

# Victoria's Riflebird feeding on floral nectar

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## Abstract

Victoria's Riflebird (*Ptiloris victoriae*) is known to feed on fruits and invertebrates. On rare occasions, it has been reported feeding at flowers, but it was not clear what food was obtained from them. Here, I report observations and provide video evidence of one adult male Victoria's Riflebird clearly feeding on nectar from Blue Quandong (*Elaeocarpus grandis*) flowers.

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Victoria's Riflebird (*Ptiloris victoriae*) is a medium-sized rainforest passerine endemic to the Wet Tropics bioregion of Queensland, Australia and belongs to the bird of paradise family (Paradisaeidae). Three species of *Ptiloris* are found in Australia and one or two in New Guinea (Frith & Beehler 1998; Beehler & Pratt 2016). Victoria's Riflebird feeds on fruits and invertebrates, with ratios of consumption of these varying throughout the year (Frith 1984; Frith & Frith 1995, 1998, 2005; Frith & Beehler 1998; Grant & Litchfield 2003). The species has been observed feeding at flowers – 2 of 65 foraging observations - by D.W. Frith (1984), but it is not clear whether they were feeding on nectar or obtaining insects. It was also "once observed feeding at flowers of the cauliferous *Syzygium cormiflorum*" (Keller & Keller in Frith & Beehler 1998: 336) without providing any information about what the bird was consuming. Victoria's Riflebird has also been recorded feeding at cuts made by Yellow-bellied Gliders (*Petaurus australis*) in Red Stringybark/Red Mahogany (*Eucalyptus resinifera*) bark, but it is not clear if the bird was feeding on sap (a carbohydrate-rich food source similar in that respect to nectar), or on insects coming to the sap (Chapman *et al.* 1999). The Magnificent Riflebird (*Ptiloris magnificus*) has also been recorded feeding at blossoms but again it is not indicated whether the birds were obtaining insects or nectar from them (Forshaw & Muller 1978).

Here, I report an observation of Victoria's Riflebird feeding on nectar from Blue Quandong (*Elaeocarpus grandis*, also known as *E. angustifolius*) flowers in Crater Lakes National Park (Lake Barrine section) in Queensland (17.2454 S, 145.6393 E). Observations were made using binoculars and filmed using a DSLR camera with a 150-600 mm zoom lens. The bird didn't appear to be disturbed by my presence or by other visitors walking past.

On 21 January 2019 at 6.05 pm, I found one adult male Victoria's Riflebird probing flowers of Blue Quandong with its bill (Fig. 1). The flowers were on a branch about 5-6 m above the ground. The behaviour was very much like that of a honeyeater, but with a lower probing frequency. The bird clearly drank the nectar of several flowers, sometimes swallowing while with his bill in a flower, but also sometimes after having withdrawn his bill from a flower, and repeating the same for several flowers of the same inflorescence before then moving to another inflorescence (video: <https://vimeo.com/313608480>). I was at the site from 5.25 pm until 6.35 pm. During this time, the observed male Victoria's Riflebird was the only individual of the species frequenting the Blue Quandong flowers. The bird fed at flowers in the tree for about 10 minutes; from 6.05 pm until 6.15 pm.

On 22 January I revisited the site and watched the same tree and two other flowering Blue Quandong



**Figure 1. Adult male Victoria's Riflebird with bill in flower of Blue Quandong (*Elaeocarpus grandis*).**  
Photo: Patrick De Geest.

about 20 m and 30 m away from the original tree. Observations were made between 5.10 pm and 6.40 pm. No Victoria's Riflebirds were seen to frequent the Blue Quandong trees during these observations. However, it was impossible to be absolutely sure that no birds were coming to the Blue Quandongs, as some branches with flowers were out of view. Two other riflebirds (an adult and immature both in female plumage) were seen feeding on the fruits of a neighbouring Pink Ash (*Alphitonia petriei*) (Fig. 2).

Other birds seen feeding at Blue Quandong flowers on both days were: Scarlet Honeyeater (*Myzomela sanguinolenta*), Dusky Myzomela (*Myzomela obscura*), Lewin's Honeyeater (*Meliphaga lewinii*) and Macleays Honeyeater (*Xanthotis macleayanus*), indicating that the Blue Quandong was a significant source of floral nectar. These species were all seen feeding high up in the tree, in contrast to the male Victoria's Riflebird, and on one occasion a Macleay's Honeyeater.

In the week preceding these observations, I had visited the site multiple times to observe Victoria's

Riflebirds feeding on fruits of Pink Ash. Up to five birds at a time – males and female-plumaged birds – were seen feeding in the same Pink Ash during these visits. This Pink Ash specimen is right next to the Blue Quandong the adult male Victoria's Riflebird was subsequently found feeding in. About 20 m away from the Blue Quandong, Laurel-leaved Hypserpa (*Hypserpa laurina*) was also fruiting and its fruits were consumed by several Victoria's Riflebirds and by a Tooth-billed Bowerbird (*Scenopoeetes dentirostris*). I conclude that there was no shortage of one of the Riflebird's main food sources, fruit, and that nectar might occasionally be a useful addition to its diet.

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**Figure 2. Female-plumaged Victoria's Riflebird feeding on Pink Ash (*Alphitonia petriei*) fruit.**

Photo: Patrick De Geest.

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