

At Last, Mystery Bird Of New Zealand Has Been Found

WASHINGTON — Scientists had never seen it before, but somewhere in the New Guinea region there was supposed to be an outlandish "yellow-fronted gardener bowerbird."

Its existence was known only from three skins sold to British zoologist Lord Rothschild by a plume merchant in 1895. Of the many spectacular species of birds of paradise and bowerbirds that also first turned up in the plume markets of London, Paris, Amsterdam, and Singapore, it was the only one that had never been traced to its home ground.

Rain Forest Hide-Out
At last, the mystery bird of New Guinea, *Amblyornis flavifrons*, has been found. Early this year, on his ninth research expedition to the region, California ornithologist Jared M. Diamond discovered the bird high up in the largest unexplored mountain range in New Guinea, the thickly rain-forested Gaultier (Foja) Mountains in the island's Indonesian half.

Dr. Diamond described this species as looking like "a fat, chunky robin with an incredibly glorious golden orange crest." It presumably had not been

seen since unknown Malay or Papuan plume hunters snared the three male skins more than 85 years ago.

The lure for ornithologists was a strange bird whose bower-building relatives were known to construct the most elaborate structures in the avian world — to woo as many females as possible.

When these remarkable courtship bowers were first discovered in the 19th century, they were thought to be the work of human artists because of the complexity of their architecture and design. Built on the ground, some

towering 7 feet high, they are the unique creation of small birds who work alone and are found only in Australia and New Guinea.

The search for the elusive yellow-fronted bowerbird had taken some of the world's leading naturalists and collectors — even a crown prince of Belgium — halfway around the world. But all of the more than a dozen expeditions, including one supported by National Geographic in 1964, had ended in failure. And at times, the missing bowerbird was thought to be extinct.

This year's attempt, partly funded by the

National Geographic Society, succeeded because Diamond went to a mountain range never explored by scientists. "If we didn't have those skins, the tameness of the animals would make it seem that no human being has ever been up there before. It's like being in the world 30 million years ago," remarked Diamond, who had to be helicoptered in at 5,200 feet with a chainsaw to construct a landing site.

Discovery a Bonus
Ironically he came across the lost bird when he wasn't really looking for it. "When I and anyone else who goes to New Guinea have dreams, we dream about finding the mystery bowerbird, but my goal on this trip was simply to do a general bird survey of this mountain range and help the Indonesian government plan a national park there. The discovery was a totally unexpected bonus."

Far from being extinct, Diamond reports, the yellow-fronted bowerbird may number a thousand or more — still a small number for a bird species. He actually saw about 30 and heard as many more. He found bowers spaced about a quarter-mile apart along the crests of ridges, within a narrow altitude band of 5,400 to 5,900 feet. The bird's range, he believes, is restricted to the Gaultier Mountains at altitudes above 4,000 feet.

Remarkably Diamond sighted both the bird and the bower on the first day (Jan. 31, 1981) of his two-week stay and within two minutes of his camp. With the help of an Indonesian forester and two New Guinea workers he was starting to clear a trail up to 6,500 feet and down to 3,200.

Initially, he almost ignored the bird, thinking its bower looked like that of another well-known species. "Only when I noticed that the crest was a golden orange and came down to the nostrils did I realize that I might be on top of the mystery bird of New Guinea," he recalled.

But he wasn't absolutely certain until he returned home and examined the Rothschild skins at the American Museum of Natural History in New York. The live birds and the skins were identical except for the color of the crest. On the live bird, it is a rich golden orange; on the skins, it has faded to a paler yellow.

Witness to Courtship
Diamond's most extraordinary encounter with the live bird occurred when he stood within 10 feet of a male courting a female at his bower. It was the only time he saw two birds together.

"It happened one day when I was walking along a ridge and heard a loud sound about 50 yards away. It sounded like gravel rolling down a mountain slope and I thought it must be a wild pig."

Instead Diamond discov-

ered the male bowerbird "making these crazy wooing sounds while holding a blue fruit about a third the size of its head in its bill. The sounds ranged from clocks, croaks, whistles and screeches to noises like crumpling paper or chopping wood."

At the same time, the bird would spread, raise, and lower its crest, shaking its head from side to side to make the crest quiver. All the while it would point the blue fruit at the female. Whenever she flew to a different perch, he would move too so that what she always saw was the blue fruit against the quivering golden crest.

The backdrop for all this was the male's Maypole-style bower: a 4-foot-high tower of sticks crisscrossed about a sapling or tree fern, surrounded by a circular moss platform 3 feet in diameter. On the platform he had neatly placed three piles of fruit, each one a different color — yellow figs, some ripe blue fruit, and the green unripe version of the blue.

But this time this bird apparently didn't have what it takes. After 20 minutes, the female flew off, leaving him alone in his bachelor pad. Bowes, which are fussed over daily, and exclusive male territory and are used just for mating. The female alone builds a nest in a tree to care for the young.

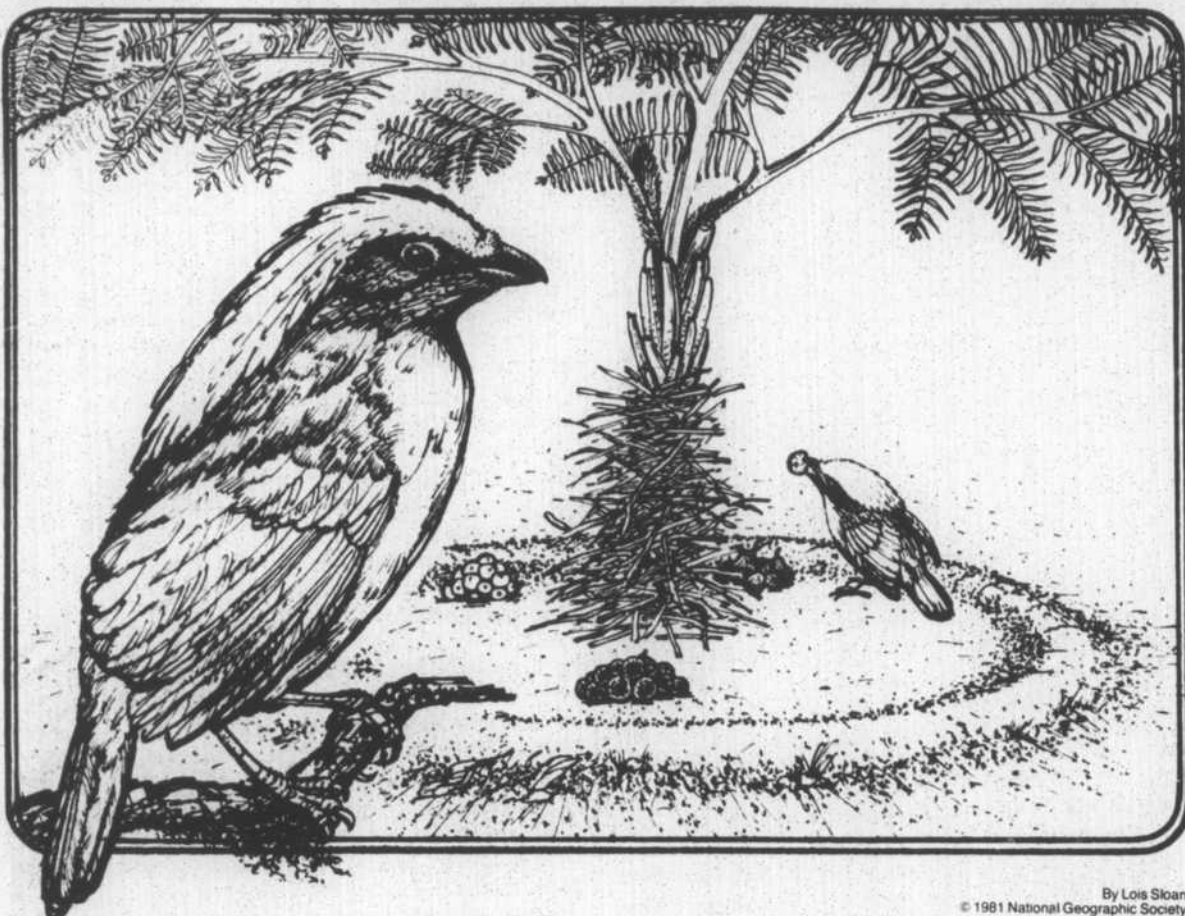
Of the 18 kinds of bowerbirds, this species' bower is among the simpler ones. Ornithologists have observed that the more colorful the bird's own plumage, the less ornate its bower. Bowes, they believe, represent the transfer of sexual adornment from the bird to the structure, so the birds tend to have the most elaborate bowes. "It's much like the dull young man with the fancy sports car," one ornithologist commented.

Huts and Lawns
Depending on the species, bowes may be walled avenues, thatched huts, Maypoles, or carefully laid out lawns. They are usually decorated with dozens or even hundreds of colorful flowers, berries, shells, or pebbles. Some birds bring fresh flowers to the bower daily and carry off withered blossoms.

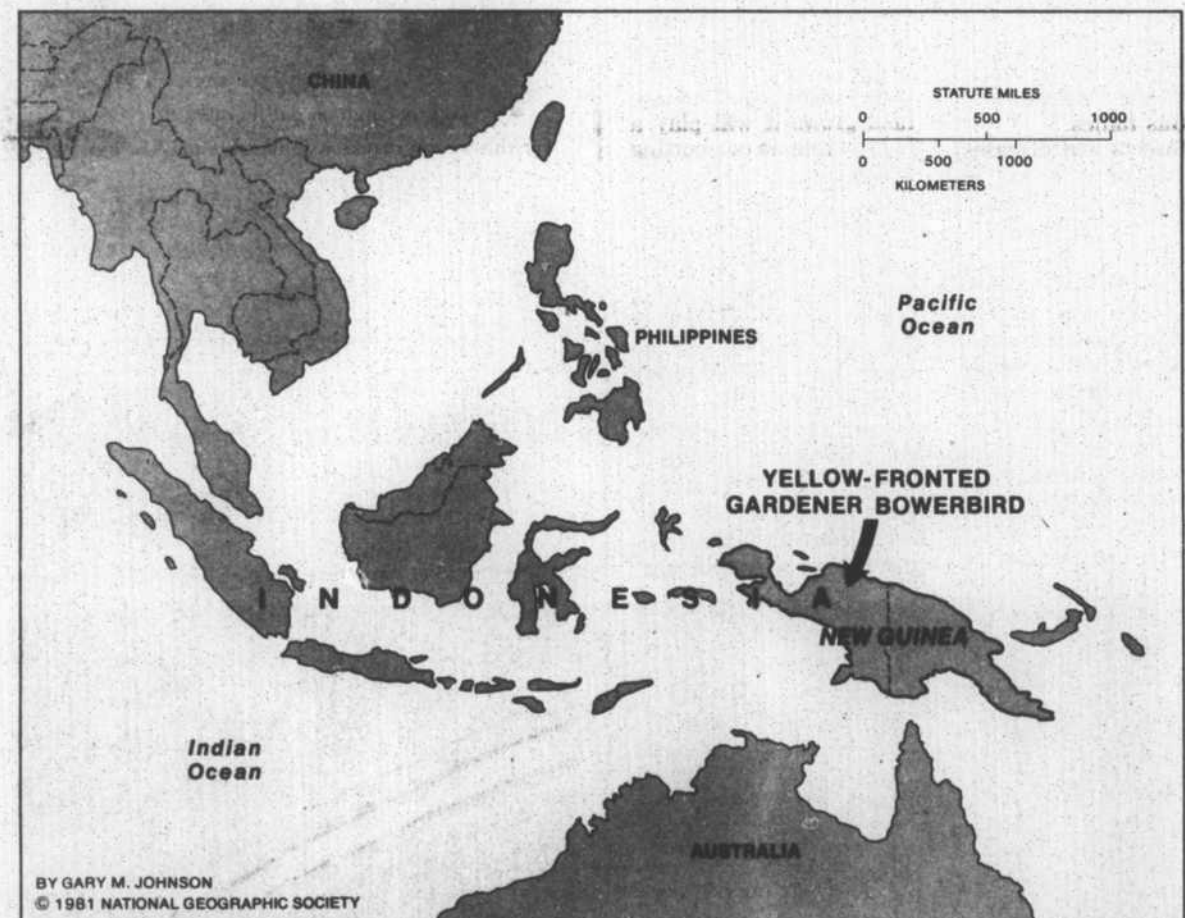
Others paint the walls with crushed plant matter, using a stick or leaf for a brush. Near populated areas, the birds have incorporated bits of civilization into the design —

clothespins, bottle caps, marbles, shotgun shells, and car keys.

To enhance their own domain, some birds also steal from their rivals' bowes and sometimes even wreck them.



Artist's sketch of the newly discovered yellow-fronted gardener bowerbird shows a close-up of the male, which resembles a robin with a golden orange crest. In the background, the bird is pictured at its maypole-style bower, decorated with three piles of fruit, each a different color. Bowes are built to court females.



By GARY M. JOHNSON © 1981 NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC SOCIETY

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