

JIRRAJUK

By Tamaso Lonsdale

Jirrajuk was a young male Satin Bowerbird.

Have you ever seen a Satin Bowerbird? They are so beautiful! The adult male is the most handsome of birds with glorious shining blue plumage, almost black. His eyes are pinky-purple and his beak is a pale bone colour. The females and all the young birds (like Jirrajuk) are brownish-green and speckled, with pale blue eyes and a dark beak.

Now, Satin Bowerbirds are not only beautiful but also they are most interesting. Did you know that they build cubby-houses? These are called bowers and are made of sticks shaped into an archway and decorated all around with bits and pieces of blue things which the birds find in the bush or in gardens or parks. If you ever lose a blue toy, a pen or a pencil, it may have been stolen by a Satin Bowerbird.

Jirrajuk lived deep in the bush, beside a silvery creek. He was six years old. For a bowerbird this meant he was almost grown-up. Strange things were happening to him. He was starting to change colour! He was getting a lot of dark blue feathers, giving him a strange mottled appearance. His eyes were becoming purple and his beak paler! It all felt very weird! But soon he would be a glossy blue-black bird, just like all the grown-up males.

Jirrajuk's father had a lovely bower! It was decorated with flowers, berries and feathers; bottle-tops and pegs; pens and pencils; tooth-brushes and drinking straws; pieces of broken toys; bits of plastic and all sorts of odds and ends. Everything was blue except for some snail shells, a few yellow leaves and feathers and some pieces of onion skin which he had found in a garden compost heap.

Every day Jirrajuk's father checked over the bower and re-arranged the bits and pieces in some new way so that it always looked gorgeous. Any dead flowers were quickly tossed aside and he would fly all through the bush looking for fresh ones. Often he went into the town to houses, gardens and parks to bring back anything blue he could find.

Jirrajuk loved his father's bower but, now that he was almost grown-up, he was beginning to feel that he really wanted one of his own. Especially as his father usually chased him away from the bower, puffing out his feathers angrily and flicking his wings at Jirrajuk, all the while making horrible growling, churring noises to scare him.

So, Jirrajuk started looking for somewhere to make his own bower. He found a lovely place near a tree full of dark shiny blue berries. This would be the perfect spot.

Jirrajuk set to work. He began by piling up some small twigs and pieces of grass as the foundation. Then he tried to stand some bigger sticks and curve them inwards to form the archway. This was much harder than he had expected! The sticks kept falling over. He tried and tried, over and over again but they always fell down. Jirrajuk was almost ready to give up but then, good luck! Two of the sticks stood up. He leant other sticks against them and added more and more until he had a thick strong archway. But he knew it would not stay up for long unless it was glued together.

Searching through the bush Jirrajuk found some bits of charcoal. He brought these back to his bower and crushed them into tiny pieces with his beak. Using a stick he dribbled saliva onto the charcoal and mixed it around and around to make a paste. Then, with the stick held very carefully in his beak, he painted the paste onto the archway. It took such a long time and Jirrajuk sometimes thought that he would never get this bower built.

When he was satisfied that the archway would not blow over in the wind Jirrajuk began collecting his blue decorations. He gathered some of the shiny blue berries from under the tree and searched all through the bush for feathers and flowers. Down at the picnic ground he found some big pieces of blue paper and some bits of plastic. Under-neath a clothes-line, at a house along the road, there were two blue pegs. At the very edge of town, in the children's playground, he discovered lots of blue drinking straws.

However, Jirrajuk was having trouble! As fast as he found pretty things, other bowerbirds came along and stole them while he was away. Even his own father flew off with the two pegs!

Of course, Jirrajuk flew straight to the other bowers and stole his precious possessions back again, plus some extra pieces if he could. This got him into some terrible fights with the other birds. He lost a few of his lovely new feathers in one fight, and the other bird flew off with them. Making your own bower was not easy!

But Jirrajuk was determined to have the most beautiful bower in the bush. Every day, from early morning until almost dark he searched for more decorations and worked at arranging them in the nicest possible way.

At last it looked so lovely that Jirrajuk danced for joy, puffing out his feathers and flicking his wings. He made a lot of strange whirring, churring noises and added in little whistles and squeaks. Sometimes, he even quietly copied the songs of other birds of the bushland.

Not far away, on a low branch of a gumtree, sat a young female bowerbird watching him. It was Jirralee and she always seemed to be nearby somewhere now that Jirrajuk had his own bower. Jirrajuk performed even more, putting on such a display of movements and sounds

that Jirralee moved closer so that she could watch him better although she pretended not to be looking at him at all. Jirrajuk was not fooled. He knew she liked him.

He picked up a little blue flower and flew to the branch beside her. She glided to the ground. He hopped down in front of her and offered her the flower. She ignored it. He lay down on the ground and stretched out his wings, making a lot of very strange noises. He strutted around her, tall and straight with the flower held high in the air. Jirralee kept moving away but Jirrajuk followed her, going through his full display of noises and poses.

Suddenly, Jirralee flew off. Jirrajuk didn't worry. He knew she'd be back soon. He just went away to search for some more blue things. Day after day it was the same, but gradually Jirralee became more friendly. She accepted the little gifts of flowers and leaves and let Jirrajuk stroke her with his beak.

Then, one day, she came right into the bower and sat down in the archway. Jirrajuk was delighted. He danced and sang. He jumped up and down. He offered her his loveliest flowers. He stretched himself to his full height and strutted in front of her. He puffed out his feathers until he looked like a big round ball on the ground. He cocked his tail feathers so that they stuck up like a shaft of arrows. And all the while, he churred and whirred; whistled, squeaked and squealed; buzzed and hissed; and twittered and chattered until, finally, Jirralee allowed him to be her mate.

Jirralee built a nest in a clump of mistletoe growing on a tall gumtree quite some distance from the bower. It was a good strong nest of sticks, lined with leaves, and soon Jirralee was sitting on two creamy-coloured spotted eggs.

Jirrajuk was not very interested in the nest. He went back to his bower. He had to guard it from other bowerbirds who wanted to steal his pretty decorations.

Bio

Tamaso has been writing most of her life. She was first published at the age of nine in the Sunbeams children's section of the Sydney Sun and also read her stories on 2GB and 2SM radio stations' children's programs.

She is the author of nine teenage novelettes for 'reluctant readers', four books on Australian birds, several published short stories and poems and has self-published one book Skye's the Limit, a story about a young girl's fight to save a rainforest.

She has recently completed the third novel in trilogy form. The first book, Brothers? Uncles! Sister? Aunt! was published in 2002. The second book The Missus was published in 2010 and the third Beyond Darkness in 2012.

Also in 2012, a book of short stories Out of My Mind was published.

Tamaso has lived in Nimbin northern NSW for twenty years, during which time she has been a volunteer worker at Nimbin News Magazine and presented a Writers' Program on NIM-FM. Community radio. She now edits the literary magazine Beyond the Rainbow.

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