



Creating a Garden for Birds & Wildlife

Throughout our towns, cities and suburbs, our gardens are becoming an increasingly important refuge for our native birds, bees, and other pollinators. Making the most of our gardens, not only for us, but for our wildlife too, is easy. From sprawling rural properties, through to small suburban backyards, there are a few simple things you can do to create refuges for native wildlife. All creatures are looking for four key things; water, food, shelter, and family.

- **Water** is a simple one, but with some refinement, it can bring a much greater diversity of birds into your garden.
- **Food** is an obvious one. We need to provide food to eat, often through planting choices, but also with other garden features.
- **Shelter** might be less obvious, but generally means we need to create opportunities for wildlife to shelter from the elements, hide from danger and find cosy places to sleep.
- Providing opportunities for wildlife to start and sustain a new **family**, can mean providing opportunities for nesting, or providing the right combination of food and shelter to feed and protect their young.

Water

Providing water for birds is as simple as providing a water source such as bird bath or pond, but considering where and how to provide the water can make all the difference to your success. Different types of birds are looking for different things from their water sources, to enable them to drink and wash.



New-holland Honey-eaters at bird bath (Photo by Caroline Jones)

The first rule of placing a bird bath is to locate it in a position where it will be out of the direct sun for most of the day. This will help keep the water cool for birds to drink and bathe and help to reduce evaporation in hot weather. The second rule is to ensure you change the water regularly and keep your bird bath topped up. If you have a slow-dripping garden tap, placing your bird bath under it can keep it topped up, but it is important to ensure that it's not overflowing and wasting water. With observation, you'll get to know how often you need to top it up. How often you need to change the water will vary depending on the weather and level of use. In cooler weather, water will stay fresher for longer, and algae won't grow as fast. Regular water changes will also prevent the water from harbouring mosquito larvae.



King Parrot visiting small feature pond (Photo by M. Stagg, TREC)

The type and location of a bird bath can also impact who visits it. Smaller birds, like Superb Fairy-wrens, Eastern Spine-bills, New-Holland Honey-eaters, and Grey Fantails, generally feel more vulnerable than larger birds do. They prefer to have some cover when visiting a bath, so placing it under a small tree, a low tree branch, shrub or patio can make it more welcoming for them. They also need something to grip on to when visiting the bath, and need shallower areas to bathe in. Placing sticks, bricks or rocks in the bath can help small birds use the bath. Sticks from a eucalyptus tree are a good non-toxic option.

Food

Providing food for birds in your garden can largely be achieved with plants, but also with other garden design features. Many of our native birds don't actually feed on plants, but rather eat insects (insectivores), or meat (carnivores), or a mix of food types (omnivores).



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Food for Insectivores, Carnivores and Omnivores

When providing food for insectivores, carnivores and omnivores, a good first step is to think about how we can mimic nature. In nature, dead trees and fallen timber aren't considered a problem, but rather an opportunity. Branches and logs provide food and shelter for a wide range of insects and other small creatures, such as skinks. In turn, leaving/placing logs and branches on the ground around your garden, encourages insects and small creatures. This attracts insectivorous, carnivorous and omnivorous birds, such as Kookaburras, Magpies, Tawny Frog-mouths Fantails, Butcherbirds, Kingfishes, Willie-wagtails, Thornbills and Pardalotes.



Rainbow Bee-eater eating insect (photo by Dorothy Jenkins)

Another way to provide food for insectivores, is through insect attracting plants. You may have witnessed, especially in the evening, birds like Wattle Birds, Fantails, Flycatchers and Willie-wagtails, flying about, darting and driving through the air above shrubs or trees. What they're doing here, is catching insects on the wing. Eucalypts (*Eucalyptus spp.*), Tea-tree (*Leptospermum spp.*), Bottlebrush (*Callistemon spp.*), Banksia (*Banksia spp.*), Hop-bush (*Dodonaea spp.*), Bursaria (*Bursaria spp.*), and Fringe-myrtle (*Calytrix spp.*) are great insect attractors.

Mulching your garden is a third, easy, method for providing food for insectivorous, carnivorous and omnivorous birds. There are a wide range of insects and small critters that will eat and live in mulch, and considering the type of mulch can make a big difference. The commonly used 'pine bark mulch', which is made of chipped pine wood, is slow to break down, will often become hydrophobic (will repel water) as it ages, and will bind together over time, creating an almost impenetrable layer for insects and small critters. Again, we want to look to nature for clues for what will work. In the bush, naturally forming mulch consists of fallen leaves, twigs, bark and other plant matter. This is what we want to mimic in our native gardens. Choosing a mulch consisting of range of plant matter types is best. Mulch

made from fallen eucalyptus trees or branches, including the leaves, twigs, bark etc., is a great option. This is sometimes called "eucy mulch" or "forest-floor mulch". This type of mulch will provide a diversity of food and shelter for insects and small critters, and encourage beneficial fungi to grow in your soil, improving conditions significantly for your plants. Many of our native plants will even form symbiotic relationships with fungi, making plants stronger and helping them to grow faster. You may need to replace eucy mulch every couple of years or so, but the extra effort will ensure your garden and birds will be much happier.

Before choosing your plants, be sure to check out our guide to 'Weeds Of Central Victoria', and ensure your plants aren't environmental weeds in your local area. Even native plants can be weeds!

Food for Nectarivores, Seed Eaters, & Omnivores

When it comes to feeding birds with plants, we're looking at two main categories of birds; nectarivores (nectar feeders) and seed eaters. Some nectarivores will also eat fruits, so be sure to net fruit trees. When netting, it is important to use fine netting, so as not to entangle wildlife. Because of this risk, is illegal in Victoria to use netting with holes greater than 5mm x 5mm in diameter. For more information visit www.vic.gov.au/illegal-fruit-netting-causes-rapid-rise-wildlife-harm.



Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoo in Banksia (Photo by Ian Jury)

Many of the species which largely eat nectar or seeds are also somewhat omnivorous, so the information in the relevant section below can also help sustain them (especially during seasons where nectar and seed availability are sparse). Similar to when you're providing water for birds, the size of the birds will inform the types of plants you provide. A larger nectar eater or seed eating bird will need different types of plants to a small nectar or seed eating bird. The greater diversity of plants you have, the greater diversity of birds you'll attract.



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Eastern Spinebill feeding on Grevillea nectar (Photo by Ian Jury)

For larger nectar eaters, such as Rainbow Lorikeets, Wattlebirds, and Blue-faced Honeyeaters, trees and shrubs like Eucalypts (*Eucalyptus* spp.), large flowered Grevilleas (*Grevillea* spp.), Banksias (*Banksia* spp.), and Bottlebrush (*Callistemon* spp.) are favourites. Many of the smaller nectar feeding birds will also feed on these plants, but the larger birds can sometimes dominate, reducing opportunities for smaller birds.



Yellow Faced Honeyeater feeding on Eucalypt nectar (Photo by Ian Jury)

To create a niche for smaller nectar eating birds, such as Eastern Spinebills, New Holland Honeyeaters, and White-plumed Honeyeaters, provide small flowers, which only small bills can access. Plants such as many species of Correa (*Correa* spp.), Appleberry (*Billardiera* spp.), Heaths (such as *Epacris* spp.), Emu Bush (*Eremophila* spp.) and Kangaroo Paw (*Anigozanthos* spp.)

If you have limited space for plants, check out our 'Creating a Small Native Garden' flier for some tips.

When providing seeds for birds to eat, again, the size of the seed will determine the types of birds that will eat them. For larger seed eating birds like Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoos, Galahs, Rosellas, and King Parrots, many species of Wattle (*Acacia* sp.), Hop-bush (*Dodonaea* sp.), Banksia (*Banksia* sp.), and Sheoak (*Allocasuarina* sp.) are among the favourites. Amongst the smallest seed eating birds in Mitchell Shire, we have Red-

browed Finches, Zebra Finches and Diamond Fire-tails. Native grass and sedge seeds make up a large proportion of a finches diet. Species like Poa (*Poa* sp.), Sedge (*Carex* sp.), and Kangaroo Grass (*Themeda triandra*) are good options.

Shelter

With a little extra thought, the plants you choose for your garden can create sheltering opportunities for birds. Prickly shrubs give small birds a place to hide from predators, who don't want to put their face into the prickles. Dense, prickly shrubs, are an easy addition to your garden. Good options include Hedge Wattle (*Acacia paradoxa*), Tree Violet (*Melicytus dentatus*), Spreading Wattle (*Acacia genitsifolia*) and Hooked Needlewood (*Hakea tephrosperma*). For larger birds, providing a tree to sleep in at night can help (called roosting). Even a small to medium tree can become a favourite roosting tree for local birds. In general, having some cover overhead will makes most birds feel more comfortable in your garden, as they are on the lookout for birds of prey in the sky above (who might be looking to eat them for lunch).

Be mindful that once birds and other wildlife begin visiting your garden, they can also become easy prey for roaming cats. If you do have a cat, ensure to prevent it from roaming freely. You can even consider creating an enclosed outdoor area for them (such as a 'catio'). A cat's instincts will still make them hunt in the daytime, no matter how well fed they are. To help protect birds and wildlife, Mitchell Shire Council has a 'cat curfew' local law. This law means cats cannot be roaming freely at night. It also means that any resident who doesn't want cats roaming on their property (at any time of day), can set traps on their property to catch roaming cats (to be collected by a Council ranger). For more information regarding Mitchell Shire Council's 'cat curfew' local law: www.mitchellshire.vic.gov.au/residents/animals/cat-ownership/cat-curfew.



Golden Whistler in Prickly Tea-tree (Photo by M. Stagg, TREC)



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Family

Providing opportunities for birds to start a family can be really rewarding. To do this, you need the right combination of food, shelter and nesting conditions for raising young. By combining tips already covered about food and shelter, then adding conditions for nesting, you may be lucky enough to have baby birds in your garden. For small nest-building birds, providing a tree or shrub, and nesting material, can really help. The dead foliage from plants like Tussock Grasses (*Poa sp.*) can be good for building nests, so be sure to scatter plant material around the garden after pruning. E.g., Superb Fairy-wrens will often use dead grass and nest in Hedge Wattle (*Acacia paradoxa*). Fallen leaves, twigs and branches are perfect nest material for many birds, so don't 'clean-up' around your garden too often.



White-faced Honey Eater nest, Tallarook (Photo by _____ TBA)

For hollow nesters, you may want to install nest boxes. This can even be done on small gardens, especially for small birds like Pardalotes. The size and style of nest box will determine the types of birds that can use it. If there are particular bird species you notice around your garden, why not research the type of nest box they will like and install one in your garden. If you don't have an appropriate tree, some nest boxes can even be installed in man-made locations, such as under a veranda.



Young Eastern Spinebill eating nectar from Correa flower (photo by Dorothy Jenkins)

Other Types of Wildlife

When creating a garden for birds, you'll also attract beneficial insects, mammals and reptiles to your garden. For example, choosing to plant a small to medium sized tree such as Silver Wattle (*Acacia dealbata*) for seed eating birds may also bring small Gliders (Sugar Gliders etc.) to your garden, cutting the bark of the tree with their sharp teeth, to feed on the sugary sap.



Sugar Gliders in Wattle tree (Photo by Patrick Kavangah)

Choosing a Eucalypt for nectar feeding birds might also attract Ringtail Possums to eat the leaves. You might install a nest box for small birds, and find amazing microbats or frogs moving in. In return, the microbats and frogs will eat mosquitos. By choosing Flax-lily (*Dianella spp.*) for seed and fruit eating birds, you could attract stunning Blue-banded Bees to the flowers, to do their fascinating and loud 'buzz pollination'. By using insect attracting plants, and a good mulch mix, shimmery little Garden Skinks might bask on sunny days, darting away to hide amongst the mulch. Choosing Kangaroo Grass (*Themeda triandra*) for grain eating birds may also attract beautiful butterflies (Kangaroo Grass is an important host plant for over 13 species of butterfly in Australia).



Blue Banded Bee visiting Fringe Lily (Photo by Jean & Fred Hort)

Once you start creating a diverse native garden, you become an important 'link in the chain' for local birds and other native wildlife. Even a balcony can incorporate a range of potted native plants. So, let's all do our bit towards local biodiversity!

By M. Stagg – Senior Landscape Architect, TREC Land Services



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DESIGN PLAN

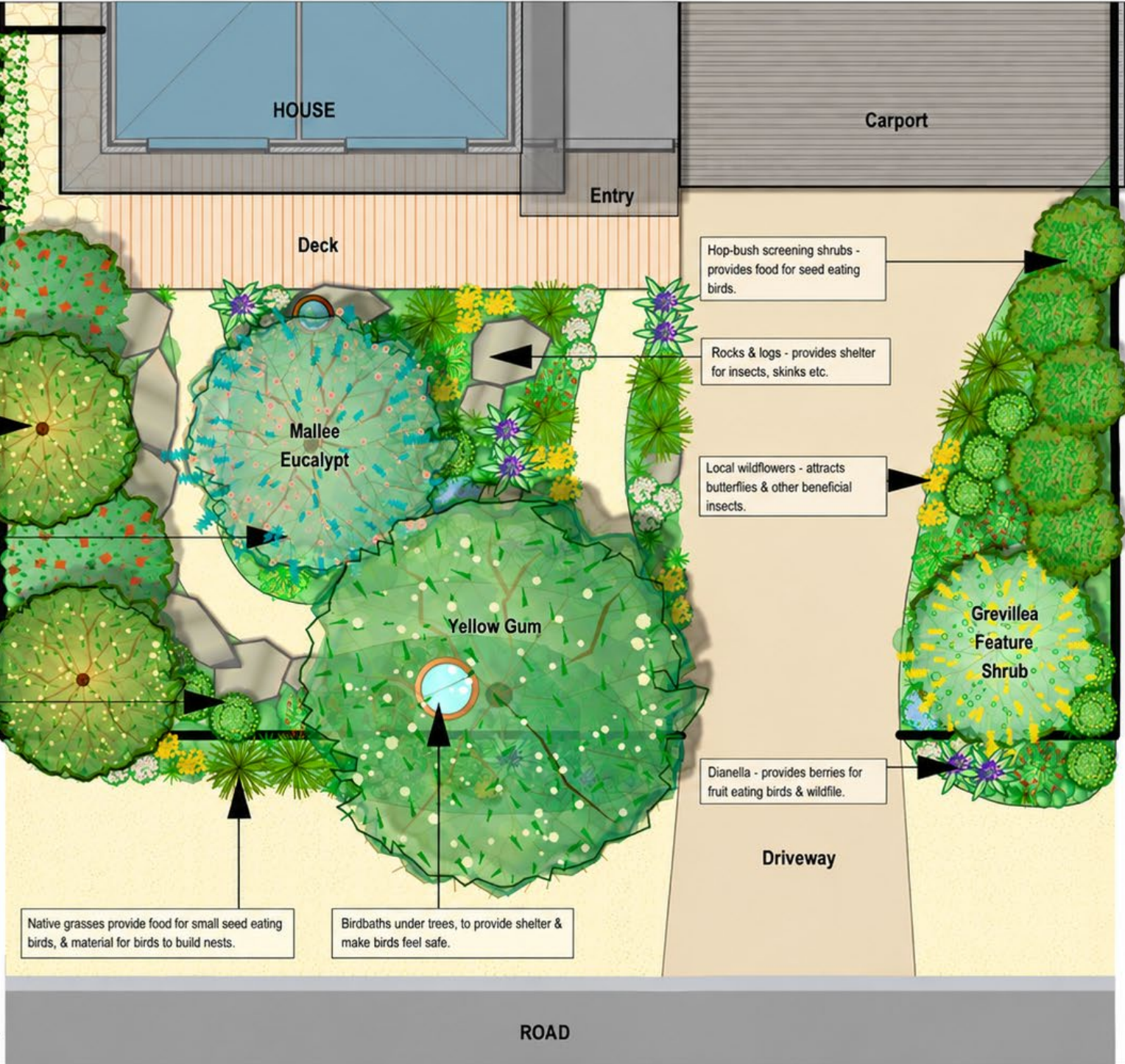
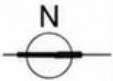
Birds & Wildlife Garden Example

Appleberry (climbing plant) on trellis - provides nectar for birds to eat.

Mix of Mallee Eucalypts & Banksias along northern boundary - provides shade & shelter. Also provides insects, nectar & seed to feed birds & other wildlife.

Including even small native trees will provide shelter, nesting opportunities, and food for birds & other wildlife.

Groups of dense, prickly shrubs, planted away from paths (so you don't brush against them) - provides shelter for small birds.



HOUSE

Carport

Entry

Deck

Mallee Eucalypt

Yellow Gum

Grevillea Feature Shrub

Hop-bush screening shrubs - provides food for seed eating birds.

Rocks & logs - provides shelter for insects, skinks etc.

Local wildflowers - attracts butterflies & other beneficial insects.

Dianella - provides berries for fruit eating birds & wildlife.

Native grasses provide food for small seed eating birds, & material for birds to build nests.

Birdbaths under trees, to provide shelter & make birds feel safe.

Driveway

ROAD