

Creating habitat for wildlife in Hunters Hill

After creating a small native garden in the inner west of Sydney, we were ready for a new challenge. We were also inspired by videos we had made for the Birds in Backyards web channel BIBY TV. While planting natives is always worthwhile, we wanted to do more for wildlife, especially local birds. All Australian birds face challenges, but small birds have been particularly affected by urbanization and loss of habitat. Buying a large block in a bush corridor not far from the CBD seemed like the perfect project.

It is one thing to know a fair bit about natives; it is quite another to make decisions for a large area. I'd like to say that the year-of-delay was all good management, but it was largely a case of not enough time (we are not yet retirees) and being overwhelmed by the task. However, that year was invaluable. From autumn 2012 to autumn 2013 we simply observed everything – the wildlife, the plants (natives, exotics and weeds), the seasons, and how they all interact. We took photos of the site at different times of the day and year and recorded our bird sightings. We also explored our native nursery options, walked in local bushland, watched web videos about creating habitat (including our own productions, with new eyes in a sense) and checked out various resources on the *Habitat Network*. The bottom line was to avoid making changes that might be detrimental to existing wildlife.

It was great to see so many bird species visiting our block or the bush between us and Lane Cove River. A non-exhaustive list includes the usual suspects, such as the Noisy Miner, Kookaburra, Currawong, Raven, Grey Butcherbird and Rainbow Lorikeet, but also the Brush Turkey, King Parrot, Crimson Rosella, Eastern Rosella, Galah, Tawny Frogmouth, Powerful Owl, White-throated Treecreeper, Eastern Whipbird, Sacred Kingfisher, Golden Whistler, Variegated Fairywren, Spotted Pardalote, White-browed Scrubwren and Brown Thornbill. However, we also noticed that the seemingly-infrequent small birds rarely entered our upper garden (where the larger or more aggressive birds dominate) and mostly used the bush-and-weed corridor near the river.

In autumn 2013 we began work on the lower section of the garden with the aim of creating a wonderful habitat for various small birds. By then we knew exactly what natives were in this section (only six!) and had forged a path through the mess of trad, asthma weed, turkey rhubarb, fishbone fern and panic veldt grass. All weed removal was by hand only, except for cut-and-paint poisoning of privet and Mickey Mouse plants. Most of the lantana was beyond our fence; this functioned as vital cover for the passing small birds. We have also temporarily kept a Tobacco Plant as birds like roosting in it and it provides shade for the young fern garden and seedling replacement trees.

In the process, we discovered why that part of the Lane Cove River bush corridor was so degraded. Many decades ago a major sewerage pipeline was built through that area (including our lower garden), creating a large amount of rubble (and burying the original native seedbank). Perhaps the native plants could have returned slowly (via birds and wind dispersal) if not for storm water run-off in and near our block. Instead, that area had decades of weed growth! The only real competitors were similarly-weedy natives *Pittosporum undulatum* and *Glochidion ferdinandi*. While they are excellent mid-storey plants, too many of them can impede growth of small dense natives. (This is where lantana plays a role, although the ultimate goal is removal.)

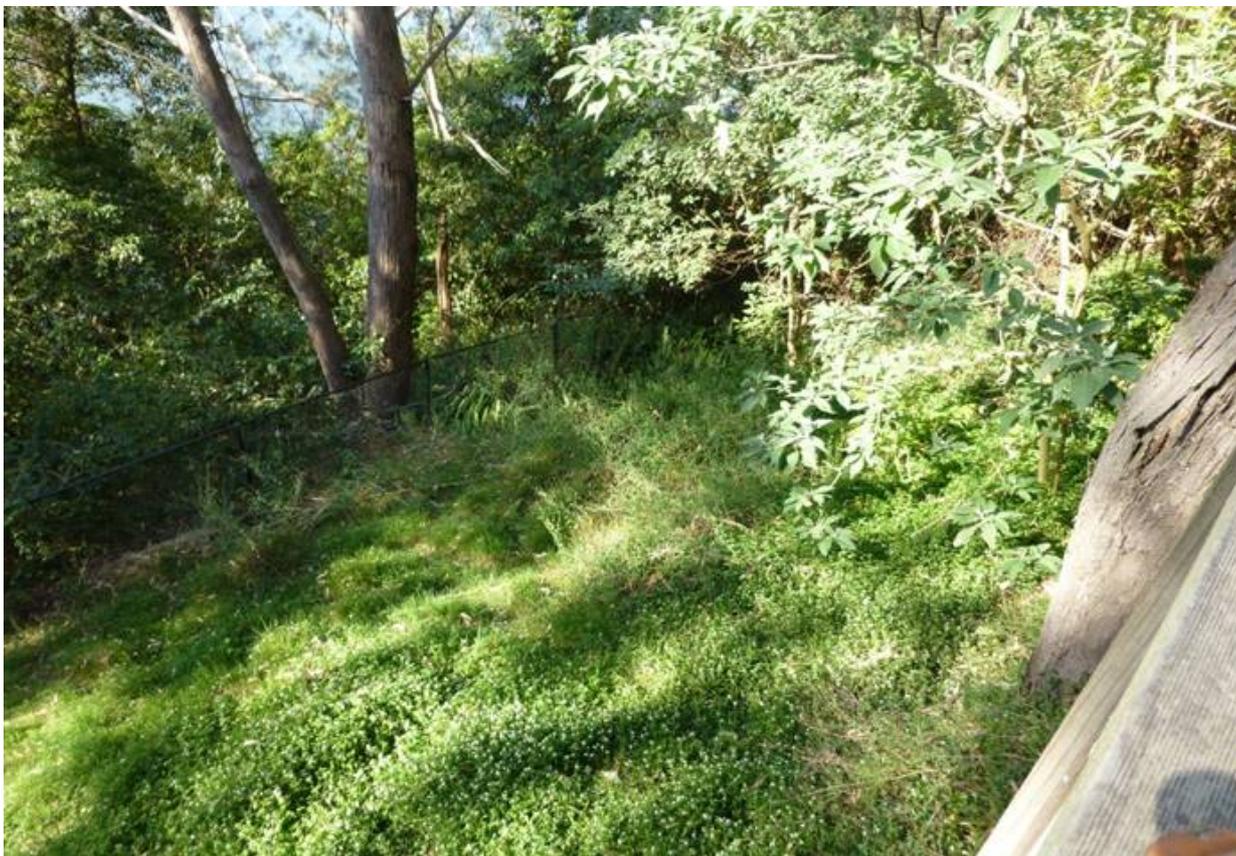
Gradually we came to understand the different soils and light and moisture levels across that lower section, and planted accordingly. The vast majority of plants chosen are indigenous to the local area, but where there was doubt, being a non-weedy Lane Cove River catchment area plant was sufficient. Our first priority was creating a fern garden in the storm water zone to reduce the spread of weeds. Other plants were chosen for their food and habitat utility for small birds. We also supplied a bird bath via a terracotta tray on a stump. Along the way,

extra information and motivation came from Hunters Hill Council brochures (and some free plants) and the Habitat Stepping Stones program.

Initially the small birds would nervously use the bird bath and flit back into the lantana outside our fence. But as the ferns, prickly shrubs (e.g. *Acacia ulicifolia*, *Hakea sericea*), grasses and vines (e.g. *Kennedia rubicunda*) grew, the small birds became more confident and extended their visit. These days the White-browed Scrubwrens and Variegated Fairywrens frequently forage across the entire re-planted section, while the other small birds visit regularly and use at least part of this habitat. For instance, White-browed Treecreepers use the birdbath and roost in our sandstone cave. And this year our flowering Grevilleas (*speciosa* and *sericea*) and *Correa reflexa* have attracted a male Eastern Spinebill. Overall, our sightings of small birds have increased! We have also noticed a lot more lizards (especially the Eastern Water Skink) and native bees (and other insects) in our habitat haven.

Occasionally the Noisy Miners try to chase away the small birds, but the extra cover (particularly *Lomandra longifolia*) allows the small birds to hide and re-emerge. The one bird we haven't enticed into the garden yet is the Eastern Whipbird. The shrubs are still too small to provide cover for this shy bird. Currently they prefer the weedy section beyond the fence. (We have started reducing weeds there but we are doing it slowly and in a mosaic fashion so that plenty of habitat remains while our natives mature. Every day we note the bird species and numbers; the whipbirds are still passing through regularly.)

Photo series for the main part of the lower section (where we started first):



Before the makeover - Spring 2012



Early Autumn 2013



Mid Autumn 2013



Spring 2014



Winter 2015



Winter 2015 – ground level view