

Mallee Fowl

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MALLEE FOWL (The Mallee Fowl is a shy bird) (Scientific Name: *Leipoa ocellata*) Mallee fowl are the largest mound-building birds in Australia. They use their large feet to build a pile of dirt and sticks, which they use as a nest. They spend most of their time on the ground and are not good flyers. Although a male and female pair for life, these shy birds are mostly seen alone. What do they look like? A mallee fowl looks like a giant quail with strong feet and legs. It has a short, sharp bill and the colours and patterns of its feathers are perfect for camouflage among the dirt, sticks, leaves, sunlight and shade of its mallee habitat. Feathers along its back are black, red-brown, white, fawn and grey. Its grey chest has a black stripe down the centre, and its head has a short crest that can stand up. Size: An adult is about 60 centimetres long and weighs up to 2.5 kilograms. Call: The male has a deep, booming call to tell other birds where his territory is. The female's "crow", or call, is high pitched. During breeding season, the male and female cluck softly to one another. What do they eat? Mallee fowl are omnivores. They search on the ground for seeds, leaf buds, berries and flowers and they will also peck at beetles and cockroaches. They hardly ever drink because their dry habitat has very little water. Moisture from the seeds they eat and from morning dew is usually enough. Where do they live? Mallee fowl are only found in dry, arid scrubland, called mallee, across southern Australia to the west coast. They like areas with a lot of low bushes for protection. Pairs of mallee fowl have a territory, or home range, of 40–70 hectares, where they build four or five mounds. Nesting and caring for young : In autumn, a pair scratch a hole in the sand about 1 metre deep and 4 metres wide. With their powerful legs, they flick leaves, sticks and dirt into the hole to make a large mound. The female mallee fowl returns and begins to lay one egg every couple of days. The male stays very busy incubating the eggs. He must protect the eggs and continually check the temperature of the mound to make sure it stays between 32–34 degrees Celsius. If he gets it wrong, the eggs won't hatch. The male's built-in thermometer is his beak. By poking it into the mound he can tell the temperature. If the mound is too hot, he kicks dirt off the top. If it is too cool, he flicks extra leaves and dirt on top to warm it up. The rotting sticks and plants inside create heat. Each chick must scratch its way through about a metre of soil to get out of the mound. Exhausted, it rests for a few hours and then runs off into the scrub to begin life on its own. Predators & threats: Feral foxes are the main predator of mallee fowl, but their major threat is the loss of mallee habitat through clearing and fires. Severe drought is also a problem. What is their status? Endangered. Left: A mallee fowl hard at work. Right: A large nest mound.

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