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*Here: Raggiana bird
of paradise male
displaying to female,
Papua New Guinea*

Colourful courtship displays provide many of the world's greatest avian spectacles, but which bird gets your vote for going the extra mile? James Parry helps you decide with his selection of the most beautiful mating rituals on Earth

For all birds, the instinct to reproduce is an irresistible force and securing a mate with which to breed is arguably the single most important dimension of a bird's life. It is no surprise that birds have evolved a vast array of techniques to achieve this goal, ranging from the simplest of territorial songs through to extravagant plumage accoutrements and theatrical gatherings at communal display areas known as leks – a word derived from the Swedish leka, meaning to play. Many acts of courtship display are exaggerated or stylized versions of everyday actions such as preening or feeding, but there is serious intent behind every action. It is easy to see such behaviour as male-dominated, but in most cases it is actually the female who makes the choice on which male gets to mate or not. Either way, the processes involved constitute some of the most beautiful and engaging spectacles in the natural world.

1 AUSTRALASIA Raggiana bird-of-paradise *PARADISAEA RAGGIANA*

Birds-of-paradise have plumage so complex and remarkable that the first skins to reach Europe were dismissed as a taxidermist's hoax. Fabulously ornamental feathers are combined with intricate choreography and extraordinary sound effects to produce spectacular display routines, often difficult to observe in the depths of the rainforest. Some species, such as the Raggiana bird-of-paradise, display communally, with the males competing to occupy the best positions in a favoured 'lek tree'. They rely primarily on the shimmering plumes that grow from their back and flanks and which can take several years to reach their fullest extent. With his head bowed low and wings outstretched to accentuate the impact, a displaying male will shiver, shake and even do press ups and rotate himself upside down, quivering in a trance-like state. Displaying males can become so preoccupied with each other that they completely ignore the spectating females, who are often joined on the sidelines by younger males 'learning the right moves'.

Where: Mount Hagen, Papua New Guinea.

When: September and October are good months to view displaying birds.

Contact: Green Tours, Tel: 01298 83 563; www.greentours.co.uk

SHAKE
YOUR
TAIL
FEATHER



2 ANTARCTICA Wandering albatross *DICOMEDEA EXULANS*

With the greatest wingspan of any bird – up to 3.5 metres – this epic seafarer is the largest of the albatrosses and spends the majority of its life on the wing over the southern oceans. Birds do not reach maturity until the age of 10 or more and will only come to land when they are ready to breed. Nesting takes place on islands just outside the Antarctic Circle, on open sites that allow these vast birds to approach and land safely. Albatrosses are monogamous, usually pairing for life but only breeding every other year and returning to their nesting colonies in the early weeks of the austral summer. With birds arriving on a daily basis, the collective urge to display soon takes over. Male and female face each

other, their enormous wings partly outstretched, and perform a series of stylized movements, including bill clattering and ‘sky-pointing’, when they point their bills vertically, all with noisy vocal accompaniment. Other ritual gestures include the placing of the bill under first one wing and then the other, a form of pair bonding activity that often stimulates other pairs to join in the action.

Where: Albatross and Prion Islands, South Georgia

When: Birds are usually displaying at their nesting sites in October and November.

Contact: Birdquest Tours, Tel: 01254 826 317; www.birdquest-tours.com



3 AUSTRALASIA Superb lyrebird *MENURA NOVAEHOLLANDIAE*

A shy denizen of the forests of south-eastern Australia, this mainly ground-dwelling bird has two chief claims to fame: an astonishing talent for vocal mimicry, and a truly monumental tail. Both are used to dramatic effect in the male lyrebird’s territorial and courtship display. His tail has 16 feathers, including a series of filamentaries or thread-like plumes which, when raised, fan out and arch over his back so that he appears as if obscured by a net curtain or shower of rain. Two outer lyre-shaped feathers frame this central arrangement and give the bird its English name. If such ornate plumage were not impressive enough, it is accompanied by a remarkable

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4 ASIA

Vogelkop bowerbird

AMBLYORNIS INORNATUS

Bowerbirds excel at the construction of display arenas, their eponymous bowers, which can be so complex and sophisticated that early European travellers in the region believed they were the work of indigenous peoples. The male Vogelkop bowerbird builds one of the most ambitious presentations of all, a hut-like structure of straw and twigs which can take several months to complete and has a roof and discrete sections furnished with objects of particular types. Popular items include pieces of glass and plastic, brightly coloured leaves and petals, as well as berries and other fruits and even children's toys, strips of fabric and sweet wrappers, opportunistically collected from human settlements. The male will sit in or near his bower, hoping to entice passing females with his song and the quality and range of the treasures he has gathered. He will spend some time each day tidying up and rearranging the displays, and is not averse to stealing desirable items from the bowers of other males.

Where: Arfak Mountains, West Papua, Indonesia.

When: Throughout the year. Vogelkop bowerbirds are fairly common in the mountain forests here, but a guide is essential.

Contact: Papua Bird Club, info@papuabirdclub.com; www.papuabirdclub.com



cacophony composed mainly of skilled mimicry encompassing natural sounds as well as mechanical noises such as car alarms, camera shutters and power drills. This bewildering performance takes place around display mounds constructed by the male by scratching soil into shallow heaps. Each territory may contain ten or more such mounds, each of which will be visited daily by their maker during periods of peak display.

Where: Royal National Park, New South Wales, Australia.

When: April to September is usually best.

Contact: Sunbird Tours, Tel: 01767 262 522; <http://sunbirdtours.co.uk>



5 AFRICA Lesser flamingo *PHOENICOPTERUS MINOR*

Flamingos are highly colonial, sometimes congregating in their millions at favoured sites. Whether or not they settle to breed in any one year depends on factors such as food availability and the weather, but ritualized group displays are often a prelude to a nesting attempt. Performed by both sexes and sometimes involving hundreds of birds simultaneously, these displays are highly ritualistic and involve sequences of neck stretching, head shaking and nodding – also known as flagging – as well as so-called wing salutes, when the birds extend their wings to reveal the brightly contrasting feather patterns. Groups also engage in synchronized formation ‘dances’, marching together in a straight line for a few metres before turning abruptly and repeating the process in another direction. Such collective behaviour helps bring the wider flock into reproductive condition, as well as enabling singletons to find a mate and reaffirming the bond between existing pairs.

Where: Lake Bogoria, Kenya.

When: All year round, but flamingo numbers can fluctuate wildly from month to month depending on food supply and water levels.

Contact: Theobald Barber, Tel: 0207 723 5858; www.theobaldbarber.com



6 NORTH AMERICA Lesser Prairie-chicken *TYMPANUCHUS PALLIDICINCTUS*

One of the most evocative sounds of dawn on the American prairie is that of prairie chickens displaying on what are traditionally known as their ‘booming’ or ‘gobbling’ grounds. Two sounds are characteristic of their leks: the constant squawking and cackling made by the male birds as they scurry about, and the curious and far-carrying moan created by the inflation of their extraordinary neck sacs. These are filled with air as part of a display that also includes the flashing of ornamental yellow-orange eye combs and the erection of both an elaborate neck ruff of feathers and a fan-like tail. Males joust with one another, often leaping into the air and lashing out with their legs as they attempt to control the lek, and with it, access to the attendant females. Prairie-chicken numbers today are greatly reduced as a result of habitat loss,



disturbance and overhunting during the 20th century, but now conservation measures are helping remnant populations to recover.

Where: Near Woodward, Oklahoma, USA.

When: Late March and April. The Oklahoma Audubon Council organises trips to view Lesser and Greater Prairie-chickens at their leks.

Contact: Lek Treks, Tel: (+1) 918-809-6325; <http://lektreks.org>

7 EUROPE Great bustard *OTIS TARDA*

One of the world's heaviest landbirds, the great bustard is a bird of open undisturbed country. Each spring mature males undergo a pre-nuptial moult that sees the growth of various dramatic plumage features, including extravagant moustache plumes and elaborate tail and chest feathers. These are the centrepiece of the male's elaborate courtship display, performed competitively at leks attended by rival males and by females seeking to mate with the most effective

performer. A displaying male will erect his tail, fan it out and bend it forward over his back whilst drooping his wings almost to ground level and puffing out his chest to create an oddly spherical body shape, with his head almost buried from view. The exposure of the bright white underfeathers creates a dazzling impression, especially in bright sunlight when they are visible from several hundred metres away. Like giant mobile powder puffs, the males parade and waltz at their leks, attempting to face down rivals and entice any watching females.

Where: Kiskunság National Park, Hungary.

When: April and May. The Kiskunság steppes are home to several hundred great bustards, one of the greatest concentrations in Europe and at its most dramatic during the spring lek.

Contact: Eco Tours, Tel: (+36) 030 645 9318; www.ecotours.hu



8 NORTH AMERICA Snowy egret *EGRETTA THULA*

Egrets and other members of the heron family grow elaborate feathers in the prelude to the breeding season, but arguably none are more spectacular than those of the snowy egret. In spring both sexes sport long filigree-like plumes on their head, back and chest, with the male using these with great panache in his territorial and courtship display. After choosing a suitably visible perch, usually within an established breeding colony, he fans out his plumes and, pointing his beak skywards, pumps his body up and down. This affirms his dominance over his 'patch' and advertises his suitability for mating. The snowy egret's elegant plumes almost caused its extinction, as during the late 19th and early 20th

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BRITAIN'S BIGGEST SHOW-OFFS

The top five courting performers closer to home

**BLACK GROUSE (*Tetrao tetrix*)**

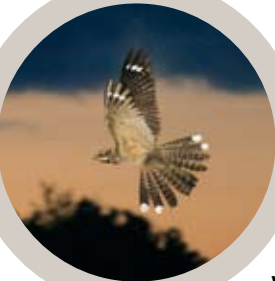
For a truly theatrical performance, it's hard to beat black grouse at their lek in April and May. The males compete fiercely with one another to hold centre stage, their red eye combs inflated and their tails fanned out, with white under-tail coverts gleaming and a remarkable bubbling vocal accompaniment.

Where: Coed Llandegla, Denbighshire
www.coedllandegla.com

**COMMON SNIPE (*Gallinago gallinago*)**

In the most dramatic spring display of any British wader, male snipe fly up and circle above their territory before plummeting towards the ground at high speed. The passage of air through the specially adapted outer feathers of their tail creates a resonant drumming sound, which can carry for up to a kilometre.

Where: Wheldrake Ings, North Yorkshire
www.ywt.org.uk

**NIGHTJAR (*Caprimulgus europaeus*)**

Head to the heaths at dusk in June for one of the great sights and sounds of high summer. The bizarre nocturnal churring of the male nightjar is actually his song, delivered from a perch before he sets off on a jerky territorial display flight, his white wing and tail patches flickering like semaphore in the gloom.

Where: Studland and Godlingston Heath, Dorset
www.naturalengland.org.uk

**FIRECREST (*Regulus ignicapillus*)**

For what it may lack in size, the diminutive firecrest certainly makes up for in personality. From early March onwards, the brightly coloured males are busy establishing territories, delivering their subtle but persistent song from choice positions and flashing their vivid crests to intimidate rivals and attract a mate.

Where: Lynford Arboretum, Norfolk
www.forestry.gov.uk

**GOLDENEYE (*Bucephala clangula*)**

From December to March male goldeneyes look their very best, using their pristine plumage and complex courtship displays to impress females. Particularly spectacular are their 'head-throwing' antics, in which they bob their head up and down and then lay it back over their wings, bill pointing skywards.

Where: RSPB Loch Garten, Highland
www.rspb.org.uk

centuries they were much in demand by the hat trade. Entire breeding colonies were destroyed, with the parent birds killed for their feathers and the young left to starve in the nest. The eventual public outcry contributed to the establishment of the Audubon Society in the USA and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds in the UK.

Where: Everglades National Park, Florida, USA.

When: March and April are the best time to see displaying birds, with several thousand birds nesting in colonies across the Everglades.

Contact: Everglades Birding, Tel: (+1) 954 319 1849; www.evergladesbirding.com

9 SOUTH AMERICA

Marvellous spatuletail

LODDIGESIA MIRABILIS

Many bird species have evolved extravagant plumage for display purposes, but the Marvellous spatuletail is undoubtedly one of the most outrageous examples of exaggerated feather modification. Found only in one small area of northern Peru, this tiny jewel uses its unique tail feathers and aerial antics to ward off rivals and attract a mate. The male's tail comprises just four feathers, the outer two of which are bare curved shafts culminating in flag-like spatules. While he is perched, the shafts sit beneath him, crossed over, but when challenged by another male or seeking to impress a female, he takes to the air and whirrs around with the shafts raised above his head, hovering in front of any potential mates whilst flicking the spatules and flashing his iridescent crest and throat feathers. It makes for a dazzling performance, and his dexterity is such that he can even manoeuvre his 'flags' independently of each other.

Where: Huembo Reserve, Amazonas, Peru.

When: All year, but usually best between November to March. Huembo is the prime location for observing this endangered species.

Contact: Naturetrek, Tel: 01962 733 051; www.naturetrek.co.uk



10 ASIA

Red-crowned crane

GRUS JAPONENSIS

Cranes are celebrated worldwide as harbingers of spring and feature prominently in traditional folklore. Their habit of usually pairing for life means that mutual bonding is an important part of crane behaviour, with their courtship dances being particularly dramatic. Some of the most extravagant are performed by the red-crowned or Japanese crane and usually commence with male and

female standing side-by-side and bugling loudly in what is termed 'unison calling'. A series of bows, head shakes and bobbing movements follows, with the birds then walking around together, their wings half-raised and their heads often turned skywards and even lain over their backs. Small jumps off the ground evolve into ever more exuberant leaps, accompanied by constant calling and frenzied wing flapping. Whole flocks can become aroused in this way, with many pairs

simultaneously dancing and calling in one of the avian world's most exciting spectacles.

Where: Kushiro Shitsugen National Park, Hokkaido, Japan.

When: Cranes are most active December to March, when excellent views are possible as they gather at winter feeding stations.

Contact: Heatherlea, Tel: 01479 821 248; www.heatherlea.co.uk **WT**



Find out more about the courtship habits of birds in James Parry's book, *The Mating Lives of Birds*, published by New Holland, priced £19.99, from all good bookshops. Visit www.newhollandpublishers.com



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