



## FLUTE LYREBIRDS

### Our Decade of Research 2009-2020

by Vicki Powys and Hollis Taylor

#### INTRODUCTION

Superb Lyrebirds *Menura novaehollandiae* in the New England Tablelands of New South Wales, Australia, have flute-like territorial songs. An old story claimed the song was mimicry of a flute player. Several members of the Australian Wildlife Sound Recording Group examined this story in an *AudioWings* journal article, "Fact or Folktale? The Flute Lyrebird," Vol. 2 no. 1, January 1999. Our views differed!

The subject was vast. In 2009 Australian recordists Syd Curtis, Vicki Powys, Hollis Taylor, and Carol Proberts decided to investigate the story more thoroughly. We eventually published three peer-reviewed articles - 1. history (2013), 2. mapping (2019), and 3. song analysis (2020), and we concluded that the flute story was unlikely. These papers are free to download, and links are given at the end of this article.

#### FACT OR FOLKTALE?

The flute story began in 1936 when potato farmer Martha Manns heard a flute-like lyrebird song on her farm at Allans Water, NSW. She believed the lyrebird was mimicking tunes once played on a flute by a neighbour.

Unaware of this story, park ranger Neville Fenton recorded a "chimes-type of call" in 1969, in the same

vicinity. He said it was the most beautiful lyrebird song he had ever heard but did not associate it with a musical instrument. He wondered if it was mimicry but could not find a source.

By 1970 Martha had moved to Tamborine Mountain in Queensland, but she heard about Neville's recording, and they met up. She showed Neville her old farm at Allans Water and related her story about a flute player and a captive lyrebird. Neville again recorded the flute-like songs onto his reel-to-reel recorder and gave a copy to Martha, who owned a similar recorder.

Also living at Tamborine Mountain in that era were lyrebird enthusiasts Syd Curtis and his mother Hilda. In 1971 Hilda employed Martha to paint the outside walls of their old timber house. During her lunch break one day, Martha played Neville's lyrebird tape to Hilda and Syd.

Syd was so impressed by both the song and Martha's story that he contacted Neville Fenton, who then agreed to share his recording with Norman Robinson, a lyrebird mimicry expert. In 1972 Norman interviewed both Neville Fenton and Martha Manns. By 1973 Norman went public with his conclusions in an interview on ABC Sydney radio, declaring that the lyrebirds were mimicking two tunes, Keel Row and Mosquito Dance.



## FEATURES

Meanwhile, in the early 1970s Martha was taping interviews with some of her former Allans Water neighbours to back up her story. Gordon and Thelma Pitkin, pig farmers from Hernani, agreed the lyrebird song was mimicry of a flute player, claiming that in the 1920s or 30s Gordon had seen the captive lyrebird at Allans Water in a big cage, and met the man who played the flute. Thelma added that her own mother had once raised a lyrebird chick, and it had become tame. Martha gave this taped interview to Neville Fenton.

In 1978 Neville Fenton took Syd Curtis to the Allans Water lyrebird site. Syd camped there and recorded, and again in 1981.

Also in 1978, Paul White and Neville Fenton released a commercial cassette tape, *Lyre-bird, Master Mimic and Musician*, featuring "a family of Lyre-birds whose 'own song' includes their interpretation of a flute player." The flute story was becoming known around the world.

Another lyrebird expert, Ederic Slater, disputed the story and believed the flute song to be a naturally occurring phenomenon. In 1988-91 Ed made many recordings in the New England area and recorded a flute-like song at Mt Boss, which is 100 km south of Allans Water. Ed said that if the flute story were true, the song could not have travelled that distance since 1920-30. Syd Curtis disagreed.

So, that was the conundrum to be solved. Was the story true or false? Our group of friends and colleagues gathered to make a plan.

### TEAM FLUTE

We called ourselves Team Flute - Carol Probets, Vicki Powys, Hollis Taylor, and Syd Curtis. We had a wide range of skills and were almost entirely self-funded in our research.

Carol, a professional bird guide, was familiar with Paul White's cassette, and in February 2009 by chance had heard flute lyrebird calls at Plateau Beech picnic ground. She was keen to investigate further. Vicki advised Carol and Hollis on suitable recording gear for fieldwork. Syd contributed historic recordings and fascinating background information.

We were split 50/50 on the truth of the flute story, with Carol and Vicki being sceptical, Hollis keeping an open mind, and Syd very much believing the story. We did not reckon on how hard it would be to prove or disprove the story.

We contacted our friend Ed Slater in August 2009, but only a few weeks earlier he had loaned 40-50 cassettes (digital and analogue) of his lyrebird recordings to a young PhD candidate. As it happened, we were then not able to access Ed's tapes for the next ten years. Although it appears the student neither used nor digitised Ed's tapes, the tapes were never shared with

us. Ed died in 2017 (aged 94), so the opportunity to listen to his tapes and ask him questions about them was lost to science forever.

Syd Curtis died in 2015 (aged 87), and we are grateful for his overwhelming generosity in sharing all the information that he had about the flute lyrebirds.

### DETECTIVE WORK - SEARCHING FOR PEOPLE

As part of our study, we needed to interview as many people as possible who knew anything about this flute story. Time was critical; by 2009, people with firsthand knowledge were now in their 80s and 90s. Martha Manns had died in 1994, but her younger brother Thorald was still alive and in his 80s, in a nursing home, and happy to chat. Norman Robinson had died in 1997 (aged 86), but Neville Fenton (78 in 2013) was alive and well at Coffs Harbour and generous with information and old recordings. The Pitkins had both died. The two Jones boys, Raymond and Evan, were in their 80s when we spoke to them in 2009. They both died in 2014. Betty Sawtell, yodelling champion from Dorrigo, is still alive and now in her late 90s.

### KEY WITNESSES - THE JONES

The Jones were named by Thorald Manns as the family who had lived next door, had a flute, and supposedly kept a pet lyrebird. Their evidence was crucial! We found them via standard family history methods. The Jones' homestead, said Thorald, was "a stone's throw" away from the Manns' house on an adjoining block of 253 acres.

We discovered that in 1911 Daniel Jones had settled on a 254-acre block at Allans Water. "They were real bushies," recalled Thorald. The Jones boys, Raymond and Evan, had grown up at Allans Water and the family moved away in about 1934-5, just before the Manns came to live next door. The Jones brothers told us that yes, their father Daniel Jones had played a wooden transverse flute and a recorder, for pop tunes and hymns, but none of the Jones boys played the flute, and they had never kept a pet lyrebird. For this information we had contacted Evan's son Roger who was a Melbourne librarian and oral historian, and Roger verified that the memories of his father and uncle were both accurate and truthful.

### FIELDWORK - SERIAL KILLERS AND BROKEN BONES

It was vital for us to investigate how far this flute song extended. In the winters of 2009-2014 Carol and Hollis set off intrepidly in their four-wheel-drives, mostly travelling solo on steep and muddy roads, undertaking nine road trips, covering 30,000 square km and recording at more than 100 sites. Carol made a map to progressively show lyrebird locations with coloured dots. Pink dots marked out flute songs, and it was exciting to see those pink dots extending well south of the Oxley Highway, up to 130 km from Allans Water. (Figures 1 and 2).

But there were hazards. Unbeknownst to Carol and

Hollis, serial killer Malcolm Naden lurked in the New England forests during the time of their fieldwork. Hollis usually slept in her vehicle, at the side of the road in freezing cold and often rainy conditions. Had they known that a serial killer was on the loose, would they have continued the survey? They carried neither CB radios nor emergency beacons, and often there was no mobile phone coverage. Naden was arrested near Gloucester in 2012, after eluding capture for seven years.

Additionally, while Carol was surveying lyrebirds in the Blue Mountains in 2014, she “slipped on a wet step and tumbled down a whole flight of metal stairs”, breaking her wrist. It could have been a lot worse, but she lived to tell the tale. In another lyrebird-related incident, Carol tore ligaments in her knee when she slid on a wet log and plummeted down a steep slope in the Jamison Valley, 2 July 2011, in the middle of the lyrebird breeding season. Such are the risks of lyrebird research.

There were also vehicle emergencies in the field: car breakdowns, boiling (or frozen) radiators, flat tyres, road washouts, and fallen trees blocking the road. Logging trucks were another hazard. Road closed signs were sometimes ignored. Survival skills were important for this bit of research.

A fitting finale to the fieldwork was in June 2013 when Hollis met up with Neville Fenton at Allans Water. By prior arrangement they spoke with local landowners and identified the ruins of both the Jones’ and the Manns’ old homesteads. These cleared farms were largely surrounded by forested areas where lyrebirds still sang.

#### TECH TALK

Carol and Hollis used paper maps in the field, and documented recording sites using GPS trackers. They employed Olympus LS10 digital recorders with Sennheiser ME66 and ME67 shotgun microphones either mono or as a stereo pair. They also carried laptop computers, as well as camping gear for sub-zero conditions. The GPS units were matched with Google Earth, on which progress could be plotted. Time, date, altitude, habitat, and weather conditions were also noted in the field.

In 2009 we digitised and transcribed old recordings supplied to us by Neville and Syd. Then in 2019 CSIRO granted us a loan of Ed Slater’s still uncatalogued recordings, with 19 compact cassettes arriving by registered mail, which Vicki digitised within a fortnight, before safely returning them to the archives in Canberra, along with a USB stick containing the now-digitised material. Despite some slight distortion and print-through on the original tapes some of which were over 30 years old, the quality was mostly good. Each cassette casing was scanned. Tape content was transcribed and documented. Fourteen of the tapes had been recorded at Allans Water in 1988, so were essential to our study, with another five tapes

recorded 1988-91 in other parts of the New England Tableland area. They all proved very useful for historic comparisons of songs and mimicry.

For the digitisation, Vicki used a Sony boombox Model No. CFD-V8 CD Radio Cassette-Corder powered by six D-cells (to eliminate hum), connected via headphone-out to line-in of an Olympus LS10 digital recorder (low sense, vol 7, no low cut), WAV 44.1 kHz / 24-bit, input not exceeding 6 db. The digital files were transferred from the LS10 to an iMac computer, trimmed, then saved to a hard drive and USB sticks along with cassette photos and documentation. (Figure 2:1 and 2:3).

#### FLUTE-TUNE FORENSICS

Technology was advancing hugely. When Vicki first studied lyrebird vocalisations in 1988, she sent songs on a cassette tape to Ed Slater in Canberra, who then printed out sound spectrograms using CSIRO’s Kay Sona-Graph machine. It was the only way to do the job. But by 1994 Audiograph software (invented by Ed’s son Ralph) became available for Mac home computers, which greatly expanded our birdsong study horizons.

By 2009 new audio software and graphic editing programs allowed songs and sounds to be studied in even more detail. Birdsongs could be played back at any speed. We had lightweight digital recorders, satellite imagery, and online mapping programs. Historic parish maps and family history databases were available online. The tools were there for anyone with imagination to use them creatively and scientifically. As the tools advanced, our avenues of exploration expanded. Citizen scientists were making in-roads into the previously exclusive order of paid professionals.

Scientific journals were now allowing articles with links to supplemental audio clips and other online material, rather than restricting our research to low quality black and white figures with size and space restrictions.

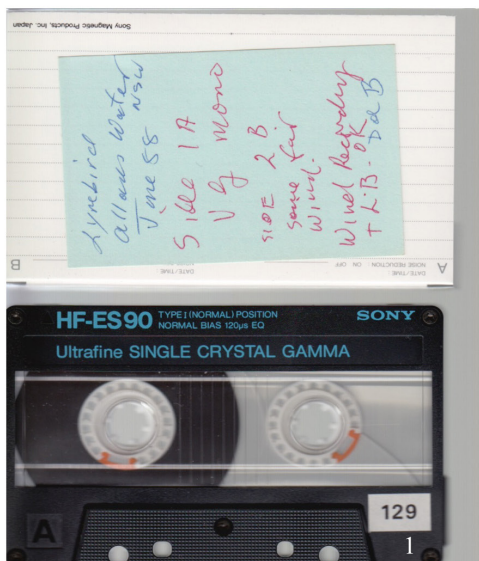
With all these possibilities, we examined the flute lyrebird vocalisations in great detail - structurally, geographically, and over time. We looked at note patterns and short motifs, and in a graphics editor we could use transparent overlays to compare recent songs with old ones, using different colours for each year. It was fun and instructive too.

To quote from our final paper, we found that territorial songs, suites of mimicry, and invitation-display calls showed regional variation but were stable over time. The territorial songs at Allans Water had not changed in 44 years, based on historic recordings from 1970-2014. Lyrebirds are weak fliers and sedentary, and our findings corresponded with what is known of Superb Lyrebirds in other areas, with calls and songs remaining relatively consistent over time. We found that the lyrebird vocal repertoire in our study area was stable, making it unlikely that a ‘new song’ was taken up quickly, as suggested by the ‘flute’ story.

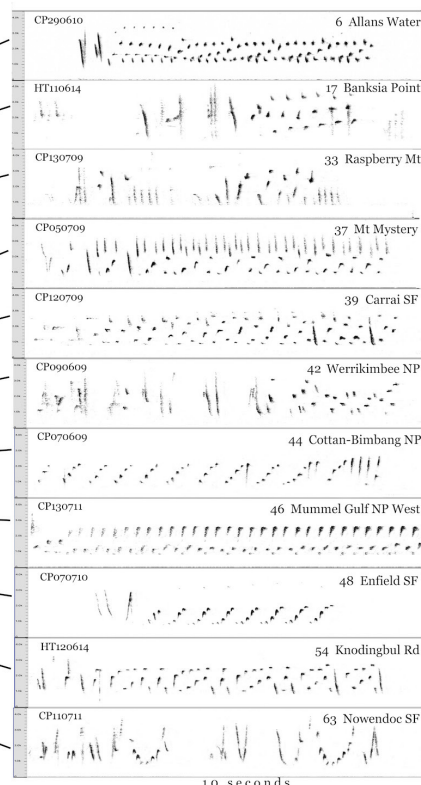
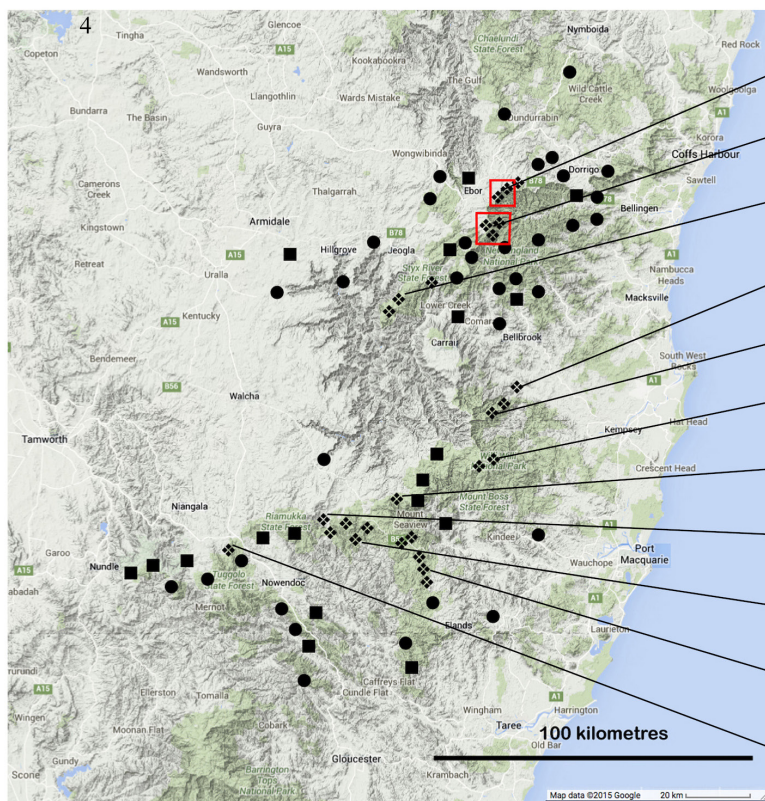


**Figure 1**

1. Carol's muddy car at Nowendoc, 2011
2. wash-out, Hastings Forest Way, Bellangry State Forest, 2013 (photo Tamara Campbell, Forestry Corp. NSW)
3. dirt road and forest, lyrebird country
4. Hollis car camping
5. Hollis stereo recording rig (2 x ME66)
6. Carol with signs, Werrikimbe National Park
7. Hollis, Neville Fenton and landholder Craig at Allans Water, 2013



**Figure 2**  
 1. one of Ed Slater's tapes, "Allans Water June 88"  
 2. Vicki, Carol and Hollis with map, 2013  
 3. digitising Ed's tapes  
 4. overview of flute dialects in the study region (spotted dots = flute; round dots = non-flute; square dots = no lyrebirds heard)





## FEATURES

### END NOTE

If you are interested in hearing and recording flute lyrebird song in the wild, the best public access is at Point Lookout in New England National Park, or for the southern populations of flute singers there is public access in national parks and on forestry roads. The Allans Water homestead location is on private property and access is difficult. It would be interesting to know what effect the devastating 2019-20 bushfires have had on lyrebird populations in our study area.

### LINKS

Powys V, Taylor H, Probets C (2013) A Little Flute Music: Mimicry, Memory, and Narrativity. *Environmental Humanities* 3: 43-70.

<https://read.dukeupress.edu/environmental-humanities/article/3/1/43/8108/A-Little-Flute-Music-Mimicry-Memory-and>

Taylor H, Powys V, Probets C (2019) The distribution of a flute-like Dialect in territorial songs of the Superb Lyrebird *Menura novaehollandiae* in the New South Wales North Coast and New England Tableland Bioregions. *Corella* 43: 1-7.

[https://absa.asn.au/corella\\_documents/the-distribution-of-a-flute-like-dialect-in-territorial-songs-of-the-superb-lyrebird-menura-novaehollandiae-in-the-new-south-wales-north-coast-and-new-england-tableland-bioregions/](https://absa.asn.au/corella_documents/the-distribution-of-a-flute-like-dialect-in-territorial-songs-of-the-superb-lyrebird-menura-novaehollandiae-in-the-new-south-wales-north-coast-and-new-england-tableland-bioregions/)

Powys V, Taylor H, Probets C (2020) A sonographic analysis of a flute-like dialect in territorial songs of the Superb Lyrebird *Menura novaehollandiae* in the New South Wales North Coast and New England Tableland Bioregions. *Corella* 44: 1-13.

[https://absa.asn.au/corella\\_documents/a-sonographic-analysis-of-a-flute-like-dialect-in-territorial-songs-of-the-superb-lyrebird-menura-novaehollandiae-in-the-new-south-wales-north-coast-and-new-england-tableland-bioregions/](https://absa.asn.au/corella_documents/a-sonographic-analysis-of-a-flute-like-dialect-in-territorial-songs-of-the-superb-lyrebird-menura-novaehollandiae-in-the-new-south-wales-north-coast-and-new-england-tableland-bioregions/)

[www.flutelyrebird.com](http://www.flutelyrebird.com)

I hope you enjoy reading about our research

Thank you

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