The Bushland Whistler

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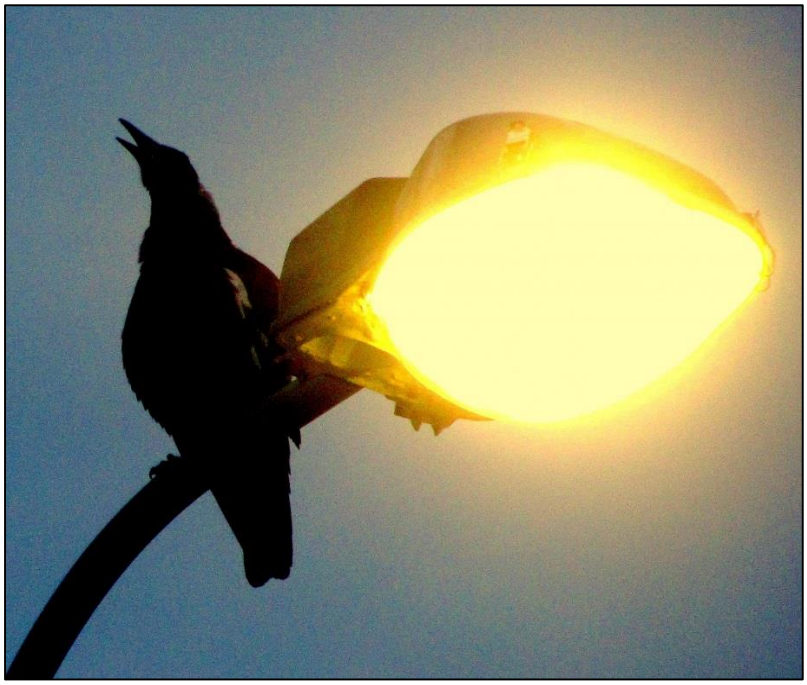
BIRDSONG

ONE OF THE UNWELCOME consequences of modern living is noise. Road, rail and air traffic, motorised watercraft, industrial machinery, power equipment, events with high decibel music—routinely played at volumes capable of causing long-term hearing loss—and much more make our world a noisy place to live.



And while we each have our own views of what constitutes good or bad sound—some people do become inured to a noisy environment—studies have shown that exposure to too much noise can be harmful to our health and wellbeing.

In contrast to the severity of much of man-made noise, the sounds of nature (for the most part) are unobtrusive and easy on the ears—a classic example being the rhythmic pound of waves breaking on the beach; an ageless, soothing sound known universally for its power to effect a sense of peace.

But the most pleasing sounds of the natural world must surely be those produced by birds. And while it is true that not all birdcalls are to everyone's taste—the rasping notes of the raven, the screeching cry of the galah, the shrill chatter of the introduced rainbow lorikeet being local examples that some people may not find appealing—most would agree that the songs and calls of the majority of our birds are a pleasure to listen to.

Surprisingly, early settlers had scant regard for the vocal ability of Australian birds and brought in an array of familiar European songbird species to try to put things right.

But this country is in fact blessed with some remarkable avian songsters; the Albert's and superb lyrebirds in the east—renowned for their vocal dexterity and mastery of mimicry—are perhaps the world's best.

What's more—as is explained in the book *Where Song Began* by Tim Low—molecular analyses provides strong evidence that all the world's songbird species have their origins in Australia.

Top: A magpie sits beside a glowing street light, warbling to welcome the dawn. **Left**: A female splendid fairy-wren trills her heart out as she catches the first rays of the morning sun.

We have around Perth many birds that make exceptional and beautiful sounds and the best-known and certainly one of the most accomplished is the magpie. Everyone is familiar with the rich warbling notes of these iconic black and white birds and (notwithstanding their aggression at nesting time) the country would be poorer without them.

Another black and white bird (often seen with magpies) is the unrelated and smaller magpie-lark. Known also as the mudlark—it builds a bowl-shaped nest of mud—this bird might not be as melodic or have the musical repertoire of the magpie, but it does have a rich resonant voice and its strident territorial and pair-bonding calls are broadcast either solo or in antiphonal duet with its mate. Pictured (left) is a male calling; magpie-larks typically raise and lower their wings or fan their tail as they call.

The pied, and grey butcherbirds (sporting colouring similar to that of the magpie and magpie-lark) are also noted songsters and the grey butcherbird (right), which occurs around Perth, produces a spirited piping melody that almost rivals that of the magpie. But the pied butcherbird, which occurs over much of the country (though not quite as far south as Perth) has perhaps the loveliest song of them all. Each individual pied butcherbird has its own special pattern of notes and phrases and its vocal prowess also includes the ability to mimic the songs of other birds. Camping in the state's northwest and waking to the sound of the pied butcherbird's fluting song is one of life's great pleasures.

Some birds have beautiful plumage, but lack a dazzling voice; others are (to our eyes) plain, but can sing superlative songs. The grey shrike-thrush is one bird that makes up for its sober attire by singing (often unseen) from the treetops with sophistication and flair. It ranges over much of Australia—avoiding heavily built-up areas—and a camping trip can be greatly enriched by this bird's consummate singing at bush camps throughout the country.

Another local bird with unremarkable plumage, but with a penchant for singing, is the brown honeyeater (pictured left feeding at the flower of *Banksia menziesii*). One of the smaller honeyeaters, it is common around Forrestdale and its sprightly song is a dominant part of the dawn chorus—that daily event that occurs around sunrise (particularly in springtime) when birds are especially vocal.

There are many songbirds living around us, in the bushland and in our gardens, that freely share their charming voices and, by doing so, somehow make the world a better place.

The ability to identify birds—not only by sight, but by the various sounds that they make—is a worthwhile skill and can add an extra dimension to our lives.

The great range of field guide books on Australian birds, and phone apps, which also feature superb-quality birdcalls, means that learning about birds—their habits, where they live, and how to identify them by sight and by sound—has never been easier.✧

BROWN HONEYEATER – *nesting*

As mentioned in the previous article, the brown honeyeater is a common resident of Forrestdale and makes up for its modest plumage by singing profusely, especially in springtime.

But singing isn't the only engaging quality of this small olive-grey bird. As well as being a resident of native bushland, it is also a visitor to home gardens where it can be seen feeding on a range of native and exotic plants.

The brown honeyeater also often displays its trust by nesting in proximity to people's houses, and the nest sites it chooses are sometimes surprising.

During this last nesting season at our house in Forrestdale, one site that a pair of brown honeyeaters chose was on a baby spider plant (an offshoot) that hangs down the side of a basket in which the parent plant grows. The basket hangs under the eaves of the front verandah.

So discreet were the birds while building their nest that we were oblivious of the event until the small cup-shaped structure—made of dry grass, cobwebs and shredded paperbark—was all but complete. When we eventually discovered the nest, they were in the final stages of applying the lining to it; and for this they used the reddish-brown woolly material found at the base of zamia fronds.

Once the nest was finished, a day or two passed before the two eggs were laid, and a fortnight's incubation followed which both birds shared.

The young birds duly hatched and fledged and here they are on the right in a nearby Geraldton wax just minutes after they left the nest.

A couple of days after the youngsters flew, we removed the nest to keep as a memento; but no sooner had we done so than we began to have doubts—what if the birds had planned to use the nest again?

Being in a hanging basket (or in this case down the side of it), the nest was safe from predators such as cats and rats; it was under the eaves so it didn't get rained on; and it faced east, so it was shaded from the hot afternoon sun.

It was therefore likely that a second clutch would be reared just as successfully as the first—and that the parent birds would not be happy to discover the nest was gone.

This meant there was only one thing to do: return the nest to its rightful place.

So, using a needle and thread, I sewed the nest back in its original spot, drawing the thread through leaves and stems, taking extra care that it was well secured. We then waited to see what would happen.

We knew, though, that nothing would happen very soon; the parents over the next few days would be much too busy keeping their (still dependent) newly fledged babies fed to be thinking about having any more.

Nevertheless, after a week, I began checking daily to see whether an egg had been laid, but each time I looked the nest was empty.

Then, when I peeked into the nest on day twelve of the chicks having fledged, it contained one white egg. It was an exciting moment.

Egg number two was laid the next day and, as before, two weeks' incubation followed.

Time passed quickly and the first chick hatched on Christmas Eve, the second on Christmas Day (this is them on the right, photographed two weeks later, just two days before they left the nest).

While honeyeaters feed chiefly on nectar, they also eat invertebrates, and our pair of brown honeyeaters fed their chicks on a steady supply of insects and spiders.

Tiny and featherless when first hatched, the chicks grew at a surprising rate, and their feathers soon began to appear.

The offerings started small and got larger as the babies grew. Pictured (left) are the parent birds about to fly to the nest—the bird on the far left has in its beak a large, leggy spider, the other a tiny fly.

After depositing the food in the chicks' gaping mouths, the parent would probe about in the nest to ensure it was clean and tidy; faecal sacs were quickly removed and taken some distance from the nest before they were dropped.

As already mentioned, the nest faced east, and although it was shaded in the afternoon, the sun beat down on it until about 11.30am—and, in this climate, the late morning sun can be fiercely hot too. There were several blistering days while the chicks were in the nest, but one particular day tested their endurance to the extreme—a day when the thermometer on the front verandah reached 47 degrees.

We knew there wasn't much we could do to relieve the situation, other than to mist around the nest at intervals using a plastic spray bottle; and to tie a large canna leaf just above the nest to shade the chicks from the intense morning sun.

Despite these measures, however, the chicks continued to pant feverishly throughout the day, their gaping beaks pointing upwards, their eyes closed from sheer exhaustion. We held little hope of them surviving.

But by late afternoon when the worst of the day's heat was over, the chicks, to our surprise and relief, were very much alive. These doughty little birds—far tougher than we thought—had made it.

By now, the chicks had grown considerably. Tiny bald scraps at the bottom of the nest two short weeks ago, they now filled the nest and had grown all their feathers. Soon they would be taking their first flight. The big day came on January 8.

The first chick to leave the nest did so in stages. It clambered onto the edge of the nest, had a rest, then onto an adjacent clump of leaves and rested again. I didn't see it fly, I was distracted for a moment and when I returned, it had vanished. But the second chick, still in the nest, was being encouraged to leave it by its parents who were anxiously flitting about in shrubs nearby. "Chit … chit … chit …," they called.

Finally, after some minutes, the chick scrambled to the edge of the nest, fluttered its wings valiantly and crash landed in a nearby potted bamboo. The calls of the agitated parents now sounded urgent; evidently they wanted this chick to join the other one, which clearly wasn't in the bamboo. But where, I wondered, was it?

All would soon be revealed.

Urged on by its parents, the chick fluttered out of the bamboo and landed unsteadily on a branch of the Geraldton wax, then, bit by bit, and increasingly getting the hang of things, up it flew into a small sheoak tree next to the verandah.

It took me a while, but eventually I saw where the first chick was: perched on an upper branch of this spindly tree. The chick was well camouflaged, blending in with the sheoak cones that surrounded it.

When I looked again a few minutes later the second chick was perched close beside it.✧

CYGNET RESCUE – LAKE FORRESTDALE December 2014

At 6am on the chilly morning of 17 December, 47 people—made up of Department of Parks and Wildlife (DPaW) staff, Friends of Forrestdale volunteers, local community and wildlife centre volunteers and City of Armadale staff—gathered at the boardwalk at Lake Forrestdale to conduct the cygnet rescue on the lake. This—the 5th rescue operation—was conducted in much the same way as the 2013 rescue (covered in the January 2014 edition of *The Bushland Whistler*), and was a great success, resulting in 19 cygnets being saved from almost certain death.

The rescued cygnets were all about three-quarters grown and none were yet able to fly. They were assessed to be in good health and were immediately taken to Bibra Lake and released.

Without the rescue operation, the cygnets would have succumbed to fox attack or died of exposure—a week after the rescue the lake was dry.

Participants all contributed to the success of the operation and Friends of Forrestdale would like to thank everyone who took part.✧

Above: Rescuers close in on the cygnets, moments before capture. **Below**: DPaW staff and volunteers with some of the rescued cygnets.

PRICKLYBARK (*Eucalyptus todtiana*)

INDIGENOUS TO THE SOUTHWEST and well represented in the nature reserves around Forrestdale, the pricklybark is a small to medium-sized tree which flowers between January and March.

The stunted, often spreading, growth of the pricklybark lends a certain charm to the tree, as do the abundant ivory-white flowers which draw a host of nectar-eating birds and insects. Moreover, its branches are often festooned with small, cup-shaped fruits, which can weigh them down, giving the tree an attractive weeping appearance.

Occurring between approximately Dongara and Byford, the pricklybark, known also as coastal blackbutt, grows on the dry, infertile coastal sandplains where larger trees are absent. The poor soils, and the lack of competition from big eucalypts which lessens the need to grow tall to reach the light, possibly explains its stunted growth.

Pricklybark is a fitting name for this tree: the rough bark is composed of tough, needle-sharp fibres which can easily penetrate the skin.

As with most rough-textured bark, it does, however, provide valuable habitat for insects, spiders, small reptiles and tiny mammals, such as bats, that take shelter in the bark's many nooks and crannies.✧

Clockwise from top left: **1**. During summer and early autumn, *Eucalyptus todtiana* bursts into flower and provides food for a range of wildlife species at a time when little else is flowering. **2**. This large jewel beetle, *Themognatha conspicillata*, is feeding on the blossoms of *E. todtiana*; the flowers are a magnet to many species of insects and birds. **3**. Often wider than they are tall, *E. todtiana* trees form pleasing shapes and the dense canopy provides welcome shade in summer. **4**. Attractive in their own right, the fruits of *E. todtiana* form large clusters that often weigh down the branches.

WEEDS – Lake Forrestdale Nature Reserve

As with many metropolitan nature reserves, weed eradication at Lake Forrestdale is a never-ending task with a seemingly endless number of problem weed species to tackle. On the lake itself, the most serious weed is the bulrush *Typha orientalis*—this is one of two *Typha* species found in WA; the other, *T. domingensis*, is native to the state and is a much daintier, less invasive plant.

Indigenous to eastern Australia, but not WA, *T. orientalis* has engulfed many a WA wetland and, if left unchecked, has the potential to do the same to Lake Forrestdale.

Since the mid-seventies, when only a tiny patch of *Typah* grew on the lake's southern edge, the weed has spread at an alarming rate and now fringes the entire lake, in some places more than 300 metres wide.

Before white settlement the then pristine lake, which held a lot more water and for longer periods than it now does, was narrowly fringed with native rushes—*Baumea juncea* in particular and to a lesser extent, *B. articulata*.

The lake was also edged in those days with clean, white sandy beaches; those beaches are now entirely lost under a blanket of weed species, including *Typha orientalis*.

Left: A mass of seeds erupting from a *Typha orientalis* flower. These feather-light seeds can float vast distances on the wind, enabling the weed to establish itself far and wide.
Below: Images of Lake Forrestdale facing east (top) and west, showing the extent of *Typha* encroachment. Because of the magnitude of the problem, and because control of the plant is particularly difficult, very little is being done to address the situation. It is much too great a challenge for a Friends group to tackle alone.

More weeds with fly-away seeds


Members of Friends of Forrestdale have recently been targeting two particular weed species in the Lake Forrestdale Nature Reserve: the swan plant or narrowleaf cotton bush *Gomphocarpus fruticosus* (above) and the spear thistle, sometimes referred to as the Scotch thistle, *Cirsium vulgare* (below).


Both these weeds have fly-away seeds and, if not kept in check, have the potential to become well established around the lake.

The key of course is to remove the plants before they set seed. But this isn't always easy; especially regarding the thistle, which is much more plentiful around Lake Forrestdale than the cotton bush and, with its vicious spines, a great deal more difficult to tackle.✧

There appears to be some confusion as to which thistle species—the spear thistle *Cirsium vulgare* or the Scotch thistle *Onopordum acanthium*—represents the Scottish emblem. We in Australia who abhor these spiny intruders, might regard either to be an odd choice for such approbation. But if there is any truth behind the popular legend of how the thistle came to be so esteemed by the Scots, then it's not hard to understand their sentiment.

According to the centuries-old legend, a Viking force, under the reign of King Haakon IV, attempted a surprise attack on a division of King Alexander III's army in northern Scotland. They came ashore by night and, in order to approach the Scottish garrison more quietly, removed their footwear. This was their undoing. One or two of the bare-footed Norsemen inadvertently stepped on thistle and the cries of pain alerted the sleeping Scots who leaped into action and were thus able to defeat the attackers.

It is suggested that, as *Cirsium vulgare* is a native of Scotland and *Onopordum acanthium* is not, and that the latter didn't become naturalised in Scotland until long after the time of the legend, the spear thistle *Cirsium vulgare* is the more likely species symbolised in the legend.

Picture: Spear thistle *Cirsium vulgare*; the (rather tatty) butterfly feeding at the flower is the Australian painted lady.