



CHAPTER 1

THE BENEFITS OF GARDENS AND THEIR BIRDS

Some sage once declared that the best things in life are free. I'll pick no argument with that assertion for although the creation of a garden can involve a substantial outlay, particularly if you're starting from scratch, the benefits that even a small outdoor space of your own can provide are immense and can cost no more than a breathe of fresh air.

A well-maintained garden dramatically increases the appearance and thus the value of your property. With decorative fencing, a dense hedge, or a confusion of shrubs and trees, it can shield you from the noise and chaos of the outside world and from the preying eyes of neighbours and any strangers who might wander by. The plants that thrive in a garden release oxygen into the air and absorb carbon dioxide, thus improving the quality of the air that you breathe. Tall shrubs provide shelter from cold winter winds and trees generously offer their welcoming shade on summer days that are almost hot enough to singe a scarecrow's ragged trousers.

Scientific research has verified what every gardener has always known – that pottering around in a garden and spending some quiet time in the company of plants reduces stress and keeps anxiety at bay. Studies have also shown that watching birds and listening to their songs help to reduce stress and promote feelings of happiness, so it's obvious to all that when you combine gardening with the simple pleasure of birdwatching your mental health will improve. You might not feel right up there on cloud nine if the black dog of depression has been your unwelcome companion, but if you're merely feeling a little down in the dumps or are burdened by a headful of worries then a garden in which birds are regular visitors will serve up the best medicine to chase the blues away. And when you see new life emerging from seeds that you've planted, and spot new growth sprouting on plants that you've lovingly tended, you'll feel as happy as the legendary King Midas when he first discovered that everything he touched miraculously turned to gold.

Establishing and maintaining a garden requires a considerable amount of physical effort, but digging and raking, pruning and weeding, pushing a wheelbarrow, and a host of other garden tasks provide a pleasurable way to keep fit without having to pay for the privilege of visiting a gym. Your body, with time spent outdoors and exposed to sunlight, produces vitamin D that plays a role not only in countering stress but also in reducing the risk of developing cancer and osteoporosis. And when you toss in the fact that a garden can provide you with a supply of fresh and nutritious food, the positive benefits of gardening become even more apparent.

Any garden, large or small, can be a place of tranquillity where, as you get your hands in the dirt and watch the antics of visiting birds, you can escape from the stress that the modern world might have inflicted on your life. Abandon your phone and other digital devices that seem to demand your attention day and night and you'll soon discover that, in a garden, you can step back in time and imagine that you're in an era when life was less complicated, for everything that happens and everything that needs to be done in a garden has barely changed over the centuries. Plants still grow and produce their colourful flowers using the same natural processes that they have always utilised. A spade is still the same implement that our ancestors used



Rainbow Lorikeet is among the most colourful of Australia's garden birds.

hundred of years ago. Weeds that continue to appear with the same predictability can still be removed by hand or with a primitive device such as a hoe. And while you might tolerate an electric blower to move leaves from one place to another you can abandon modernity altogether and adopt the old and silent method of cleaning up the garden with nothing more than a traditional rake to gather up the detritus that nature repetitiously tosses around the garden. Fallen leaves can be used as mulch or added to a compost heap where worms and beneficial microorganisms work their magic to turn an accumulation of organic debris into fertile soil – as they've done since the days before dinosaurs strode across the landscape.

A garden can be a quiet place where you can be alone to dream, to meditate, and to enjoy the beauty of nature and come face to face with some of the wild creatures that appreciate the serenity of a garden too. You might see butterflies drifting by on a subtle breeze, bees enthusiastically gathering pollen from gaudy flowers and a grasshopper munching on verdant foliage, but the most prominent creatures that you'll encounter in a well-designed garden will be birds that will be happy to visit a tranquil corner of the world that they erroneously assume you have created for their pleasure alone.

Birds bring a host of benefits to every garden, large or small, and the good news is that they provide their extensive range of services free of charge.

Bird songs

I'm not one to appreciate being woken before the sun has even ventured beyond the horizon and yawned into gleaming action, and I don't always appreciate the early morning call of an Eastern Yellow Robin. Its monotonous *beep, beep, beep* 'song' negates the need for an alarm clock as this glamorous little bird invariably greets the new day before the black doona of night has been dragged from the sky. "Get back to sleep and leave me in the Land of Nod a little longer," I plead as I pull the blankets over my ears to muffle the bird's repetitive call, but my grumbling entreaties go unheeded and, conceding defeat, I inevitably get up with the birds.

Once I'm wide awake, I have no further complaints when other early birds start the day with their songs. The Laughing Kookaburra welcomes the dawn with its iconic cackling. The Grey Shrike-thrush serenades each new day with its melodic harmonies and an Australian Magpie belts out its inimitable call that I'm confident is an accurate prediction of the weather that lies ahead. The varying and delightful songs of birds are guaranteed to put me in a good mood, but as each day begins with music of the most natural kind I'm not the only one to feel as happy as a fly in a dustbin.

Entertainment

In a well-designed garden, even a very small one, there will often be more than a melody from an unseen avian performer to bring a smile to your face at the start of the day. If you plant a flowering shrub or other bird-attracting plants within sight of a window, or close to a patio or a verandah where you routinely relax with a cuppa, you'll be able to watch the comings and goings of birds from your own comfortable and convenient bird hide. If you've made the right planting decisions you might be treated to a free performance as birds, completely oblivious to your presence, feed on the flowers of shrubs or rummage through foliage for a tasty meal. Most birds, once they've adopted your garden as their home or have become regular visitors, demonstrate little or no concern about human activities. When they feel safe in their adopted habitat and seem totally unaware that they're being watched, or simply don't regard your presence as a threat, they may lose all their inhibitions and get down to some amazing antics, and even engage in a little hanky panky with a mate – right before your eyes! And if the gods of nature are smiling down on you some feathered friends might even nest nearby so you can watch their frenetic comings and goings as they raise their family right on your doorstep.

When you're watching the activities of birds and enjoying their often subtle songs it's easy to relax and toss aside any cares and worries that might haunt your thoughts – until something abruptly jolts you back to reality. You might suddenly realise, as I often do, that you've been so absorbed by some avian activities that you've lost track of time and are running late for work or for an appointment, that you've left the saucepan on the stove for too long, or that you were totally oblivious to what your partner or someone else in the vicinity had been saying. "The aliens have landed and asked if they can come in for a cuppa!" my husband might sarcastically say when I'm totally absorbed by the antics of my feathered friends and haven't heard a word he's uttered about some more serious topic. "Tell them I'll be there in a minute!" I reply – and he knows instinctively that when the birds have captured my attention any attempt at meaningful conversation is definitely off the agenda.



Nectar-feeding species, such as Noisy Friarbird, are great fun to watch.

Companionship

My husband is an incredibly patient bloke and a wonderful companion who tolerates my varied obsessions with good humour and never gives even a muted snigger of derision when he hears me talking to the birds that visit my garden. He never utters a word, and neither do the birds. Despite the lack of any verbal response, birds can provide valuable companionship, and that's something that can be particularly welcome if you live alone or experience hours of solitude when other members of your household are getting on with their lives elsewhere. Wild birds can help to combat one of modern society's greatest afflictions – loneliness. If you feel a twinge of that sad complaint when you get up in the morning in a house where there's little human noise and activity, you certainly won't object when a bird greets you with its song or simply brightens up your day with its presence. Birds that have become familiar with your routine might, as soon as they notice that you're up and about, flutter out from the garden's vegetation and perch on a verandah railing, a windowsill or on the branch of a nearby tree. "How are you today?" you might enquire as you spot the arrival of the welcome visitor. "And what have you been up to?" You might be greeted by a muted twitter in response to your friendly chatter, or you might receive nothing more than a quizzical stare as the bird tries to

comprehend your words. If you find yourself talking to some feathered friends don't be concerned, for there's nothing wrong with that. Talking to birds is not a sign that you're a few sheep short of a flock, so there's no need to feel the slightest twinge of embarrassment about what other people might think if they catch you engaging in a one-sided conversation.

You'll eventually get to know your regular visitors as though they were old friends. You'll recognise their familiar songs and their exuberant chirping, twittering and squawking voices. You'll know which is their favourite perch when they have time to take life easy, and with many birds adopting a routine for bathing you'll soon be able to predict the time of their arrival at a bird bath or other garden water feature.

If you provide food for visiting birds you'll quickly realise that many are creatures of habit, especially when free snacks are on offer, and with a regular invitation to dine some birds will become the best of mates in no time at all.

Nature's little helpers

Birds certainly aren't bludgers who enthusiastically accept anything that's free without volunteering to do a scrap of work in return. No siree! If they discover a quiet and welcoming garden environment they'll become some of the best little helpers that you could wish for. They'll quietly go about their work with barely a twitter of complaint, and all they ask for in return is good living conditions and a reliable supply of food and water.

Insect control

Some birds, with irrepressible enthusiasm, hunt for insects on the ground, among vegetation, and in the air, in the process playing a vital role in controlling pest species. Fortunately, most birds are not particularly fastidious and will feast on a variety of invertebrates, including mosquitos, caterpillars, grasshoppers and other bugs and beetles that might be unwelcome in a garden. Nature's battalions of feathered helpers will keep populations of garden pests such as aphids, scale insects and mealy bugs under control too so that you may never even realise that these unwelcome insects had even been there. If you assume that you can do a great job of eradicating insect pests all by yourself then think again before you mix up some organic brew or grab a can of insecticide, for your intervention might do more harm than good. Any healthy and balanced ecosystem, including that of a garden, should include a wide range of insect species – the good, the bad and the positively ugly – all of which are important

Many birds feed on insects such as grasshoppers.



members of the wildlife community, and rather than massacre every little critter that you encounter leave the onslaught to others. It's definitely a task for the birds and one that they fulfil with pleasure.

If the population of one specific insect species increases so that it is in almost plague proportions you might have to take some drastic action, but if you want to share your garden with birds, as well as reptiles and amphibians that also consume insects, then you'll need to take a back seat and actually encourage insects into the garden by creating a desirable habitat for them and establishing plant species that will lure them with the promise of pollen, nectar and everything else that their little hearts desire.

Insectivorous birds and even honeyeaters that routinely add insects to their menu will have little hesitation in adopting a garden as the focal point of their universe if it contains the insects that they favour. They will silently and discreetly dispatch unwelcome insects, as well as some spiders, and consequently keep the populations of pest species at an acceptable level, thus alleviating the need to use any insecticides. Some birds, such as White-winged Chough and Apostlebird, hunt for their prey on the ground, and as they scratch frenetically with their feet and bills in an enthusiastic search for grubs they toss organic mulch in every direction, turning it over and over, mixing it with the soil and uprooting small weeds at the same time. They deserve a pat on the back for their efforts, for while they're busily eradicating both insects and weeds their efforts also guarantee that mulch decomposes far quicker than it would have done without the invaluable assistance of these most welcome of birds.

Some birds are happy to spend their lives mooching around on the ground while others prefer to rummage for food in clumps of grasses or among the foliage and flowers of shrubs. A garden that has at least one large tree will occasionally attract birds of prey such as kestrels and hawks that are always on the lookout for a takeaway meal, and like owls and frogmouths that work the night shift and that appreciate large trees in which to doze during daylight hours, they'll diligently hunt for rats and mice and will eagerly add reptiles and amphibians to their dining menu too.

Pollinating flowers

Several species of honeyeaters will home in on nectar-laden flowers, particularly those of Australian native species such as grevilleas, callistemons and banksias. There's no such thing as a free meal however, and in return for a few sips of nectar the birds unwittingly pollinate the flowers that they visit. Some insect-eating birds, those that snatch their prey from flowering plants, are similarly cooperative and spread pollen from flower to flower as they inadvertently gather nature's golden dust on their plumage and carry it to the next flower that they visit.

Spreading seeds

Birds that feast on small fruits and seeds, such as Mistletoebird and Australasian Figbird (that needs more than figs to satisfy their appetite), inadvertently take on the role of an assistant gardener. They deposit any undigested seeds, together with a dollop of faeces as nutritious fertiliser, in any spot where they take a momentary rest, and the seed of new life is planted. That's all very well in a large garden where there's ample room for new plants to flourish, but some might develop into large trees so if space is at a premium in your garden you'll need to keep an eye out for any uninvited and perhaps unwelcome plants that sprout unexpectedly, particularly after rain.



Weed control

Crimson Rosella.

Some small birds, such as finches that feast primarily on seeds, are happy to offer gardeners a helping hand too. They consume large quantities of weed seeds, and every seed scoffed means that there will be one less weed to be removed at a later date. Ensure that your garden has some low and dense vegetation and finches and other small birds will move in to take advantage of the welcoming habitat that such plants provide. Add some decorative grasses, such as native *Poa* species or non-invasive species of fountain grass (*Pennisetum* species), and the birds will be as happy as caterpillars in a cabbage patch. Such plants will not only provide birds with material for the construction of their nests but will also produce an abundance of small seeds. The birds will appreciatively feast on this natural source of food before tucking into a second course of weed seeds, and there'll be plenty of avian activities to entertain you, particularly if birds adopt your garden as their home and eventually have ravenous chicks to satisfy.

Education

Observing the birds that take up residence in your garden, as well as those that are merely casual or infrequent visitors, gives you the opportunity to learn more about their habits, behavioural characteristics, feeding preferences, courtship rituals and methods of nest construction. And as the seasons come and go you'll see the changes in the plumage of some species and watch in awe as some juveniles gradually replace their drab plumage with the more gaudy adult attire.

Many Australian birds are facing the threat of extinction and although the rarest of species might never flutter into your corner of the world a bird-friendly garden is the perfect environment in which to introduce the younger members of your family not only to the pleasures of gardening but also to wildlife. Teaching children about plants, about the lives of birds, and about how to care for a garden and its diversity of wild residents is a positive step towards protecting the natural environment that is essential for the survival of all living creatures, including humans.