

FIELDWORK WITH BOWERBIRDS

Perdita Phillips



Above: Houdini (Bower 1) repairing his bower after a rival male damaged it. Photographed here in 2007, Houdini was first banded as an adult about 12 years earlier and his bower is much photographed by visitors to the Broome Bird Observatory.

From 2007 to 2008 I visited the Broome Bird Observatory (BBO) in northern Western Australia working on the art and science project *Green, Grey or Dull Silver: art and the behavioural ecology of the Great Bowerbird, Chlamydera Nuchalis*. It involved observing and interacting with the common and largely sedentary Great Bowerbirds that live in the surrounding pindan savanna. Male birds build bowers and collect small display objects. Different types of objects are grouped in specific areas of the bower and the male spends time each day arranging and re-arranging his collection, renovating his bower, and even stealing from or wrecking the bowers of his rivals. Each bowerbird species prefers different coloured materials; the Great Bowerbird prefers green, grey or dull silver.



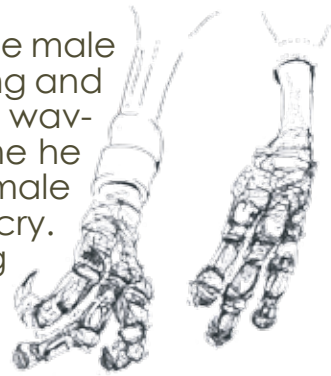
Commando bower (bower 8) (right, with detail above) showing asthma inhaler and other material gathered from a house nearby and numbered green glass nuggets as part of my interactions with the birds. Birds compete by stealing objects from neighbouring bowers.



Given a choice of cubes, rectangular prisms and cylinders of equal weight and colour (seen at Bower 1, above), the occupant(s) preferentially retrieve cylinders and transferred them to high status locations (below Bower 2, Spoon with a view).



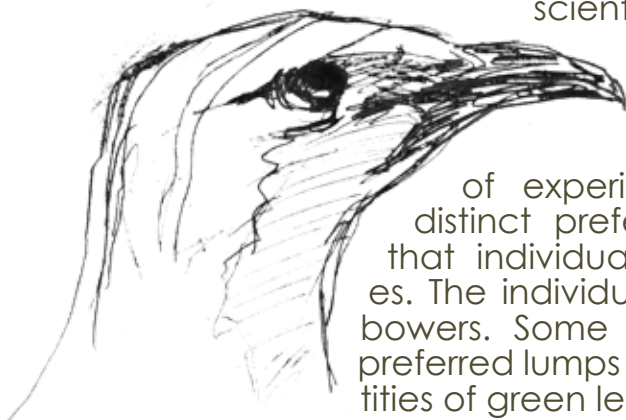
An interested female will enter the avenue of twigs. The male then performs for the female by posturing and dancing and by taking up the collected objects in its beak and waving them rhythmically at the female. At the same time he calls and fans out his pinky-mauve nuchal crest. The male makes a spectacular variety of noises including mimicry. The female visits a number of bowers before choosing a mate and then raising her young alone.



My art/science project explored the dual questions: 'how far can a conversation with these nonhumans proceed, in an endeavour to be more fully attuned to the *Umwelt** of the bowerbird?' and 'how can behavioural ecology be challenged or refashioned by artistic practices?'

For the former, I worked in a conversational mode, as a way of transforming the position of the artist from potentially voyeur and protagonist, to conversationalist or participant in the "ebb and flow" of field art. Geographer Steve Hinchliffe notes that 'any form of bird watching is about more or less subtle movements and making oneself available... in order to find appropriate responses to the world of the bird' (2010, p. 34). Throughout the project I endeavoured to remain open to dialogue and to the unknown territories of exchange.

My interaction with the birds included providing 'gifts' in the form of differently coloured or shaped objects to see what kind of preferences they had. Using a scientific protocol, identically weighted green coloured cylinders, cubes and rectangular prisms were placed near bowers. Birds could choose to accept or discard. From a small series of experiments I discovered that there were distinct preferences for rounder objects, but also that individual birds had subtly differing preferences. The individuality of birds was also reflected in their bowers. Some birds preferred bones to shells; some preferred lumps of grey mud and others collected quantities of green leaves.



When scientists aggregate data, they do so to minimise variation so as to achieve meaningful results. I pondered whether it was possible to retain the individuality of the birds without falling into the trap of explaining the variation in merely anthropomorphic terms. This is where it was important to portray the bowerbirds as vital entities and for myself to act as a conduit for their active natures. I tried to capture this in the field drawings and photography that I did (see overleaf). I left arrays of objects at the bowers and waited to see how they would be moved around, hoping to receive in return spatial poems, as the objects were re-patterned in ways outside of human control.



as if its leg
was a crystal
and its head was
a leaf.

The Great Bowerbird is a proficient vocal mimic of other birds and mammals such as cats and humans. Birds at BBO have been known to mimic footsteps on gravel, cricket commentary on the radio, someone's sneeze or a creaking weather vane. I was

Above: bowerbird thoughts. Overleaf: capturing a sense of *vital life* was an important aspect of the project.

* The surrounding environment, a perceptual world seen from the perspective of the animal, within which things 'fit'.





Above and below: Mango, a young juvenile with fluffy new covert feathers was caught stealing fruit.





Above and below: when birds are banded they are measured and their statistics are recorded and the size of the nuchal crest is noted. Held firmly and safely in the hands of a Class A bird bander, this is one of the few occasions where I was able to touch a bird (below).



interested in their mimicry and wanted to see if I could record an example, or provide a distinctive sound that could be absorbed back into their vocabulary. What then could be made from relating this to the attendant notions of acting, impersonation, doubling and re-presentation?

The Great Bowerbird is a species that has fared well in urban areas. Raised as a concern in the university ethics procedure was whether my 'conversations' were going to have long-term effects on bowerbird behaviour. Fortunately the birds are a gregarious species and the males returned to their original behaviour within minutes of my departure from their bowers. As individual organisms they carry around a relatively flexible perceptual world. Bowerbirds are adaptable and readily appropriate human items including spoons, toys, nails, glass, golf balls, light globes and aluminium foil from abandoned campfires. When I offered my green objects they acted as 'conversations' with the male bowerbirds. There was a to-ing and fro-ing and a listening as well as a speaking in the relationship between bowerbirds and humans.

Returning to the second question of how artistic practices might challenge or even modify behavioural ecology, one of my original objectives was to put enough information together to publish a field note about the object preference tests, as part of interacting with the science of bowerbirds. I worked on the experimental design with a behavioural ecologist. I also worked with the BBO Warden and staff to initiate colour banding of bowerbirds so that they could be individually identified at their bowers. Visiting birdwatchers and ornithologists were invited to contribute to an observation book for the banded birds. I envisaged my role then as a conversational intermediary between bowerbirds and scientists and birdwatchers, in the sense that I was working to generate interest in bowerbirds as well as putting potential scenarios in place for future conversations.

The process of bird banding has been developed and refined over the last century so that it is a skilled procedure that minimising distress and injury to the bird. As a beginner my role was to assist by handing equipment over and recording results. I took photographs of the process. It could be said that these photographs were reinforcing a distanced, objectified vision of the birds, but I tried to focus in on the energy of the bird, shown in their scaly feet or strong beaks or documented the rare times I touched their bodies prior to their release (see previous page).

The relationship between science and nonhumans was also examined in the sound installation *The world has no shortage of things (the world of the Great Bowerbird)* (see overleaf). The work featured two stereo soundtracks and two opposing shelves. The different classificatory systems of bowerbirds and humans were contrasted. One shelf showed typical objects collected from a bower. One of the lesser-known aspects of Carolus Linnaeus's works was his attempt to extend his system of biological classification to the mineral kingdom. Linnaeus classified crystals depending upon their external angles and the model objects on one of the shelves related to this work.

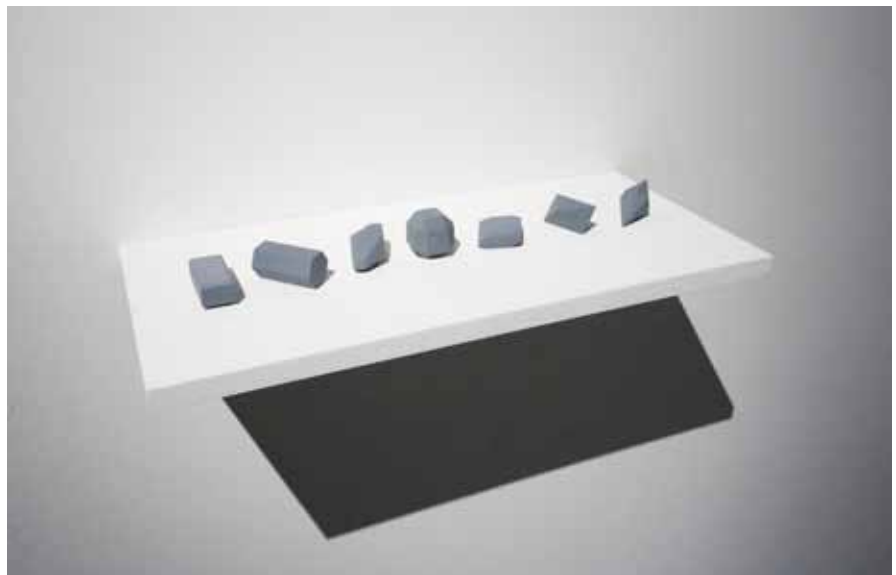
A stereo soundtrack could be heard above two shelves. It featured ornithological notes read by a human



Right: A light globe photographed from the collection at Bower 4.

on one side with the rich oration of a male bird in full recital (including mimicry of a Black-Faced Cuckoo-Shrike) on the other. Drifting through the entire gallery space was a layered soundscape of the BBO. Whilst conveying the full *Umwelt* of the bowerbird might ultimately be an impossible task, overall the artwork explored this space of complexity and uncertainty between the human and the nonhuman.

Working with wild animal behaviour in the field as either a scientist or artist takes considerable time and resources and there is much more that could be done with *Green, Grey or Dull Silver*. Nevertheless the project has led to further discussions with researchers on bird vision and artistic perspective (Great Bowerbirds use forced perspective at their bowers). My impact on behavioural ecology or on research at Broome Bird Observatory has been most effective at the level of individual engagement and much potential still remains. I would see the effect of this project as being a persistent tugging at how the human-nonhuman boundary is thought of in society, via the affective dimension of socially based pieces and gallery-based artworks.



The world has no shortage of things (the world of the Great Bowerbird) 2007 Mixed media sound installation with found objects: 30 minute ambient sound installation over gallery speakers and 7 minute stereo looped track from speakers above the two shelf works. Opposing shelves held taxidermy specimen, objects exchanged from actual bowers, and mineralogical crystal system teaching models.



Hinchliffe, S. (2010). *Where species meet*. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 28(1), 34-35.