

William T. Cooper

A Bird Artist in "Eden"

by Rae V. Anderson
Sierra Madre, California

When I returned to my home in the Los Angeles area with smog, congestion and concrete from a visit to the Atherton Tableland of northern Queensland, Australia, I felt a richer man. This was partially, of course, the result of the exhilaration experienced from being in close proximity with the magnificent rainforest birds, mammals, insects and plants with their myriad of shapes, sizes, colors, displays, scents, defenses (yes, defenses — the stiletto-like inner claw of the spectacular cassowary, the venom spurs of the male platypus, the razor sharp claws and big teeth of the "loveable, cuddly" Koala, the toxins of some *Lepidoptera* and caterpillars, the spines and toxins of many plants, their fruits and seeds), etc. But especially enriching was my opportunity to spend some, but much too little, time at the home of a very special couple, Mr. and Mrs. William T. Cooper.

Bill Cooper, as no ornithologist or aviculturist needs be told, is one of Australia's finest painters or illustrators of birds and no doubt the world's foremost painter of parrots and hornbills. Bill's earlier paintings were principally traditional land and seascapes. He then, in collaboration with the late Keith Hindwood, illustrated *A Portfolio of Australian Birds* (Charles E. Tuttle Company - 1968). After that, Bill teamed with the noted Australian ornithologist Joseph M. Forshaw, to illustrate *Parrots of the World* (Lansdowne Editions - 1973). This, the finest parrot book of this century, is now in its third and final edition. Following this was *Birds of Paradise and Bowerbirds* (William Collins Publishers - 1977), a magnificent volume on these spectacular bird groups which resulted largely from Bill's extensive field studies in New Guinea. Then came *Australian Parrots*, 2nd edition (Lansdowne Editions - 1981), for which Bill created all new paintings, choosing not to use any that had illustrated *Parrots of the World*. The last joint venture by this author-artist

team is the tremendous three part, six volume series, *Kingfishers and Related Birds* (Lansdowne Editions - 1983 -). Part 2, Volume II of this series will probably be released about the time this essay appears and Bill Cooper is now completing the paintings which will illustrate the two volumes of Part 3 (the hornbills). It has been announced that this will be the last joint undertaking by the Forshaw-Cooper team, a very sad note for the ornithological community.

Bill's meticulous attention to detail and scientific accuracy together with his vast technical knowledge of the birds and ability with the brush results in true ornithological masterpieces. His paintings are found in private collections throughout the world. The ultimate recognition of the artistic merits of Bill's work was bestowed upon him when the Australian government purchased, for inclusion in their National Gallery, all of the original paintings for *Parrots of the World*, 1st edition, and the Papua New Guinea government did the same thing for all of the *Birds of Paradise and Bowerbirds* originals!

In the recent book *Masterpieces of Bird Art — 700 Years of Ornithological Illustration*, author Roger F. Pasquier states of Bill Cooper "The foremost practitioner today (of the Gouldian style) is William T. Cooper", and "Cooper, an Australian, is the most accomplished living painter working in the Gouldian style". The Gouldian style is simply the style for which Bill Cooper is best known. This is the style which predominates the hundreds of watercolor, acrylic and gouache illustrations in his numerous books. In addition to the Gouldian style, however, Bill does large, very spectacular, full background habitat scenes in oils and alkyds on canvas. Some of the more recent examples of these are: Victoria Riflebirds; Hyacinth Macaws (which was published as a limited edition, reduced size print - the original being 48 inches x 36 inches); Palm Cockatoos; Great Indian Horn-

bills, etc.

Additional styles in which Bill Cooper paints are brush and ink wash as those published in *Australian Parrots*, 2nd edition, limited issue; field paintings for reference use when doing final illustrations; and "handbook" style illustrations. All considered, Bill has a wide, varied and pleasing style repertoire.

Wendy Cooper, Bill's lovely and gracious wife, is not only an avid bird enthusiast but also a blossoming botanist as well as seemingly being interested in everything related to the rainforest. Wendy is a rare woman indeed. In addition to her love of all things of the rainforest she does not hesitate to get her feet wet nor does she recoil at the presence of the leeches in spite of some very traumatic personal experiences with them.

These two people reinforce and complement each other's interests beautifully (in addition, Wendy is a good cook). This, dear readers is a very difficult-to-beat arrangement.

The Coopers' friendly and very comfortable home, located well in the Australian bush, completely hidden from all passing casual viewers, is within their own 160 acre block of primal rainforest. This is immediately adjacent to a large World Heritage area so their property and the surrounding rainforest are now well protected. The Coopers have so far identified 80 species of the native rainforest trees which are visible from the immediate area of their house. There are many more. These are only the ones they have so far been able to identify!

Imagine if you will, against a background of rainforest, a garden landscaped with native *Platycerium*s (staghorn ferns) and lovely wild orchid species through which wander cassowaries and wallabies and decorated with honeyeaters, riflebirds and spectacular butterflies. It has become necessary to fence their garden (unobtrusively just inside the natural rainforest from the area cleared for the house and garden) in order to prevent the wallabies from eating all of the landscaping in the cleared area, including the lawn, down to bare red earth. The wallabies seem to prefer the landscape plants and open area of the garden over the countless plant species in the dense forest in which they live. It seems the old adage "things always look better on the other side of the

fence" even applies to the wallabies.

Stepping out of the house and into the rainforest (be sure to close the gate so the wallabies won't get in) we are immediately into dense forest of tall trees with their magnificent buttress bases, rare (at least in the U.S.A.) palms including various *Linospadix* species, *Calamus australis* and *Calamus moti* (vigorous, climbing or vining palms with trunks the diameter of my finger, covered with extremely sharp spines and "flagella" two or three meters long, armed with sharp, recurved hooks hanging down and always ready to snag any part of the unwary intruder including eyes), the attractive feather leafed palm *Orania appendiculata*, tree ferns, the very interesting and uncyad-looking cycad *Bowenea spectabilis*, which is almost a weed pest in the Coopers' garden, it's subterranean stems pushing leaves up between the paving bricks of the walkways as well as in the lawn, flower bed, etc. Also there is the Strangler-fig *Ficus crassipes*, or Banana-fig, so called because of the shape of its fruit. This large tree begins when a bird deposits the seed high in the branches of a tree. The seedling sends down very long roots to reach the ground. As the plant grows, more roots are sent down until they form a network which bond together, eventually strangling the *host* tree. This fig tree then becomes huge and ultimately shows little evidence that it ever grew on a host. Then there are the myriad of lianas and other plants which I find interesting but cannot identify. The flagella of the *Calamus* palms together with the leeches require us intruders to remain ever alert when in their domain.

Our attention is quickly diverted by the loud, harsh scolding of Sulphur-crested Cockatoos *Coccyu z. galerita*, objecting to being disturbed from their feeding. We get no more than glimpses of them as they fly away above the forest canopy. Bill picks up from the forest floor, pieces of the seeds and pods on which they were feeding, to be taken back to the house for identification, recording and sketching, thus adding to his already large but ever growing file of research material.

Further down the track Bill points out the partially constructed bower of a Golden Bowerbird *Prionodura newtoniana*. While we are observing this marvel of avian construction Bill

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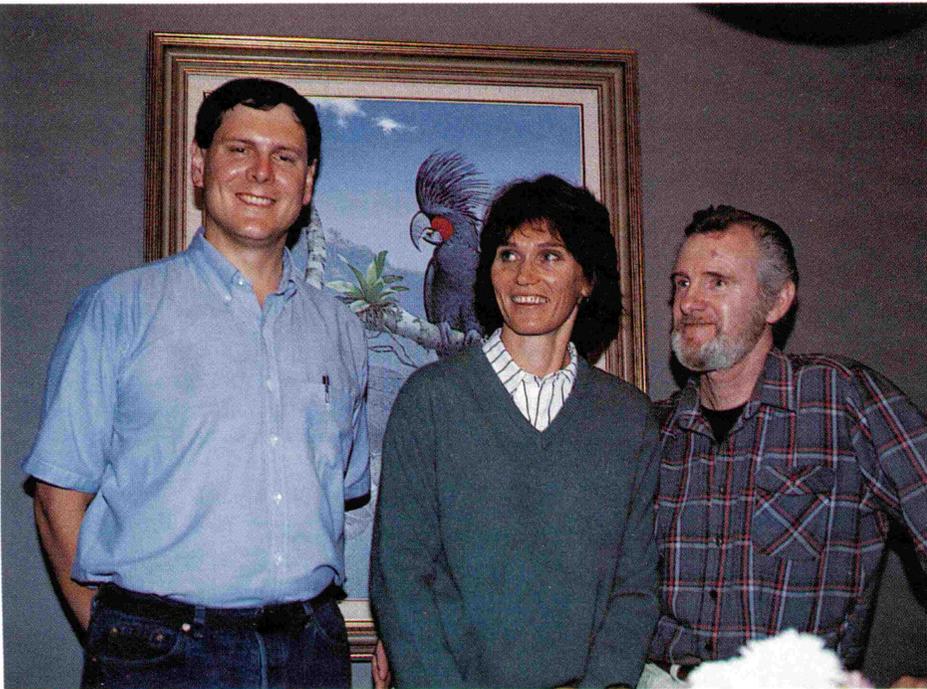
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Bill and Wendy Cooper and author's son Eric with 1990 habitat painting of Palm Cockatoos. Photograph taken in dining room of the Coopers' home.



Bill Cooper's 1990 habitat painting of Palm Cockatoos (*Probosciger aterrimus aterrimus*) on the wall of the Coopers' dining room.

attempts to "call" the bird in to us. The bird, however, while answering Bill's calls refuses to venture close enough to view. Somewhat deeper into his property is a stream with several waterfalls and pools in which Platypuses *Ornithorhynchus anatinus*, can be observed feeding and playing. These squirrel size creatures are probably the world's most anomalous mammal with their soft

underfur similar to that of an otter, beaver-like tail, webbed feet, duck-like bill, venom spurs on the rear legs of the males, egg laying and milk producing glands for feeding their hatchlings. These are one of the world's three genera of *Monotremes*, mammals having only one external body opening or cloaca, as in birds and reptiles, into which the intestine, urator and genital canals all open.

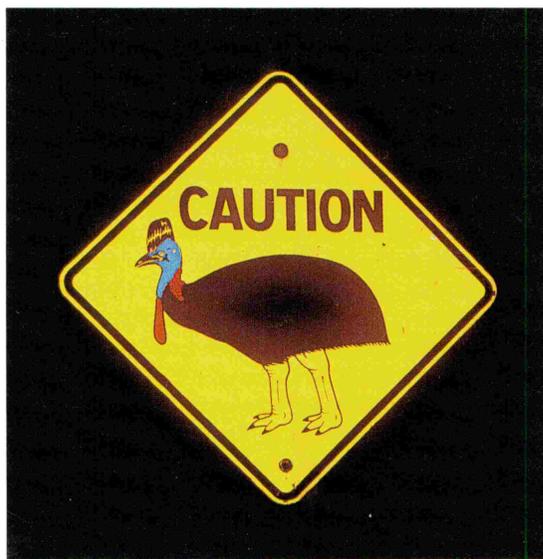
We are hoping to be fortunate enough to see a cassowary *Casuarius casuarius*, in the wild here. These big ratites, dwellers of the rainforest, with their dagger like inner claws are very shy though potentially dangerous and in spite of their large size seem to have no difficulty keeping out of view of us who are intruding into their domain. Evidence of their presence is found in the track on our return to the house. A fresh pile of feces the size of a "cow pie", still warm (determined by sticking my finger into it - some basic scatology, a few people will no longer shake hands with me) and full of large seeds the size of English walnuts and golf balls. These birds apparently swallow the large seeds for the benefit of the pericarp surrounding the seed and the seeds themselves pass right on through. Bill stated that sometimes the digestive process does not even remove the pericarp from certain of the seeds which causes one to wonder why the bird bothers to eat it in the first place? This process however seems to benefit the seed in a manner similar to that of the acacia seeds which germinate better after having passed through the digestive tracts of elephants and other large herbivores. In older piles of cassowary feces many of the seeds show signs of sprouting.

These large, spectacular birds with their hair-like feathers, boney cask on their heads and brilliantly colored bare skin on face and neck, pose little threat to humans unless cornered or, as in the Mission Beach area of coastal Queensland where they are fed by residents and tourists, they lose their fear of humans.

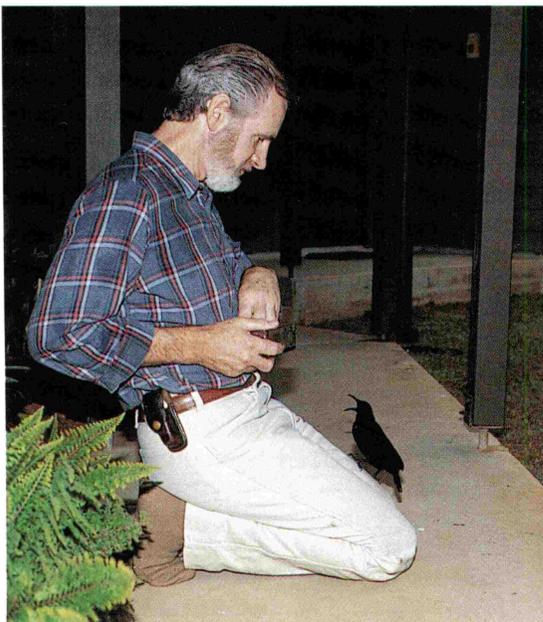
Through all of this you try to continually be aware of leeches (Bill informed us "they are only a problem when the weather is wet", which I understand is most of the time). They drop on you from above and crawl up from the leaf duff on the forest floor. They seemingly sense the carbon dioxide or something emitted by our bodies. They are rather unappealing (to most of us) creatures but are as much a part of the rainforest as are the plants and birds. They secrete an anesthetic so you don't feel their bite and an anticoagulant to facilitate their feeding. Their anticoagulant is being studied for potential beneficial use in some forms of human cardiovascular disorders. Just one more example of the rainforest's importance. Sometimes



Older pile of Cassowary (*Casuaris casurius*) feces with seeds beginning to sprout on the Coopers' property.



Cassowary crossing hazard road sign, Mission Beach area, Queensland.



Bill Cooper with wild Victoria Riflebird (*Ptiloris victorise*) male, taking handout of mealworms in the Coopers' garden.

the only reason you know you have been bitten by a leech is the discovery of a large spot of blood on your clothing. Because of their anti-coagulant, you continue to bleed for a while after the leech detaches from you.

The area of the Tableland where the Coopers located their home receives an average of 406 centimeters (160 inches) of rain per year. The Coopers commented that the heaviest rainfall they are aware of at their location was 30 inches (76 centimeters) per day for four successive days in 1967! Ten feet of water falling

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in four days! That, ladies and gentlemen is something I am not able to comprehend. It would cause me to question if the "ark" would be able to reach us before we sink! Needless to say, it caused a great deal of damage.

Because of the extreme and continuous humidity and high temperature, considerable care must be exercised in the selection of building materials. Conventional woods, if used externally, would deteriorate very rapidly. Consequently the Coopers' home is built on a concrete slab with exterior siding made of hard wood fibers compressed with a binder which creates a moisture barrier and resists decay. Their floors are covered with beautiful green slate which adds a great deal of cooling comfort to bare or stockinged feet. The house exterior, as you might expect of the naturalist, ecologist and artist that Bill is, is of a mottled green that almost disappears into the surrounding forest. Their water supply is rain run off from their roof captured in a pair of large cisterns with a storage capacity of 22,000 gallons. I doubt that the rain on the Tableland ever permits the water level in these tanks to drop a foot. I have been jokingly told that on the Tableland three days without rain is a drought. I wanted to look inside these cisterns with the expectation of seeing what creatures were sharing them. I had expected to find the giant green tree frogs, various aquatic insects, etc., and if lucky some other fun surprises but I chose not to ask for fear of causing our hosts possible embarrassment. Bill however, dashed this idea when he told me "they are completely sealed against unwanted intruders with the inlet meshed with a very fine metal gauze such that not even a mosquito can get in."

Stepping inside the house, our attention is immediately drawn to Bill's 1990, large habitat (full background) painting (Bill paints one of these a year in addition to the illustrations for the books) of a pair of Palm Cockatoos *Proboscigar aterrimus aterrimus*, an absolutely spectacular piece, right down to the green beetle on a leaf. The image of this painting is four feet by three feet with the birds life size. This piece is painted in alkyd

on Belgian linen canvas.

In his large, light and airy studio, Bill had a couple of large hornbill paintings in progress. With one of these were some small, very preliminary water color sketches which were particularly interesting to me because they showed some of the evolution of his composition. He honored us with a preview of the originals which he has completed (the hornbills) to illustrate Part 3, Volumes I and II of *Kingfishers and Related Birds*. Bill's ability to produce technically and scientifically accurate paintings of these birds virtually guarantees this third part to be the crowning glory of this magnificent *Kingfishers* series.

During our discussion of his resident cassowaries, Bill mentioned that he is going to paint a cassowary life size in habitat. That will be a huge and very spectacular painting. I commented to him that I would expect a very limited market for such a large piece because few people (at least of the class I am familiar with) have any place in their homes large enough to accommodate it. Institutions are a distinct possibility of course but finances appear to be generally in short supply with them in the world's current economic conditions. Bill's response was that of a truly dedicated and motivated artist: irrespective of possible difficulties of placement "I am going to paint it because I want to." That is the attitude of a true winner.

Bill has recently informed me that "we came across a large cassowary with a chick by one of the creeks in our rainforest. After an initial burst of fright the birds settled down and permitted us to observe them from a distance of about twenty paces." I have trouble imagining a more perfect combination for the big cassowary painting. I am already anxious to see the end result of a project which has not yet even been started except in Bill's mind.

Rather continually at the feeder tray in the Coopers' garden is a parade of various interesting rainforest birds. The beautiful Yellow-breasted Sunbirds *Nectarinia jugularis*, nest and rear their young in the protection of a covered walkway

which runs between buildings. There are two male riflebirds which alight on Bill's knees or hands and take mealworms from his fingers. This is a beautiful sight to behold. Also adding even more beauty, if possible, to this "Eden" are the large Cairns Birdwing Butterflies *Ornithoptera priamus euphorion*, whose larvae feed on the *Aristolochia tagala* which vines in the garden as well as in the forest. This is a beautiful, large green and black butterfly (the male), a female of which emerged from its chrysalis the morning of our visit. As if this isn't enough there are also the Blue Ulysses Swallowtails *Papilio ulysses joesa*, possibly when flying, the world's most beautiful butterfly. The Ulysses, the size of the North American Tiger Swallowtail *Papilio glaucus*, is an electric blue on black. This butterfly, being a tasty morsel to some bird species, rarely seems to stop moving. It does not appear to alight for more than a fraction of a second even when depositing eggs or feeding, and even then its wings do not stop fluttering. This makes it a rather difficult photographic subject. The larvae of this flying jewel feed on the *Euodia* or *Melicope bonwickii, elleryana* and *vittiflora* in this area of Australia.

In the Coopers' rainforest there is also the lovely fig parrot *Cyclopsitta diophthalma macleayana*. Though I strongly suspect we were in the near proximity of these beautiful little birds, they are very difficult to spot in the high foliage and we were not successful in doing so.

At dusk Bill and Wendy take us to a large crater-swamp where each evening about 1500 Brolga *Grus rubicunda*, and Sarus *Grus antigone* Cranes fly in to roost. As they fly over the lip of the crater they perform their beautiful aerial ballet. This is certainly one of the world's most spectacular ornithological wonders. Unfortunately, the weather is not very cooperative with the clouds (fog) sitting right on us. We are however still able to hear the cranes as they approach and with that warning, see them in silhouette as they pass overhead.

After dark there is always spotlighting for nocturnal mammals of

the forest. The various cute Australian possums, very unlike the "giant rat" looking American Opossum, and if lucky a Lumholtz's Tree Kangaroo *Dendrolagus lumholtzi*, and possibly even the beautiful Amethystine Python *Liasis amethystinus*.

Bill Cooper has been painting, in their various stages of development, the many fruits, pods and seeds of the Queensland rainforest. He has a very significant portfolio of these completed now and Wendy is writing the text for the book, *Fruits of the Rainforest*. This husband and wife team effort is expected to produce an important publication which will fill a present botanic void.

On the Atherton Tableland, most of the rainforest has been cleared for farm and dairy use. In the cleared areas beside the roads and along fence rows large quantities of *Lantana (Lantana camara)*, a West Indian introduction, has naturalized. Bill says that because of its high requirement for sun it cannot encroach on the rainforest and it provides a very popular and continuous food source for the adult butterflies. It therefore serves a beneficial purpose with few apparent negative effects.

Bill has experienced some rather harrowing if interesting adventures during his field studies of the birds he paints, both in New Guinea with sometimes less than hospitable locals while observing birds of paradise and in India while "chasing" hornbills. One spine chilling, adrenaline flowing incident, which took place in India while sitting on the back end of an American wartime open jeep observing those birds, occurred when an adult Bengal Tiger appeared at a distance of about five meters. Bill commented that while his options were racing through his mind his better judgement told him to sit still and hope for the best. After a few very long seconds of watching each other at hair-raisingly close range, the big cat turned and disappeared into the undergrowth. Definitely not an adventure for the "faint-of-heart". A large painting of a Bengal Tiger with a Chital Deer kill now hangs in the living room - a birthday gift to Wendy.

The Coopers are extremely busy



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people, fortunately doing what they love to do. In addition to finishing the illustrations for the hornbills volumes of *Kingfishers and Related Birds* and *Fruits of the Rainforest* for which he has so far completed the illustrations of 440 species (he and Wendy plan to publish 550 to 600 species), Bill is also in the process of painting a series of rainforest birds, mammals, reptiles, insects, fish and plants to illustrate an anecdotal or diary type story of the rainforest. This latter book is being authored by Stan Breeden, a friend of the Coopers and is not intended to be a serious academic work.

In the rainforest it would be easy to convince one's self you are in heaven were it not for a few earthly inconveniences such as the high humidity and heat, mud, leeches and biting insects and the Calamus "flagella" which continually try to snag all parts of the anatomy of the intruders as you make your way through the lianas. These remind you that your feet are still on the ground.

Postscript

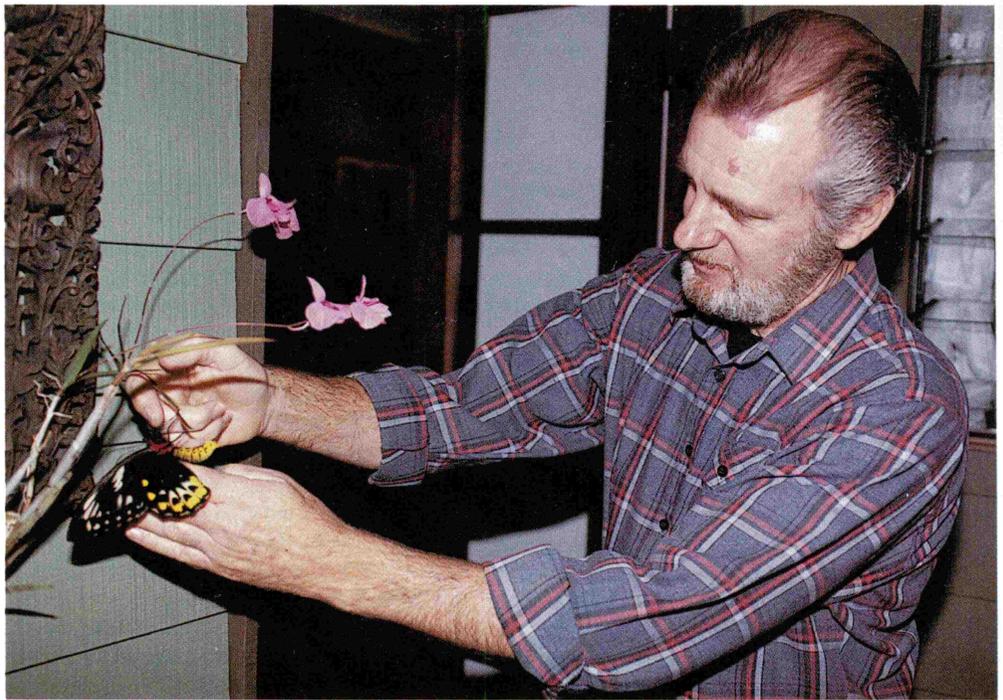
The following are excerpts from a recent news release by the Philadelphia Academy of Natural Sciences.

William T. Cooper of Queensland has been selected by the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia to receive that institution's Gold Medal for Distinction in Natural History Art. The presentation was made by the Academy's president, Dr. Keith S. Thomson in Cairns on Saturday, June 20 (1992).

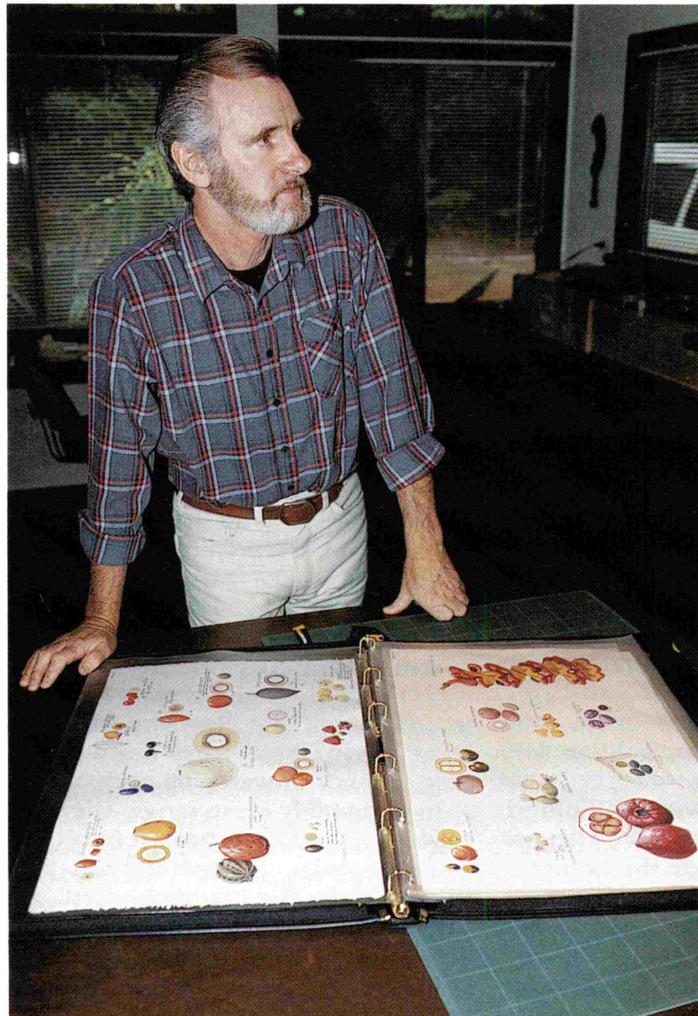
Mr. Cooper is a painter of many natural history subjects, but it is his extraordinary paintings of birds for which he has been singled out for the Academy's award.

The Academy of Natural Sciences, founded in 1812, is the oldest natural history institution in the Western Hemisphere. Among its early members were Charles Darwin, John James Audubon, and John Gould (whose collection of Australian Birds is housed in the Academy's Ornithology Department).

The Academy's Gold Medal is awarded periodically to artists "whose artistic endeavors and life's work have contributed to mankind's better understanding and appreciation of living things". Previous recipients of the medal have included photographers Ansel Adams and Eliot Porter, painters Roger Tory Peterson and Sir Peter Scott, and writer Peter



Bill Cooper with newly emerged Cairns Birdwing butterfly (*Ornithoptera priamus euphorion*) female in the Coopers' garden.



Photos by Rae V. Anderson

Bill Cooper in his studio showing "field study" paintings made for reference use when painting the "Fruits of the Rainforest" illustrations.

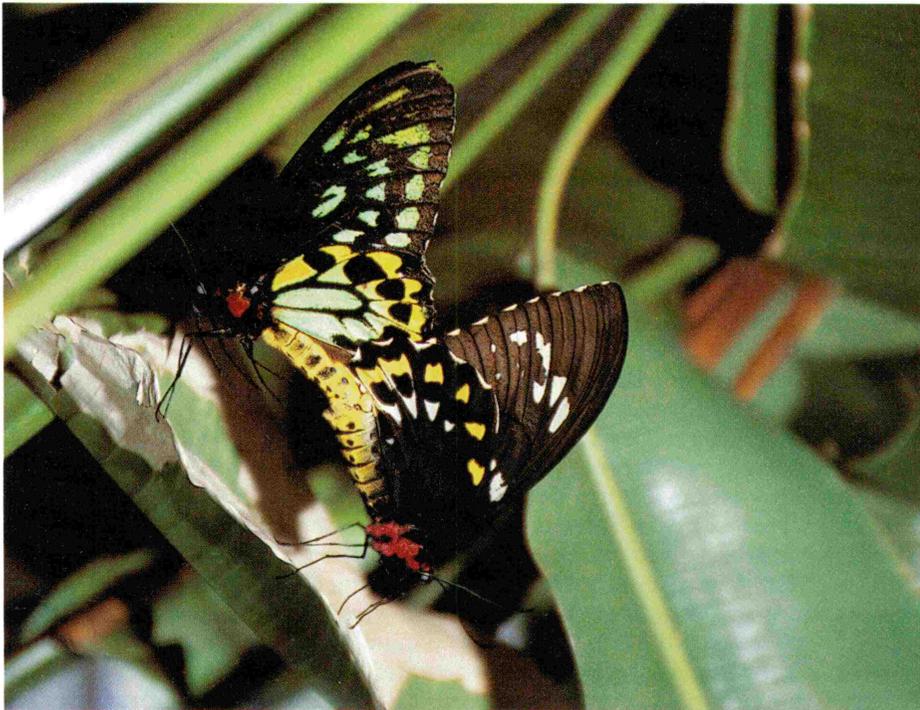
Matthiessen. The medal was last presented in 1987 when the B.B.C.'s famed Natural History Unit was honored for excellence in scientific cinematography.

According to Dr. Thomson, William Cooper is the first Australian to be honored by the Academy in its 180 year history. "Mr. Cooper's paintings have set a new standard for excellence for scientific publications", commented the Academy's

president.

Mr. Cooper, a professional artist for over twenty years, has collaborated with Joseph M. Forshaw on a series of large-format monographs which, according to Dr. Thomson "recall the glory days of scientific publishing more than a century ago, but with all of the newest scientific information available. Dr. Thomson describes the Forshaw/Cooper books as modern monuments to science and art". ●

Photos by Rae V. Anderson



Cairns Birdwing butterflies (*Ornithoptera priamus euphorion*) copulating. Male is more green.



Blue Ulysses Butterfly (*Papilio ulysses joesa*).



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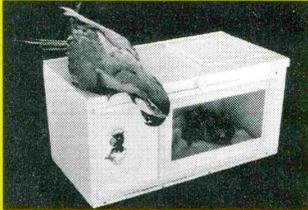
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