

An introduction to creating small bird habitat

By Sue Stevens, Bev Debrincat and Louise Brodie

Watching small birds in your garden is a delight. You might catch sight of the red flashes as small red-browed finches dart through bushes, or hear female wrens chattering amongst themselves about the wonderful blue coloured male showing off. These are some of the delights you experience when you have small birds using your garden as their home or playground.

The natural habitat of many small birds (birds that are less than 20 cm long) is patches of dense vegetation within bushland. With urban settlement, little dense vegetation remains and what does remain is in fragmented and isolated pockets. This leaves very few areas in which small birds can live, breed and take shelter when threatened.



These last refuges may be all native plants or all weed plants or a combination of both. In our urban areas sadly often the small birds are only found in the “waste land” areas which are totally overgrown with weeds. In this situation what is bad is in fact good. Bad weeds do make good habitat! In fact, in many urban areas, they are the only habitat small birds have left. This tells us a lot about the requirements of small birds and something about how we should be managing our gardens, parks and bushland. It illustrates the structure of what we need to provide if we wish to save small birds, such as, superb and variegated fairy-wrens, white-

browed scrubwrens, silvereyes, spotted pardalotes and eastern spinebills from local extinction.

When a habitat pocket, that is, an area of vegetation which is being used by small birds, is discovered, **it should be protected - even if it is 100% weeds**. It needs to be protected until alternative native plant habitat has been created **and has been seen to be in use by the small birds for at least an entire year**, including a breeding season.



Structure of habitat

Small birds need protection from predators such as dogs, cats, foxes and larger birds such as ravens, currawongs and butcherbirds as well as from aggressive competitors such as lorikeets, wattle birds and noisy miners. Many Australians, in their efforts to attract birds to their garden, have planted showy, nectar-producing plants that attract aggressive honeyeater birds that compete with, and drive

away, smaller birds. To keep safe, small birds generally live in and take refuge in dense, multilayered vegetation. By studying the structure of the vegetation, in which small birds are found, we may be able to reproduce these habitats utilising local native plants in bushland and parkland areas, and a mix of native and non native plants in our home and community gardens.

The vegetation structure of areas used by small birds is mostly closed and dense around the outside while being more open and protected with lots of twiggy branches on the inside.

- A typical “waste land” habitat area consists of weedy plants such as privet in the centre, surrounded by lantana and with an outer covering of morning glory and/or other vines. Herbaceous weeds such as grasses and fennel are often also present. Altogether this makes a dense and varied vegetation structure, offering protection and a food source.



Fairy-wren foraging next to typical weedy habitat—dense twiggy plant covered by weed Morning Glory

- A typical bushland area providing small bird habitat consists of native plants such as Hakea or small Melaleucas together with weeds such as lantana which have invaded the bushland and weed or native vines. The small birds living here will make short flights out into bushland areas with a more open structure to feed. Adjacent areas of bracken and grasses are also used. These areas will always be close to a protected area into which the birds can return if threatened.



Find the white-browed scrubwren in this weedy habitat



Fairy-wren nest site in dense cover of native Hakea.

Creating Habitat

To create a habitat haven, study the areas used by small birds then try reproducing what you see using local native plants. Include several 'layers' of vegetation with the highest layer being no higher than a tall shrub or small tree.

Bushland, park land and "wasteland" habitat creation

In larger areas, such as bushland buffer zones or "wasteland", select a location close to an existing small bird habitat area but far enough away from it so as to not disturb the small birds. Select a location maybe 10-20 metres away. This will be the start of creating a bigger habitat corridor in which these birds will be able to move safely.

The steps:

- Check with the land owner or manager that you can create a habitat area.
- Densely plant a central area with a number of shrubs that will grow to 1.5 to 2.5m tall. These could include *Cassinia*, *Leptospermum*, local (Sydney) species of *Grevillea* (these are small flowered, and don't attract a lot of attention from the larger honey-eating birds), *Ozothamnus*, small *Melaleucas* and *Pomaderris*. Plant the shrubs close together, so there is no space between them once they reach a mature size. We recommend planting as close as 30 cm apart or even closer for smaller shrubs and groundcovers. Avoid planting tall trees, especially eucalypts and berry-producing trees, as these will attract predatory and aggressively competitive birds.
- Around the central planting add some spiky plants, such as *Hakea*, *Bursaria* and *Acacia ulicifolia*, creating a protective circle.
- Finish with an outer circle with a rich variety of native grasses such as *Microlaena*, *Themeda* and *Danthonia*, and small shrubs and ground covers, such as *Dianella*, *Centella*, *Pratia* and *Commelina*. These lower level plants add an additional food source close to the protective sanctuary you are creating, and provide habitat for insect food.
- You can also plant vines such as *Hardenbergia*, *Eustrephus*, *Clematis*, *Pandorea* or *Kennedia*. Vines can help to create a quick protective cover over a habitat area. Allow the vines to climb over the shrubs.
- Vines can also offer additional nesting sites when planted to grow over existing native taller shrubs and small trees or over dead or dying weed plants such as Privets.

Garden habitat creation

In your garden:

- Start with a small area that you can manage easily. Perhaps pick an area at the back of your garden which is not visited often. A back fence or corner might be a good place to begin. Ensure there are no gaps in the fence for cats to enter.
- Plant several larger shrubs along the fence, and then plant outwards using

prickly shrubs and some smaller shrubs, finishing with some grasses and groundcovers.

- Outside a window you could reverse this pattern, to provide safe shelter for the birds while you can watch them inside their safe haven from your window!
- You can choose species such as those natives listed above, and you could also include a lemon or orange tree. Some exotic shrubs, especially bushy ones such as Plumbago or prickly ones, can be useful. Exotic climbers such as Banksia rose can also help to create good small bird habitat.
- Preferably choose shrubs with small white, cream, or yellow-coloured flowers as these attract insect pollinators (rather than honey-eating birds).
- Make sure you are not using plants which are noxious or environmental weeds in your area.
- You may already have some suitable shrubs in your garden that you can use as a basis for your habitat area. Have a listen and look - there may already be small birds using these shrubs. Also observe the structure of your existing shrubs and think about whether a larger bird like a currawong could enter. If it can be penetrated, it is not good small bird habitat. However you could add more plants to create a denser area.

To maintain your habitat area in your garden you can lightly prune the taller shrubs occasionally. This will cause the plants to add additional branches and thicken the foliage especially on the outside, providing greater protection. Use raked up leaves for mulch on your garden. This mulch will be a good source of insect food. Think about mowing your lawn less, especially when grasses are seeding. Small birds like to forage on the lawn when they are safe from predators and have a dense shrubs close by to retreat to.

Many small birds are insect-eaters and they will help to control insects in your garden. Avoid using pesticides. Firstly, they will reduce the number of insects available for food for the small birds, but secondly if an insect is poisoned this passes to the bird. The poison from one insect cannot kill a bird, but after a time poisons build up within the birds and may result in death or inability to reproduce. Pesticides also kill beneficial insects – and there are more species of these than pest insects! Beneficial insects are often

working to keep the pest insects under control, but pesticides kill them all.



Start small and enjoy watching the changes in your garden. Place a chair to relax in where you can sit quietly to watch and delight in watching your habitat area grow and the activities of the birds.