



# John Gould

*nature's illustrious illuminator*

This year marks the 200th anniversary of the birth of John Gould, author and publisher of some of the most magnificently illustrated works on birds and mammals. The observations and illustrations resulting from his adventures in the 'newest world' helped to bring the uniqueness of Australian wildlife to the world's attention.



by Kevin Kenneally

**J**ohn Gould was born at Lyme, England, on 14 September 1804. As a child he moved with his parents to Stoke Hill in Surrey, and in this rural setting he acquired a keen interest in plants and animals.

In 1818, the family moved to Windsor, where Gould's father was employed in the royal gardens, and where young Gould was able to further his already keen interest in plants and wild creatures. At this time, he became proficient as a taxidermist, a calling that stood him in good stead throughout his life.

Gould's expertise in taxidermy undoubtedly contributed to his intimate knowledge of bird anatomy, and his skill in selecting the right pose for his many bird subjects. Just before his appointment to the Museum of the Zoological Society, he set up a taxidermy business in London, at a time when the gentry liked to have their trophies mounted for exhibition, and when the Royal Menagerie of King George IV was a constant source of exotic material.

Gould's thirst for information was insatiable. He recorded the habits of birds he saw and, where possible, collected their nests and eggs and prepared skeletons for future study. Quite often, he kept live birds in captivity to better study their habits



and perfect his sketches. He frequently checked the stomach contents of bird specimens, and included any undamaged insects in his ever-growing collection.

### Elizabeth Gould

It has been suggested that Gould's success was due mainly to his talented wife, Elizabeth. Her artistic ability and personal support in accompanying him abroad were of immeasurable assistance, and her early death in 1841, aged 37, left a void never to be filled. Gould was the first to acknowledge his great indebtedness to Elizabeth, and named the Gouldian finch (*Erythrura gouldiae*) in her memory:

'It is with feelings of the purest affection that I... dedicate this lovely bird to the memory of my late wife, who for many years laboriously assisted me with her pencil, accompanied me to Australia, and cheerfully interested herself in all my pursuits.'

### Arrival in Australia

Before Gould finished *The Birds of Europe*, commenced in 1832, he turned his attention to the birds of Australia. In 1837, he began *A Synopsis of the Birds of Australia and the Adjacent Islands* and, soon afterwards, *The Birds of Australia and the Adjacent Islands* as a fully illustrated folio work. However, Gould found that material available to support this project was totally inadequate and went to Australia himself to accumulate material for a completely new and most ambitious work, *The Birds of Australia*, in 36 parts and comprising 600 folio plates.

Gould was 33 when he, Elizabeth, son Henry, John Gilbert, Henry Coxen (Elizabeth's nephew) and a servant, Mary Watson, left London in the *Parsee* on 16 May 1838. They arrived at Hobart, Tasmania (known as Van Diemen's Land) about four months later, on 18 September 1838, where the family stayed with the Governor of Van Diemen's Land, Sir John Franklin. In mid-February 1839, Gould left his family at Government House, and



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**Main** A finished plate from John Gould's *The Birds of Great Britain* showing moorhens and their chicks with waterlilies.

**Image** – Courtesy of the Australian Museum Research Library

**Insets (top)** Portrait by T H Maguire of John Gould aged 45.

**(bottom)** Preparatory sketch of moorhens, attributed to John Gould.

**Images** – By permission of the National Library of Australia

**Top** J A Heyman's metal plaque of John Gould that is in the possession of the WA Gould League.

**Far left** Portrait by an unknown artist of Elizabeth Gould.

**Image** – Courtesy of a private collection

**Left** The Gouldian finch was named in honour of Elizabeth Gould.

**Photo** – Babs and Bert Wells/CALM



sailed to Sydney in the *Potentate*. There, Gould met Charles Sturt and greatly admired the explorer's watercolours of Australian parrots, which he offered to purchase. Sturt refused to sell, which was unfortunate, for the paintings were later stolen and never seen again.

Gould was anxious to record local Aboriginal names of the birds and mammals collected and instructed John Gilbert to gather this information. He found Aboriginal people in New South Wales very helpful to his collecting pursuits:

'I find the natives useful in assisting, being scarcely ever without a tribe or portion of a tribe with me in neighbourhood; they are nearly all excellent and dead shots, and are excessively fond of shooting. I frequently give into their hands my best guns, and never find them in the slightest degree disposed to take advantage.'

### John Gilbert

Gould's diligent collector John Gilbert was born in 1812. Like Gould, he trained as a gardener under John Aiton. In 1828, aged 16, he was recruited by Gould to work at the Zoological Society of London as a taxidermist before accompanying Gould to Tasmania in May 1838.

After collecting for several months in Tasmania, Gilbert left for Western

Australia, while Gould stayed in Tasmania as well as visiting New South Wales and South Australia (Gould never visited Western Australia). Gilbert reached Fremantle in the *Comet* in February 1839 and spent the next 11 months based in Perth, also making significant trips into the country and to offshore islands with Colonial botanist James Drummond and visiting German botanist Ludwig Preiss. Gilbert complained in a letter to Gould that Preiss was collecting for 'several continental museums' and that 'he gives large prices for almost everything and has literally, with but few exceptions bought up everything in the shape of natural history in the town'. He further remarked 'I am happy to say [the locals] generally appear to think I should be supported in preference to the foreigner'. Preiss did, however, share many of his bird specimens with Gilbert.

Gilbert left Fremantle for Sydney in January 1840 on the *Caledonia*, as it would stay a fortnight at King George Sound, where he could make additional collections from the south coast. At King George Sound he collected the potoroo (*Potorous gilbertii*) that Gould was to name in his honour. Believed extinct for more than 100 years, Gilbert's potoroo was



**Top** A lithograph by Henry Richter of Gilbert's potoroos from *A Monograph of the Macropodidae, or Family of Kangaroos*. Image – By permission of the National Library of Australia

**Above** Gilbert's potoroo, first collected in 1840 by John Gilbert. Photo – Jiri Lochman

rediscovered in 1994 (see 'Lost and Found. Gilbert's Potoroo', *LANDSCOPE*, Autumn 1995). In describing the new species, Gould wrote:

'The animal here represented was procured at King George's Sound, where it is called Ngil-gyte by the Aborigines. This little animal may be said to be the constant companion of *Halmaturus*



**Above** A malleefowl on its nest mound.  
Photo – Kevin Coate/CALM



**Left** Gould's goanna (*Varanus gouldii*).  
Photo – Brad Maryan

*brachyurus* [quokka], as they are always found together amidst the dense thickets and rank vegetation bordering swamps and running streams. The natives capture it by breaking down a long, narrow passage in the thicket, in which a number of them remain stationed, while others, particularly old men and women, walk through the thicket, and by beating the bushes and making a yelling noise, drive the affrighted animals before them, into the cleared space, where they are immediately speared by those on the watch: in this way a tribe of natives will often kill an immense number of both species in a few hours. I have not heard of the *Hypsiprymnus Gilberti* being found in any other part of the colony than King George's Sound. In dedicating it to the late Mr Gilbert, who proceeded with me to Australia, to assist in the objects of my expedition, I embraced with pleasure the opportunity afforded me of expressing my sense of the great zeal and assiduity

he displayed in the objects of his mission; and as science is indebted to him for his knowledge of this and several other interesting discoveries, I trust that... it will not be deemed inappropriate.'

In February 1842, Gilbert sailed from England for the Swan River Colony. He was determined to collect specimens of the malleefowl, about which he had heard so much. With James Drummond and an Aboriginal guide, he travelled to Wongan Hills. On 28 September, Gilbert found what he was looking for, describing the encounter in a letter to Gould:

'This morning I had the good fortune to penetrate into the dense thicket I had been so long anxious to visit in search of the Leipoa's [malleefowl's] eggs, and had not proceeded far before the native who was with me told me to keep a good look-out, as we were among the Ngou-oo's

hillocks; and in half-an-hour after we found one... in my haste I threw aside the black fellow and began scraping off the upper part of the mound... and he became very indignant... making me understand "that as I had never seen the nest before I had better trust him to get out the eggs, or I should, in my haste and impatience, certainly break them." I therefore let him have his own way, and he began scraping off the earth very carefully from the centre, throwing it over the side, so that the mound very soon presented the appearance of a huge basin; about two feet in depth of earth was in this way thrown off, when the large ends of two eggs met my anxious gaze; both these eggs were resting on their smaller apex, and the earth round them had to be very carefully removed to avoid breaking the shell, which is extremely fragile when first exposed to the atmosphere.'

Gilbert left Western Australia for Launceston and Sydney on 20 December 1843 on the schooner *Timbo*. Later, he was to join Ludwig Leichhardt's ill-fated expedition to Port Essington and was fatally speared during an attack on the camp in June 1845 by Aboriginal people. Gilbert's early death, at 33, meant he was given



**Above** Gilbert's hakea (*Hakea gilbertii*).  
Photo – Marie Lochman

**Right** Budgerigars were introduced to England in 1840 by Gould and became instantly popular as pets.  
Photo – Dave Watts/Lochman  
Transparencies



little credit for his discoveries and his contribution to *The Birds of Australia*. For an account of his collecting activities see 'John Gilbert's Australian Collections', *LANDSCOPE*, Winter 1997.

Gilbert dispatched his Western Australian plant collections to Gould in England. Gould forwarded them to Joseph Hooker, Director of the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew. Gilbert's plant collections were widely distributed, with specimens held at the Royal Botanic Gardens; the British Museum; and at herbaria in Vienna and Kiev. He is commemorated in the plant names *Acacia gilbertii*, *Dryandra gilbertii*, *Hakea gilbertii*, *Leucopogon gilbertii* and *Senecio gilbertii*.

### Gould's travels in eastern Australia

Important places visited on this trip included Berrima, Camden and the Upper Hunter, where Gould stayed with his brothers-in-law, Stephen and Charles Coxen. In the Hunter district, Gould shot several lyrebirds, some of which he sent to the famous anatomist, Professor Owen, of the Royal College of Surgeons, for dissection.

In the Hunter-Namoi district, Gould saw, for the first time in the field, many species sent to him earlier by Charles Coxen and collected new species such as the red-browed tree-creeper, white-backed swallow, black-eared cuckoo, yellow-throated miner, striated grasswren, flock pigeon and red-backed kingfisher. He also observed the star finch on the Namoi River, the second and last recording of this finch in New South Wales (more recent records of the star finch in NSW may involve aviary escapes).

Gould's visit coincided with unusual irruptions of the budgerigar (known by local Aboriginal people as Betcherrygah) and flock pigeon. Gould encountered budgerigars on the

Liverpool Plains in flocks of thousands, with many breeding in the hollow spouts of eucalypts. He noted that:

... this lovely little bird is pre-eminent both for beauty of plumage and elegance of form, which, together with its cheerfulness of disposition and sprightliness of manner, render it an especial favourite with all who have had an opportunity of seeing it'.

Gould took live specimens back to England with him in 1840, where they were soon being bred in large numbers and became popular pets. Gould was fascinated by them as cage-birds and commented that they were 'constantly coquetting, squabbling and assuming every variety of graceful position'.



**Above** A western grey kangaroo (*Macropus fuliginosus*).  
Photo – Tom Chvojka

**Left** The scarlet-chested parrot by John Gould and Henry Constantine Richter from *The Birds of Australia*. Gould described this bird in 1841 from a single specimen received from the Swan River Colony. In 1845 he was sent additional specimens collected by Johnston Drummond from the Moore River. Gould's text records that the bird is figured on a specimen of *Beaufortia decussata* from Western Australia.

He returned to Hobart in April 1839 by the *Susannah Anne*, but in a month was ready to move on to South Australia. He went with the good wishes of the *Hobart Town Courier* (24 May 1839), which recorded that Gould had collected 'about 800 species of birds, 70 quadrupeds (several of which are new) and eggs of above 70 species of birds, together with skeletons of all principal forms'.

Gould returned to Sydney in February 1840 to finalise his business in Australia before returning with his wife, their two children and servant to England. They sailed on the *Kinnear* on

9 April 1840 and reached London on 25 August. Elizabeth died within a year of their return and, although John worked relentlessly for another 40 years, he never recovered fully from his loss.

### Mammals of Australia

In Australia, Gould became fascinated by the strange mammals he encountered. Soon after his return to England he began *A Monograph of the Macropodidae, or Family of Kangaroos*. After parts 1 and 2 appeared in 1841 and 1842 respectively, the publication was discontinued. Three years later he

began work on *The Mammals of Australia*, published in three volumes. Commenting on his departure from the study of birds Gould wrote:

'Tired by a long and laborious day's walk under a burning sun, I frequently encamped for the night by the side of a river, a natural pond, or a water-hole, and before retiring to rest not unfrequently stretched my weary body on the river's bank... [where] the water was often disturbed by the little concentric circles formed by the *Ornithorhynchus* (platypus), or perhaps an echidna (ant-eater) came trotting up towards me. With such scenes as these continually around me, is it surprising that I should have entertained the idea of collecting examples of the indigenous Mammals of a country whose ornithological productions I had gone out expressly to investigate?'

**Right** Twenty-eight parrots by John Gould and Henry Constantine Richter from *The Birds of Australia*. Gould recorded that this bird was widespread throughout the Swan River Colony and was given the common name 'twenty-eight' by the colonists after its distinctive call.

### Observations and concerns

Gould was the first to point out the relationship between many of the birds of eastern and south-western Australia, and quick to notice small adaptations for a particular lifestyle. Writing of the spinebill honeyeater, he observed:

'There is no member of the large family of Honey-eaters to which it belongs that enjoys a structure more especially adapted for the purposes of its existence than the present species, whose fine and extremely delicate bill is peculiarly suited for the extraction of insects and honey from the inmost recesses of the tubular flowers which abound in many parts of Australia, particularly of the various species of *Epacris*.. which when in bloom are always frequented by numbers of these birds. So much so, indeed that it would seem as if the one was expressly designed for the other.'

On several occasions, Gould predicted the extermination of certain native species if exploitation continued. He expressed concern for the long-term survival of Australia's wildlife:

'Short-sighted indeed are the Anglo-Australians, or they would long ere this have made laws for the preservation of their highly singular, and in many instances noble, indigenous animals; and doubly short-sighted are they for wishing to introduce into Australia the productions of other climes, whose forms and nature are not adapted to that country. Let me then urge them to bestir themselves, ere it be too late, to establish laws for the preservation of the large Kangaroos, the Emu, and other conspicuous indigenous animals: without some such protection, the remnant that is left will soon disappear, to be followed by unavailing regret for the apathy with which they had been previously regarded..'



He predicted the demise of the Tasmanian tiger, or thylacine:

'When a comparatively small island of Tasmania becomes so densely populated, and its primitive forests are intersected with roads from the eastern to the western coast, the numbers of this singular animal will speedily diminish, extermination will have its full sway, and it will then like the wolf in England and Scotland, be recorded as an animal of the past.'

### Gould's legacy

In 1841, the British Museum made the first purchase of Gould's Australian

bird specimens. Gould and many of his colleagues were astonished when, in 1847, the trustees of the British Museum declined an offer to purchase his personal collection for the sum of £1000, or to accept it as a gift should they order 25 copies of his folio work. Disappointed and bitter, Gould accepted an offer of £1000 for his Australian bird and egg collections on behalf of Thomas Wilson, patron and one-time president of The Academy of Natural Sciences, Philadelphia. Wilson's other purchases included many rare books and journals on ornithology, and several other important bird

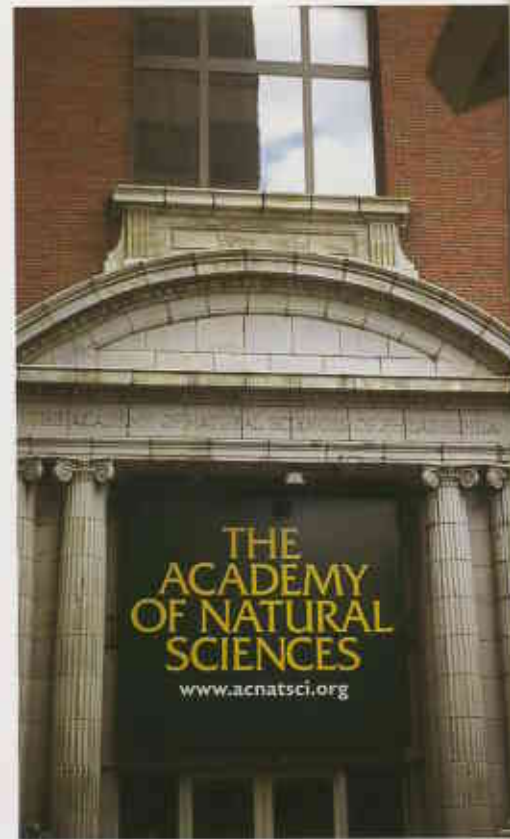




**Above** Nate Rice, collection manager, ornithology, The Academy of Natural Sciences, Philadelphia, with a tray of John Gould's Australian bird specimens.

**Above right** The Academy holds the largest collection of Gould's Australian bird specimens.

Photos – Kevin Kenneally



collections. The bird skins numbered some 25,000, then the finest assemblage in the world. They arrived in Philadelphia in 1849, but were not formally presented to The Academy of Natural Sciences until 20 March 1860.

After Gould's death, his remaining bird collection was bought by the British Museum for £3000. The 'disgraceful spectacle' of Gould's 'unrivalled' Australian collection sailing off to the USA would not be repeated.

Gould ultimately died on 3 February 1881, aged 76. He was buried alongside Elizabeth in Kensal Green Cemetery, London. The stone slab on his grave carries the inscription: 'Sacred to the Memory of John Gould, F.R.S., born September 14, 1804, died February 3, 1881'. His final wish was for his epitaph to read 'Here lies John Gould, the "Bird Man"'.  
 1910, Tasmania in 1920 and Western Australia in 1939.

As interest in the study of birds and natural history grew in Australia, there was strong support for bird clubs to be formed in schools. At first, these groups were unofficial, but the value of formalising them soon became apparent. The name of John Gould, variously described as the 'Bird Man' and 'Father of Australian Ornithology', was the obvious choice for the newly-formed enterprise. The Victorian Gould League of Bird Lovers was officially established in 1909 and the first president was Prime Minister of Australia, Alfred Deakin. New South Wales formed a Gould League in

1910, Tasmania in 1920 and Western Australia in 1939.

Today, Australian Gould Leagues are among Australia's most respected and influential non-profit, nature conservation education groups. They enable people to understand, appreciate and protect the natural environment (see 'A league of their own', *LANDSCOPE*, Spring 2003). The legacy of John Gould's fascination with the natural world continues through the League's education activities and the enthusiasm for nature shown by the generations of children who have been members.

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In preparing the article, Kevin referred to several books that would make excellent further reading. They are *John Gould in Australia* (1997) by Ann Datta, *John Gould: Bird Man* (1987) by Maureen Lambourne and *The Bird Man* (1991) by Isabella Tree.

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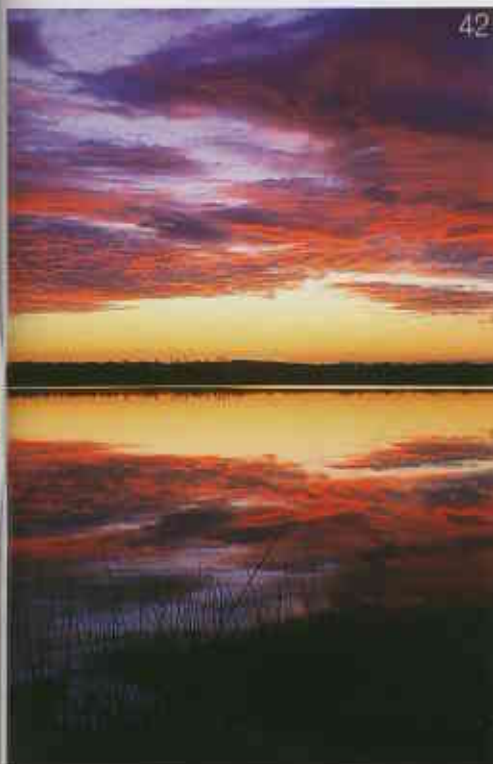
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