

tips & tools

NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT



Encouraging birds onto your farm

A rich diversity of birds usually indicates a healthy ecosystem. Birds help control pest insects in pastures and crops, and make farms more attractive places to live and work. Native birds are good 'indicator' species that can be encouraged by establishing and protecting natural habitats and conserving the biodiversity on your farm.

Tactics

Protect existing bird habitat

- Protect existing habitats around blocks of remnant vegetation, giving priority to the largest areas and those that retain a complex understorey that encourages birds.

Create new bird habitat

- Re-create local habitat blocks in areas where remnant vegetation has been lost (see also *Native vegetation 3: Revegetating the farm*). Include a proportion of shrub and understorey plants, as birds need these for protection and a source of food. Many small birds (such as fairy-wrens, scrub-wrens and thornbills) will only survive where there is at least 30% shrub and understorey plants.
- Plant a selection of flowering species to attract honeyeaters and lorikeets. However, too many nectar-producing shrubs may result in the area being dominated exclusively by red wattlebirds, minors and New Holland honeyeaters.

Enhance all bird habitat areas

- Aim for large patches of native vegetation, linked by wide strips of planted vegetation. Enlarge small areas to better accommodate those birds that need large habitat areas.
- Existing remnant areas should also be enlarged, aiming for at least one major habitat area (10 hectares or more) on the farm to encourage birds and animals that cannot live in small patches.
- Small remnant areas may be enhanced to provide specific habitat requirements not possible on a large scale.
- Assist natural regeneration of remnant vegetation in fenced areas (refer to *Native vegetation 2: Improving the value of*

Key benefits

- Learn how to attract more birds onto your farm to help control pests
- Improved bird habitat areas encourage other beneficial native animals onto your farm
- Bird habitat areas have the potential for other low-impact uses, such as tactical grazing and seed production

remnant vegetation). Where regeneration is poor, plant or direct-seed plant species native to the area and preferably from local provenance seed.

- Plant native grasses and shrubs among remnant trees that lack understorey plants.
- Avoid uncontrolled grazing of bird habitat areas. Understorey species are particularly vulnerable to overgrazing, and bird diversity is reduced by 25% when understorey is removed. Carefully managed grazing can also be beneficial for weed control, fire hazard and vermin habitat reduction.
- Retain large, old trees with hollows, even if they are dead, for shelter or nest sites as one in five Australian birds requires nest hollows for breeding. Or create an artificial nesting habitat specifically for birds that are rare or threatened in your district.
- Natural vegetation is never tidy! Fallen trees and leaf litter are required by some bird species for protection while others need it to supply their food sources.
- Ensure water is available to birds. Water points are best provided near, but not within, bird habitat areas. Most of the rarer birds can travel some distance to water or do not need a permanent water source at all. Finches are the exception, as they require a protected water source very close to their habitat.
- Control foxes and feral cats using routine shooting or baiting programs. These predators are encouraged by your efforts to improve bird habitat.

Create links between areas of bird habitat (patches of brush)

- Establish corridors of at least 20 metres wide (5-7 rows), to maximise bird access between patches of bush and to increase habitat value and breeding opportunities. While most large birds such as magpies and galahs readily fly between neighbouring habitat areas, most small birds (such as wrens) will not cross large open paddocks. Make use of natural corridors such as waterways and roadsides to create these links.

Foster wetlands for waterbirds

- Protect natural wetlands, particularly those that have varying water depths and areas that dry seasonally. These provide the habitat required for a diverse food supply. Create wetlands if none currently exist on your property. In some cases, this may mean blocking drainage lines or waterways that were installed many years ago.
- Maintain native vegetation around water – corridors along rivers, creeks and small gullies are particularly valuable.
- Retain dead trees and logs in or around the wetland for perches and nesting purposes.

Manage native grasslands

- Fence areas of remnant native grassland.
- Use tactical grazing and spell at strategic times to allow grasses to set seed and seedlings to establish.
- Apply fertiliser carefully. Higher nutrient levels in native grasslands can encourage invasion by weed species.

Bird facts

- Ravens, magpies, Willie wagtails, cockatoos and crested pigeons have increased as a result of tree clearing on farms, but most species have been disadvantaged. Some are now threatened, especially the honeyeaters and understorey birds.
- Corridors enlarge the available habitat and enable movement of small birds and other animals between patches of brush.
- Yellow robins, hooded robins and some species of hawks and owls need large areas of bush, more than one hectare.
- Large, old trees and hollows are vital for wildlife, being required for shelter or nest sites by 57 species of birds (kingfishers, tree martins, pardalotes, some ducks and most parrots and owls), bats and small arboreal mammals. Trees less than 70cm in diameter rarely contain hollows.
- Birds seek old, larger trees when they are flowering, in preference to younger trees.
- Many species of birds cannot breed or occupy areas that are devoid of ground cover.
- Logs and leaf litter are vital for many bird species, including bush stone-curlews and spotted nightjars. Other birds (robins, flycatchers, thornbills, treecreepers and babbler) feed on and among logs and fallen branches.
- 21% more woodland birds are found in naturally regenerated vegetation when compared with sites where trees have been planted.

- Exotic birds have been found to be five times more diverse in sites where exotic trees are planted.
- Magpie-larks and all seed-eaters need water, but most will travel quite a distance to obtain it.
- Most insectivorous birds do not require a permanent source of water. If water is provided, their numbers may be suppressed by highly territorial species such as noisy minors, or dominated by galahs and other parrots.
- Action taken to increase birdlife on your farm will also provide a habitat for other native animals such as bats, bandicoots, sugar gliders, lizards, flower wasps and frogs, and will help conserve native plants.
- Tree, shrub and grass cover helps protect waterways from nutrient run-off and provides cover for water-loving birds.
- Populations of foxes and feral cats are likely to increase when more cover is provided in bird habitat areas. Ground-nesting species are particularly vulnerable to attack and efforts to encourage these species will be undermined by these pests.

Management tips

- Bird habitat areas have the potential for other low-impact uses, such as tactical grazing, seed production, honey production, timber cutting or emergency/occasional stock shelter.
- A program of routine shooting or baiting can help control feral cats and foxes. Coordinate campaigns with neighbours for a more effective approach.

Further information

This publication is part of a series of *Tips & Tools* on biodiversity that provides further details on managing native species within a grazing enterprise. For a copy of the *Biodiversity Tips & Tools* series call the MLA producer hotline 1800 675 717 or email publications@mla.com.au

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