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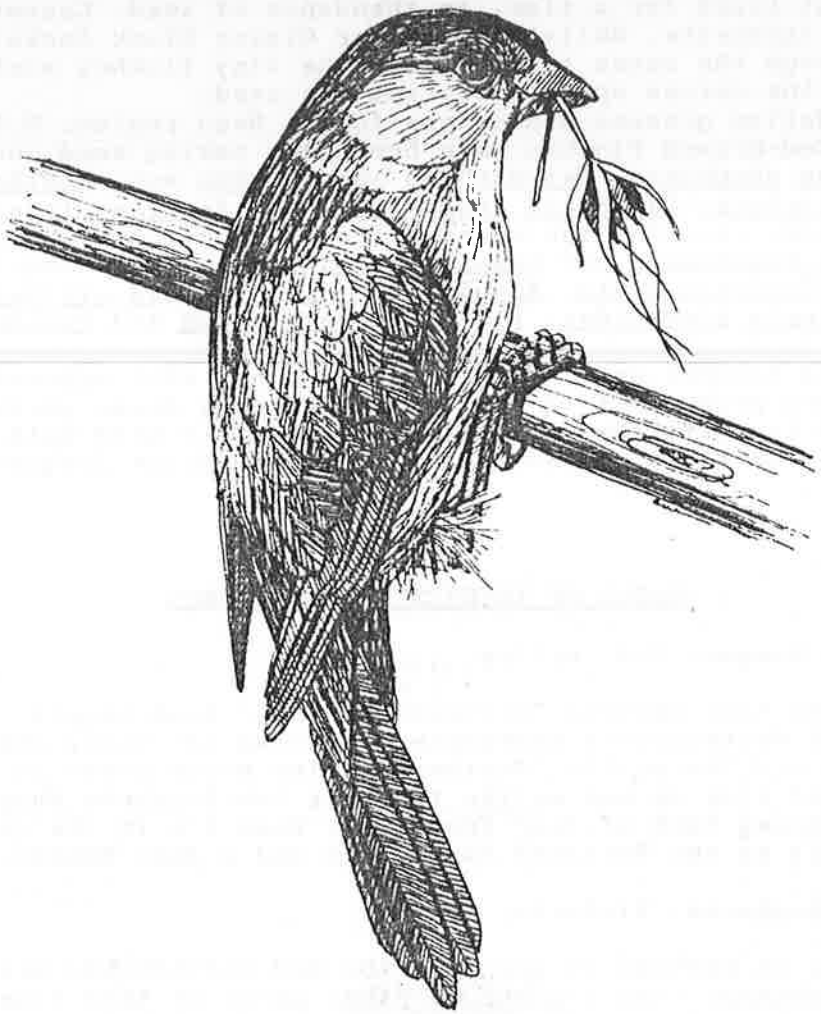
S.G.A.P. BIRDS AND NATIVE PLANTS STUDY GROUP

Newsletter No. 15 September 1988



RED-BROWED FIRETAILS

Small, weighing in at about 10g, olivey green to grey finches. Adults have scarlet on the rump, sides of the bill and on the eyebrow. Juveniles are duller generally, have a black bill and lack the scarlet eyebrow. They are found along the coast from Cape York Peninsula to Adelaide..

The Red-browed Firetails feed on small seeds and are not averse to taking budgie mix from feeding tables. Writes Norm Bone, Anglesea, Victoria:

'They come into my garden in quite large numbers and they are always on the lookout for a free feed at my seed table. They seem to relate very well with Crimson Rosellas because the Rosellas dont seem to mind sharing a meal with them but they will not tolerate other birds so they must have something going for them. It is quite comical to see the finches darting in and out from under the Rosellas feet as they enjoy their share of the meal and even funnier to watch a finch trying to snare seeds from a weed or grass that is too high for them to reach.'

Red-browed Finches are locally nomadic in loose non-breeding flocks. Flocks of up to 300 birds have been recorded. When breeding, which here in the Lower Mountains at least, may be year round, they tend to pair off or form smaller groups. A male finch's courtship is almost comical to human eyes. The male will move close to the female, often on a branch, and jump up and down whilst holding a grass stem in his bill. Nests are messy looking constructions of grasses lined with softer feathers and fur, and suspended in prickly or dense shrubs. Nests have been found in Acacia cognata, A. echinula, Hakea petiolaris, H. propinqua, Melaleuca linariifolia amongst others. Four to six white eggs are laid.

Away from the feeding table Red-browed firetails feed on the dry rather than green seeds of native or introduced grasses and herbs. I have seen them become plentiful in areas which have been recently burnt and then colonised by weedy grasses which have subsequently provided, at least for a time, an abundance of seed. Casuarina seeds are also a favourite. Whilst the larger Glossy Black Cockatoos can crunch through the cones to tkae seed the tiny finches must wait for the moment the valves open to extract the seed.

Native grasses and sedges in the Bega region, N.S.W., at which the Red-browed Finches have been seen taking seed include Lepidosperma urophorum, Tetrarrhena juncea, Poa spp, Danthonia spp, Entolasia stricta, Danthonia longifolia, Lepidosperma laterale. They have also been recorded taking seed from drying flower heads of Helychrysum bracteatum and Cassinia trinerva and gleaning in the foliage of Goodenia ovata, Acacia sophorae, Lomatia myricoides, Culcita dubia, Daviesia mimosoides, Pteridium esculentum and Pomaderris cinerea.

If finches are in the area then they will appreciate grasses in the garden being left to go to seed. Prickly dense shrubs might entice them to nest. They will also appreciate a bird bath or some form of water - like all dry seed eaters they must drink frequently.

NOTES OF INTEREST FROM MEMBERS

Anne Green, Morgan, S.A. writes....

'Re hone yeaters "protecting" their food supply - I've seen our resident White-plumed honeyeaters chasing off Spiny-cheeked honeyeaters and Thornbills. Another species which seems to spend a great deal of time in our mallee trees is the Southern Whiteface. They have a charminmg lack of fear around me, when I'm in the garden, rivalled only by the Striated Pardalotes and a male Magpie.'

Norm Bone, Anglesea, Victoria, writes.....

'I am pleased to see that the Red Wattlebirds are down in numbers so perhaps they migrate to other areas at this time of year (June). I do hope that they get lost on their way back as they tend to give the smaller honeyeaters a hell of a time.'

and 'With regard to my own garden I find that the most popular with birds is Banksia paludosa. It is only about a metre high and although the flowers are hidden you can be sure to flush a honeyeater out of it at any time of day. I had some initial success with some W.A. banksias when I first planted out the garden but they failed to come on so have mainly eastern state species at this stage.'

Judy Woodward, Baulkham Hills, writes....

'Although Eucalyptus nicholli or Peppermint gum is widely grown in gardens it is not a good bird tree. Birds visit the tree mainly, it seems to me, as a vantage point from which they can drop to get worms or beetles etc. from the lawn. The Ironbark on the other hand seems to always harbour birds. Exotics, particularly in the winter, attract many birds, eg Camellia sasanqua when in bloom, berry plants such as Cotoneaster and the fruits of the liquid amber.'

Burnie Garner, Belmont, Victoria, writes....

'The land is bordered pretty well by the Otway State Forest and since our plants have developed we've had quite an increase in bird activity,

We're very pleased at the moment to notice a pair of Spotted Pardalotes nesting in a naturally occurring hollow in a tree trunk quite close to where we eat our meals whilst visiting or working on our block.

Shortly we hope to begin propagating our own plants in earnest. I've also chacked for naturally occurring nest sites. There is plenty of cover in the way of bushes but virtually no hollow limbs, logs etc. I hope to start building these myself, probably in time for next season.'

BIRD ATTRACTIVE PLANTS TO RECOMMEND

In the last newsletter I asked if you could help the study group to collate a list of good bird-attractive plants. This list might help to answer accurately the frequently asked question "What should I plant in my garden to bring birds?" From time to time I have seen plants, in which I have rarely if ever seen a bird, being recommended as being bird-attractive (perhaps I have always been looking the wrong way).

So, firstly, thank you to all who have already sent back the sheet. If you forgot, didn't get round to but really meant to or whatever, or perhaps have thought of good plants to recommend since the last newsletter then all is not lost..... a copy of the table is again placed at the back of the newsletter. If you are uncertain about such things as flowering times then please just send in whatever information you can - it all adds up when put together.

Eventually I will put together all the information in a newsletter. As a progress report - as yet completed forms have come from NSW, Victoria and SA (with NSW well in the lead). The following plants have been recommended in the following categories:-

FLOWERS:

Acacia longifolia, Angophora floribunda, Anigozanthus spp., Banksia ericifolia, B. spinulosa, B. robur, B. paludosa, Brachysema lanedatum, Callistemon 'Captain Cook', C. 'Hannah Ray', C. viminalis, Calothamnus spp., Correa reflexa, C. glabra, Eremophila calorhabdus, E. maculata, E. serpens, E. subteretifolius, E. viscida, Eucalyptus caesia, E. curtisii, E. obliqua, E. leucoxylon, E. torquata, E. torwood, E. woodwardii, E. sideroxylon, E. megacornuta, Grevillea banksii, G. thelmannania, G. lavandulacea, G. barklyana, G. 'Robyn Gordon', G. robusta, G. shiressii, G. jephcottii, G. 'Poorinda Queen', G. ivanhoe, G. dielsiana, G. hookerana, G. asplenifolia, Hakea petiolaris, H. francisiana, H. bucculenta, H. laurina, H. multilineata, Hymenosporum flavium, Kennedia spp., Melaleuca elliptica, M. adnata, M. hypericifolia, Scheffleria actinophylla (Umbrella tree).

FOLIAGE:

Acacias, Acacia baileyana, Banksia ericifolia, Grevillea robusta.

FRUIT:

Trema aspera, Grevillea robusta.

NESTING TREE:

Ironbark.

BARK:

Callistemon 'Captain Cook', C. 'Hannah Ray', C. viminalis, Eucalyptus sideroxylon.

SEEDS:

Acacia pravissima, Grevillea asplenifolia (green), G. robusta, Eucalyptus pilularis.

If you can confirm these recommendations, disagree wuth any or can add more to the list then please let me know. There is a shortage of plants to recommend for insect and seed eaters, as shelter sites, nest sites etc. so perhaps you can recommend others ?

EXOTIC FRUITS - MULBERRIES

Having in the past given up feeding birds because of the large numbers of Indian Mynas which seemed to hog the table we instead provide a mulberry tree.

The tree is huge, full of ripe fruit and much loved by all the Indian Mynas from far and wide. Still, the native birds love it too.

In early Spring the mulberry flowers and small groups of Peaceful Doves move in to peck the fallen flowers from the bare earth beneath. At this time the tree is still partly bare of leaves and the Peaceful Doves are easy to watch.

When the fruits ripen, October onwards, the noisy hordes move in - not only Indian Mynas but also Bowerbirds, Channel-billed Cuckoos, Olive-backed Orioles, Pied Currawongs, Magpies (who feed at ground level),Black-faced Cuckoo-shrikes, Noisy Friarbirds (who always pick a fruit, fly to a nearby eucalypt and proceed to "kill" it before they devour it), and Bulbuls who peck daintily at the fruit and then meticulously clean their bill. The noisy hordes are fickle, when the mulberries finish most we will only see in pasing until the grapes ripen in February.

"Our" blue-tongue has even been spotted under the tree with a tell-tale purple mouth.

BIRD WATCHING IN THE GARDEN

from Norm Bone, Anglesea, Victoria

The other day I was doing some work in the back garden when I became aware of a lot of bird activity so I stopped what I was doing and just sat and listened. There were plenty of Crimson Rosellas about because I had not long filled the seed trays that are placed in strategic positions around the garden and they were chattering amongst themselves as they fed.

As I listened to the Rosellas I became aware of other bird calls in the garden. First of all I could hear some Crescent Honeyeaters calling from the Eucalypts that are growing at the rear of the block. The call is quite strong and sounds as if the bird is calling "Egypt".

The next call I heard came from a Grevillea barklyana (Jervis Bay form) which, by the way, is a terrific bird plant as it always seems to have a flower on it and on closer inspection I discovered a couple of New Holl and honeyeaters working over the lolly pink toothbrush flowers. The New Holland is the most numerous honeyeater by far in this part of the state. They are here year round.

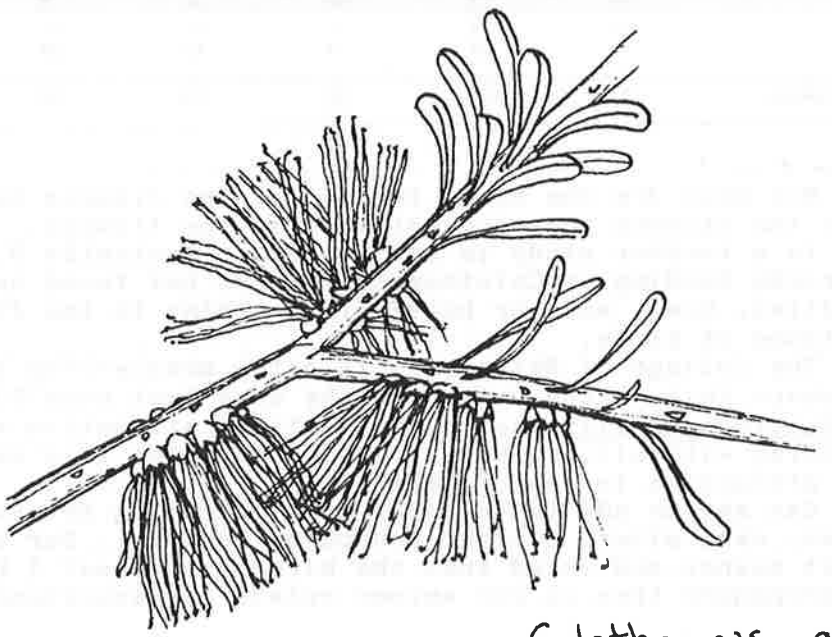
As I sat watching all of the activity I noticed several Red-browed Firetails and a couple of Grey-shrike Thrushes enjoying a free meal of seed while nearby a group of Yellow-rumped Thornbills moved over the back lawn checking the area out for insects and grubs. I have never heard of Grey-shrike thrushes eating seed but they were and they are now regular visitors to the seed trays. While I was watching the goings on a small group of Superb Blue Wrens arrived on the scene and joined the Thornbills in their search for food and they also started eating from the seed trays. One of them was in full plumage and the others either females or immature males.

I then decided to move to the front garden to see what I could find in that area which is basically new and is full of all sorts of tempting plants for the local bird population and as usual I was not disappointed as there were the usual New Holland Honeyeaters as well as Yellow-faced Honeyeaters, Eastern Spinebills and a group of Wattlebirds having a ball drinking the nectar from the many Grevilleas that are in flower.

In another corner a couple of Magpies were digging for worms and grubs and a Pied Currawong was having a rest in a large Eucalyptus obliqua that is the main feature of the front garden. It is a bit unusual because the foliage tends to weep. It is a great with all sorts of birds because it is very shady and I have placed a bird bath right underneath so on a hot day I sit in the lounge and watch the antics as all sorts of birds line up for a bath.

The next bird I saw was a male Scarlet Robin, all decked out in his black, red and white plumage and it was interesting to watch him pecking at the bark of the Eucalypt and by his antics he was getting a good feed. His lady friend joined him but after a quick feed and a bath she was off.

Being a retired person I am lucky enough to be able to spend a large part of my day watching the birds in my garden and I never tire of their company. They not only give me a lot of pleasure but they also make short work of any insects or grubs that could damage my plants and all you have to do to encourage them is to plant a few suitable shrubs and perhaps feed them on a bit of seed or artificial nectar if you desire. They will save you having to spray your garden. I just cannot remember the last time I sprayed a garden of mine.



Calothamnus asper
by Colleen Werner

CALOTHAMNUS

The NET BUSHES or ONE-SIDED BOTTLEBRUSHES

The 25 or so species of Net-bushes are all native to Western Australia. They are moderately hardy shrubs and in sunny, well-drained situations, many are also successfully cultivated in the eastern states.

The Net-bushes belong to the family Myrtaceae. The showy part of the flower is, as in the Eucalypts and Callistemons which belong to the same family, actually bundles of stamens. These stamens are joined at the base and there are four to five bundles of stamens in each "flower". The flowers are arranged along one side of a section of old wood, hence the name "one-sided bottlebrushes". Why they are also called "net bushes" I do not know. Flowers, (Spring to early Summer), are usually red but yellow forms do occur.

Propagation is by seed or cuttings. As the Net bushes are cross pollinated then cuttings are necessary if you wish to propagate and maintain yellow forms.

The flowers are attractive to nectar feeders. Study group members have noted Red Wattlebirds, New Holland Honeyeaters (Karoonda, S.A.), and Eastern Spinebills and New Holland Honeyeaters (Woodford, N.S.W.),feeding at flowers and Brown Thornbills (Mt. Riverview, N.S.W.), feeding in the foliage.

A study in south-western Australia of birds and pollination recorded New Holloand Honeyeaters, Brown Honeyeaters, Red Wattlebirds, Western Spinebills, Singing Honeyeaters and Silvereyes at the flowers.

Results of the study are summarised in the following table:

Table 6. Percentage of times that the seven most frequently observed Western Australian birds have been seen at flowers of the twelve most frequently visited genera of native plants. Data from Burbidge and Hopper (unpubl.).

	BIRDS (% of records)						
Plant genus	New Holland honeyeater	brown honeyeater	red wattlebird	western spinebill	singing honeyeater	purple-crowned lorikeet	silvereye
Eucalyptus	26	30	34	3	21	100	15
Banksia	24	10	27	37	4	—	18
Grevillea	—	13	5	4	28	—	6
Dryandra	12	8	5	7	4	—	—
Anigozanthos	4	3	16	16	2	—	9
Hakea	2	6	5	—	7	—	3
Calothamnus	5	6	1	1	4	—	6
Lambertia	9	2	—	7	—	—	—
Melaleuca	3	2	2	1	2	—	3
Adenanthos	3	1	—	8	2	—	3
Diplolaena	—	2	—	—	5	—	3
Lysiana	—	1	—	—	—	—	—
Other	11	17	4	15	24	—	35
Total No. of observations	132	124	99	73	58	45	32

Not only are the birds feeding at the flowers but as they brush past the stamens they are pollinating the flowers.

In a further study in south-western Australia G. J. Keighery recorded birds feeding at Calothamnus flowers but found no evidence of beetles, flies, bees, ants or butterflies coming to the flowers - hence the importance of birds.

The foliage of Net-bushes is often needle-like and quite dense (perhaps this is the origon of the name 'net bush'?). The Woolly Net bush Calothamnus villosus is particularly attractive with long thin leaves covered with silvery hairs. One would think that such foliage should be attractive to insect eaters.

Can anyone add to the list of birds using Net bushes - either for shelter, nest sites, nectar, source of insects...?or has anyone planted Net bushes and found that the birds dont come? I have never tried to propagate them so can anyone relate any experiences in this area?

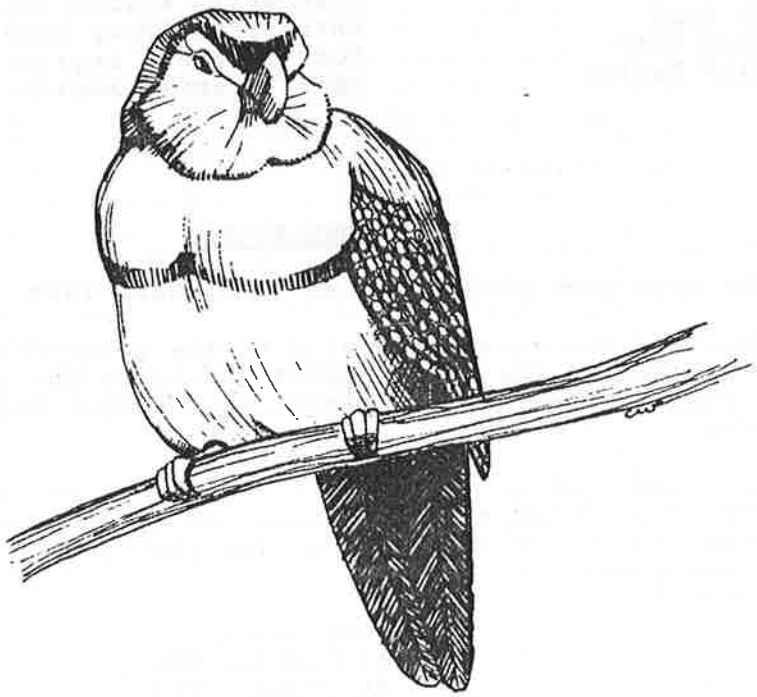
And finally a question, perhaps a bit off the track, but do you know of any species of Calothamnus which are scented?

The following description of FEEDING BEHAVIOUR of birds is extracted from "Foraging patterns of breeding birds in eucalypt forest and woodland of southeastern Australia" in the Australian Journal of Ecology (1985) Vol. 10, No. 4 :-

The two parrots, Gang-gang Cockatoo and Crimson Rosella, fed mainly on seeds taken from eucalypts. Seeds were also the principle food of the two finches which visited the woodlots (study areas). The European Goldfinch fed mainly on the seeds of exotic weeds (e.g. Spear Thistle Cirsium vulgare) while the Red-browed Finch fed mainly on seeds of native and introduced grasses.

Honeyeaters and the Silvereye took insects as a source of protein, but also relied on sugar-rich carbohydrates (i.e. nectar, manna, honeydew, lerp and sap) as a source of energy. Honeydew and lerp are sugary exudates of sap-sucking insects while manna and sap are exuded by plants (especially eucalypts) usually following damage by insects. On the woodlots, only the Crescent Honeyeater, Red Wattlebird and Eastern Spinebill fed extensively on nectar. White-eared honeyeaters foraged mainly under loose bark while Yellow-faced and White-naped Honeyeaters fed mostly in foliage. The Brown-headed Honeyeater fed, almost equally from loose bark and foliage. Visual inspection showed that sugar-rich carbohydrates were abundant under the bark of eucalypts as it was first being loosened and shed. Peeling bark was therefore attractive to honeyeaters. For example, large numbers of White-eared and Crescent Honeyeaters aggregated during the Winter when Swamp Gum shed its bark. At this time, these birds foraged by probing under the bark just at the point where it was loosening from the tree.

Psyllid insects were abundant on eucalypt foliage throughout the plots. Manna and the sugary secretions (lerps) of these insects were probably the carbohydrates sought by honeyeaters which foraged among the foliage. Other foliage gleaners, such as the Striated Thornbill and Striated and Spotted Pardolotes, also fed on manna and lerp and such carbohydrates may be an important source of energy for these birds. Few fruits were available on the woodlots, but the Silvereyes fed on Blackberries along the edges of nearby pine plantations. Bark as a substrate occurred on tree trunks and branches . Although loose and hanging bark was associated with tree trunks and branches, it formed a distinctive and important substrate. It was the most important substrate for the Shrike-tit and White-eared Honeyeater. Loose bark was the second most important substrate for six other species (Grey Shrike-thrush, Red-browed Treecreeper, Orange-winged Sittella, White-naped, Brown-headed and Yellow-faced Honeyeater). Shrike-tits took mainly insects and spiders from under loose bark or from within coiled strips of hanging bark, but bark-foraging honeyeaters took carbohydrates in addition to arthropods. Other bark-foragers took mainly insects from the bark surface with the White-throated and Red-browed Treecreepers taking mainly ants.



Double barred finch by Colleen Werner

LIST OF MEMBERS

NEXT NEWSLETTER

The next newsletter will be in JANUARY 1989.

Plant of the newsletter will be the genus PITTOSPORUM and the bird of the newsletter the CUCKOO-SHRIKES . You might also like to include the CICACDBIRD since it belongs to the same genus as the Cuckoo-shrikes.

Contributions on the above or any items of more general interest are always most welcome, as are any observations you can add to the listing of 'Bird-attractive plants to recommend' (form attached at the back).

Judy Smith,
44 Hawkins Pde.,
Blaxland, 2774.

RECOMMENDED PLANT	PLANT PART	MATURE SIZE PLANT	FLOWERING / FRUITING TIME	BIRDS ATTRACTED	CULTIVATION REQUIREMENTS, ANY FURTHER COMMENTS.