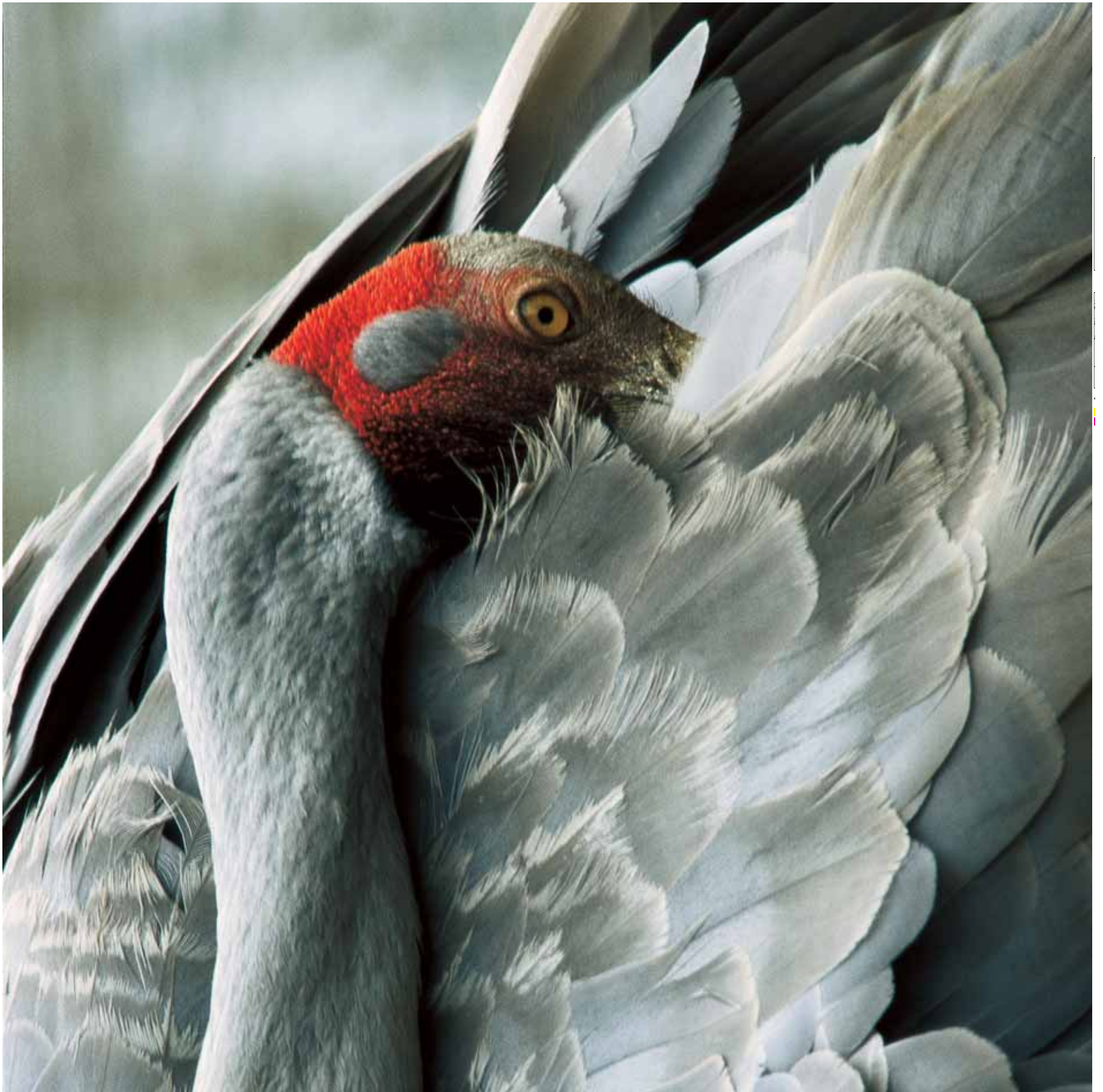




*Brolga was out walking when she saw Emu with her many chicks. Jealous Brolga hid her only chick and said to Emu, 'What a weary life, feeding so many babies! Take my advice and kill them before they tire you to death.' Foolish Emu listened to the soft words and destroyed all her children. After her cruel trick, Brolga twisted her neck so quickly to call her chick that she strangled her pretty voice and was left with only a harsh, discordant cry.*

—'WHY BROLGA HAS A HARSH VOICE', ABORIGINAL CREATION STORY





*The pink-eared duck is a dedicated desert wanderer.*

OPPOSITE: *Stock watering points have encouraged an increase in desert dingo and galah populations.*

Stopping only to eat and sleep, I continued south through the isolated and thinly populated Channel Country in Queensland's south-western corner. With an average annual rainfall of less than 250 millimetres—too little to support crops—this is technically desert country. However, although arid in terms of the amount of rain that falls, the Channel Country's inhospitality is offset by the lacework of floodplain channels and braided streams, lined with corridors of tall river red gums and understorey vegetation, that give it its name. Flowing from the western slopes of the Great Dividing Range on average every three to five years, these waterways create refuges and paths along which birds, mammals and fish can migrate. At such times the Channel Country supports a great abundance of plants and animals when compared with deserts on other continents.

This fickle wealth of food sets in motion a great wave of life, drawing in broilgas and other nomadic birds from halfway across the continent. The ability of birds to reach resources quickly after they become available makes them far more successful in Australia—with its very large size, erratic climate and poor resource base—when compared with the continent's mammals. The number of Australian bird species, calculated on an area basis, is equivalent to or richer than that found on other continents, while its mammal fauna is very small when viewed on the same basis.

After a succession of good seasons, generations of the Channel Country's smaller animals radiate widely from their refuges over what would normally be parched regions. In the earth-cracking droughts that inevitably