

Last Meeting... report by Geoff Gosling

THE BIRDS AND THE BEES, FLOWERS and the TREES, with Bill Martin

Bird photographs are by Alan Nicol, and used with permission



Bill Martin

An expectant crowd gathered at the Bermagui Community Centre for the March meeting of the SE Group of the Australian Plants Society to hear a talk about the birds and the bees – well, mostly about the birds.

Ornithologist and former National Parks Ranger, Bill Martin, addressed the gathering about how to attract birds to the garden, with hints on feeding regimes and identification thrown in along the way.

The first point to be noted was the important role that gardens play in local biodiversity, including providing homes for various wildlife.

Birds are only one form of wildlife which also includes reptiles, amphibians and insects.

Birds are generally the most easily seen and noted with their calls, flights and colours but the others are there and are part of the attraction for the birds. Bill encouraged each person to enjoy each form of wildlife for its own sake and what it contributed to the garden ecology. As in all things, balance is what is required – sufficient of each form to keep the others, particularly the pests, in check.



Everybody's favourite, Superb Fairy Wren



White headed Pigeon



Bill also noted that it was fairly easy to attract birds to a garden as all they look for is food, water and shelter.

On the question of food, it is probably best to have plants that provide food (nectar, seeds, seeds, insects) rather than buying “bird food” which may or may not meet the birds dietary requirements. Not all birds are seed eaters and not all seeds are healthy for birds e.g. sunflower seeds have a high oil content that may not suit the bird’s digestion. In addition, a tray of seed will attract different sorts of birds that are in competition. For example, the king parrots may be the first to turn up but they are quiet and non-aggressive and easily pushed out by sulphur crested cockatoos which in turn can be intimidated by rainbow lorikeets.

Brown Cuckoo Dove



Magpies and kookaburras are often fed meat morsels but the morsels are muscle meat (choice pieces of chicken or beef) which by itself is insufficient. These birds are better suited to eating the whole animal with its blood, sinews, skin or feathers and other bits to give a full range of nutrients and promote health.

Leadren Flycatcher

Denise Krake mentioned that during her time at Healesville Sanctuary Victoria, she saw many birds with poor skeletal development due to poor diet. Indeed Kookaburras which had feasted on prime meat from well meaning gardeners presented in such a state that they were unable to support their own weight.

It is more important for gardeners to provide water than food. Bill cited one example where the property owner had seven watering points for birds, all set up for automatic refilling. Food is generally available even in dry spells but in urban or semi-urban areas water is harder to come by.

Another popular garden visitor, Grey Butcherbird

A shallow container with sloping sides is better than a deep container. Birds like to sit on the edge and dabble rather than dive in for a swim. If a deep container is provided, rocks should be placed in the bottom to provide a perch or roost for users.

Another important point about watering points is that they should be placed in an area where the birds cannot be ambushed by an animal or reptile hiding in a bush or undergrowth nearby. Keep growth around the container pruned right back and provide a perch close by so that the birds can land on the perch, check the area for predators and then flutter onto the container without fear. The other advantage of this is, of course, that the gardener can have a clear view of the container and see who is using it. Some of the spectacular photographs shown by Bill were taken of birds visiting a watering point in a suburban garden by a photographer sitting inside in an armchair!



Grey Fantail attracted to a shallow watering point

Some basic equipment will add to your enjoyment. Bill recommended a comprehensive book and a good pair of 8 – 12 times magnification binoculars as an ideal start. Not everybody wants to pursue their birding hobby to that extent but it does make life easier.

There are degrees of bird watching ranging from the informal watcher just enjoying the movement and colour that birds bring to the garden and perhaps trying to identify the species through to a more hectic pursuit of setting yourself targets of birds to see and record, maybe on a semi-professional basis.

In between these extremes, there are the relaxed observers who watch and record bird visits either at home or on walks, and the beginnings of keeping lists, for example, a simple list of how many species visit an area.

This may lead to a keener interest and working harder to see unusual species in the area, for example the migratory species that only come at certain times. At this stage, the observer may become more rigorous with recording the observations in a list, maybe breaking the individuals into sexes, family groups, or specific time periods. Beyond this, observers may be starting to move into the twitching stage and become more competitive (my list is longer than yours) or specialising in behaviour, food or migration patterns.

And there are a lot of migrants along the coast. There are birds (eg Currawongs) that move down from the hills during winter; those that travel thousands of miles to breed; those that are starting to move further south because of habitat loss through urbanisation or climate change. Of course, there are also those that are taking advantage of the growing human population on the coast that is providing habitat that better suits the bird and so their population expands. What we regard as a nice native garden, the birds regard as a terrific home. The thing to avoid is encouraging pest species, particularly the Indian Mynah which is slowly making its way south. Unfortunately this incursion is probably inevitable however there are dedicated groups working to prevent this.



Yellow faced Honeyeater

landscape to make a corridor.

The NSW Department of Environment and Heritage started the 'Land for Wildlife' movement as a voluntary scheme to preserve privately owned areas for wildlife. One of its aims was to provide



**Scarlet Honeyeater
on Xanthorrhoea flower spike**

The third ingredient in attracting birds is shelter. This does not have to extend to providing nest boxes (although some people may wish to do that) but does require a range of plants from trees to grasses and everything in between. Although gardeners may not want thorny and prickly shrubs, the smaller birds love them. The little birds (superb fairy-wrens, fantails, Red-browed firetails) require thick shrubs in which to shelter from larger birds (kookaburras, magpies) and nest. Larger birds require larger shrubs and trees. Equally important to the individual trees and shrubs is providing a corridor of greenery that the birds can move along. This is becoming more difficult with housing development usually starting by clearing large areas of all vegetation but as gardens develop is possible to join with neighbours or 'borrowed'

corridors for wildlife, including birds, within a region. Those members with larger land areas may wish to contact the Department or council to determine the current status of this program.

Bill wound up his talk by showing photographs of a large number of species and giving some clues to identifying the species and individuals within the group.

He pointed out that it is notoriously difficult to be authoritative as birds are not that cooperative in the wild and we may only get a quick glimpse in which to record pertinent information.

Differentiation between some birds may be a matter of the colour of the eye iris for example in one it may be red and in another white.



“Look, there it is over there”, says Bill



Some of the group gather to hear Bill as he points out an easily recognisable sound, and describes the bird as a Striated Thornbill, one of a number of LBB's (Little Brown Birds) often heard but difficult to determine which is which

His talk was followed by a walk around the Bermagui North Lagoon (Walawaani njindiwan) boardwalk and headland to see the different habitats and birds in that area.

It was an enjoyable finish to an informative gathering. Vice President Geoff offered a vote of thanks on behalf of members, both at the meeting venue, and later at the lagoon.