, and there, precipitation is constant. The rivers have their sources in mountains and plateaux, which, over the greater part, are covered with snow during nine months in the year. Even in the height of summer snow lies for weeks in the deep recesses of the mountains and when it is melted the bright green of the sub-alpine flora marks the sites it has occupied...

The great height above the sea of a considerable portion of Gipps Land, the relatively large proportion of water to land surface, the form and direction of the great valleys, and the dense foliage that clothes the upland slopes, temper the heats of summer.

The great ranges on the north-west are not the only barriers which separate Gipps Land from the remainder of the colony, the track from Melbourne towards Sale is almost impracticable in winter. Where the track crosses a patch of older volcanic rock a little to the east of the Buneep the soils are deep and in wet weather almost prevent the passage of wheeled vehicles. The spot is well known as the 'Glue pot'.

And on entering Gipps Land, if the traveller should seek to explore the carbonaceous tract extending towards Corner Inlet or the summits of the ranges bordering the principal rivers, he would find his course stopped by scrubs and thickets so dense that only a well equipped party would be able to advance a mile or two in the day.

SURVEYOR-GENERAL  
AND THE SECRETARY FOR  
THE MINES 1874



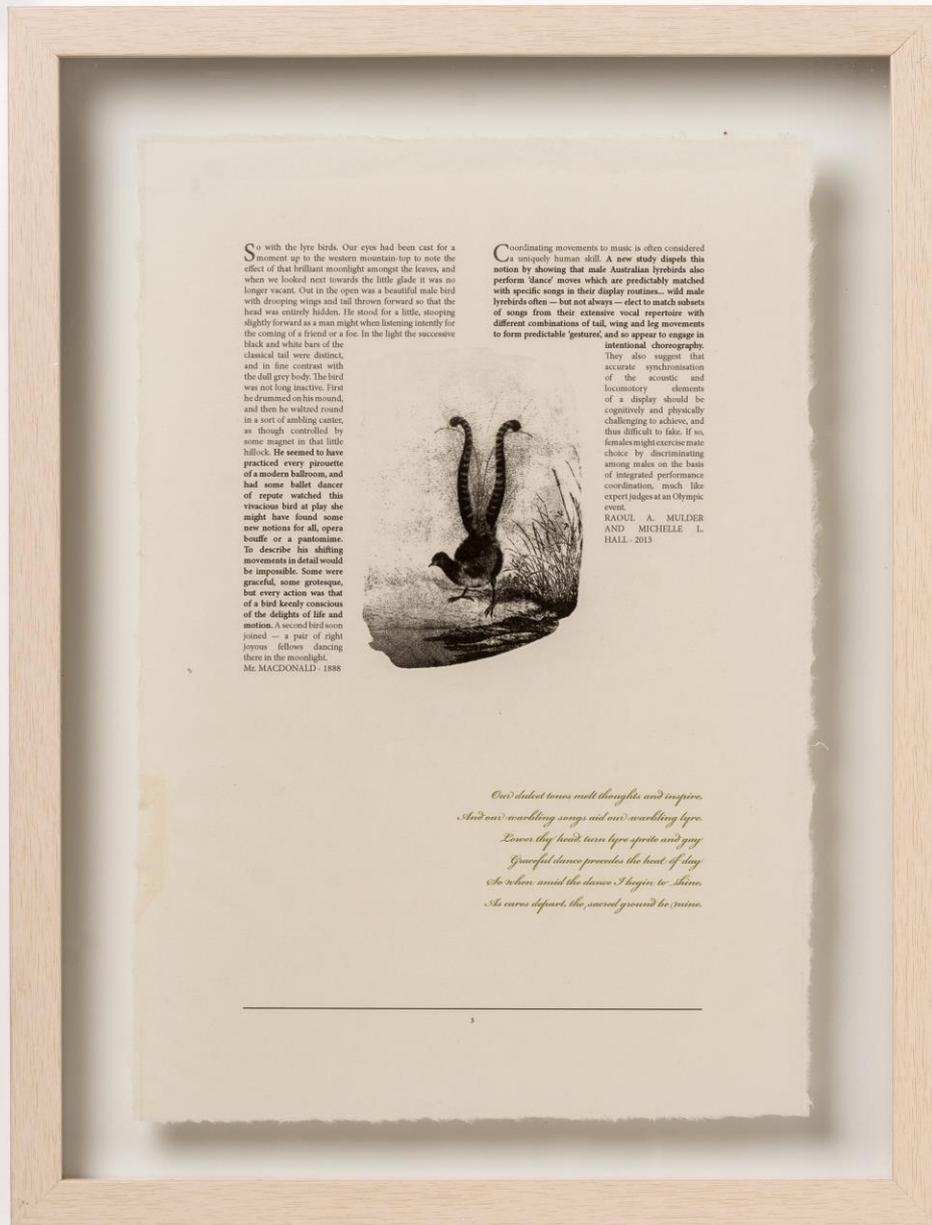
The deep gullies in the recesses of the ranges are filled with a dense jungle of musk, sassafras, light-wood, fern and various other trees and shrubs of a more or less aromatic character, besides a great variety of creepers, vines, and herbaceous plants, many of which appear to be peculiar to the region, while others are common to the southern districts of New South Wales. Water is abundant everywhere. A peculiar characteristic of Gippsland, is the abundance and variety of the fern-tribe. They cling lovingly to moss-grown rocks made dank and slippery with the oozing moisture of some tiny spring. In the rich humus of the windless glens, they assume the arborescent form, and rising to the height of twenty or thirty feet, with a graceful palm-like crown, impart a peculiarly rich tropical character to the scene.

AMATEUR DIGGER 1869

In a mountain glen, in the heart of the forest lived a pair of lyre-birds. This was long before the white man came to Australia, and so the birds lived in peace and quiet, never fearing hunters and their guns. This mountain glen was very beautiful. Graceful tree-ferns spread their feathery fronds over tangled undergrowth, and thick creepers hung suspended between the boughs of lofty trees or clasped their stout trunks. A silvery waterfall tinkled over mossy rocks, and formed a little pool, clear as glass. Banks of lovely ferns fringed the water, where the wild birds of the forest came to quench their thirst. Far above the tall trees the birds could see blue sky, and the white drifting clouds. Amongst the leafy undergrowth the lyre-birds built their nest. It was a beautiful nest, and the lyre-birds were very proud of it.

V. FETTINGELL 1916

*Trees with rings that show their age,  
Leafy tops amidst the sky dapple sun rays,  
And gentle pulsing whirs as waters fall and flow;  
Nurturing spaces where ferns and vines grow.*



So with the lyre birds. Our eyes had been cast for a moment up to the western mountain-top to note the effect of that brilliant moonlight amongst the leaves, and when we looked next towards the little glade it was no longer vacant. Out in the open was a beautiful male bird with drooping wings and tail thrown forward so that the head was entirely hidden. He stood for a little, stooping slightly forward as a man might when listening intently for the coming of a friend or a foe. In the light the successive black and white bars of the classical tail were distinct, and in fine contrast with the dull grey body. The bird was not long inactive. First he drummed on his mound, and then he waltzed round in a sort of ambling canter, as though controlled by some magnet in that little hillock. He seemed to have practiced every pirouette of a modern ballroom, and had some ballet dancer of repute watched this vivacious bird at play she might have found some new notions for all, opera bouffe or a pantomime. To describe his shifting movements in detail would be impossible. Some were graceful, some grotesque, but every action was that of a bird keenly conscious of the delights of life and motion. A second bird soon joined — a pair of right joyous fellows dancing there in the moonlight.  
Mr. MACDONALD - 1888

Coordinating movements to music is often considered a uniquely human skill. A new study dispels this notion by showing that male Australian lyrebirds also perform 'dance' moves which are predictably matched with specific songs in their display routines. Wild male lyrebirds often — but not always — elect to match subsets of songs from their extensive vocal repertoire with different combinations of tail, wing and leg movements to form predictable 'gestures', and so appear to engage in intentional choreography. They also suggest that accurate synchronisation of the acoustic and locomotory elements of a display should be cognitively and physically challenging to achieve, and thus difficult to fake. If so, females might exercise mate choice by discriminating among males on the basis of integrated performance coordination, much like expert judges at an Olympic event.  
RAOUL A. MULDER AND MICHELLE L. HALL - 2013

*Our delect tones melt thoughts and inspire,  
And our warbling songs and our warbling lyre.  
Lovers they lead, their lyre spirits and glee  
Graceful dances precedes the heat of day  
As when amid the dance I begin to shine,  
As eeres depart, the sacred ground be mine.*

So with the lyre birds. Our eyes had been cast for a moment up to the western mountain-top to note the effect of that brilliant moonlight amongst the leaves, and when we looked next towards the little glade it was no longer vacant. Out in the open was a beautiful male bird with drooping wings and tail thrown forward so that the head was entirely hidden. He stood for a little, stooping slightly forward as a man might when listening intently for the coming of a friend or a foe. In the light the successive black and white bars of the classical tail were distinct, and in fine contrast with the dull grey body. The bird was not long inactive. First he drummed on his mound, and then he waltzed round in a sort of ambling canter, as though controlled by some magnet in that little hillock. He seemed to have practiced every pirouette of a modern ballroom, and had some ballet dancer of repute watched this vivacious bird at play she might have found some new notions for all, opera bouffe or a pantomime. To describe his shifting movements in detail would be impossible. Some were graceful, some grotesque, but every action was that of a bird keenly conscious of the delights of life and motion. A second bird soon joined — a pair of right joyous fellows dancing there in the moonlight.  
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RAOUL A. MULDER  
AND MICHELLE L.  
HALL · 2013

*Our delect tones melt thoughts and inspire,  
And our warbling songs aid our warbling lyre.  
Lower thy head, turn lyre sprite and gay  
Graceful dance precedes the heat of day  
So when amid the dance I begin to shine,  
As cares depart, the sacred ground be mine.*

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## About the Author

Louisa Waters' practice is concerned with the space where history and landscape intersect; where memories and discourses produced by people and places create ideology, and how ideology transforms land and informs notions of place. She is a PhD candidate at Charles Sturt University.