





Birds

IN THE GARDEN

by Allan Burbidge

You don't have to go bush to see native birds; a wide variety live in or visit the urban parks and gardens of Western Australia. But what is it about these places that attract birds to some and not others? Allan Burbidge suggests a few easy ways of making your garden an attractive place for native birds to feed and nest.

Residents of Perth and other Western Australian cities and towns, rarely have to go any further than their back gardens or local parks to spot a wealth of native birds going about their daily business.

Unlike residents of eastern States' cities, where native birds have been largely displaced and outnumbered by introduced birds, such as starlings (*Sturnus vulgaris*), sparrows (*Passer domesticus*), blackbirds (*Turdus merula*) and mynas (*Acridotheres tristis*), we are extremely fortunate in Western Australia to still have a wide variety of native species roaming our urban areas.

Although there are several introduced birds, such as laughing turtledoves (*Streptopelia senegalensis*), native to Africa and India; spotted turtledoves (*Streptopelia chinensis*), from South East Asia and rainbow lorikeets (*Trichoglossus haematodus*) and kookaburras (*Dacelo novaguineae*), from eastern Australia, all of which are common in urban gardens, they are outnumbered by the native birds.

COMMON NATIVES

The native species familiar to people in Perth's urban areas include the singing honeyeater, brown honeyeater, red wattlebird and Port Lincoln ringneck ('twenty-eight' parrot).

The singing honeyeater (*Lichenostomus virescens*) is a common resident in gardens where there are suitable shrubs for nesting. Its cup-shaped nest, which looks somewhat flimsy, can be found suspended from a small fork of a tree or shrub. The nest is made of grasses and lined with wool, fur or down from flowers such as banksias. This is probably the most widespread native bird in Perth gardens, and is also one of the most widespread birds in Australia. The name 'singing' is a bit of a misnomer, as many of its calls are rather

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A symbiotic relationship in action.

Western spinebills take nectar from grevilleas and pollinate the plants at the same time.

Photo - M & I Morcombe

Right: Introduced laughing turtledoves are one of the commonest birds in Perth gardens.

Photo - Jiri Lochman



Above left: Flowering bottlebrushes (*Callistemon* spp.), planted as street trees or in gardens, will attract singing honeyeaters.

Photo - Babs & Bert Wells

Above: The brown honeyeater is easily observed in Perth gardens, becoming quite accustomed to human presence.

Photo - Babs & Bert Wells

unmusical, although it tends to be at its most melodious during the dawn chorus.

The brown honeyeater (*Lichmera indistincta*) is another common resident that adapts well to gardens. Sometimes it will even nest in plants in hanging baskets, or in ivy on a wall. It builds a small cup-shaped nest, made of fine bits of bark and spiders' webs, that is suspended between small twigs. The bird lays two eggs, sometimes as early as August. As its scientific name suggests, the brown honeyeater is rather modestly plumaged, but it makes its presence known with a loud spirited song, as well as several harsh alarm and warning calls.

The red wattlebird (*Anthochaera carunculata*) is a large, noisy and aggressive honeyeater that often occurs in Perth gardens, especially those with

trees. It is distinguishable by a small pink-red flap of skin, or wattle, behind the eye at the base of the bird's cheek. Like singing and brown honeyeaters, red wattlebirds can be seen searching under gutters and around verandahs and pergolas for spiders and insects to feed to their young. They also take nectar from a wide range of common garden flowers.

If you live near a patch of bush, you may be lucky enough to have New





Port Lincoln ringnecks, known locally as 'twenty-eights', will visit most gardens with one or more native trees and will also feed in many exotic trees. Photo - Jiri Lochman

Holland honeyeaters (*Phylidonyris novaehollandiae*), white-cheeked honeyeaters (*Phylidonyris nigra*) or western spinebills (*Acanthorhynchus superciliosus*) visiting your garden. The male western spinebill is a striking little bird. It has a black face with red eyes and white eyebrows, a rich chestnut collar and throat and a black and white breast band.

Port Lincoln ringnecks, or 'twenty-



eight' parrots (*Barnardius zonarius*) are frequent visitors to gardens with trees, where they come to feed on fruits or flowers, or just to perch and chatter. If there is an old eucalypt tree in or near the garden they may stay to breed, laying about five white eggs in a hollow tree limb.

The dapper little silvereye (*Zosterops lateralis*) is generally nomadic, but will often breed in parks or gardens. In spring and summer, colourful rainbow bee-eaters (*Merops ornatus*) are a common sight along many suburban streets. They are usually found perching in trees or on power lines and wheeling and diving to catch bees and other flying insects. Bee-eaters nest in a tunnel that they excavate in the ground. They are migrants, moving to South East Asia and New Guinea



during the winter, arriving back in the South West in late September or early October. Black-faced cuckoo-shrikes (*Coracina novaehollandiae*) - streamlined pearl-grey birds with a clearly defined black forehead and throat - occur in many areas, and are sometimes seen nesting in street trees. Their call is an unusual musical rolling purring or chirring.

Another common visitor to gardens is the Australian raven (*Corvus coronoides*), often known as the 'crow'. Although these birds are common, it is worth spending some time watching them, as they have some complex and intelligent behavioural patterns. In some areas, galahs (*Cacatua roseicapilla*) will also visit gardens. Large flocks of these garrulous birds are spectacular, twisting and turning to show alternately grey and then pink, and giving high screeching calls as they fly over the suburbs.

Australian magpies (*Gymnorhina tibicen*) often occur in relatively open gardens, and sometimes get quite tame in suburban areas. Like willie wagtails (*Rhipidura leucophrys*), they can sometimes even be heard on bright moonlit nights with a familiar flute-like or organ-like carolling. During nesting season, after the chicks have hatched, both male and female magpies often vigorously defend the nests by swooping and diving at potential intruders. Care should be taken not to approach nest sites during this short period.

If you are in a reasonably well-wooded suburb, you may also be lucky enough to hear a boobook owl (*Ninox novaeseelandiae*) calling at night, repeating its well-known falsetto 'boobook' or 'morepork' at intervals.

Gardens near patches of bush, or on the edges of metropolitan areas, will have more native birds than gardens some distance away from such areas. In some gardens in outlying suburbs, 30 or

Far left: Another important pollinator of plants is the strikingly-marked New Holland honeyeater. Photo - Babs & Bert Wells

Left: Spring and summer migrants to southern Australia, rainbow bee-eaters frequent prominent perches, from which they hunt for bees and other flying insects. Photo - Jiri Lochman

more bird species can be seen during the course of a year. But even these suburban gardens will only have a very small number of resident breeding species, relative to those species that visit regularly or occasionally.

WELCOME VISITORS

The colour, movements and song of birds add an extra element to any garden. But in addition, many honeyeaters are also important pollinators of native plants. Bird-pollinated flowers produce relatively large amounts of nectar, which is an important food source for nectar-feeding birds. If you have a grevillea in the garden, you may well have seen honeyeaters sucking repeatedly at the flowers. The advantage for the plant species is that birds, being mobile, are good at transferring pollen between individual plants (albeit unwittingly) and so effecting cross-pollination.

All honeyeaters occurring in our urban gardens will take nectar from flowers, but insects are also a major part of their diet. Most other native birds found in urban areas of Western Australia,

including willie wagtails (*Rhipidura leucophrys*), rufous whistlers (*Pachycephala rufiventris*), pardalotes (*Pardalotus* spp.) and silvereyes, also eat insects and perform the useful function of helping to keep down the numbers of insect pests in our gardens.

CREATING A BIRD-FRIENDLY GARDEN

Different kinds of bird forage in different ways. Magpies or willie wagtails forage on the ground, silvereyes prefer shrubs, pardalotes forage in trees, honeyeaters feed on flowers, and other birds, like sittellas, pardalotes and gerygones, feed on insects that live on rough bark or leaves.

Gardens with a broad range of habitats and foraging sites are likely to attract a larger number of bird species than gardens containing a large expanse of lawn with, perhaps, one or two roses or a couple of conifers.

When it comes to planning and planting a garden to attract birds, it is best to include a variety of potential habitats or foraging areas: some relatively

open areas, some areas with shrubs and some with trees. If space permits, include vegetation of different heights and densities.

The key to attracting native birds to a garden is in the diversity of shrubs and trees present and their placement within the garden. Try looking at your garden from the perspective of a bird. If it consists mainly of lawn, with only one or two shrubs, then it will offer few places for shelter or nesting, and few places in which to look for food. In open places, small birds are vulnerable to predators, but the addition of even one tree will attract more birds. Some birds will just use the tree as a resting point on their way through, but a tree with flowers that provide a good nectar supply, such as a banksia or a eucalypt with large flowers, will attract honeyeaters and other nectar-eating birds. Flowering trees also attract insects, and hence insect-eating birds.

Many people attract nectar-feeding birds by planting some of the numerous species of plant that are bird-pollinated, such as grevilleas and banksias. However, it is just as important to achieve a diversity of foliage heights, leaf shapes and bark textures. If you put the emphasis on these aspects when you plant your garden, you will have the best chance of attracting a range of insect-eating birds and you will find that some plant species that attract nectar-feeding birds are inevitably included. This approach will also provide a greater choice of nest sites for birds (see 'Garden for Wildlife', *LANDSCOPE*, Autumn 1987, and 'Landscaping for Wildlife', *LANDSCOPE*, Autumn 1991).

Ideally, species endemic to the local area should be planted, as native birds are well adapted to these. If you cannot obtain local species to your liking, try to choose species from the general region - many plants from south-western Australia will grow in Perth and will provide excellent habitats for birds.

The striated pardalote, a little bird with a big call that sounds like 'wit-wit', forages for small invertebrates in the leaf canopy. It sometimes nests quite low down in narrow hollows of tree limbs.

Photo - Babs & Bert Wells





Above: *Banksia occidentalis* is native to the south coast of WA, but grows well in Perth gardens. Its attractive flowerheads provide a useful source of nectar for birds.

Photo - M & I Morcombe

Above right: Sociable birds, silvereyes move through gardens in small flocks, mostly feeding on insects, but sometimes also feeding at flowers.

Photo - Babs & Bert Wells

Right: Noisy and aggressive red wattlebirds will try to defend rich nectar sources, such as those provided by the bull banksia, from other birds.

Photo - M & I Morcombe



The bigger the area that can be devoted to bird-attracting plants, the better. Consequently, if you can convince your neighbours to plant for birds and other wildlife, you will achieve even better results. If enough people do this, it will not only contribute to knowledge and appreciation of native birds and plants, it will also help provide corridors for bird movement throughout urban areas.

A TEMPTING TABLE

If you have a garden that is already planted in a way that is attractive to birds, one way to attract even more birds is to provide extra food or water. A bird bath or feeding station will provide a focus for bird activity and opportunities for viewing the birds in your garden. However, if you decide to do this, care should be taken.

Food or water must be in a position

where it is difficult for cats to 'ambush' the birds. Cats are very effective predators of birds, and even putting a bell on a cat will not necessarily prevent it from catching birds. (Multiple bells are more effective.) If you provide food, it is best not to do so continuously in large amounts, for two reasons. The first is that the birds may come to depend on you and may encounter problems if, for some reason, you are unable to continue feeding them, for example, if you go away on holiday. Second, the food being provided may not match the natural diet, and therefore the birds' diets may become unbalanced. For example, in Melbourne it has been found that red wattlebirds may suffer from thiamine deficiency in winter. This is because they rely too much on food from feeders and on nectar from non-local plants that flower in the winter, when wattlebirds would normally

be eating a high proportion of insects. Without sufficient insects in their diet, they do not get enough protein and, in extreme cases, become convulsive and die.

Providing water is not a problem, because native birds can survive well without it. However, when it is available, they will use it for bathing and drinking. Water can be provided in a classic bird bath or in a pond. A pond will have the added advantage of attracting frogs and other interesting creatures (see 'Frogs in the Garden', *LANDSCOPE*, Winter 1993). A pond is more likely to be used by small birds, such as honeyeaters, if there is some vegetation overhanging one edge to provide perches and an access or escape route. If you have a large pond, you may have ducks visiting occasionally or, if the pond contains fish, a heron may stop by to look for a meal.

ARTIFICIAL HOMES

Another way to make a garden more attractive to birds is by providing nest boxes. This has been done for hundreds of years in Europe, but little is known about the use of nest boxes by birds in Australia. This is a great opportunity to learn something new about Australian birds. The birds themselves are not fussy about construction standards, so any old pieces of wood could be used. What is more important is the size of the box and the size of the entrance hole. Pardalotes use quite small hollows, but parrots require a bigger entrance hole and chamber. However, making the hole too large may provide easy access for neighbourhood cats, with disastrous consequences for the nesting birds.

Attracting birds to your garden is a marvellous way of experiencing nature, literally at your back door, with the added advantage of bringing the sounds of bird song into your home. If we can get birds to nest in our gardens, we, and especially our children, will have the opportunity for even greater appreciation of the birds and their family life, and also help make suburbia a greener and better place.



Above: The galah has expanded in range following clearing. The population in Perth is a mixture of local birds and escaped cage birds.
Photo - Jiri Lochman

Below left: The rich song of Australian magpies is a welcome contrast to the sounds of traffic in urban areas.
Photo - Jiri Lochman

Below right: The kookaburra, introduced from eastern Australia, preys on small lizards, snakes and large invertebrates.
Photo - G. Saueracker/Lochman Transparencies



A TASTE OF HONEY

Nectar-feeding birds (honeyeaters and silvereyes) will come to a feeder containing a dilute solution of honey. A concentration of about 10-20 per cent (made by mixing approximately one teaspoon of honey with two tablespoons of water) will match the concentration of nectar in bird-pollinated plants. Do not use sugar, as it contains only sucrose, and none of the vitamins and minerals that are present in trace quantities in nectar and honey. Make sure to change the solution regularly so that it does not ferment or go mouldy.

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The galah is just one of the many bird species that visit our urban and suburban gardens. 'Birds in the Garden' shows us how we can attract more.



In spring, the Wongan Hills are ablaze with wildflowers, but this 'island' sanctuary is also a home to a wide variety of animals. See page 21.



Yanchep National Park is having a facelift. Our story on page 28 examines the history and rebirth of one of Perth's closest and most visited national parks.



Banksia gardneri var. brevidentata is one of a number of plants named in honour of Charles Gardner. See 'Gardner's World' on page 41.



The Pinnacles is one of several destinations for licensed tours operating in WA's national parks. See 'Travel Companions'.

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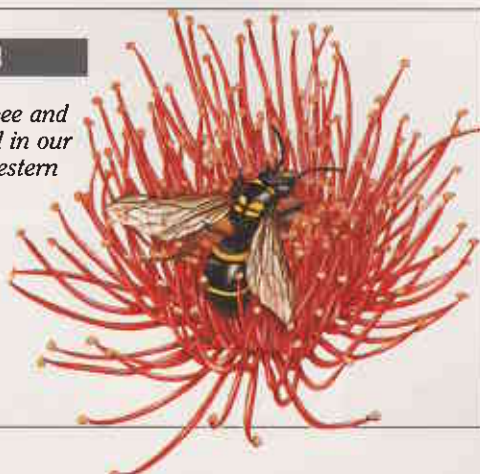
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Hyleoides zonalis is a solitary bee and one of the native bees described in our story about the 'real' bees of Western Australia on page 17. The illustration is by Philippa Nikulinsky.



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