This fact sheet explains which bush birds may be present or absent from your place and what you can do to encourage a greater diversity to live with you.

The drier, settled areas of southern Tasmania, compared to other places, still have much of their original bush. In many instances the clearing for agriculture and urban development has produced a mosaic of habitats including highly modified treeless paddocks through to fully vegetated hills, in which many species of birds still thrive. But bird species begin to decline or will be absent where intact patches of bush are lost or if this mosaic becomes too highly modified.

About 60 species of birds live within the bush of southern Tasmania. Common groups of species include honeyeaters, parrots, robins, pardalotes and whistlers. Some, like Pink Robin and Scrubtit, prefer wet forest and others, such as Forty-spotted Pardalote are rarely seen outside their preferred specialist habitat.

Some species live in the same bush all year, whilst others migrate in the late autumn to increase their foraging range, descend in altitude or cross Bass Strait to spend their winter on mainland Australia. Bush habitat also supports birds of prey, water birds in creeks and wetlands, and a small number of other species using heaths or grasslands on the forest fringe.

Visit a local patch of intact bush and discover the multitude of bird species that could live with you.

STRUCTURE IN THE BUSH

Understorey vegetation provides a range of feeding, sheltering and/or nesting habitats. Loss of understorey through clearing, over-grazing or too frequent burning makes it unsuitable for many bush birds.

Logs, fallen branches, twigs and litter provide habitat for countless invertebrates like insects, spiders, millipedes, and earthworms that process this debris into soil. As most bush birds consume invertebrates at some stage of their life cycle they depend on these structural elements.

Intact bush usually has a full range of structures – a varied understorey of grasses and herbaceous plants, small and tall shrubs and different aged trees especially large old eucalypts with hollows.

BUSH BIRDS’ HOMES

Just like us, birds have three basic needs:
1. Their preferred food.
2. Places to rest and hide from danger and inclement weather.
3. A safe place to raise young.

And just like us, different species of bird have their preferences in where they find these basic needs.
**IMPROVING HABITAT FOR BUSH BIRDS**

1. As the highest priority, retain extensive areas of bush with structurally diverse vegetation, good understory and especially bush that is close to waterways.
2. Where extensive areas are structurally degraded, restore missing structural elements by excluding or reducing grazing and browsing pressure, or using fire or disturbance to encourage seedlings.
3. Retain habitat patches larger than 20-30 ha and restore missing structural elements.
4. Retain smaller patches, copses and even single paddock trees, where they can act as 'stepping stones' between habitat patches.
5. Increasing the size of bush remnants by buffering them with new plantings may also help to increase bird diversity, but only if the remnants are structurally diverse.
6. Weeds — especially gorse and blackberry — may be extremely important in retaining bird diversity in areas where native understorey has been lost. A cautious and staged approach to their control is necessary if it is the only remaining habitat.

**STRUCTURE IN THE LANDSCAPE**

- **Home gardens** in any area can be rich in birds, especially if it is close to native vegetation. Areas typically dominated by the introduced Sparrrow, Starling and Blackbird. Planting a mix of flowering plants provides food for new birds, especially if it is close to native vegetation but are typically dominated by the introduced Sparrrow, Starling and Blackbird.
- **Woodlands and forests** with intact layers of vegetation support the richest array of bush bird species including pardalotes, robins, whistlers, honeyeaters, thornbills and cuckoo. The mix of species will vary depending on the vegetation e.g. Golden Whistler and Dusky Robin prefer drier areas whereas Olive Whistler and Pink Robin prefer wet areas.
- **Paddocks with same trees** may provide feeding and nesting sites for species such as Forest Raven, Magpie, Eastern Rosella, Noisy Miner and Kookaburra. Raptor like Brown Falcon survey the landscape for prey atop paddock trees while other species use trees and small copse as ‘stepping stones’ between favoured habitats.
- **Bush edges** are favoured by Scarlet Robins, Brown Thornbills and Superb Fairy-wrens, species that may feed in the open but like bush nearby where they can roost and escape from danger.

**PATTERNS OF HABITAT IN THE LANDSCAPE**

- **Large areas of bush** with little human disturbance have the most bird species as they contain all structures that birds need: older trees with canopies, mature trees with full leaf canopies, younger trees, tall and short shrubs, tall grasses and sedges interspersed with heath. In wetter areas the ground layers are often richer in ferns, cutting grass and mosses.

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One reason for species loss may be an influx of aggressive bird species like the noisy Miner which thrive in modified environments. This medium-sized native honeyeater forms social colonies and in small (less than 20-30 ha) remnants will mob and drive out other usually smaller bush birds. Other dominating species like the butcherbird, Magpie, currawong and raven, can co-exist with the noisy Miner but the overall net effect is species loss.

Loss of the understory or tree layer can also make a site unsuitable for some bird species: shrubs are a rich food source of insects and nectar, and trees provide lerp, manna and a host of invertebrates on their trunks, branches and foliage.

Some bird species will not fly more than 100 metres across open ground without some cover in which to hide. Most won’t fly more than a kilometre.

Either separately or in combination, loss of understorey, small patch size and increasing isolation account for much of the decline in bird species compared to those in structurally intact bush.

Getting to know your birds
Discover the birds in your area by looking and listening. Binoculars will help you see the detail needed for positive identification. Birds have distinctive calls and with practice you will learn what they are saying and why. Bird books (e.g. Field Guide to Tasmanian Birds by Dave Watts) and phone apps (e.g. Bird in Hand by the Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife Service) will help you identify local species.

Noisy Miners, patch size, understorey and isolation
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Restoring existing bush
Improve species and structural diversity of existing bush remnants by:
- never clearing understorey
- reducing grazing/browsing impacts
- burning or disturbing soil to help seed germination and survival
- planting missing grasses, shrubs or trees
- removing weeds

Restoration is used to increase the ‘health’ of bush, habitat patches and stepping stones. Priority for restoration depends on the health of each patch. If all the layers (structural elements) are already there, restoration isn’t needed. See which elements are missing and work out the best way to restore them. Some bush is naturally deficient in some structural layers, so if in doubt, have an experienced botanist look at your bush before commencing work.

Planting
Planting means direct seeding, planting or transplanting native species in cleared (non-native) areas or home gardens. Planting is mainly used to protect and connect existing patches, but can also provide new habitat in gardens. See http://understorey-network.org.au/municipalities.html for species lists.

Photos by Sarah Lloyd