Stephen Moss

Stephen is a television producer, writer and broadcaster specialising in British wildlife, especially birds.

He works at the BBC Natural History Unit in Bristol, where I have been responsible for many successful series, including **Birding with Bill Oddie**, **Bill Oddie Goes Wild**, **Big Cat Diary**, **The Nature of Britain** and **Springwatch**, which won the Royal Television Society award for Best Factual Entertainment Programme. I am currently making short films for **The One Show** before moving on to become the Executive Editor of **Autumnwatch**.

Stephen writes a monthly column on birdwatching for **The Guardian**, and regularly contribute to **BBC Wildlife**, **BBC Countryfile** and **Gardener's World** magazines, **Radio Four** and **Radio Five Live**.

His books include **A Bird in the Bush: a Social History of Birdwatching**, **Everything you always wanted to know about Birds**, and **This Birding Life**, a collection of my Guardian columns.

Forthcoming books include **A Sky Full of Starlings** (a year in the life of a birder), **The Bumper Book of Natu**re (a practical guide aimed at families and children) and **British Garden Birds**.

A nine-day birding blitz: Australian odyssey comes to an end

After nine days, almost 2,500km and over 200 different kinds of bird, Stephen Moss's whirlwind Australian birding journey from Melbourne to Sydney is approaching its end

Days seven to nine:

Capertee Valley, the Blue Mountains and Sydney, November 19-21

The small, brown, wren-like bird just did exactly what it is supposed to do: hopped out onto a rock, and delivered a quiet, warbling song. It's a rockwarbler – New South Wales's only endemic bird, found nowhere else in the world but these mossy sandstone canyons a couple of hours inland from Sydney.

Our local guide, Carol Probets, has taken Mike Schultz and me to see my 200th different species of bird in Australia. Forgive me if I can't remember the details of where and how I saw every single one – 200 species in just over a week is pretty mind-blowing, especially when well over 80% of these are completely new to me.

We are in the Capertee Valley, on the edge of Wollemi National Park in rural New South Wales. After a week of birding in the dry box gum forests to the west, these lush, verdant temperate rainforests come as a welcome change, even if our two days here are marked by frequent and often heavy showers.

Our first stop is a site near the town of Lithgow, where we enjoy a magical hour, during which new species just keep on coming. A satin bowerbird shows himself in his breeding finery –glossy blue-black with a beady eye. A shining bronze-cuckoo, a tiny, jewel-like version of our own species, sings from a low branch. And all around us, the flutey tones of the golden whistler, a bird as beautiful as its name suggests.

My only disappointment is that we fail to see the aptly named superb lyrebird, though compensation comes in the shape of a single, impossibly long feather which I smuggle home to show the children.

Our main quest is to see the highly endangered regent honeyeater, one of Australia's rarest and most vulnerable birds. A nomadic forest-dweller, this species depends on finding regular supplies of nectar-bearing trees within its massive home range. But extensive loss of habitat, coupled with many years of drought, has taken its toll.

We stand beneath a flowering tree, watching as the aptly named noisy friarbirds chase off any rivals to the precious nectar. A smaller bird appears and is immediately driven away; but he doesn't give up, and finally manages to land and briefly feed. The view through my binoculars confirms his identity: a handsome black and yellow bird, about the size of a thrush, with the decurved bill common to members of the honeyeater family.

Captive-bred regent honeyeaters have recently been successfully released in the Chiltern area, where I was birding only a few days ago. So far the news is good, but much more effort will be needed if this gorgeous songbird is to escape extinction.

On our way back to Sydney after an all-too-brief visit to the nearby Blue Mountains, we enjoy an unexpected sight: four massive black birds flying leisurely overhead. They are yellow-tailed black-cockatoos, the largest of Australia's dozen or so cockatoos, and surely

the most impressive. With their long wings and buoyant flight they look like something imagined by a sci-fi film-maker; while seeing one expertly dismantling a pine-cone is a truly unforgettable experience.

As has been my entire stay in Australia: a nine-day birding blitz unlike any I have ever experienced. The mixture of iconic creatures (kangaroos and koalas as well as kookaburras, emus and wild budgies) – together with so many birds I had never even heard of before, let alone seen – has been truly mind-blogging.

After a quick glance at two other Aussie icons, the harbour bridge and the opera house, I spend my final morning in the famous Sydney Botanical Gardens. Along with the noisy and colourful rainbow lorikeets, there is a huge colony of grey-headed flying foxes: hundreds of these massive fruit-bats hanging upside down from trees, with the city skyscape in the background.

It's a suitably bizarre end to what has been an extraordinary trip, to my seventh and final continent.

I would like to thank my Aussie guides, Sean Dooley, Carol Probets and Mike Schultz, for their company and expertise; and Tracey Valenzisi for organising my trip.

Days five to six:

Leeton, NSW, November 17-18

With the third Australian Birdfair finally over, I get the chance to explore rural New South Wales with Birdfair organiser and local birder Mike Schultz. Mike has lived here all his life, and has a justifiable pride in the region as one of the best birding areas in Australia.

We start at Mike's own project, Fivebough and Tuckerbil Wetlands; a wetland whose very existence is a tribute to his determination to safeguard an oasis for wildlife in this drought-ridden area. Back in the 1990s there were plans to transform Fivebough into a "recreational wetland", complete with speedboats and other watersports. This would have ruined it for the thousands of migratory birds that depend on the reedbeds, pools and food-rich mud of this very special site.

Fortunately, after a successful campaign, Fivebough was saved – and today I can see the benefits of this for myself. Thousands of glossy ibises and whiskered terns roost and feed here, along with a rich array of waterbirds including crakes, waders and the star of the show, the Australasian bittern, which we see at dusk spiralling down to its reedbed home. For Mike, creating a sanctuary for this mysterious and threatened wetland bird is a high priority, although despite his best efforts the species has not yet been proven to breed here.

This, I discover, is often the case with Australia's birds. Unlike ours, which are usually either resident or migratory, many species here are nomadic opportunists, often traveling

long distances in order to find the right places to feed – and eventually, if conditions are suitable – to breed.

This can make for exciting sights. Leaving Fivebough we come across a party of five brolgas, Australasia's endemic crane; while as we drive along one of the many dirt roads criss-crossing the area a flock of tiny birds turns out to be genuine, wild budgerigars.This inland-dwelling species doesn't always get this far south, and these are Mike's first for the year.

A shower of very welcome rain brings another surprise: amongst the birds drinking and bathing in a roadside puddle are a dozen or so crimson chats. This Outback species is rarely seen this far south and east, and although we enjoy watching the males in their splendid red finery, our pleasure is tempered by us realising that conditions must be particularly dry for the chats to have reached this part of the country. The same may be true of the hundreds of woodswallows – the most that Mike's has seen since for many years – hawking for insects as the rain begins to clear.

We also catch up with one of Australia's true icons: an emu, with a single well-grown chick, in a roadside field. Seeing us stop, the parent bird breaks into a trot, its huge feathers bouncing up and down like an ill-fitting fur coat, while the youngster rushes to catch up. Again, the presence of just a single chick (emus can have up to ten) suggests that the dozen years of drought are taking their toll, even on Australia's largest bird.

Day four:

Oolambeyan National Park, NSW, Sunday November 16

The plains-wanderer may sound like the jolly swagman out of Australia's best-known song, but it's actually one of Australia's rarest, least-known and most sought-after birds. About the size of a song thrush, and the shape of a pot-bellied quail, its nearest relatives are the South American seedsnipe, making it loosely related to our plovers, sandpipers and other kinds of wader.

To see this bizarre little bird, a group of 20 or so of us has gathered under a clear, star-filled sky in a paddock on the eastern edge of the Great Australian Plain. At 21,000 hectares in size, and with a perimeter comfortably longer than a marathon course, this is a pretty impressive paddock.

Searching for a bird this rare, after dark, in this vast, featureless grassland might seem like looking for the proverbial needle in a very large haystack, but fortunately we have expert help in the shape of ecologist David Parker and ranger Michelle Balisten. David has spent many hundreds of hours in the field studying these enigmatic birds, and both he and Michelle have a legendary reputation for being able to find them for visiting birders.

So, torches at the ready, we set off. It's a chilly night, and I am wishing I had worn something warmer, as it looks set to be a long one. Yet barely five minutes after we begin our search, one of the spotlights catches a pale, moth-like creature in its beam. Fluttering

on long, slender wings, it plummets to the ground – surely never to be seen again. The torches sweep around like anti-aircraft lights, and then I hear Michelle's warning voice: "Stephen... DON'T step forward."

As the torch beam reaches me, I see a small, brown creature crouching motionless in front of me, where my foot was about to tread. It is a male plains-wanderer, staring back at me intently. At that moment it occurs to me that although I have been watching birds for over 40 years, and seen almost 2,000 different species during that time, this truly is the most extraordinary, heart-stopping moment of my birding life.

The appreciative noises coming from the darkness around me suggest that I am not alone in feeling like this. We stand and stare like members of some minor religious sect. A few moments later, the bird flies away.

But there is more excitement to come, as another shout goes up a short distance to my right. Another plains-wanderer has been sighted, and as we approach we realise it is a female. This is significant, because like just a handful of other species, the plains-wanderer exhibits reverse sexual dimorphism. In a nutshell this means that the female takes the lead in courtship, leaving all childcare duties to the male. As a result of this unusual lifestyle, she is more brightly-coloured than her mate – though brightly-coloured is a relative term when it comes to a bird as cryptically camouflaged as this one.

This particular female is also more obliging than the male, allowing me to grab some hasty photos – mementoes of an unforgettable night. And in years to come, possibly mementoes of a lost species, for the plains-wanderer is yet another bird on the edge of survival. Drought, predation by foxes and the relentless loss of habitat mean that, like so many of the extraordinary birds I have seen during my brief trip to this incredible country, the plains-wanderer – one of the most iconic of all Australia's birds – may be on its way to extinction.

Day three:

Saturday November 15, Leeton, NSW

I'm out birding before breakfast, on a surprisingly cool morning – especially given that this time last year the temperatures hit 40C. The typical sounds around here include chirping house sparrows and singing blackbirds, but a flock of pink and grey galahs (the most common species of cockatoo) flying overhead reminds me that I am still thousands of miles from home.

The little town of Leeton isn't all that different from many other rural Australian communities – a homely main street containing the shops and cafes essential to local life; beautifully manicured lawns and sports fields; and the usual welcome signs – which around here do actually mean what they say.

But Leeton does have two significant differences from a typical Aussie country town. First, it is slap-bang in the middle of some of the best birding locations in Australia; and

second, two years ago, some far-sighted local people set up the first ever Australian birdfair here in this quiet corner of rural New South Wales – much to the chagrin of the big boys in Sydney and Melbourne.

For the past 15 years or so, I've attended the British birdfair – an event I once described as being like a cross between the Chelsea Flower Show and Glastonbury, but with more mud and less music. This event now attracts more than 20,000 visitors each year; but it started with a couple of tents in a field, much the same as its Australian cousin.

This is the third year the Aussie birdfair has been held here in Leeton, and the locals are justly proud of the event. Earlier today a man came up to me as I was out birding and introduced himself. He and a friend had driven here all the way from Queensland, a three-day journey – and as he pointed out, he was new to birding. With this sort of dedication amongst its attendees, the Leeton birdfair certainly deserves to succeed.

The theme of this year's birdfair is: Climate change: what are the birds telling us? And this couldn't be more timely, given the prolonged drought this region – and indeed much of Australia – is currently suffering. So the birds' message is very clear: they are in big trouble, as I am finding out for myself.

A couple of days ago, on my journey here from Melbourne, I caught sight of a distinctive, long-tailed, chocolate-brown bird as we drove past. Stopping and reversing, my guide Sean was delighted to discover that it was a grey-crowned babbler – his favourite of all the 860 or so Australian birds. But as we got out of the car to have a closer look, he soon realised something was wrong – instead of the sociable, noisy flock he expected, this particular babbler was alone.

It's likely that the babbler was the sole survivor of a larger family group – "one of the flying dead", as Sean eloquently described it, doomed to forage alone until the end of its life, after which another pocket of grey-crowned babblers will effectively be extinct.

The news from those attending the birdfair carried the same message: that all over Australia birds are getting scarcer and scarcer, before finally disappearing from localities where they were once common.

Dr Lynda Chambers, senior scientist with the Bureau of Meteorology based in Melbourne, is trying to do something to help save such threatened species. As she explained in one of the birdfair's lectures, we urgently need to find out what is happening to Australia's birds, and the only way to do this is to mobilise the small but growing army of Aussie birders.

Listening to her made me appreciate just how lucky we are back home, where organisations such as the British Trust for Ornithology and Woodland Trust can rely on thousands of people to carry out systematic surveys of our native birdlife. Here in a country where the annual movements of even quite common birds remain a mystery, this is a truly mammoth task.

So the organisers of the Australian birdfair deserve our thanks – for setting up an annual event which brings the country's birders together – and gives them the motivation to go back to their homes, right across this vast country, and begin to save their precious birds.

Day two:

Friday 14th November

If you want to please a birder, where do you take them? To what my Australian guide Sean Dooley calls "the happiest place on Earth" – Werribee sewage farm, a short drive west of Melbourne.

Okay, it's not the Sydney opera house or Uluru, but from a birding point of view it's up there with the very best. This is the mother of all sewage farms, the largest in the world: 30km of pools, mud and slime, simply packed with birds.

Sean is a comedy writer, lifelong birder, and author of The Big Twitch, a very funny and compelling account of his attempt to see more different kinds of bird in Australia in a single year than anyone else. It's well worth a read, even if I do now reveal that he succeeded, seeing a grand total of 703 species. As he wryly points out, it was a great way to fulfil his dream – and blow his inheritance.

Werribee is Sean's favourite birding destination, and it's rapidly becoming one of mine. It's an unexpectedly windy day, so we use the car as a hide, creeping forward a few metres at a time. But this, the wind and the jet lag all fade into insignificance in the face of the sheer wonder of the place.

The main attraction of Werribee is the migrant waders: huge flocks of birds which have nested somewhere on the Arctic tundra, then headed south and east to spend the winter here in the southern hemisphere, thousands of miles away from their summer homes.

Sharp-tailed sandpipers and red-necked stints – both extremely rare in Britain – are the most abundant species. I can also see bar-tailed godwits and curlew sandpipers, black-winged stilts and red-necked avocets, and a host of different duck species, as well as massive Australian pelicans. Later on we see two bizarre grey birds, with green beaks and red legs: a pair of Cape Barren geese, a globally endangered bird found nowhere else in the world but in this corner of Australia.

After taking our fill of the Werribee wader spectacle, we head north, towards bush country. Even as we crawl around the Melbourne ring road I notice the grass looks dry and parched – a legacy, Sean tells me, of more than a decade of below average rainfall. Already this spring has been the driest ever, and the birds are beginning to suffer.

After a couple of hours we reach the little town of Chiltern, where a few years ago Sean bought a block of land – not to build on or grow crops, but to save it for the birds. We stop, and I am immediately treated to two of Australia's most iconic wild creatures: a family group of kangaroos (of the eastern grey variety), and in the branches above, a

laughing kookaburra. There are also more small birds from families I have not only never seen but hardly ever heard of: woodswallows, honeyeaters and treecreepers (of the Australian rather than British variety, and quite unrelated to the bird I know).

Sean's passion for this landscape comes across in everything he tells me: its history (there are several mounds of earth and pits where gold was mined more than a century ago), its natural history (he patiently explains to me the complex ecology of gum trees and the species they support) – and most of all its future.

By buying this land, and by bringing visiting birders like me to see it, Sean hopes that the local community will eventually come to understand that what they often regard as just another patch of gum trees is a vital link in the natural chain, supporting species unique to this part of Australia, and found nowhere else in the world.

Day one:

Thursday November 13

The first morning on a new continent is one of the most exciting experiences in a birder's life. Especially when I've been lucky enough to have visited six of the world's seven continents before. And even more so when that continent is Australia – where more than three-quarters of the birds I am likely to see are completely new to me.

I flew into Melbourne on Wednesday night, and after a few hours of fitful sleep I am wide awake, ready for a new dawn and the birds it will bring. I'm staying just a block away from the city's botanical gardens, which according to my guide, Where to Watch Birds in World Cities, is the best place to ease myself into the local birdlife.

In fact my Aussie birdlist already stands at one – out of almost 900 species. As we drove in from the airport last night, I saw flocks of silver gulls hawking for insects over the freeway, illuminated by the city lights. This is the gull you see on TV coverage of cricket matches in Australia; not perhaps the most exciting bird with which to break my duck, but it's a start.

As I leave the motel, my second species is a brown-and-buff coloured, starling-like bird with a striking yellow patch around its eye. It's a common mynah – not an Australian bird at all, but an import from the Indian sub-continent. Unfortunately for the native birdlife, this alien invader is doing rather well.

And it's not the only one. More or less the first birds I see on entering the botanical gardens are all-too-familiar: blackbird and house sparrow. Both were brought here in the 19th century by misguided, homesick Brits – and both have prospered in the streets, parks and gardens of urban Australia. In the distance I can also hear the unmistakable, repeated phrases of a song thrush. Have I really travelled more than 10,000 miles just for this echo of home?

Then, finally, here's something truly different: a stout, handsome, black-and-white bird hopping across the carefully manicured lawn. I turn rapidly to my bible – the Birds of Australia field guide – and discover its identity: a magpie lark. Neither a magpie nor a lark, it is, like so many Australian birds, from a completely different family to anything we see back home. With this genuinely Aussie species safely under the belt, my first from what is a truly unique avifauna, I feel I have finally arrived.

The magpie lark breaks the jinx, and I start to see more birds I've never seen before, and can't at first identify. That one looks like an elongated greenfinch, and sounds like an iron bar being banged against a wall. After some difficulty, I find it in the book – a bell miner, known colloquially as the bellbird. Then there's some kind of parrot – but faced with several pages of brightly coloured species I give up, by which time it has flown away. It's easy to get frustrated, but any bird I see here is almost certainly pretty common elsewhere, so hopefully I'll catch up with it later.

When birding in an unfamiliar location, a good plan is to head towards water, so I heave a sigh of relief when I come across a large, ornamental lake. This time the birds look very similar to ours, but with subtle differences: that's a dusky moorhen, not our common variety; while this one's an Australian, not a little grebe. Black swans are of course familiar, but these are the first truly wild ones I've ever seen.

It's time to head back for breakfast. On the way I stumble across a troupe of half-a-dozen sulphur-crested cockatoos feeding on the grass: bulky, snow-white birds with a lemon-yellow headdress. I inch slowly nearer, and eventually get so close I can almost reach out and touch them. Luckily I don't – they have a reputation, I later discover, of being able to inflict a very nasty bite.

So as thoughts of bacon and eggs lure me back towards the hotel, I feel like my nine-day flying visit to this extraordinary continent has well and truly begun.

• The Australian birdfair is being held in Leeton, New South Wales, from November 14-16, 2008