

ASSOCIATION OF SOCIETIES
FOR GROWING AUSTRALIAN PLANTS

BIRDS AND NATIVE PLANTS
STUDY GROUP

NEWSLETTER NO. 19

FEBRUARY, 1991.



GOLDEN & RUFOUS WHISTLERS.

Although I chose 4 different species of Whistlers for the newsletter, I'll concentrate on only these two, as they are the most widely-distributed throughout Australia. Here in my Samsonvale garden, they are both Winter visitors, but can be heard in the bush during Spring & Autumn. My 1990 records show the Rufous Whistler returning in late April, but I've noted a March sighting of a male bird. Golden Whistlers arrived in early May, and by mid-June were joining in when I fed the Pied Butcher-birds and Kookaburras, picking up crumbs of mince. The male Golden Whistler continued to come and sit in the Hymenoporum flavum (Native Frangipanni) near the verandah, and call to be fed nearly every day until mid-August. After returning to the bush, the Rufous Whistler could be heard calling in the early morning, along with the rest of the dawn chorus in October. This Whistler, the female in particular, seems to remain within the general garden area from March to August.

As you can see by the newsletter heading, the Golden Whistler is one of my favourite birds, I think the male is most attractive.

Golden Whistler - *Pachycephala pectoralis*: Throughout its wide range to Indonesia, New Guinea and Fiji, the Golden Whistler has evolved into more geographic races than any other known species. Even in Australia, 14 forms are recognised. The bird is common in the densest coastal forests, and in the heavily vegetated parts of its Australian range.

Distribution: South-west Australia; Cairns, Q., to Eyre Peninsula, S.A., inland to the Great Divide and mallee areas; Indonesia, New Guinea, Fiji.

During the breeding season, the Golden Whistler calls persistently, male & female in equal vocal ability. A loud noise such as thunder will often make it break into a sudden crescendo. Birds move slowly and deliberately, hopping from branch to branch in a constant search for insects and their larvae. They also eat fruits.

The male Golden Whistler is most attractive, with his olive-grey back, black wings edged dull yellow, bright yellow shoulders and collar across back of neck, slightly lighter yellow breast & belly, white throat, black head and throat band, and black to grey tail. The female is mainly pale olive-grey with buff belly.

Rufous Whistler - *Pachycephala rufiventris*: One of this bird's common names - Eechong - aptly pertains to one of its most distinctive calls, a clear "eeee-chong". Its song surpasses even that of the Golden Whistler, and can be heard often. It is perhaps the loudest and most persistent songster of the open timbered areas - especially when courtship begins and the nest is being built. Both take turns at the nest with brooding and feeding the young. The Rufous Whistler is common throughout much of its range, and there is scarcely a tract of open forest in the southern part of Australia where it has not been recorded.

Distribution: Australia but not Tasmania; also New Guinea, Moluccas, New Caledonia, some offshore islands.

Main food of the Rufous Whistler is various insects, mostly taken from trees, occasionally eats berries. The bird is migratory in the southern part of its range, appearing late August, departing about April.

Male birds have dark olive-grey back, black-brown wings and tail, dark head with black face and neck band, white throat and rufous breast and belly. Female is dark olive-grey

with buff underparts heavily streaked with brown. These streaks help distinguish the female Rufous Whistler from the female Golden Whistler. Both Golden & Rufous Whistlers make a soft peeping sound while moving through trees and feeding.

Joan Wallace, of Beecroft, N.S.W., is saddened by the diminishing number of birds in her locality, due to increasing development. There were Golden Whistlers at her previous garden, about $1\frac{1}{2}$ kms. away, and she wonders if they are still there.

Two members of the Pine Rivers S.G.A.P. in south-east Qld., are able to report on the presence of Rufous Whistlers in their gardens for most of the year. Shirley Reyer, of Petrie, lives on a few acres with the North Pine River at the bottom of the block. The creek-bank vegetation and her garden are a marvellous habitat for many bird species, and I have often sat there listening to the song of the Rufous Whistler.

Betty Richardson lives on a dairy farm outside the small rural township of Dayboro, and we can see our farm from her garden, away across the rolling ridges. She has planted a "rainforest garden" on a steep slope, and Rufous Whistlers are regular visitors. Their farm is bounded on the east by the headwaters of the North Pine River, their "creek", and she reports that the Golden Whistlers stay near the creek, never coming into her garden.

Both these members find, as I do, that the Rufous Whistlers seem to retreat into the bush during mid-Summer, but are constant garden visitors for the rest of the year.

If any of my facts are out-of-date or incorrect, please don't hesitate to send me the truth, or an update. Any other stories about your feathered garden visitors will always make good reading, so let me have them for the newsletter.

SOME RED-FLOWERING EUCALYPTS.

I asked for some information about 4 of our (basically) red-flowering Eucalypts, and have received it about one in particular.

EUCALYPTUS: leucoxyton; torquata; calophylla; ficifolia.

The following descriptions of each of these species have been taken from "Australian Native Plants" by J.W. Wrigley and M. Fagg, I have added a few notes taken from survey results which were returned to the previous Study Group leader.

E. leucoxyton: Small to medium-sized tree to 15m. Flowers white, pink or red. Red forms have been successfully grafted on to E. paniculata. Not too large for most gardens. Very hardy in most soils. Frost-hardy, tolerance to -7°C in conditions of normal rainfall. May be used as a feature plant. Distribution: N.S.W., Vic., S.

From Port Huon, Tasmania: Mature size of 8m., Green Rosellas attracted to the flowers which appear from January to March.

Josie Radloff, Karoonda, S.A.: Purple-crowned Lorikeets come to the flowers of both E. leucoxyton and E. torquata.

Lola Smith, Mt. Riverview, Blue Mts., N.S.W.: Flowers between March and June attract Noisy Miners, Noisy Friarbird, Crimson Rosellas, Spinebills, Yellow-faced, Yellow-tufted and White-naped Honeyeaters. It does not grow strongly in the area, but flowers prolifically over the three months.

Gillian McDonald, Clergate via Orange, N.S.W.: They have grown approximately 2500 tree seedlings over the last few years to gauge the best species for their environment. E. leucoxyton has been one of the most rapid growers, and seems to be reasonably resistant to attack by Christmas Beetles (their biggest tree-growing problem). So far none of her trees has flowered, despite the largest trees having reached 2m. in height.

My own experience of E. leucoxyton comes from 2 attempts to grow it. The first plant, when I knew much less about native plants, got attacked by insects and a bright red scale, and died. Not to be beaten, I tried again, $3\frac{1}{2}$ years ago. The plant, multi-trunked, is still alive, although one trunk died off as if something had eaten through it at the base. It appears to be still very immature, with large, rounded heart-shaped leaves which are quite lovely. Not exactly bird-attractive yet, but there is hope for it, as it looks fairly healthy.

EUCALYPTUS leucoxylon "Rosea" - A reliable flowering Gum.

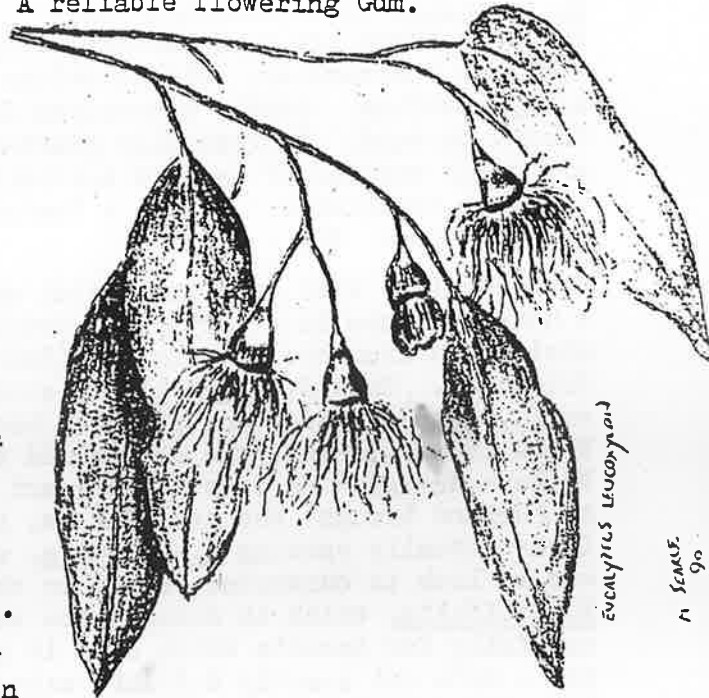
Family: Myrtaceae.
Common Name: Yellow Gum.
Distribution: South Australia and Victoria.
Flowering Period: Late autumn to early spring.
Flower Colour: Pink, red or white.

The Western Australian "Red Flowering Gum" (E. ficifolia) is justly famous for its outstanding display during summer. Unfortunately, successful cultivation of that species as well as of some of the other spectacular western species such as E. caesia is a "hit or miss" affair in humid areas of New South Wales.

There are certainly good specimens of E. ficifolia around Sydney (eg. Penrith and Richmond) but these tend to be the exceptions.

A much more reliable flowering gum for Sydney is E. leucoxylon ssp. megalocarpa. This often is referred to in the nursery trade as "variety rosea" although that name has no botanical status. Like all flowering gums, the flower colour is variable, but is usually pink to red. It flowers in 2 to 3 years from seed and doesn't get too large for small gardens. The flowers are not as spectacular as E. ficifolia but, if reliability is important, it's worth a try.

Drawn by: Michael Searle.



The above article was in the December 1990 issue of Native Plants for New South Wales.

E. torquata (Coral Gum): Small, spreading tree to 8m. with profuse pink flowers. Operculum is grooved and beaked. Flowers when very small. Good specimen tree for well-drained sunny position. Particularly suited for drier climate or winter rainfall. Good tub plant for patio. Used successfully as street tree in drier areas. Frost-hardy, tolerance to -7°C in normal rainfall conditions. Use as a feature plant. Useful as cut flowers, foliage or fruits. Suitable as indoor plant, or potted specimen. Distribution: W.A.

I would love to grow a E. torquata, it is so attractive, but it cannot tolerate the humidity of the south-eastern coastal Queensland summers. I have seen the plants struggle to grow for a couple of seasons, even flowering & fruiting, but they are usually attacked by scale insects, and either die or have to be removed. West of the Great Dividing Range, from Dalby out, it does very well, just as described. Heavier black or reddish soils, a drier climate, and some beautiful street & garden specimens can be seen at Chinchilla, Miles, Roma and Injune - central southern Queensland. Flower colour varies from light pink & apricot through to red. When I eventually find a plant nursery with a E. torquata, I am going to try to grow it despite our totally unsuitable climatic conditions.

E. calophylla (Marri): Medium to large tree to 20m. Good shade tree. Bears cream, pink or red flowers in large clusters, and large urn-shaped fruits. A good red-flowered form makes a spectacular tree. Flowers in Summer and Autumn. Most soils suitable. Frost-hardy, tolerance to -7°C in normal rainfall conditions. Attractive fruits. Distribution: W.A.

It is one of the hardier red-flowered species from Western Australia, and does well at least as far north as Sydney on the east coast provided drainage is good. It is a recommended bird-attracting tree, providing food for both nectar and insect eaters. The Red-capped Parrot of W.A. has a specially adapted beak to extract the seed from the large woody fruits.

Having no feed-back from Study Group members, and no experience of this species myself, I cannot add any more comments.

E. ficifolia (Red-flowering Gum): Small, often twisted tree to 9m. with rough bark. Although there are many Red-flowering Gums, this one deserves its common name. It is the most spectacular. Flower colour varies from white to pinks, reds and orange, always profuse. Large, urn-shaped fruits. Does well in heavy soils, but does not thrive on sand. Successfully grafted onto E. gummifera and E. maculata. (These two are hardy species of eastern Australia.) Frost-hardy, tolerance to -7°C in normal rainfall conditions. Use as a feature plant. Attractive fruits.
Distribution: W.A.

This Eucalypt will grow in coastal south-east Queensland, but is not highly recommended. I have seen one in a carpark in Redcliffe's seafront shopping centre, where buildings shelter it from the sea winds. (Redcliffe is a small seaside city immediately north of Brisbane). This E. ficifolia is about 3½m. high, has been there 4-5 years, is still a small, slender tree, and produces beautiful deep red flowers a couple of times a year. Where it is growing, the soil could probably be classed as heavy. We have one growing in our back yard at the farm, in shaley loam. About 18 months ago, my husband brought one home for me, knowing that I was looking for a red-flowering gum. I was actually wanting E. torquata, and had mentioned that the only way I could get one was to look in nurseries, etc., on the Darling Downs and westward. So home he came with E. ficifolia, which is doing quite well, and is his red-flowering gum, which he watches carefully for insects which chew it sometimes. I do hope it grows well, and flowers for him - he's not exactly S.G.A.P. material, gets a bit fed-up with all the (unpaid) work I do for native plants, and all my meetings, but he has learnt a lot in 10 years. Meanwhile, I'm still waiting for my E. torquata.

Too much time has passed since my July 1990 newsletter, with the months simply flying by in a mad rush. Following a week away in both August (Wallum wildflowers on our Sunshine Coast), and September (a Central Queensland S.G.A.P. gathering at Springsure), I got involved in house renovations, which led on to the usual busy Christmas season. The weather was a bit hard to take for a couple of months, but at least I am grateful that we escaped the continuous flooding much of northern & central coastal Queensland has had, and the bushfires which raged through much of southern Australia. A bit of uncomfortable stickiness is nothing by comparison. The rain we had was most welcome, and with the constant warmth, everything is growing madly, and we are now kept busy mowing and slashing grass & weeds. The dam is full again, but the garden is doing well without watering just now, and the birds are happily raising this season's young ones, making life quite enjoyable when I have time to stop and watch it.

I am still re-activating this Study Group, and deciding just what area to concentrate on while the group re-builds. Basically our task is to provide information about what to grow where to attract birds to our gardens around Australia. For a while I thought about dropping the "bird and plant per newsletter", but decided to retain it, as it gives us some definite pattern of study. The previous Study Group leader had conducted surveys of the best bird-attractive garden plants, including some of the results in her final newsletter. As time permits, I'll continue to reproduce the remaining survey findings in the newsletters. In my introductory issue - No. 18 - I asked for any notes on 4 species of Whistlers, and 4 red-flowering Eucalypts. In this newsletter, I have included the information received, plus some research and experience of my own.

For the next newsletter, in June/July, the bird will be the Little Wattlebird, and the plant will be Hakeas. Any contributions on these, and/or the "birds" and "plants" from No. 18 newsletter will be most welcome.

To keep this Study Group functioning I will need regular feedback from members, so please send me any information you can find about the "bird and plant" of each newsletter. Stories about any special feathered garden visitors and friends always make good reading, so send them in too.

As this is my first attempt at leading a Study Group, I am finding I have much to learn. I have received correspondence from members and groups in New South Wales, A.C.T., Victoria, Tasmania, South Australia and Western Australia. It is something like a Geography lesson, and I feel that I would like to meet you, and see where you live. My travels so far have been limited to south-eastern Queensland, and as far inland as Alpha & Springsure, north to Mackay, and I've been south in New South Wales to Kiama.

So there is much of Australia I have yet to explore, so many more birds and flowers to see. It would help me to "see" your gardens and your birds, if you could send some notes about them, and the district in which you live. Would that be possible? From the few letters I have received so far, I feel that I am blessed to be living in an area which still has so much "green" left. Some parts of our country seem to have been virtually cleared of all wildlife, be it flora or fauna. Where I live, it is still rather inaccessible in parts, with fairly steep mountain and hill country predominant. But bulldozers can still do a lot of clearing in a very short time, even here on our hills. In most places they leave most of the Eucalypts standing, but they remove all the undergrowth and make it all look so tidy. I think Council regulations are responsible in many places for this almost total clearing of the bushland. But by taking away all that undergrowth, they are removing so much of the habitat of the smaller birds such as Wrens, Thornbills and Finches; the feeding places of the ground birds like the Whipbirds, Pheasant Coucals and native Doves; the environment which provides nest material, insects for food; so many of the needs of birds. And they don't seem to know or wish to learn about what they are doing! It is considered to be a fire hazard. Well, it probably is, especially when, like this summer, we have good rains and everything grows lush and thick, then dries off in the spring. I dread the months of spring and early summer when the men say it is time to "burn off". The soft-hearted side of me worries about all the nesting birds and their new chicks, while the practical farmer's wife knows that some burning-off is necessary for a safe summer. But thoughtless clearing really gets me mad! Whenever some land is cleared around here, it changes the pattern of the birds and their comings & goings. We have a lovely little creek in our district, called Kobble Creek. It rises in the mountain range to our south-west, near Mt. Glorious - a beautiful rainforest region with a small township nestled in amongst the trees and the lush undergrowth. Kobble Creek descends from the "mountain" to a valley where it has a heavy gravel and stone bed, beneath which the creek disappears when dry, leaving only a few pretty little pools. Not far from our farm, it passes through a large open gully between two steep ridges, and a road follows along its course. When it is dry, there is a road and a very benign trickle of water here & there, but after several inches of rain, up comes the creek, and away goes the road. A few years^{ago} a property bordering the creek was cleared, right to the creek bank, all the lovely cool scrub vegetation was pushed into heaps, the whole area was altered, and now the creek becomes somewhat of a torrent after decent rains. About the time this clearing was done, I noticed a definite change in the birds visiting my garden, and I feel that it was due to the alteration of that creek's habitat. Even when our men or our nearby relatives clear away any areas of bush, there is a change in the birds' habits for a while. We used to have our bananas growing quite near to the house until recently, and about three summers ago, I had Pheasant Coucals and Eastern Whipbirds in the garden. Now they are further away, and cut off from the shelter in among my shrubs. However, a young male Satin Bowerbird visits via 4 large Mango Trees and "plays" under my trees and shrubs each year. Even a small gully cleared for a dam made a difference to the birds visiting my garden. But I really can't complain, over the years here, I have recorded nearly 100 different birds, either resident or passing through. And I have learnt so much in that short time about them.

BIRD AND NATIVE PLANT BOOKS.

Because my knowledge at present is limited to the birds and plants of south-eastern Queensland, I have purchased three books to help me with my studies. Two of them may be of interest to Study Group members.

"Creating a Native Garden for Birds" written by Frances Eutchison, is the first book in the Mount Annan Botanic Garden Native Plant series. It has been published in collaboration with the Royal Botanic Gardens, Sydney. Mount Annan Botanic Garden is its native plant garden, located in south-western Sydney. It is the largest botanical garden in Australia, covering a 400 ha. site located off Narellan Road, between Camden and Campbelltown, and about 56 km. south-west of Sydney. It holds an outstanding collection of Australian native plants, and will eventually include a large proportion of our 25,000 known plant species, thereby becoming one of the great plant resources of the country. It was officially opened in Spring 1988. There is a Mount Annan Bird Study Group, which has been observing and banding birds at Mount Annan since May 1986.

From 76 species observed in the first year, 114 were recorded by 1990. While I haven't yet read this little book from cover to cover, I've had a good look at it and its contents. It contains some lovely colour photographs, and drawings of bird feeders, and lots of information about the plants to grow, covering a wide variety of vegetation types. There is a "Bird Reference List" dealing with the most common garden visitors, and much, much more about the general subject of birds and native plants. It has an attractive beginning, the front cover illustrated with a Superb Blue Wren reflected in a rock pool. The plants described cover species for all States - a marvellous help, as so many books in the past have dealt with specific regions and are useless elsewhere.

"Bird Attracting Plants" is one volume in a series of books based on the definitive reference work "Australian Native Plants" by John Wrigley and Murray Fagg. It provides detailed descriptions of an extensive selection of bird attracting plants, as well as information on maintenance, and the flowering & seeding times of each plant species. There is also helpful advice on landscaping your garden to provide birds with shelter and nesting sites, and on selecting plants that will be both uniquely beautiful and attractive to birds. Foods such as nectar, fruits, seeds and insects are all dealt with, with more than 400 descriptions of Australian native plants, and approximately 70 colour photographs.

(Three other books are available in this series - "Australian Native Plant Library". They are: "Rockery Plants"; "Ground Covers"; "Aromatic Plants".)

Once again, this book can be used around Australia, as it lists plants suitable for gardens in all States. I often found, in the early days of growing Australian native plants, that the books available were written by southern authors, about southern species, and here in Queensland, all the wonderful plants described just didn't survive in the humid Tropics and sub-Tropics. Nowadays, there is so much more knowledge being spread around, we can all get books describing plants which can be grown successfully in all the different regions. (There are still many of those lovely little Victorian and Western Australian plants we Queenslanders cannot grow, but S.G.A.P. members are now experimenting with grafting, and as those skills improve, so will our chances to grow some of those plants.)

To close, just another mention of next newsletter's "bird" and "plant" - the Little Wattlebird, and Hakeas. Next newsletter in June or July, so write back by the end of May.

Membership dues for the Study Group fall due in June - \$5 - payable simply to "Birds and Native Plants Study Group".

A slight change in my address is the postcode:

Mrs. Barbara Henderson,
M.S. 1063 Farrow Road,
Samsonvale, Qld. 4520.