

Habitat protection for small birds in Honeysuckle Reserve, Jannali **By Steve Anyon-Smith, Bushcare Volunteer**

A report prepared a little over ten years ago that assessed the potential for conservation and rehabilitation of Honeysuckle Reserve had this to say:

“The weed infestation that has a tight grip of the reserve has altered its appearance. It is typified by a thick weedy understorey, which has prevented access to parts of the reserve and reduced the recreational amenity. Such degradation of the area has encouraged further abuse and the reserve is probably viewed as a wasteland which could be used for development”.

There have been various efforts over the years to rehabilitate the reserve. Some have resulted in lasting improvement whilst others have had no positive impact at all.

Naturally we view the world with our own eyes – these are the only ones we have! Most people interested in bush regeneration have an aversion to exotic plants, and so do I. We see these plants as the enemy – to be removed and replaced as fast as possible. Now imagine you are a white-browed scrub-wren (this is not easy without non-prescribed medication but anyway....). White-browed scrub-wrens have no understanding whatsoever about ‘good’ or ‘evil’ vegetation. They eat insects and are programmed to survive as best they can.

I made a conscious decision to undertake all my volunteer effort in this reserve whilst imagining that I was a small bird. Imagining you’re a small bird is a fairly easy thing to do if you are a social imbecile and have spent much time watching them in the field. Small birds need food, nesting sites and nesting material, shelter from predators (mainly other birds and cats), and for resident birds in isolated reserves like this one, there needs to be enough habitat for them to maintain genetic fitness. There needs to be at least a few breeding pairs. We will look at each of these requirements in terms of this reserve.

Food. There is a rich food supply in the reserve for small birds. Most of them eat insects, but some such as the red-browed finch rely almost exclusively on seeds. I have already suggested that no bird knows which of its local plants are indigenous and which are not. This is very important. Exotic plants are being used by small birds. We can strategically replace these with native plants that can provide a similar or better quantity of food, but not all at once. The biggest threat to small birds in isolated reserves is for their food supply or shelter to disappear. If this reserve loses, say, its few pairs of white-browed scrub-wrens they will never return. They do not migrate and they can’t fly very far or very high.

Nesting sites and nesting material. The best nesting sites are those where small birds don’t get eaten or their nests destroyed by wind or rain, or by passing feral animals like us. These sites are most likely found in dense weedy child and dog-proof understorey, or in known nesting situations that certain birds will generally favour. The red-browed finch is a resident of the reserve with its numbers steadily increasing. It nests in Hakeas for fairly obvious reasons.

It isn't much use having a great nest site but nothing from which to build the nest. Premium nesting material is less common than you might imagine. Christine Guthrie and I watched one day as three different bird species (little wattlebird, spotted pardalote and white-browed scrub-wren) simultaneously stripped bark from a brown stringybark (*Eucalyptus capitellata*). *The particular tree is now dead but harvested seeds have been propagated and reintroduced.*

Shelter. Obviously small birds need shelter for reasons other than nesting. Many will not tolerate wide-open spaces and simply will not cross them. Others will if they have to, but this exposes them to all the normal hazards. Increasingly they are exposed to noisy miner* attack. Corridors are essential – even if they are composed of totally exotic vegetation that could very easily be cleared.

Genetic fitness. I don't know enough about the subject to make too many noises. But I would suggest that at least a few breeding pairs would be needed of each resident bird species to have any long term chance.

Why is this reserve – and many others just like it – important? Firstly it provides habitat for resident small birds. In Honeysuckle these include superb fairy-wrens, white-browed scrub-wrens, spotted pardalotes and red-browed finches. Secondly it provides feeding habitat for winter visitors. These include golden whistlers, role robins, grey fantails, brown thornbills and silvereyes. Importantly it provides a rest and re-fuelling stop for summer migrants, principally black-faced monarchs and rufous fantails. And lastly it provides food and shelter for regionally nomadic and opportunistic birds that include various honeyeaters; such as scarlet, New Holland, eastern spinebill and yellow-faced.

It is interesting to compare similarly sized reserves in terms of small bird diversity. There are many reserves with better or larger habitats than Honeysuckle Reserve, and yet most lack the common small birds present here. One reason might be that a single catastrophic event took place to wipe out all the small birds. A fire might do this but another possible cause might be the well intentional but poorly planned and executed bush regeneration team that destroy a critical element of the habitat across the whole bushland remnant. That is why you can still see many areas of Honeysuckle Reserve that are infested with exotic weeds.

*** A note on noisy miners.**

Noisy Miners (and their only close relative, the bell miner) are a recent addition to the avifauna of the Sutherland Shire and much of Sydney. They are a native bird often confused with the unrelated Indian (or Common) Myna, which is not native to Australia. Indian Mynas have not led to the exclusion of a single native bird in areas they inhabit – not one. They may have reduced the numbers of some species – after all they eat stuff, but they do not persistently and aggressively remove other birds.

Noisy Miners, on the other hand, are truly bad news to small birds. Best-selling author Tim Low describes them as the “most aggressive bird on earth”. Noisy Miners have removed all but some parrots, magpies, butcherbirds and crested pigeons from my leafy back garden. They breed almost continuously. The only habitats they do not occupy are dense forest and very open sparsely vegetated areas. So it is critical that

small reserves have core areas that are not Noisy Miner friendly. It is best if these are in the middle of reserves as Noisy Miners love edge habitat. So far the small birds of Honeysuckle Reserve have survived this latest threat, but I am afraid this is a “work in progress”.