

CREATING A WILDLIFE FRIENDLY GARDEN

STORY **GORDON ROWLAND**

Throughout the natural world, plants and animals live in balanced, mutually supportive relationships within communities or ecosystems. Each organism within the community occupies its own particular niche and depends on others for food, shelter or pollination.



The term 'bio-diversity' - short for **biological diversity** - refers to the diversity of plants and animals within a community and which, together with the human family, forms a complex of communities: the **Web of Life**.

Until European settlement in 1788, Australia was covered in a mosaic of interlacing plant communities including heaths, grasslands, woodlands, open forest, rainforest and wetlands. An abundance of birds, mammals, marsupials, reptiles, fish and other wildlife thrived within them.

By the end of the twentieth century many of these once-abundant species had become extinct, and many more are still threatened with extinction.

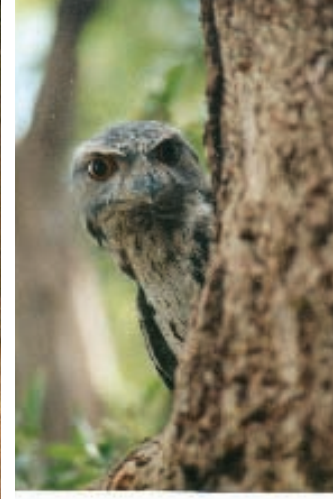
Land-clearing and the replacement of indigenous with introduced species are the major causes of plant and wildlife extinction. Despite warnings from environmentalists, ecologists and others, invasive introduced plants, animals and birds continue to spread across the continent, checked only by the sustained efforts of undervalued, underpaid bush regenerators and volunteer landcare groups. Gardens are a major source of new environmental weeds with over 6 in 10 of the new weeds in Australia since the 1970s being deliberately introduced ornamental plants that have escaped from gardens.

Some native wildlife is found in a variety of habitats, others only where particular plant species grow in sufficient numbers to provide a regular source of food. For example, Pardalotes are small birds that live almost entirely in eucalypt forests and woodlands. They need the trees for nesting and for shelter, and they benefit them by feeding on scale, thrips and other insect pests. For this reason Pardalotes are sometimes called the 'vacuum cleaners' of the gum trees.

Numerous exotic plant species help sustain introduced birds such as the Indian Myna, that displaces native birds. Winter-fruiting trees and shrubs such as Cotoneaster and Firethorn, for example, sustain the predatory Pied Currawong throughout winter until its preferred diet of small birds and birds eggs becomes available during spring. In urbanised areas, the escalating population of currawongs (described by ecologist Professor Harry Recher as "wolves that fly") has been at the expense of smaller, more vulnerable birds.

If you have a garden you can undo much of this damage and help restore the balance of Australia's biological diversity.

To attract a wide variety of native birds and other wildlife, you need to provide food, water and shelter. This is easy to achieve if you carry out the following:



Grow plants of differing heights, from trees to tall shrubs to small shrubs to grasses and groundcovers. These will provide a variety of natural food sources, nesting sites and protective cover, and an incentive to a greater variety of birds and other wildlife to visit and maybe take up residence in your garden.

Include nectar-producing understorey plants such as local banksias, grevilleas and correas, to encourage smaller honeyeaters to settle or become regular visitors. Nectar-producing trees alone are not enough.

Hybrid eucalypts and grevilleas with enlarged flowers attract large, aggressive honeyeaters such as the Noisy Miner and Red Wattlebird, that are not endangered and that will defend their territory against smaller, more vulnerable species such as the tiny Scarlet Honeyeater.

Provide safe nesting sites for these smaller native birds by reserving a corner of your garden for dense native shrubs such as acacias and hakeas with prickly leaves, that will deter cats and other predators.

Grow insect-attracting plants such as your local acacias, eucalypts and tea trees, as many small birds including the Fairy Wren and Tawney Frogmouth feed almost entirely on insects. Insect-attracting plants are also worth growing because the birds that feed on them help control insect pests. Nestlings of all species, including honeyeaters and seedeaters, need a regular supply of protein, provided by the insects that their parents feed to them.

Grow local wattles, she-oaks and grasses to attract seed-eaters such as finches and rosellas to your garden.

Avoid artificial foods because these create dependence and may lack the correct balance of nutrients.

Provide your visitors with regular access to clean water, for drinking, for bathing before preening their feathers and to help them keep cool in summer. Most bird baths are too low. To keep cats out of reach the pedestal should be about a metre or more in height, and the bowl up to half a metre across with sloping sides to provide variable water depth for a variety of birds.

Rainbow Lorikeet Photo: Catherine Stewart (**facing page**)
Blue Tongue Lizard Photo: Catherine Stewart (**above left**)
Opossum Photo: Marion Tyree (**above middle**)
Tawny Owl Photo: Liz Pash (**above right**)

(Install to a depth of about half a metre, a hardwood or treated softwood post, 1.5 metres in height by about 125 millimetres across, then secure a glazed saucer or shallow bowl using a proprietary adhesive, and fill with water. Your local birds will be more likely to use their new facility if you place it close to protective trees and shrubs. Allow several days for them to discover it.)

Attract frogs and other native wildlife to your garden pond by including floating ferns, water lilies and other cover-plants and by surrounding the pond with a few boulders and half-buried hollow logs, to provide these creatures with refuge and shelter.

Grow lomandras and pimeleas to attract butterflies.

Encourage birds to come and live in your garden by installing strategically placed hollow logs and nesting boxes, with the openings protected from direct sunlight and prevailing winds, until trees and shrubs have developed enough to provide natural nesting sites.

If you live close to bushland, grow local *Eucalyptus* species suitable as food sources for native animals and you will also attract them to your garden.

Indigenous Landscape Design Australia

info@ilda.com.au

www.ilda.com.au