

Daylight robbery

Bowerbirds are renowned for the spectacular gazebo-like structures they build and decorate on the forest floor to impress potential mates, and there was no stopping one particularly determined individual...



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IT WENT 'THUNK!' as it landed on top of our makeshift hide. The intruder flapped its wings, showering us with rainwater from the saplings that formed the roof of our shelter. I slowly turned to my girlfriend Sarah, pointed upwards, and nodded. "I think it's here," I whispered, somewhat unnecessarily.

We were coming to the end of a year spent teaching in West Papua, and for our final trip before returning to the UK had decided to trek into the remote Arfak Mountains. This fantastically beautiful area is home to a host of endemic animals, including jewel-coloured birds of paradise and enormous birdwing butterflies. It likes to keep its secrets: much of this vast forest wilderness is unexplored, so it is almost certainly home to undescribed flora and fauna. But Sarah and I had a more modest aim than finding species new to science – we simply wanted to see a bird of paradise one last time.

Dog-tired after long hikes through the forest and nights spent in freezing shelters, and itching from countless insect bites, our spirits were not high. To make matters worse, it was pouring with rain and we had only two days left to see our target, the six-plumed bird of paradise. So the bird dropping onto our

hide just a few inches above our heads came as something of a shock.

It turned out that our visitor was not a bird of paradise, but the Papuan master of mimicry – a Vogelkop bowerbird, or 'clever bird' as it is known locally. Though somewhat plain, with dull brown plumage offset by a pale yellow breast, this species' behaviour is remarkable. Not only can the male mimic the calls of pretty much any bird in its vicinity (and even, according to locals, the sound of passing aircraft), but it is also a superb architect. Later that day, we found its bower – a structure for attracting a female.

In front of the bower lay a neat collection of flowers, pieces of charcoal, a blue biro, noodle wrappers and beetle shells.

In the middle of an immaculately swept clearing, dozens of plant shoots and twigs had been woven around a central sapling to create a four-foot high wigwam. In front lay a neat collection of flowers, pieces of charcoal, a blue biro, noodle wrappers and a heap of perfectly plucked beetle shells. It was a labour of love.

I didn't know it then, but I was due to receive a further display of the bird's ingenuity the very next morning.

The weather on the second day was perfect: the clouds had disappeared, revealing the forest canopy as a blanket of dark green. The jungle was pulsing with birdsong, and



The bowerbird takes a breather during the construction of his rainforest 'des res'.

as we settled back in the hide we caught a fleeting glimpse of a six-plumed bird of paradise. We were so uplifted by our success that we didn't notice the bowerbird quietly creeping nearer until it was almost right on top of us.

Sarah suddenly sat bolt upright. "Quick, Will! A bird has got your photos!" I looked to where she was pointing. There was the bowerbird, struggling to stay in the air with my entire collection of family photos in its bill. At first I told myself they must be someone else's pictures, but when the bowerbird perched it started casually dropping them on the ground like a litter lout – first a photo of my grandparents, then my dog and my sister as a baby. I could hardly believe what I was seeing. "What the...? "How did...?" "Impossible!" was all I could manage. Meanwhile, the bird was busily deciding whether to place a picture of my brother next to the charcoal or the beetle shells.

AS WE LEFT the hide, the evidence of the theft was everywhere. My bag had been opened, the journal dragged onto the floor, and the photographs must have slipped out. Unable to carry my heavy diary, the bowerbird had instead plumped for the prints in their garish blue plastic sleeve. The 'clever bird' had outwitted us. We picked up the scattered photos, laughing, but didn't have the heart to retrieve the latest addition to its bower. When it was finally time to go, we left my brother among the beetle shells, a caution to other human visitors to this incredible bird's well tended garden.

Photos: Will Millard



"I'm having that!" The bowerbird helps itself to another photo from Will's album.