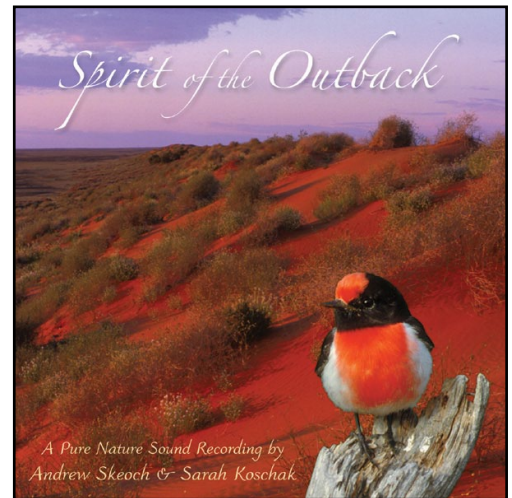


# “Spirit of the Outback”

## Listening Notes

This album on [www.listeningearth.com](http://www.listeningearth.com):  
<http://www.listeningearth.com/LE/product.php?id=1>



### Track 1: **Ormiston Gorge, Full Moon, 3 a.m.**

Our recording opens at one of the most spectacular locations in central Australia, and features the purest calls of any Australian songbird. Ormiston Gorge is a huge slash carved by the Fink River through the ancient Macdonnell Ranges, west of Alice Springs. The acoustic is like a cathedral, sounds echoing sounds off sheer rock walls and drifting up and down the gorge.



At the bottom of the chasm are permanent waterholes, with huge River Red Gums growing next to the water's edge. Crickets chirrup softly from dense grasses around the waterhole, and what may be a katydid can be heard later (4.27, 4.37, 5.40). A Sheath-tailed Bat flies quickly through the tree canopy overhead, you may just be able to hear its sharp 'chipping' (around 0.15-0.37), which may be echolocation, or possibly vocalisation. Green Tree Frogs (2.03-2.30) shelter in rock underhangs near the water, and call intermittently.

It is the small hours of the night, and the full moon casts a silvery light with deep shadows. A Pied Butcherbird is roosting in a tree opposite the waterhole. Its calls (0.40 on) are a succession of musical phrases, which are repeated and restated at intervals, forming a repertoire of over a dozen melodic fragments and variations.

In the outback, there are many bird species that call nocturnally, especially at full moon. Often, their calls are lazier and more languid than at dawn or during the daytime. Here the Ormiston Butcherbirds call intermittently, unhurried, their calls echoing up and down the gorge.

On the water float a pair of Australasian Grebes (1.52, 1.56, 2.02...and softly at 5.05), and from overhead comes the rasp of a Barn Owl as it flies up the gorge (2.43 & 3.00). Black-fronted Dotterels are often found on the edges of permanent water bodies in central Australia, and seem to have a habit of giving a song flight in the pre-dawn hours. Here a pair of them take to the wing, and you can hear them flying from one end of the waterhole to the other and back (3.24, 4.50...).

Hooded Robins are often fairly silent throughout the day, but at this time of the morning they are very definitely vocal; their calls heralding the beginning of the dawn chorus (3.33, 3.48, 4.01...).

## Track 2: **Dawn Across the Mulga**

Mulga woodlands are an extraordinarily rich environment for birdlife across central Australia. This track comprises a single recording, made on a lovely, still morning, and shows a great diversity of birdlife. It also features the songs of some of the most distinctive of the outback's birds.

The track begins with the hypnotic calls of Chiming Wedgebills (0.00 on throughout). With the first paling of the eastern horizon the whole landscape becomes animated with their delightful, rhythmic tinkling. Their songs interact, creating curious acoustic phasing effects, which you can hear on this recording, but not as strongly as in real life. Wedgebills are related to whipbirds, and like them keep furtively to dense low bushes.



Another distinctive vocal presence is that of the Crested Bellbird, which has a bell-like, repetitive call which is quite ventriloqual (throughout, best at 6.11-6.32, 7.04-7.11, 8.44-9.12). It is quite impossible to tell where the bird is actually calling from, the sound seems to come from all around. (Incidentally, they are not related to the better known Bellbirds of Eastern Australian forests).

Spiney-cheeked Honeyeaters are also common outback residents. Their dawn song is a liquid series of descending notes which can be heard in the distance here (1.03), while during the day it gives a bubbling, wheezy call (this can be heard later in track 5, or in the background here at 10.12-10.17). Variegated Fairy-wrens trill softly in the background (1.12, 1.23, 1.41...).

Another honeyeater, this time a Singing Honeyeater, calls sweetly nearby (3.03, 3.24, 9.30-37). A Crested Pigeon also calls from a nearby bush where it has been roosting, slapping its wings simultaneously (softly at 0.05, close at 10.11 & 10.17). Crested Pigeons have a very distinctive sound in flight, their wings whistling loudly as they flap (2.10-2.15). A Mulga Parrot flies in (around 3.00), settling and giving a series of sharp contact calls (3.13-38), before flying on again.

In spring, wherever there are bushes or low trees, you will probably find Rufous Songlarks. They are one of the most continuously vocal birds, calling from dawn until dusk throughout the breeding season. This is done from the top of a bush with far-carrying whip-like calls. Every minute or so, the bird takes to the air to give a spirited song-flight, climbing upwards, giving its twangy 'twitchy-tweedle' calls (throughout in background, noticeable around 3.40), before diving for another bush. They also have a rarely heard but lovely, fluid glissando whistle which makes up for all the twangy stuff! (7.00-7.04, 7.12, 7.18, 8.33, 9.25, and a beautiful down-up glide 9.50-57).

A small flock of Yellow-throated Miners fly past (3.50-4.10), and can be heard later giving contact (8.04) and territorial calls ('tew, tew', 10.33, 10.39, 10.41, 10.48).

There are several small ground feeding birds which occur commonly in the Outback. The most spectacularly coloured of them is the Crimson Chat, which can be heard giving a delicate trill (3.52, 4.16, 4.20, 4.33, 4.39...) before flying off (5.33-5.41). In some places they are very common, and there are times when the various vocalisations of Crimson Chats form an almost subliminal presence in the Outback landscape.



Another little ground-feeder is the Yellow-tailed Thornbill, with its animated rippling song (5.47, 6.50). (This is heard much better on track 5, or our 'Experience of Uluru' album). Tiny, and as spectacular as the Chats, are the Mistletoebirds, which can be heard giving contact calls and song (8.14, 8.17, 8.25, 8.27).

Pied Honeyeaters are nomadic blossom feeders, and have a distinctive 'morse code' song (4.22, 5.49, 5.53, 5.56, 6.06, 6.47), often given during a spectacular song flight, which concludes with the bird folding its wings and falling head first out of the sky, diving at the last second into a protective shrub.

In the background can be heard Galahs (in far distance around 7.30-9.30...) and Magpies (4.32, 4.49..., 6.17, 6.40, 6.58). Torresian Crows have also been calling in the distance, and now a small group of them approach (from 7.30...) and fly lazily overhead (8.00-8.15), calling on the wing (8.10, 8.12, and 9.42). Also flying past is a Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike (7.15, 7.21, 7.27..).

A Horsefield's Bronze Cuckoo is heard giving its mournful descending whistle (~9.40 gradually getting louder, to 10.46). Brown Songlarks are related to the Rufous heard earlier, and also perform songflights. They have noticeably different calls, which can be contrasted here with two Rufous Songlarks first (10.25-10.40ish), before the Brown takes wing, flying off into the distance (10.50-11.03).

### Track 3: **Wild Budgerigars**

Huge flocks of these familiar little parrots are found in good seasons throughout the outback. They alight to feed on grasses in numbers often in the hundreds, chattering incessantly (3.10...). When they take off, the roar of their wings is like the breaking of ocean waves (0.07, 0.18, 0.43, 2.41). On this recording small groups of them fly close by at head height, whizzing past like feathered torpedoes. Try listening to this recording with headphones - you will feel the reflex to duck!

In the background are Diamond Doves (0.15, 0.22, 0.26, 0.33, 0.38...), and a Grey-headed Honeyeater (2.01-04, 2.07).



### Track 4: **Spinifex Country**

Spinifex grasslands occur across large areas of the outback often on rocky slopes. There are a few species specially adapted to this apparently barren terrain, such as the Dusky Grasswren or the Spinifex Pigeon, but most of the birds on this track are more associated with the vegetated watercourses nearby.

A small family group of Dusky Grasswrens hop furtively from one clump of Spinifex to another. Grasswrens are related to the well-known Fairy-wrens, but are more likely to be found in drier country. They have a very high-frequency trill (0.05, 0.12, 0.17, 0.21, 0.28, 0.33, 0.37, 0.42, 0.46,...), which is often given from the top of a bush.

Grey-crowned Babblers are also birds which move around in family parties. Their wonderfully exuberant 'yahooing' calls (0.51, 0.57, 1.01, 1.06, 1.12, ...1.38, 1.52....2.13-2.25...) serve to keep the family group together as they move from one low bush to another. Budgerigars and Zebra Finches (0.13, 0.22, flies past 1.33) are heard in the background.



Spinifex Pigeons are very much ground-dwelling birds, and their low, resonant calls are usually heard among rocky hills (2.31, 2.40, 2.57...). They are surprisingly inconspicuous, sometimes only making very soft little contact calls (around 5.33-6.36), and often the first you become aware of them at all is when they explode into the air, their wings making a loud, characteristic, whirring sound (6.38).

White-plumed Honeyeaters have a varied repertoire, including 'chick-o-wee' territorial calls (2.25, 2.30, 2.43...), a chatter while engaged in aerial chasing (2.04-2.08), 'chip!' contact calls (6.00, 6.33, 6.47), songflights (similar call to dawn song 6.16-18), and alarm calls (6.25).

Also to be heard here are: a Western Bowerbird (in background 1.33, 2.51), a Willy Wagtail (2.47, 2.57...), the song of a Mistletoebird (3.13, 3.22), a Torresian Crow (3.22, 3.43...), a Ringneck Parrot flying overhead (3.51-4.03), a pair of Grey Butcherbirds duetting (4.07, duets 4.28 & 4.41, 5.00), a Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike (4.34, 4.40, ...5.16, 5.30), a Red-browed Pardalote (in background, then 4.52, 4.58, 5.30, 5.51...), Spiney-cheeked Honeyeaters (5.33, 6.53), and Rainbow Bee-eaters (5.20) and Brown Songlarks in the distance.

### Track 5: Red Gorges and River Gums

Giant old River Red Gums are found wherever there are watercourses in the outback. Under their spreading branches, by the banks of an often dry riverbed, is the place to hear the lovely dawn chorus of White-plumed Honeyeaters. It is one of the characteristic sounds of the inland; a sweet two-syllable 'chew chew' (0.01, 0.03, ...), heard at first light.

Spiney-cheeked Honeyeaters can also be heard, again giving their dawn calls (0.04-0.09, 0.11-0.20, 0.23-0.28,...), including their contact 'toc!' call (3.02, 3.09), and later their bubbly daytime call (7.11- 7.37). Variegated Fairy-wrens are again in the background (0.06, 0.16, 0.26, 0.36...). The rippling trills of a Yellow-rumped Thornbill come from the foliage above (1.58, 2.00, 2.04, 2.10, ...2.22...).



Owlet-nightjars are like tiny miniature owls, and are common throughout woodlands in Australia. At dawn they will often give a last call, a series of harsh rasps, before settling in to roost for the day (2.04 - 2.18).

Zebra Finches will often flock to water or feed in large numbers, and the air is filled with their plaintive little calls (3.42 ....) - its easy to hear why the aboriginal people call them 'nyii nyii's'. Budgerigars are present again, here a large flock of them move around in the distance (3.09 - 3.13, 3.41,...).

Red-backed Kingfishers are the desert kingfishers of Australia, often found far from water. They can be recognised by their penetrating piping calls, sometimes monotonously repeated (6.26, 6.40, 6.46, 7.01-7.09). They also have a range of other calls, and here, as one flies in to its nest hollow in a tree trunk (6.18), we can hear a range of them, including rasping (6.31-6.35, 6.43-6.45, 6.49...) and cackling calls (6.38). A tiny Diamond Dove, Australia's smallest member of the pigeon family, is also heard (3.23, 3.28, ...), and a pair of Ringneck Parrots chatter from a tree overhead (4.26).

The Western Bowerbird builds a beautiful avenue bower, often adorned with dried shells and green berries. Like other Australian Bowerbirds, the male is an accomplished mimic. He is most often heard giving a range of churring and rasping calls (7.36...), however here he can be heard imitating firstly a Whistling Kite (7.28, and later again 9.33) and a Brown Falcon (9.47-9.56). And there is something else. I don't know whether this is an imitation or a part of his original repertoire, but whatever it is, its an extraordinary sound; very-high frequency and likable to the sound of coins clinking (8.38, 8.40-41, 9.08). Its quite soft and brief, but see if you can catch it. I had to watch very closely at the time of recording to confirm that the Bowerbird was indeed actually making this sound!

Lastly you can hear a Variegated Fairy-wren (8.53), and another beautiful little outback Finch; the Painted Finch (soft two-syllable, 'did-ip, did-ip' call 9.41-45, 10.01), as a pair fly past.



## Track 6: **Mulga Afternoon**

It is late afternoon, and we return to the open plains of Mulga woodland country. A Pink Cockatoo flies past, giving a cry that can be heard over large distances (0.01-02, 0.08, 0.12 0.15. 0.21). Magpie-larks are well-known throughout Australia, and here they are nesting in a Ironwood tree, flying in to and from their mud-built nest. Their territorial calls are penetrating (0.17-19, 0.28-30, 0.36-40, 1.33), but they also have some lovely, and less-often heard, fluting calls (0.50-53).

Also to be heard are a tiny Weebill, Australia's smallest bird (0.08, 0.16), a single begging call from a juvenile Pied Butcherbird (0.24), and a Spiney-cheeked Honeyeater in the background (0.13-16, 0.43-50, 1.06-09, 1.18-1.22, 1.36-40, 1.51-53).

The Ground Cuckoo-shrike is somewhat rare in central Australia, but immediately recognised by the whistles and cackles of its electrifying call (0.59 - 1.37, 1.42, 1.49, 1.54, 2.03). White-winged Trillers are more common, and found wherever there are scattered trees. As well as its 'trilling' call (2.15, 2.18, 2.25, 2.29, ...), you can also hear something quite unusual; a kind of hissing, produced in this case by a female bird with its bill open (1.56, 2.42, 2.50). As well as being an extraordinary vocalisation, the sound is very quiet, almost inaudible. This raises an interesting question; if another bird couldn't hear it, then what is the purpose of this call?

There are several other calls to be enjoyed here; the evocative 'creaking' of a Torresian Crow (1.58, 2.08, 2.11...), along with its call (3.23, 3.29...), a Ringneck Parrot flying past (2.20-25) and then calling in the background, an Australian Magpie (2.56, 3.08...I love the whip at the end of this call; 3.19!), and a Grey Butcherbird (3.45-51). Brown Songlarks and Budgerigars are in the distance.

## Track 7: **Red-tailed Black Cockatoos**

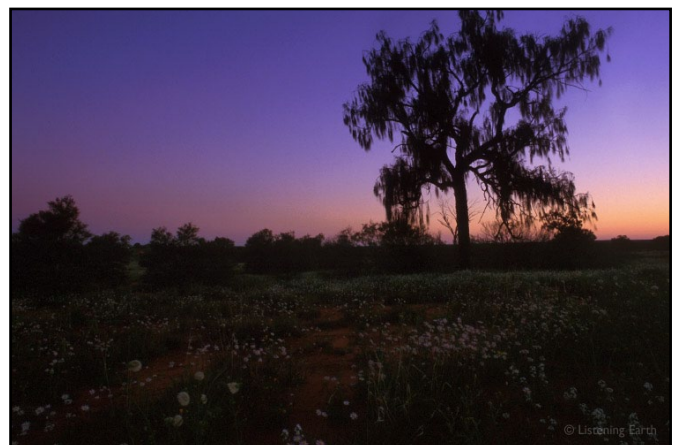
Red-tailed Black Cockatoos are sometimes encountered in flocks numbering hundreds of birds. It is a spectacular experience to have them all flying overhead, landing in nearby trees by the dozen, the air filled with their electrifying calls.

Here a pair fly directly overhead firstly, to be then followed by a large group, which wing past on their way to an evening roost. Those red tails lit up by the setting sun are a fantastic sight! You can also hear the slow wingbeats of one overhead (1.23).



## Track 8: **Desert Dusk**

Crickets and katydids create a wonderful soundscape after dusk; I think the higher frequency ones are katydids. A Willy Wagtail gives his last calls of the day (0.09, 0.34, 0.59...), before a Spotted Nightjar, the inland representative of this family of night birds, awakes for the evening hunt (2.00, 2.23, 2.52). Its interesting to hear the similarity between the call of this species, the Spotted, and the White-throated Nightjar which is common around Eastern Australia (and can be heard on our 'Morning in the Australian Bush' album); the White-throated has the same call accelerating 'whooping' call, but without the maniacal gabbling at the end. If you listen very carefully (and know what to listen for..), you may just hear the almost subliminally distant calls of a Boobook Owl (3.12, 3.16).



### Track 9: **Nightfall at the Waterhole**

With the coming of darkness, we hear something special in the Outback - frogs. They are only heard immediately after rain, or at places with permanent water. Here we are treated to a impressive chorus of Desert Tree Frogs, one of the four species of frog to be found in Central Australia.

### Track 10: **Dingoes**

Dingoes are often seen around campsites, but only rarely heard, which makes this chorus of them all the more special.

The first short call is probably from a young male (0.05-0.14), while the haunting full chorus comes from only three dingoes; one close and two others joining in from further away (0.47-1.43).



### Track 11: **Ormiston Gorge, the Following Night**

We return to Ormiston Gorge for the last track, recorded the evening after the first. Now the Pied Butcherbird is roosting in a different place, this time a few hundred metres up the gorge. We can hear other Butcherbirds even further away, calling distantly on the night air (0.04, 0.11, 0.17...).

Several Black-tailed Rock Wallabies are feeding quietly on moist vegetation near the waterhole, and every now and then, one can be heard dislodging rocks as it moves around (1.32, 1.37, 3.29, 4.02, 4.26, 5.09) - you can even hear one snorting (4.29). The pair of Australasian Grebes (2.07..., and splashing 2.39 & 3.01) are still on the water, and the Black-fronted Dotterels give a distant songflight (1.51-2.05, 3.33-3.41).

