

bird-friendly & *Beautiful*



This page:
double-barred
finches are
attracted to
native grasses.
Opposite:
banksias provide
food in autumn
and winter.

Don Burke says you can discourage the bossy, unwanted feral birds and encourage lots of colourful and beautiful native birds with your garden design and choice of plants.



A good native garden design should attract a variety of birds, such as a spotted pardalote (left), kookaburras (top right) and a red-browed finch (above).

There are good birds and bad birds. Some birds are thugs, others mass murderers. The worst thugs are Indian mynahs. They chase most other birds away and can beat up even large birds like king parrots and white cockatoos. Mynahs are also amongst the smartest animals on Earth. They can learn to talk, fit in almost anywhere and eat almost anything. Some twit introduced them to Australia in 1883 to control insects in sugar cane plantations.

But native birds can be thugs too. Wattlebirds can be very aggressive and territorial. Noisy miners and their close relatives, the bellbirds, can chase almost every other bird species away. Charming as the bellbirds may sound, they create a bleak neighbourhood with few bird species and often sick gum trees.

And when grandpa feeds the kookas, is he aware that feeding kookaburras, currawongs, magpies or butcher birds is an environmental disaster? These carnivores prosper with hand-feeding and eat all the small bird species in the area. Blue wrens, silvereyes, finches – all of these charming creatures are devoured by the out-of-control populations of meat-eating birds.

All a bit depressing isn't it? Well not really. What has emerged in recent years is that we ordinary punters can easily steer the local bird populations. We can balance the bird species and ensure that native species develop a lasting foothold in suburbia and on farms.

BETTER DESIGN

How? Well it is clear now that our choice of garden design, plant

selection and which birds we feed has a dramatic effect on the bird species in an area. Indian mynahs, noisy miners, sparrows, turtledoves, feral pigeons and starlings (all introduced pests except the noisy miner) love open, grassy or paved areas dotted with trees. They hate densely planted shrubberies – they want wide open spaces. So, at home, less lawn means fewer pests.

BIRD BALANCING

So, how do you get a practical and pretty garden that is bird-balanced? First of all, minimise paving. Paving is wildlife-unfriendly. And divide the garden into outdoor rooms. This creates usable areas to entertain in, play sport in, grow vegies in, etc. Divide the areas with swirls or beds of shrubs.

You will notice on my bird-friendly garden design on page

38 that there are no large, open areas. The lawn is created in swirls, not big circles or squares. There is still room for kids to play cricket, footy, basketball or to ride bikes. You still have a swimming pool onto which opens a glorious pavilion for outdoor cooking, entertaining or even as a rainy day play area for the kids. You still have a shed, a cubby house or an aviary. You have room for a vegie garden.

BEST PLANTS

There are no prickly or ugly plants. All of them either flower well or produce excellent foliage. You have the best variety of bottlebrushes, kangaroo paws, grevilleas, banksias, Gynea lilies, grass trees and seeding weeds which all feed wild birds. The *Syzygium francisii* 'Little Gem' is our best privacy plant of all, and

Photos by Brent Wilson, Geoff Higgins



Crimson rosella

it grows well everywhere, except in our coldest areas. It reaches around 2.5m tall and wide, is very dense, looks superb and hardly, if ever, needs pruning. Most lilly pillies grow far too tall and force you to spend your life pruning them. 'Little Gem' and the miniature baeckeas are outstanding nesting plants for birds – they are very dense and have lots of forks for nests. Neither are prickly. The *Austromyrtus* I have suggested for areas down the sides is a lilly pillie relative and very pretty. It loves part shade.

Banksias are critical food sources for many nectar-feeding birds as they flower in autumn-winter when little else flowers. If you don't like any of the plant groups you could grow paper-barks. The 'Summer' series of gum trees – ie, 'Summer Red',

'Summer Beauty', etc – are also excellent backyard trees. These are possibly our best flowering trees and quite small, too (5-7m). The Queensland firewheel tree (*Stenocarpus sinuatus*) is stunning. All attract and feed birds. Obviously you would substitute some plants in some areas of Australia (no design can suit everywhere). Your local nursery should be easily able to help you.

SOILS FOR NATIVES

If you can, please don't buy any commercially-available soils, particularly in Sydney and Brisbane, where these soils are problematic when they are sourced from alluvial silts. Your own soil from your own block of land is far better, even if it is very clayey.

If you must buy extra soil, get crushed rock. Most crushed

rocks are far better for growing native plants than bought soils. Remember that native plants live in broken-down rock out in the bush. They do not live in the alluvial silts that many landscape supply companies sell.

Crushed rock is often sold as road base. Fear not. Sandstone road base is fine for growing native plants, as are most other crushed rocks. Crushed limestone and old concrete are too alkaline, so avoid them. Most river sands are awful horticultural products, so avoid them too.

You can mix crushed rock with your own soil, but I prefer to use it as a 300mm deep layer on top of the soil. Cover it with leaf litter mulch to finish it all off.

No-one can guarantee that you won't get some pest birds. No-one can guarantee that native

birds will definitely come to your garden. But with a design like the one on page 38 you'll have every chance of fulfilling your dreams.

If you don't understand the pavilion thing in this garden design just go to the Burke's Backyard website at www.burkesbackyard.com.au and look up the Backyard Blitz fact sheet in the 2005 makeover archives, and find the 'Ultimate Outdoor Entertainer'. It has all the details.

And promise me that you will send your results, pictures and number of bird species spotted in to us in due course.

Oh, and an after-thought. I mentioned earlier that it is very naughty to feed kookaburras, magpies, currawongs and butcher birds, but it is fine to feed rainbow lorikeets with a lorikeet mix, and finches with seed.



My garden

Our present garden (featured in my book, 'Indigenous') was a barren, open area when we bought it, populated by many bird pests. Today, none of them visit our place. We have around 200 species of native birds visiting. We reduced our areas of lawn – taking care to replace large areas with longer, narrower areas.

Some people will advise you to plant dense, prickly plants with short flowering periods. As if! As if people want ugly, prickly backyards with nowhere for the kids to play or for the adults to party.

One person recently said that *Grevillea* 'Robyn Gordon' attracts noisy miners and thus leads to a loss of biodiversity. This sort of silliness represents a real threat to our future. For the record, I have created and lived in two gardens designed to attract native birds for the last 35 years.

The first was in Chatswood in Sydney. 'Robyn Gordon' was a major part of my plantings and we never saw noisy miners. What we did see was an annual increase of no less than five species of native birds: white-cheeked honeyeaters, silvereyes, blue wrens and eastern spinebills came in the first year after planting. 'Robyn Gordon' was the key plant in the garden. Why? Because it produced flowers (and thus nectar) in winter. Without it, our birds would have had to fly away – and that probably means starve to death.

In our second garden 'Robyn Gordon' also features prominently. Over 200 species of native birds attend but no noisy miners (even though they are in nearby gardens). We have no resident feral species, but occasionally get a visit from turtledoves who accompany the bronzewing pigeons, white-headed pigeons, brown pigeons, wonga pigeons, crested pigeons, diamond doves, bar-shouldered doves and peaceful doves. Not a bad list of companions.



Kangaroo paws



Wonga pigeon



Common bronzewing pigeon

Grevillea 'Robyn Gordon'



Beautiful bird-friendly garden

Don's bird-friendly native garden has lawns and cubbies where the kids can play, plus fun zones for adults.



1. BOTTLEBRUSH

We've included a mixture of bottlebrush here, such as *Callistemon* 'Harkness', *C.* 'Captain Cook' and *C.* 'Hannah Ray'. These are all excellent long-flowering shrubs whose nectar-filled flowers attract many different native birds.

2. BAECKEA

Baeckea virgata 'Miniature' is a small (1m tall), dense, rounded shrub which produces small white flowers. This is an excellent nesting plant for small birds. Its very dense foliage provides very good security for small native birds, and the plants have lots of forks for the birds to build their nests on. You don't need birdhouses, just nest-friendly plants.



3. LILLY PILLY

Syzygium francissii 'Little Gem', like the baeckea, is a great nesting plant for birds. A small shrub to about 2.5m tall and wide, it's dense from the ground up and is a top class screen plant for all but our frostiest zones.

4. GYMEA LILY

Doryanthes excelsa is pure garden drama for any garden designer, with its 1m clump of strap-like leaves and that tall flower spike (which can reach between 2-6m high) topped with a huge, nectar-filled flower head. A wide variety of nectar-eating birds will flock to visit this plant when it's in flower in spring and summer. It does well in most parts of Australia, except frosty areas. It's worth a try in the tropics.



5. AUSTRORYTUS

Austromyrtus inophloia is a lilly pilly relative that likes part shade (we used it down the sides). Its burgundy coloured new new foliage is very pretty. Afterwards the foliage fades to green tinged with copper.



6. GRASS TREES

Several potted grass trees (*Xanthorrhoea*) are on the paved area around the pool. These slow-growing plants need excellent drainage, and are very well suited to pots.



7 LOMANDRA

Lomandra longifolia 'Tanika' is an outstanding, low-growing (to 60-70cm tall and wide) native grass with olive-green leaves and cream flowers. It grows well in either full sun or light shade anywhere in Australia.



8. GREVILLEAS

We've chosen tropical grevilleas here, such as *Grevillea* 'Robyn Gordon', *G.* 'Honey Gem', *G.* 'Golden Lyre', *G.* 'Flamingo', and *G.* 'Pink Surprise'. Long-flowering and filled with nectar, all will attract many birds.



9. BANKSIAS

A mixture of banksias such as *Banksia spinulosa*, *B. serrata* and *B.* 'Hinchinbrook' (with unusual grey blooms) is an important inclusion, as these provide food in autumn and winter when food is scarce.

10. KANGAROO PAWS Fabulous native perennials in a range of colours. They thrive in Perth and Adelaide, but on the humid East Coast choose the hardy 'Bush Gems' series.

11. BIRD GRASSES An extremely important source of food for seed-eating birds: guinea grass and panic veldt grass – see page 40 for more on the best grasses for native birds.

12. LAWN AREAS There's plenty of lawn here, but it's not wide, to discourage birds such as noisy miners (who love wide lawns) taking over and driving other native birds away.

13. PAVILION Build a covered pavilion complete with barbecue, table, chairs and a fridge, put it by the paved area and the pool, and enjoy watching the native birds at play.

14-18. BUILT ELEMENTS 14. House. 15. Paving. 16. Pool. 17. Cubby house. 18. Compost bins 19. Shed.

Garden design by Don Burke, garden plan illustration by Pamela Horsnell