CREATING HABITAT FOR BIRDS

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Fact Sheet

No. 6

Birds are among the most visible of the wildlife of central and western NSW. Most people would be familiar with many of the common and obvious species. These include brightly coloured parrots, such as Red-rumped Parrots (or Grass Parrots) and Blue Bonnets; large birds, such as Wedge-tailed Eagles and Magpies; and birds exuding 'character', such as Apostlebirds (or Lousy Jacks) and Babblers (Happy Families). These species can be found around most homesteads throughout the region, and can be a joy to watch and listen to.

Unfortunately, many other bird species in central and western NSW are in decline, and indeed are disappearing from many districts. On several occasions over the course of the Darling Riverine Plains surveys landholders have told the story of the disappearing Bush Stone-Curlew. Mainly, they have commented on no longer hearing the mournful call of this bird in the evenings.

Birds play an important role in pest control. Eucalypt dieback is mainly caused by insect attack, and is linked to the use of fertiliser and land clearance. Birds are critical in maintaining tree health[1], as a healthy bird community removes between 50 and 70% of the leaf-eating insects from patches of farm trees[2].

SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVING BIRD HABITAT

RETAIN NATIVE VEGETATION

Existing native vegetation is in nearly all cases the best habitat for local bird species, and retaining these remnants is the best way to keep the bird species currently occurring on your property. A Birds Australia study found that bird diversity increased with the proportion of native vegetation on properties, while the number of exotic bird species decreased [1].

REGENERATE NATIVE VEGETATION

Increasing the amount of native vegetation on a property is of great benefit to native birds, as well as providing additional benefits in reducing dryland salinity and soil deterioration, and in maintaining long-term farm productivity[3]. Vegetation cover can be increased by:

- allowing the natural regeneration of trees and shrubs by excluding stock. This is generally only feasible if there are existing trees to provide seed, and may be especially appropriate if there are some seedlings already coming up.
- planting native, locally occurring trees and shrubs. Use seed from local plants if possible.

> Native vegetation is best retained and planted in patches rather than as isolated trees.

Patches of vegetation can support more species of birds than isolated trees, and if patches of vegetation are linked with native vegetation along windbreaks, rivers etc, woodland birds can readily move around. Larger patches of vegetation are better for birds (and other farm wildlife) than smaller ones. Bird diversity is known to decline in woodland patches less than 10 ha in size[1].

LEAVE FALLEN AND DEAD TREES

Standing dead and fallen trees provide valuable habitat for reptiles, bats and other mammals in addition to birds. Dead trees often have hollows, which provide suitable nesting sites for a range of native birds, such as parrots, owls and even small birds of prey, like Kestrels. The insects that break down fallen trees provide food for treecreepers, and fallen logs provide cover for Bush Stone Curlews. The removal of dead trees and logs for firewood and as a pest control measure also removes bird habitat. There are other ways to reduce fire risk and manage feral animals that can leave this valuable habitat intact. Bark and ground foraging birds are more abundant in woodland blocks with many fallen logs[1].

MAINTAIN OR INCREASE NATIVE SHRUB COVER

A healthy understorey of native shrubs and/or grasses is one of the most important factors in maintaining bird diversity. Unfortunately, shrubs are also easily lost from pastoral landscapes, and many areas that retain a good cover of native trees lack understorey shrubs. Native shrubs provide nesting habitat for small birds (prickly shrubs such as Needlewood are particularly favoured), and a range of food such as nectar, seed and fruit that are not always available from eucalypts. Modification of grazing regimes to allow natural regeneration of shrubs or planting can be used to increase shrub cover. Planting a diversity of shrub species is important. In particular, do not plant a large number of nectar-producing shrubs (such as Grevillea cultivars), as this may create a nectar-rich environment that can be dominated by a few, aggressive honeyeater species, particularly the Noisy Miner, which excludes other birds[1].

In a Birds Australia study, native bird diversity was higher in vegetation with two or more species of trees, and in sites that had regenerated naturally (compared with planted sites). Native birds were less diverse in tree-lots of exotic species, while exotic birds were more abundant[1].

KEEP VEGETATION NEAR WATER

Keeping the margins of farm dams, rivers and gullies well vegetated serves to improve the value of these wetland habitats for birds, and also to improve water quality[1]. Stock access can be restricted to small sections of farm waterways, and the remaining margins allowed to regenerate. Well-vegetated rivers, creeklines and farm dams usually increase the diversity of birds on a property.

If new farm dams or other water storage's are to be constructed, they can be designed to enhance the habitat for birds. Shallow areas of water for birds to feed, islands or dead trees for birds to roost, reed banks, and the retention of nearby trees with hollows to provide nesting habitat all improve the value of a wetland for birds.

With responsible farm management and by following some of the suggestions above, your farm can continue to be (or become) a haven for a variety of birdlife.

A handy website: http://www.npws.nsw.gov.au or http://www.birdsaustralia.com.au

[1] Barrett, G. (2000). Birds on Farms: Ecological Management for Agricultural Sustainability. Supplement to *Wingspan* Vol. 10, No. 4, December 2000.
[2] Ford, H.A. (1989). *Ecology of birds – an Australian perspective*. Surrey Beattie, Sydney.
[3] Walpole, S. (1999). Assessment of the economic and ecological impacts of remnant vegetation on pasture productivity. *Pacific Conservation Biology* 5, 28-35.

[1] Barrett, G. (2000). Birds on Farms: Ecological Management for Agricultural Sustainability. Supplement to *Wingspan* Vol. 10, No. 4, December 2000.
[2] Ford, H.A. (1989). *Ecology of birds – an Australian perspective*. Surrey Beattie, Sydney.