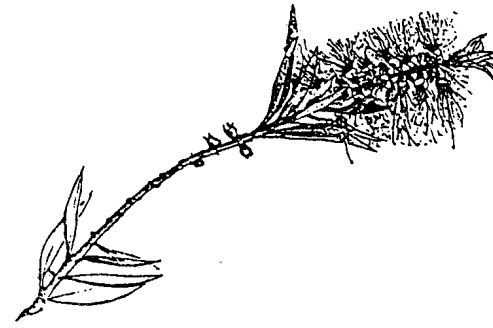


Attracting birds to your garden



Birds are a welcome addition to a garden because they add colour, movement and sound, and they provide interest and companionship. One of the most common questions we are asked is "How do I attract birds to my garden?" And the second is "What do I feed them so that they will stay?"

The European/North American tradition of providing supplementary food to help small birds to survive an icy winter is completely inappropriate for Australia. Many of our birds, including parrots, lorikeets and honeyeaters, can travel long distances in response to rain, or the flowering and seeding of eucalypts, banksias and heaths. It is only the strongly territorial such as Magpies and Kookaburras which may remain in one place all year round.

However, the birds' ability to move quickly to take advantage of a new source of food is also the cause of the problems which arise when supplements are provided. Just as corellas and cockatoos will quickly gather around a heap of spilled grain in a paddock, so a constant supply of seed or artificial nectar in a garden will attract an ever-growing crowd of the local birds. Provided they can afford the mounting feed bill, many people are happy with this outcome. But are they doing the right thing by the birds?

Should I feed the birds?

Taken to excess, a constant supply of 'artificial' food makes the birds fat and lazy. They sit around waiting for the handouts (making an easy target for local hawks and other), and may suffer from dietary problems which affect their health and their breeding potential. They also quickly pass on their bad feeding habits to their offspring. So the first rule is:

Never allow birds to become dependant on you for food. If you give supplementary food such as seeds, meat, breadcrumbs or nectar, provide small amounts which are quickly eaten up. Do not feed every day.

In the past we have published a recipe for artificial nectar made from sugar, but no longer recommend it for many reasons, including those given above. It may also encourage the European wasp. Offering diluted honey is illegal because it can transmit diseases to bees.

Provide water

The second rule is the most important of all: if you want to attract more birds to your garden:

provide a permanent source of water for birds.

Our research shows that this is the single most important factor in attracting birds. A slowly dripping tap above a shallow bowl will be welcomed by many species, and above-ground water is usually more popular (and safer) than a deep pond. A sprinkler on a hot day will often attract a crowd of small birds. In fact the ideal is to provide several different water sources around the garden. But once again, there are dangers. It must be a permanent and reliable source. If you are going away in summer, it is very important to leave a constant supply of water for birds which have come to rely on it.

Each bath or pond must be carefully sited to allow small birds to dive quickly into nearby cover. An overhanging branch gives both shade and protection, and thick bushes near a birdbath allow birds to approach the water safely.

Protect from cats

Which leads us to the third rule: Do all you can to protect your birds from cats.

If you permit your cat to roam in your garden it would be better not to try to attract birds at all. Neighbouring cats quickly become aware of feeding and drinking routines, and there is no point in providing them with a quick takeaway lunch each day. A cat-free garden will also be a haven for other small native creatures of the area.

No poisons

In order to increase the amount of insect food available for the birds to eat, do not use poisons in your garden.

Young eucalypts in particular often go through a season of larval infestation which may be unsightly, but cures itself in time.

Improve bird habitat

Our research shows that supplementary feeding may increase the number of birds which visit a garden, but will not increase the number of species (or different kinds of birds). This means that if you are already visited by turtle-doves and lorikeets, you are much more likely to increase the number of visiting turtle-doves and lorikeets than to add a variety of finches and honeyeaters. Just as a well-designed garden will contain a mixture of trees and shrubs at different heights, so a well-designed bird garden will contain a mixture of bird species, making full use of all the different plants and the variety of foods they provide.

If you rely on supplementary feeding to attract birds, you are preventing other birds from making full use of your garden, because the territorial bullyboys such as mynahs, sparrows, wattlebirds and currawongs will take over the feed tray and drive the others away. So the fourth rule is: **Improved bird habitat, not increased feeding, will attract more bird species to your garden.**



For further information about creating Gardens for Wildlife please phone 1300 305 342 fax 9894 4048; www.birdobservers.org.au

Bird Observers Club of Australia
PO Box 185, Nunawading 3131

Email: information@birdobservers.org.au

Creating bird habitat

The garden with the most potential to attract a variety of birds is one which contains the greatest variety of plants and plant-forms. A large acreage is not so important.

Mature indigenous trees

Gardens which contain, or are in close proximity to, several tall eucalypts (or the dominant indigenous tree, shrub or palm species in the area), can provide insects, nectar, seed, nest-sites and night-roosts. The retention of mature flowering eucalypts, casuarinas, banksias, etc. is very important. Find out (if you can) which trees grew in your area before settlement, and try to plant at least one in your garden.

Habitat diversity

The greatest diversity of species naturally occurs where two or more kinds of habitat overlap--where grassland meets woodland, for example, or trees reach down to the edge of a lake. Gardens are ideal places to create this diversity on a small scale, as long as you include a mixture of the three main elements: tall tree cover, bushy understorey, and low ground cover or grassland.

Nectar, insects, seed and shelter

As for the question of native or introduced plants: our research found that as long as the tall trees were appropriate to the region, a mixture of native and introduced plants below them could attract as many resident bird species as a totally native garden. However, plants should be chosen with the needs of native birds in mind.

A thick understorey layer, of ferns, tall grasses or shrubs from ground-level up to two metres, gives security to small birds such as thornbills, robins, scrubwrens and fairy-wrens as they move around your garden. Nearby areas of open grass or ground-cover can then be used with confidence: Try to include some prickly shrubs for safe nesting.

Action for birds

The BOCA was established in 1905 to encourage informal, amateur participation in activities related to bird conservation and birdwatching.

We are the major birdwatching organisation in Australia.

As part of our conservation program we encourage home gardeners to provide food and protection for Australian birds.

For further information about the Bird Observers Club of Australia please write to PO Box 185, Nunawading, Vic 3131. Ph 03 9877 5342 Fx03 9894 4048

Plant List

The following selection is a list of plants, both introduced and native, which have been proven to provide insects, nectar, seeds, or all three, for our native birds.

Please be careful. Some plants, although attractive to native birds, can become feral weeds in nearby parkland. This applies to some native Australian plants outside their natural region as well as introduced plants from overseas, so if you are uncertain please check with your local authority before making a final choice.

*these are introduced plants

Multi-purpose plants

These may well provide the backbone of your bird-attracting garden.

Acacia

dealbata, floribunda, mearnsii, melanoxylon, retinodes

Banksia

ericifolia, integrifolia, marginata, robur, serrata, spinulosa

Brachysema lanceolatum

Calistemon (all)

Eucalyptus (choose those native to your region)

Grevillea

alpina, banksii, robusta, rosmarinifolia.

'Honey Gem', 'Misty Pink', 'Ned Kelly',

'Pink Surprise', 'Poorinda Constance',

'Robyn Gordon', 'Sandra Gordon', 'White Wings'

Hakea laurina, sericea

Hymenosporum flavum

Leptospermum

juniperum, laevigatum

Melaleuca

armillaris, hypericifolia, nesophila, quinquenervia, styphelioides

Syzygium

Tristania

Native plants hosting insects on which birds feed.

(This is only a selection.)

Acacia

baileyana, fimbriata, longifolia, podalyriifolia, verticillata

Agonis flexuosa

Angophora costata

Brachychiton

Bursaria

Ceratopetalum gummiferum

Chamelaucium uncinatum

Correa

bauerlinii, decumbens, pulchella

Hardenbergia

Melaleuca (all)

Melia azedarach

Metrosideros queenslandica

Oreocallis wickhamii

Pimelea ferruginea

Pittosporum

Prostanthera

Tristania

Wahlelbergia

Washingtonia

Plants visited for nectar or flowers

*Abelia

*Abutilon

Albizia lophantha

Anigozanthus (Kangaroo paw)

*Berberis darwinii

Billardiera longiflora

*Buddleia

Calothamnus

*Camellia

*Chaenomeles (japonica)

Correa

Epacris

Eremophila

*Feijoa

*Fuchsia

Grevillea

*Hedychium (false ginger)

Kennedia

*Kniphofia

Lambertia formosa

*Leonotis (lion's ear)

*Lonicera

*Melianthus major

Mistletoe

Pandorea

*Paeonia

*Protea

*Rosmarinus

*Salvia

*Streptosolen jamesonii

*Tecomaria capensis

*Virgilia

*Weigela

Xanthorrhoea

Plants which provide seed (many also from the other lists)

Acacia (wattle)

*Acer (maple)

*Betula (birch)

Casuarina

*Cupressus

*Liquidambar

*Milk thistle

Pelargonium australe

*Pinus

Poa annua

Restio tetraphylus

*Thuja

Typha angustifolia (Bullrush)

Zoe Wilson