

CREATING A BACKYARD BIRD HABITAT WITH AUSTRALIAN NATIVES

Bringing birds into a suburban garden is not easy especially where suburbs and house blocks have limited green space – supplying store bought seed is an option to encourage visits from birds but if you want them to stay around then you need to add vegetation in one form or another and create a habitat for them – even if all you have is a balcony!

To create a successful habitat for birds, the risks to the birds must be considered – whilst it is nice to watch your little friends come and perch on a seed bowl on your veranda to watch the sunrise with you, you must be sure that you are not creating a breakfast smorgasbord for the local cats or contributing to a mess on the neighbours patio that may see them retaliate against your feathered friends. A good habitat is provided by a good ecosystem that has a balance of all things natural, including a few insect pests. Many people strive to plant species that have no known pest or problem but if you create a balanced ecosystem and fight the urge to use pesticides regularly, the pests will be taken care of by the birds in your garden and you will probably never have to waste money on chemical insecticides again.

Birds fall into 3 main feeding groups – Seed eaters, Insectivores/carnivores and Fruit/Nectar eaters.

Plants for Seed Eaters often overlap with those for Insectivores because the foliage of the seed plants also provides a great habitat for insects to breed. Seed eaters and insectivores will be attracted to grasses such as Native Millet (*Panicum decompositum*) which is relished by many bird species, Kangaroo Grass (*Themeda australis*) produces a seed that attracts a range of finches and medium parrots like the Ground Parrot but is also a favoured habitat for butterfly larvae and will support insectivores like Australian Robins and Fantails, Barbed Wire Grass (*Cymbopogon refractus*) is relished by Rosellas, Weeping Grass (*Microlaena stipoides*) also great for butterflies and will support the insectivores like Wrens as well as the small and medium seed eaters like the Turquoise Parrot, Wallaby Grass (*Rytidosperma* species) – this one has had a lot of name changes from *Danthonia* to *Austrodanthonia* to *Rytidosperma* but it will attract Finches, Rosellas and smaller parrots, Tussock Grass (*Poa labillardieri*) is great for butterfly larvae and smaller seed eating birds like finches as well. A good covering of grasses will encourage small lizards and insects which in turn will encourage Kookaburras and insectivores into the garden.

Once you have a food source sorted, you also need to provide a protective habitat for the birds that come to visit – a good rule of thumb is to include the plants people usually avoid – the ones with SPIKES and THORNS. Small birds are very adept at navigating those prickles without getting hurt but most importantly, cats, dogs and large birds like hawks are not. As well as providing protection from predators, these plants can provide

an additional seed source for birds. Prickly Moses (*Acacia ulicifolia*), Spiny Bush Pea (*Pultenaea spinosa*), Gorse Bitter Peas (*Daviesia ulicifolia*), Finger Lime (*Citrus australasica* or *glauca*), Blackthorn (*Bursaria spinosa*) and Native Violet (*Hymenandra dentata*) are a few thorny favourites that can be considered. There are also non thorny species that produce a high amount of seed to support your local bird populations such as Sweet Sarsparilla (*Hardenbergia violacea*) which can be found as a “bushy variety” or a climbing variety but either one will produce a huge crop of seed pods filled with medium sized black seeds, Wattles (*Acacia* species) also produce a good crop of seeds and are a valuable habitat species.

Nectar eating birds such as the Lorikeet and Honey eaters will be looking for species like Bottlebrush (*Callistemon* species), Paperbarks (*Melaleuca* species) and of course Grevilleas so they can lap the nectar straight out of the flowers. Grevillea's are great for nectar eaters because of their extended flowering times and the high nectar content in the flowers. The seed of a Grevillea is encased in a high protein wafer that is a favourite food of ants BUT the seed itself is coated in cyanide (not enough to hurt us, but enough to stop an ant eating it). The ants take the seed into their nests and eat the wafer but leave the seed and hey presto, the Grevillea has conned the ant to plant its seed deep inside the ant nest where it will germinate and eventually destroy the nest! Grevillea is a good species if you want to limit unwanted seed eaters into your garden because it does not provide a viable source of edible seed for them. Bottlebrush and Melaleuca are great nectar providers and they also produce a small seed enjoyed by many smaller birds and some larger ones as well.

Both seed eaters and nectar eaters will enjoy the fleshy fruits of Lilly Pilly (*Acmena* and *Syzygium*), Midyim Berries (*Austromyrtus* species), Winter Apple (*Eremophila debilis*), Native Quince (*Alectryon subcinereus* or *tomentosa*), Muttonwoods (*Myrsine howittiana* or *variabilis*), Rose Myrtle (*Archirhodomyrtus beckleri*), Flax plants (*Dianella* species) which are very attractive to Bower Birds because of the vibrant blue berries. One of my friends supplies the nursery with seed of the Tuckeroo (*Cupaniopsis anacardoides*) every year because the small birds in their garden collect the seed pods from a tree somewhere close by and bring it back to their patio where they devour the sweet lining of the seed pod and leave the perfectly cleaned ripe seed for collection!

It is important to choose a range of species that will provide a year-round source of food. That is quite easy to achieve for the seed eaters because most of the species nominated produce large crops of hard seeds that fall to the ground for the birds to forage over a long period of time but planting a wide range of species will ensure that there are no gaps in the food supply. In the case of grasses, it is important to plant more than one specimen of each species. Planting in clumps produces a good result and avoids one species overpowering or over shadowing another, plus a larger area of

seed to fossick through may save arguments between different species as they compete for the same source of food.

The next essential part of any habitat is of course a reliable water source. In periods of drought, birds are the first animals to move to greener pastures because they face no barriers or obstacles to their travel, therefore shallow bird baths that dry out quickly should not be the only source of water in your habitat if you want the birds to be a permanent part of your life. As well as a good supply of drinking water, nesting birds need to wet their tummy feathers to keep the eggs moist.

The final factor to include in your garden is a source of nesting material – most grasses will be dormant over winter and may even appear to be dead but they have simply evolved that growth habit so they can provide nesting material for the birds to collect in early spring. Most Eucalypts and Angophora will produce small twigs that are excellent for nest building for medium sized birds. The Coastal Apple (*Angophora costata*) is a neat and compact tree that will not overpower your back yard but will provide a great source of small twigs and a good nesting site as well. The range of mallee or multi stemmed Eucalyptus are also a good choice for smaller backyards. Some larger Eucalyptus species support birds in multiple ways – the Manna Gum (*Eucalyptus viminalis*) produces an abundance of nectar filled flowers and nutritious seeds and as a bonus, the tree exudes a soft white sugary pulp that is enjoyed by birds like a marshmallow treat. In addition to that, the other common name for *Eucalyptus viminalis* (Ribbon Gum) provides a hint of the benefits of the bark as a nesting aid.

The final touch to your habitat should be the inclusion of a few species with highly fragrant foliage. A study in the UK proved that birds that had access to scented foliage plants like Yarrow and Lavender, readily chose those species to line their nests and that those nests had significantly less parasite attacks than nests that did not have access to the scented foliage and there is no reason to think that Australian birds are not as smart as their UK cousins! Australian natives with scented foliage include Native Mint (*Prostranthera* species), Lemon Scented Tea Tree (*Leptospermum petersonii*), Camphor Myrtle (*Sannantha crassa*) and Lemon Myrtle (*Backhousia citriodora*) to name a few.

When you are creating your backyard bird habitat, don't forget your history. Captain Cook landed here in 1770 and he and successive travellers introduced and established a multitude of fruit and vegetable crops that over 250 generations of Australian birds have grown up eating and enjoying so chances are very high that our Australian fauna and birds will occasionally hop and fly right past the native habitat you have provided to enjoy the juicy plums, pears and apples in your neighbour's yard. The native Blue Banded bees ignore every *Grevillea* and *Bottlebrush* in my garden and go straight to my

little Coral Salvia so I always make sure I have a few plants somewhere but that is another story for another day!

The list of shrubs and grasses is endless but the following suggestions should be readily available. I have not included the larger trees like the Tuckeroo or the Eucalypts because most yards will only sustain one or two larger trees.

GRASSES & GROUNDCOVERS

Cymbopogon – all varieties -Seed & foliage

Dianella species -fruit

Einadia hastata - Fruit & foliage

Einadia nutens – Fruit & foliage

Entolasia stricta – seed and foliage

Eremophila debilis - Fruit

Gahnia melanocarpa -Fruit & seed

Gahnia sieberiana -Fruit & seed

Geitoplesium cymosum - Fruit

Glycine species - Fruit

Lomandra – all species -Seed

Lotus australis – Nectar and foliage

Microlaena stipoides - seed

Myoporum groundcover species – Fruit

Panicum decompositum – Seed

Poa labillardieri – Seed

Rytidosperma species - Seed

Stypantra glauca – Fruit

Themeda triandra - Seed

SHRUBS

Acacia species - Seed

Alectryon subcinereus - Fruit

Alectryon tomentosa - Fruit

Aotus ericoides - Fruit

Archirhodomyrtus beckleri - Fruit

Austromyrtus dulcis - Fruit

Austromyrtus tenuifolius - Fruit

Banksia integrifolia - Nectar

Banksia spinulosa - Nectar

Breynia oblongifolia – Fruit

Bursaria spinosa - Seed

Callistemon – Nectar & Seed

Celastrus subspicata - Fruit

Daviesia – all varieties - Seed

Decaspermum humile - Fruit

Deeringa amaranthoides - Fruits

Denhamia sylvestris - Fruit

Dillwynia – all species - Seed

Elaeodendron australe - Fruit

Eremophila species - Fruit

Grevillea species – Nectar

Hardenbergia - Seed

Hymenanchera dentata - Seed

Indigofera australis – Seed

Leptospermum – nectar & Seed

Leucopogon – most species – Fruit

Melaleuca – Nectar & Seed

Melicope micrococca - Fruit

Myoporum shrub species - Fruit

Myrsine species - Fruit

Notelaea species – Fruit

Podolobium species – Seed

Psychotria loniceroides - Fruit

Streblus brononianus – Seed

Syzygium spp - Fruit

Trema tomentosa - Seed

Syzygium – all species-Fruit