Garden for Wildlife

by Robert Powell

Many of us who read *Landscope* care about nature and wish to make our own contribution towards conservation. One of the ways we can do this is by creating habitat for wildlife in our own back yard.

This is an important subject because, if enough of us considered wildlife habitat as one of the purposes of our private land, even of small suburban blocks, there would be an enormous benefit to wildlife conservation. The Nature Conservancy Council in England has produced a 'nature jotter' entitled *The Wildlife Garden*. The following paragraph from its introduction summarizes its message:

> Wildlife may be safe in nature reserves but, on their own, these small areas are not enough if we are to continue to enjoy wildlife as an everyday experience. Most native plants and animals occur on private land, not on nature reserves. What we do with our land is thus extremely important for wildlife.

The same is true here.

Robert Powell

Blackboy flowers are a rich source of food for honey-eating birds, and for insects such as native bees, wasps, ants, moths and butterflies. Moreover, a wide variety of beetle species burrow into the trunk and the spears.

Blackboy seeds are easily collected in summer. They germinate readily, and the young plants develop much faster than is commonly believed, sometimes flowering at three years old.

How To Provide Habitat

One approach, which many people have used, is to plant trees and shrubs that provide a large amount of nectar for honey-eating birds. But many birds and other animals do not use nectar; and, in any case, there is already a good supply of nectar in most Perth suburbs.

A better approach is to grow plants that provide habitat for insects. Insects are a very significant component of our fauna: about 50 000 Australian species are known. Of these, only a tiny proportion are harmful to humans, so planning for insects does not mean filling your garden with flies and mosquitoes! Insects are a fascinating group in their diversity of forms and ways of life, and they are a major food source for other fauna, such as lizards, birds and bats. Even most honey-eating birds also eat large quantities of insects.

Many insect species depend on particular plants for their survival; thus numerous species have largely disappeared from Perth and other areas where there has been widespread clearing of vegetation. Plant species that occur naturally in the area

(local species) will support more wildlife than plant species that do not. Not only introduced plant species but also native non-local species (e.g. Eastern States eucalypts, commonly sold in nurseries) usually support less wildlife than local plant species.

If you have the opportunity to retain vegetation on a new block, this is of great benefit to wildlife, even if only a small part of the block can be left. Moreover, it will preserve something of the area's natural setting. Some bush species are difficult to propagate. Retaining them in gardens is a way of conserving these species and their associated wildlife.

Grow Local Plants

Local plants are those species that grow or used to grow naturally on your block or close by. Even having one local tree, or a few local shrubs in a corner of your block, is of value.

Preferably grow the trees or shrubs from seed you collect yourself (with permission from the landowner). You will be surprised how easy it is to collect and germinate seeds of many, such as the eucalypts, hakeas, melaleucas and sheoaks. Neighbours and friends will often accept left-over seedlings. It is cheaper than buying plants from nurseries!

Many insects (and other invertebrates) and lizards live in or use ground litter. In suitable parts of the garden, leaves and twigs can be left to accumulate. This has the added advantage of keeping the soil cool in summer, and reducing the need for watering plants, and thus contributes to water conservation.

Leave trees and shrubs unpruned if possible. Old wood is good habitat. Select trees and shrubs that will not grow too large for the space available.

In Europe, nest-boxes have enabled bird species to return to areas from which they had disappeared. Nest-boxes have also been used with some success in eastern Australia. You may wish to construct one as an experiment. The entrance-hole should not be too large, and the box should be placed high in a tree.

Finally, we should consider eliminating or reducing the use of insecticides in our gardens.

By taking the above approach, you have a marvellous opportunity to observe and experience nature right at your back door. There are quarter-acre blocks in Perth that have as many as eight species of small lizard, and where twenty species of bird have been recorded. This is a practical (and inexpensive) way of making a contribution towards nature conservation, which can also serve as an example to others.□

Peter McMillan

The larva of this beautiful jewel beetle *(Cyria vittigera)* burrows into the trunk of swamp banksia *(Banksia littoralis)*, and the adult feeds on the leaves.

Swamp banksia is a small, stout, densely foliaged tree natural to Perth. It is an adaptable species that grows well in gardens.

The Department of Conservation and Land Management has a list of trees and tall shrubs of the Perth Metropolitan Region and the soil-types they grow in naturally.

For extra information on obtaining and growing local plants, you can contact the Local Plants Group (3 Barque Place, Kallaroo, W.A. 6025).

Cliff Winfield

Flooded gum *(Eucalyptus rudis)* is a graceful medium-sized tree natural to the Perth area, where it occurs round lakes and swamps (e.g. Perry Lakes) and along the Swan and Canning Rivers. This vigorous species has a large amount of insect life associated with the leaves, branchlets, bark and trunk. It flowers over an extended period from late winter to early summer, and is thus also a useful supplier of nectar.

Flooded gum is readily grown from seed, which is easy to collect.

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Contents

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Editorial

W.A. is a vast, sparsely populated State, and it is not uncommon to hear some parts of it described as 'the last frontier'. But there are few, if any, parts of W.A. that have not been affected by European settlement.

Evidence of western civilization in some of the most remote areas is far too often the empty can. But even where there are no obvious traces, the effects have been profound.

There is compelling evidence, for example, that the displacement of Aboriginal communities from much of inland W.A. — and the subsequent removal of Aboriginal firing practices — is directly responsible for major changes in vegetation, which in turn has resulted in the virtual extinction of many native animals.

It is not always easy to pick the effects of European civilization on the natural environment even when the history is well-documented. This *Landscope's* account of the woodlands around Kalgoorlie talks about the often horrific environmental damage, but an observer of these woodlands today would have difficulty recognizing that vast areas were clearfelled less than 50 years ago.

While the concept that we should 'let nature do its thing' has superficial appeal, the reality is that the purity of nature has been, and will continue to be, distorted by human presence. We have no option if we want to sustain the unique ecosystems of W.A. but to apply management principles.

The history and management problems of Benger Swamp, which feature in this edition, illustrates two fundamental points. Firstly, even the most disturbed areas of W.A. can make a major contribution to conservation. Secondly, we must be careful not to change a system that works even though the way it works may not be 'natural'.

As complex and as difficult as the task of understanding ecosystems is, the social and political factors which influence the type of management that can be applied are often more difficult to deal with.

The key to good management is an understanding of the processes that drive the ecosystem. Once we understand what the natural processes are, we can then devise management systems which will mimic them.

The only way to ensure that rational decisions are made on environmental management is to provide the facts .

COVER PHOTO

Just when you thought you had seen every angle on our State symbol, photographer Jiri Lochman surprises you with a fresh perspective.