

BUSH BIRDS

MAKING YOUR PLACE THEIR PLACE TOO



This fact sheet explains which bush birds may be present or absent from your place and what you can do to encourage a greater diversity to live with you.

The drier, settled areas of southern Tasmania, compared to other places, still have much of their original bush. In many instances the clearing for agriculture and urban development has produced a mosaic of habitats including highly modified treeless paddocks through to fully vegetated hills, in which many species of birds still thrive. But bird species begin to decline or will be absent where intact patches of bush are lost or if this mosaic becomes too highly modified.

About 60 species of birds live within the bush of southern Tasmania. Common groups of species include honeyeaters, parrots, robins, pardalotes

and whistlers. Some, like Pink Robin and Scrubtit, prefer wet forest and others, such as Forty-spotted Pardalote are rarely seen outside their preferred specialist habitat.

Some species live in the same bush all year, whilst others migrate in the late autumn to increase their foraging range, descend in altitude or cross Bass Strait to spend their winter on mainland Australia. Bush habitat also supports birds of prey, water birds in creeks and wetlands, and a small number of other species using heaths or grasslands on the forest fringe.



The Yellow-throated Honeyeater needs bush with good structure, as it forages high in trees but nests in shrubs close to the ground.

BUSH BIRDS' HOMES

Just like us, birds have three basic needs:

1. Their preferred food.
2. Places to rest and hide from danger and inclement weather.
3. A safe place to raise young.

And just like us, different species of bird have their preferences in where they find these basic needs.

Visit a local patch of intact bush and discover the multitude of bird species that could live with you.

STRUCTURE IN THE BUSH

Understorey vegetation provides a range of feeding, sheltering and/or nesting habitats. Loss of understorey through clearing, over-grazing or too frequent burning makes it unsuitable for many bush birds.

Logs, fallen branches, twigs and litter provide habitat for countless invertebrates like insects, spiders, millipedes, and earthworms that process this debris into soil. As most bush birds consume invertebrates at some stage of their life cycle they depend on these structural elements.

Old hollow-bearing trees are important for cavity-nesting species like pardalotes, owls, parrots and cockatoos, and for species that nest in large forking limbs like Wedge-tailed Eagles. Old trees provide more food than young trees simply because they are larger and thus produce more blossom, nectar, bark and litter for invertebrates and birds.

Messy is good!

Intact bush usually has a full range of structures – a varied understorey of grasses and herbaceous plants, small and tall shrubs and different aged trees especially large old eucalypts with hollows.

PATTERNS OF BIRDS IN THE LANDSCAPE

Large areas of bush with little human disturbance have the most bird species as they contain all structures that birds need: older trees with cavities, mature trees with full leaf canopies, younger trees, tall and short shrubs, tall grasses and sags interspersed with herbs. In wetter areas the ground layers are often richer in ferns, cutting grass, and mosses.

Protecting existing remnants with new plantings should take into account how birds use habitat patches and stepping stones. Always seek to bring the size of patches over 20 – 30 ha, as this may provide persistent breeding habitat.



Photo: Chris Tzaros

Rehabilitating understorey and helping regeneration in large (>20-30ha) patches should increase bird diversity. Techniques can be as simple as removing or reducing grazing and browsing pressure, or using fire or disturbance to encourage seedlings.

Even **single paddock trees or small copses** are important to retain as stepping stones where their context is good. They provide shelter and nesting for cockatoos, owls and other animals.

Areas close to waterways are excellent sites for revegetation. Often some of the structural layers already exist because they are less suited to agriculture and primary productivity is naturally high. Planting a mix of trees and shrubs around marshes can be very effective.

Open paddocks remote from intact bush are often not worth replanting to increase bird diversity. This is because all the structural layers that birds need can take at least a whole human generation to grow.

IMPROVING HABITAT FOR BUSH BIRDS

Retain and restore existing bush, then buffer and reconnect - this is the priority order of work to help bush birds survive, thrive and recolonise.

1. As the highest priority, retain extensive areas of bush with structurally diverse vegetation, good understorey and especially bush that is close to waterways.
2. Where extensive areas are structurally degraded, restore missing structural elements by excluding or reducing grazing and browsing, active regeneration or even selective replanting.
3. Retain habitat patches larger than 20-30ha and restore missing structural elements.
4. Retain smaller patches, copses and even single paddock trees, where they can act as 'stepping stones' between habitat patches and restore missing structural elements.
5. Increasing the size of bush remnants by buffering them with new plantings may also help to increase bird diversity, but only if the remnants are structurally diverse.
6. Weeds — especially gorse and blackberry — may be extremely important in retaining bird diversity in areas where native understorey has been lost. A cautious and staged approach to their control is necessary if it is the only remaining habitat.

PATTERNS OF BIRDS IN THE LANDSCAPE



Photo: Chris Tzaros

Woodlands and forests with intact layers of vegetation support the richest array of bush bird species including pardalotes, robins, whistlers, honeyeaters, thornbills and cuckoos. The mix of species will vary depending on the vegetation (e.g. Golden Whistler and Dusky Robin prefer drier areas whereas Olive Whistler and Pink Robin prefer wet areas).

Paddocks with some trees may provide feeding and nesting sites for species such as Forest Raven, Magpie, Eastern Rosella, Noisy Miner and Kookaburra. Raptors like Brown Falcon survey the landscape for prey atop paddock trees while other species use trees and small copses as 'stepping stones' between favoured habitats.

Bush edges are favoured by Scarlet Robins, Brown Thornbill and Superb Fairy-wren: species that may feed in the open but like bush nearby where they can roost and escape from danger.

Home gardens in any area can be rich in birds, especially if it is close to native vegetation, but are typically dominated by the introduced Sparrow, Starling and Blackbird. Flowering plants provide food for New Holland Honeyeater and wattlebirds that may defend rich nectar sources and exclude smaller species. Plant dense bushy vegetation to support more bird species like Superb Fairy-wren and Eastern Spinebill.

Open paddocks typically favour introduced species like Skylark, Goldfinch and Starling but native birds like Sulphur-crested Cockatoo, Magpie, Masked Lapwing, Pipit and Flame Robin use them on a frequent basis. Swamp Harrier nest in open paddocks if long grass provides shelter.

STRUCTURE IN THE LANDSCAPE

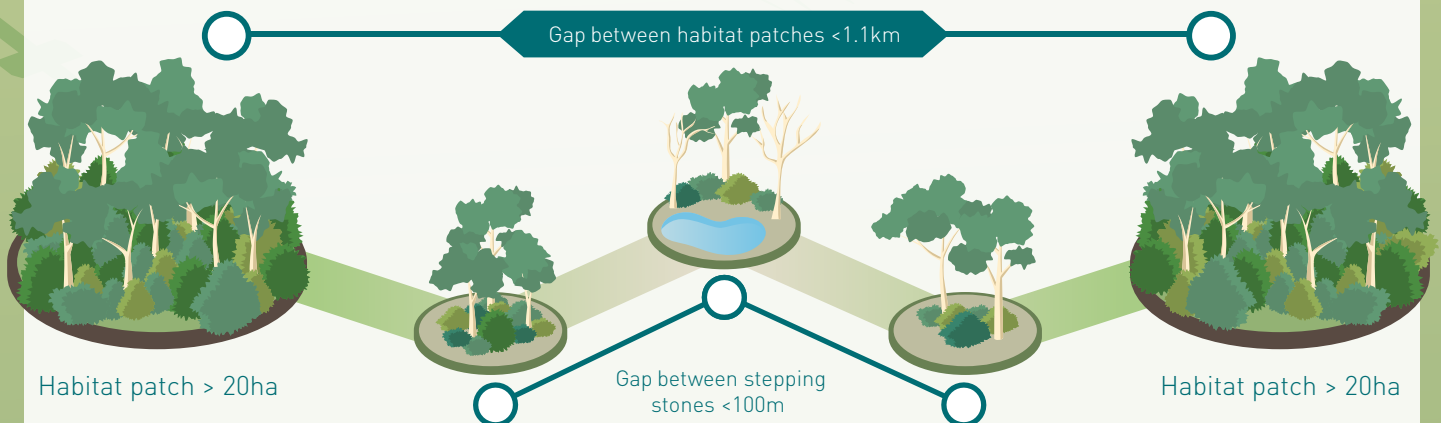
Most bush birds are reluctant to fly over open areas greater than 100m and prefer to use 'stepping stones' to move between habitat patches.

Habitat patches

In Tasmania, good habitat patches are considered larger than 20-30ha, with a range of structures, enabling many bird species to breed successfully.

Stepping stones

Stepping stones are patches smaller than this: even as small as single paddock trees. Many birds may use these stepping stones to travel between habitats, but seldom live or breed in them.



GETTING TO KNOW YOUR BIRDS

Discover the birds in your area by looking and listening. Binoculars will help you see the detail needed for positive identification.

Birds have distinctive calls and with practice you will learn what they are saying and why. Bird books (e.g. Field Guide to Tasmanian Birds by Dave Watts) and phone apps (e.g. Bird in Hand by the Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife Service) will help you identify local species.



Scarlet Robin – male



New Holland Honeyeater



Yellow Wattlebird
– Australia's largest honeyeater



Noisy Miner – an aggressive bird that thrives in modified environments



Crescent Honeyeater – male

NOISY MINERS, PATCH SIZE, UNDERSTOREY AND ISOLATION

One reason for species loss may be an influx of aggressive bird species like the Noisy Miner which thrive in modified environments. This medium-sized native honeyeater forms social colonies and in small (less than 20-30 ha) remnants will mob and drive out other usually smaller bush birds.

Other dominating species like the butcherbird, Magpie, currawong and raven, can co-exist with the Noisy Miner but the overall net effect is species loss.

Loss of the understory or tree layer can also make a site unsuitable for some bird species: shrubs are a rich food source of insects and nectar, and trees provide lerp, manna and a host of invertebrates on their trunks, branches and foliage.

Some bird species will not fly more than 100 metres across open ground without some cover in which to hide. Most won't fly more than a kilometre.

Either separately or in combination, loss of understory, small patch size and increasing isolation account for much of the decline in bird species compared to those in structurally intact bush.

RESTORING EXISTING BUSH

Improve species and structural diversity of existing bush remnants by:

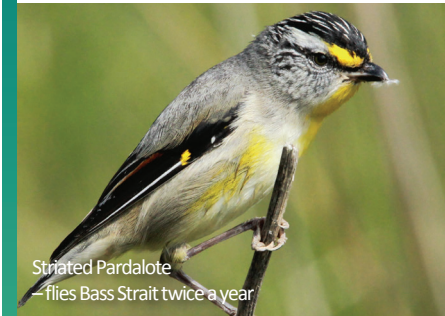
- never clearing understory
- reducing grazing/browsing impacts
- burning or disturbing soil to help seed germination and survival
- planting missing grasses, shrubs or trees
- removing weeds

Restoration is used to increase the 'health' of bush, habitat patches and stepping stones.

Priority for restoration depends on the health of each patch. If all the layers (structural elements) are already there, restoration isn't needed. See which elements are missing and work out the best way to restore them. Some bush is naturally deficient in some structural layers, so if in doubt, have an experienced botanist look at your bush before commencing work.

PLANTING

Planting means direct seeding, planting or transplanting native species in cleared (non-native) areas or home gardens. Planting is mainly used to protect and connect existing patches, but can also provide new habitat in gardens.



Striated Pardalote
– flies Bass Strait twice a year



Brown Thornbill
– the classic 'little brown bush bird'

FURTHER INFORMATION

For more information please refer to NRM South's Healthy Farming & Environment Reference Guide: <http://www.nrmsouth.org.au/>