

Brush-turkeys in your Garden

Love them or hate them they are birds full of character.....

Some residents of urban areas seem to think they are being invaded by brush-turkeys and consider them large, boisterous birds who seem determined to destroy the garden by moving mulch all over the place and uprooting new plantings.

However, there are ways to live with these birds in your garden and many residents have come to admire them.



Why are we seeing more of them in Sydney?

Many areas are increasingly providing suitable habitat for brush turkeys. Brush-turkeys prefer to live in rainforest or wet sclerophyll forests with plenty of shade and moisture. When we create lush gardens with lots of trees, shrubs and mulch, we create the ideal environment into which brush-turkeys can move. They will also be attracted to gardens with open compost heaps. Brush-turkeys are fond of pet food, such as cat and dog biscuits or chicken pellets, and will take advantage of food left lying around. They have even been known to chase pets away from their food so they can eat it themselves.

Residents across Sydney are seeing an increase in brush-turkeys and many will be seeing them for the first time in their area. Large-scale fox control has been carried out by local government and the National Parks and Wildlife Service in the past few years. It is thought that by reducing fox populations more brush-turkeys have been able to survive, and this has allowed brush turkeys to return to their former haunts in the Sydney area. However brush-turkeys may also be heavily preyed-upon by cats.

The brush turkey is a bird to admire.

Brush-turkeys (*Alectura lathamii*) are 'mound builders' and are descendants of birds once found in the ancient land mass of Gondwana. Their closest relatives now live only on islands of Indonesia, the Philippines, New Guinea and the Pacific region. Australia is lucky enough to have three "mound builders" - the other two being the Orange-footed Scrubfowl and the Mallee Fowl.



Small children love the brush-turkey, which is easily noticed because of its large size and unusual appearance. It is easily recognised by its deep black plumage, bare red head and neck and its unusual, broad, flat, fan-like tail. The bird's wattle (a fleshy lobe hanging down from the base of its neck) varies in colour with its age, gender and location. In the southern parts of its range, the male brush turkey has a bright yellow wattle, females and younger birds have dull yellow wattles.

Breeding occurs from August through to December or January. Eggs are incubated in large mounds of vegetation. The male brush-turkey builds a very large mound comprised of decomposing vegetation, leaf litter and soil. This can be up to 4-6 m wide and 1-1.5m high. The females are attracted by a well-maintained mound and one or more birds will then lay eggs inside the mound. The eggs are a bit larger than a chicken's egg and laid in intervals of two to three days.

The decomposition of the vegetation in the mound produces heat. The male brush-turkey checks the temperature of the mound by digging holes and inserting his bill. He then removes or adds layers to the mound to ensure the optimum temperature is maintained being between 33°C and 35°C. Mounds are re-used every year with the dominant male bird maintaining the best locality. Males defend their nest and the territory around it from other males. However, quite often the eggs that the male tends in his mound have been fertilised by another male.

Incubation and temperature regulation is the only assistance the parents provide to their offspring. After around 50 days, the young brush-turkeys hatch. They are fully feathered and able to run and even fly. However their first job is to dig their way through the layers of the mound, into the open air. This can take a few days. Newly hatched young resemble quail with huge legs and feet.

Loss of eggs and mortality of chicks is high. Animals such as large goannas often raid the mounds stealing the eggs and disrupting the incubation temperature. The chicks fall prey to goannas, snakes, birds of prey, foxes and domestic cats and dogs.

Living with Brush-turkeys

The least stressful way to live with brush-turkeys is to simply acknowledge how lucky we are to have such birds living in our local areas. It has been found that around 75 per cent of people tolerate them in their back yards.

We can do things to ensure that the destruction in our gardens is minimised. However, remember that the brush-turkey is a protected native animal and attempts to harm the bird or trap it without the appropriate permit are illegal. This includes damaging or destroying the eggs in a mound.

Don't encourage brush-turkeys into your garden

Firstly discourage them from the garden by reducing food sources. Don't leave food out for other native species and household pets. Keep piles of spare mulch and leaves covered with tarpaulins. Cover the compost.

Encourage them to relocate their mounds

Don't waste time trying to destroy a well-established mound or chase the bird away. Once a mound is established, waging war on a brush-turkey will be more damaging to you than the bird!

However some people have had success in forcing the birds away from their yards in a number of non-harmful ways. You can encourage a resident brush-turkey to change location, by trying one of the following (but not in the breeding season):

- Cover the mound with a heavy duty tarpaulin, black plastic or shade cloth.
- Carry-out selective pruning of the shade-producing vegetation cover above the mound to let in a good bit of glaring light. Brush-turkeys require suitable shade to assist in maintaining their mounds at optimal temperature. By reducing the shade cover, they may move elsewhere.
- Try and encourage the bird to use a different part of the garden by building a compost mound under good shade cover. The brush-turkey may be attracted towards the area, and may eventually take over the compost mound as its nesting mound.
- An idea that has been effective for some people is the strategic placement of a large mirror which could drive the bird away. The bird moves on after a couple of days of fighting its image (another perceived male in its territory) in the mirror.

Planning your garden

Once well established, a garden is not as vulnerable to destruction as newly planted and mulched areas. When planting and mulching new areas, the best way to deter brush-turkeys is to make it really hard for them to rake the ground. The following suggestions may help prevent destruction of newly planted or mulched areas.

- Time your work between when the brush-turkey has ceased to tend the mound and before he returns to reuse this mound or create a new one.

- Prevent new plants from being dug up by placing small rocks at the base of the stems. Tree guards can also be used to protect individual plants.
- Try covering the area with large heavily branched sticks and tree loppings. These may make it difficult for the bird to get into the area and rake.
- Consider your landscaping materials. Use heavier mulches which are not easily raked. Landscapes which use rocks combined with heavy planting of low growing or clumping plants like *Dianella* and *Lomandra* can provide a barrier and also good habitat for other native animals.
- Develop the garden in stages, protecting plants at each stage.
- Deter brush-turkeys raking by placing a layer of diamond-wire or chicken-wire below the surface of the mulch. Allegedly they detest the feeling of raking wire, thus will seek optimal habitat elsewhere. However some birds persist which can be distressing to watch.



More information:

Learn to embrace brush-turkeys and find out more about them.

Wildlife Queensland <http://www.wildlifeqld.com.au>

Birds in backyards <http://birdsinbackyards.net>

Mound-Builders (2008) by Darryl Jones and Ann Goth. CSIRO Publishing

Article written by the Habitat Network – www.habitatnetwork.org

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