

Birdscaping Gardens - Dr Tony Saunders

Urban gardens have the potential to attract a wide variety of birds if they are designed to provide for them. When I designed my first garden nearly 45 years ago, I was rewarded with more than 50 different bird species that visited the garden within the first two years! I can remember the joy of seeing Yellow-faced Honeyeaters descend from high above on their migration south into my first Grevillea, a Sacred Kingfisher that came into the garden every spring to collect skinks from my raised log gardens, a White-winged Triller seeking shelter from the local population of Noisy Miners and even a Rufous Fantail foraging as it was on its way north for the winter. Although most of the bird species were not able to gain all of their required resources from just my one suburban garden, I did have a resident family of Superb Fairywrens.

Encouraging birds and the other wildlife that form their foods into a garden can be a very rewarding experience, especially as you have put back some of what was lost when your urban area was cleared of natural vegetation.

Most of the larger bird species that are more common in urban areas, even when compared with the natural habitat that once existed there, can often dominate the average urban garden. The smaller, mainly insectivorous birds do not visit most gardens because there is insufficient food, or shelter for them from potential predators, which include many of the larger bird species that frequent urban gardens. Yet it is the small insectivorous bird species that are declining across the landscape and which need our help.

The emphasis here is to provide habitat for these smaller bush bird species and you will be surprised at what will visit a garden if it has the right structural complexity even if it not adjacent to a bushland remnant.

The choice of plant species is not as critical as you might think. Many introduced plants can also provide good habitat, although you need to be careful that they do not become weeds in nearby bushland remnants. Often your local council will list local weeds of concern and often they will also suggest suitable native alternatives. It is preferable to plant local plant species as the local wildlife are best adapted to them. Some Australian native plant species can become local weeds if they are planted a long way from where they occur naturally. Some native plants like Callistemons and some of the hybrid Grevilleas have large terminal showy flowers that provide abundant nectar and are best avoided as they attract more aggressive Noisy Miners and Rainbow Lorikeets which can dominate a garden and exclude smaller nectar foraging species and other small birds. There is still a great variety of plants to choose from and it is a good idea to look for dense-foliaged and prickly-foliaged plants that cater for insectivorous bird species. These attract insects, provide dense cover and also may provide nesting opportunities. The bulk of each vegetation layer should be mostly made-up of only 4 to 5 plant species, rather than aiming for a botanical arboretum. Each plant species will then provide an abundance of food when it is flowering or sets seed or is attractive to insects. You can select plants that flower at different times so as to prolong the period of food availability. What is important is to provide a complex many-layered habitat area with a varied density of plants from the ground up into the tree canopy.

To achieve a high structural diversity within a garden you need to select from low ground covers, low shrubs, medium shrubs, tall shrubs and canopy trees. Areas of grasses and leaf litter are also important, as they provide different foraging opportunities. The overall height may be limited by the size of your garden and you may have to restrict your trees to shorter species. Find your nearest bushland remnant or an area of similar rock/soil type and similar exposure and use this as a guide to what can be grown in your garden. The density of different areas within the garden should also vary as this will also increase the structural diversity within the garden habitat. A denser garden is more attractive to smaller bush bird species and less attractive to the larger urban adapted species that prefer more open habitat areas.

The only supplement I recommend is water. The presence of water will increase the diversity of birds that visit your garden. This can be provided as a bird bath which needs to be placed so that there is a patch of dense cover nearby that small birds can fly out from and escape to if predators are about, but not too close so that it would provide an easy vantage point for cats and other predators that may attack birds at the bath. The water needs to be kept clean and replaced regularly.

I do not recommend feeding birds for several reasons. Firstly, the birds that use most of the supplements provided are the larger more aggressive species that are already very common in urban areas. One example is the Rainbow Lorikeet which has increased more than 5-fold in the last 40 years. This is likely to be due to feeding birds and providing abundant nectar in the garden. The problem is that some research has shown that feeding parrot species increases their fecundity and if they are hollow nesters like the Lorikeet then other bird and mammal species are being displaced. Some studies have also shown that introduced species use these food supplements and smaller native species then avoid gardens where feeding occurs. If you feel compelled to feed birds in your garden, I recommend reading the books by Darryl Jones where you can find-out how to do it in ways that minimise some of the negative impacts. One successful approach I have seen used is to provide small seeds for finches in a feeder which has a built-in screen that prevents larger parrots from accessing the seed. Remember that the advice given here is designed to help smaller bird species that need our help to recover from our impacts. I am of the opinion that two Fairywrens in a bush trumps ten Rainbow Lorikeets at a feeder any day.

While on the subject of feeding birds, if you have pets then you need to prevent introduced birds from accessing excess left-over food. I recommend feeding dogs and cats indoors or removing unfinished food from outside. If you have cats, I recommend that they be kept indoors or have access to a cat-run when outside in the garden. Cats have a considerable impact on local wildlife and not just the birds in your garden and cat bells do not work in protecting prey species.

I have included a list of reference books that provided much information on garden design and plant choice for attracting birds to gardens. I can also highly recommend going to BirdLife Australia's Birds in Back Yards website as an excellent source of ideas and information about garden birds.

Suggested Reading:

Adams, G.M. 1995 (2nd ed.) *Birdscaping Your Garden*. Rigby, Sydney.

Adams, G.M. 2015 *Birdscaping Australian Gardens: Using Native Plants to Attract Birds to Your Garden*. Penguin, Australia.

Australian Plant Study Group. 1980 *Grow What Where*. Nelson, Melbourne.

Dengate, J. 2000 (2nd ed.) *Attracting Birds to Your Garden*. New Holland, Sydney.

Elliot, R. 1994 *Attracting Wildlife to Your Garden*. Lothian, Melbourne.

Hutchinson, F. 1993. *Creating a Native Garden for Birds*. Simon & Schuster, Roseville.

Jones, D. 2018 *The Birds at My Table: Why We Feed Wild Birds and Why It Matters*. New South Publishing, Sydney.

Jones, D. 2019 *Feeding Birds at Your Table: A Guide for Australia*. New South Publishing, Sydney.

McCulloch, E. 2000 *Birds in Your Garden*. Hyland House, Flemington.

Pizzey, G. 1988 *A Garden of Birds: Attracting Birds to Australian Gardens*. Angus & Robertson, North Ryde.

Pizzey, G. 2000 *The Australian Bird-Garden: Creating Havens for Native Birds*. Angus & Robertson, Pymble.

Saunders, T. *101 Native Plants of the Sydney Region to Attract Native Birds*.
<http://www.cboc.org.au/>

Wilson, Z. 1994 *BOCA-Birds and Gardens Survey 1991*. BOCA Report No. 3. Bird Observers Club of Australia.

Wrigley, J.W. & Fagg, M. 1990 *Bird Attracting Plants*. Angus & Robertson, North Ryde.