

# Wildlife & *Autumn/*

## Native *Winter*

### Plants study *1999.* ISSUE 26

# group

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**In This Issue:** Native pigeons; Gerygones; the 'dead heart' of Australia, and much more!

**Send contributions, letters, questions to:**

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2460. New  
members welcome.**

## **GERYGONES (AUSTRALIAN WARBLERS).**

Australia has at least ten (10) different warblers covering areas and habitats as diverse as the country itself.

Their range extends to the coastal

mangroves, to tropical rainforest, central desert regions, open forest country and mountain woodland.

The Australian Warblers are relatives of the thornbills and scrubwrens. Their nests can be distinguished from these relatives though by being a dome-shaped construction suspended from a twig. The side entrance will be half concealed by an overhanging section.

The name Gerygone (pronounced grig-on-ee) is the family name and is often used by bird observers instead of Warbler.

In the Eastern states of Australia the following Warblers are to be found.

Rusty-tailed Warbler (*Gerygone ruficaunda*), mainly found in the coastal areas of central east Queensland. There is not a lot known about this bird or its range. Its distinguishing feature is its rusty brown rump colouring and short white eyebrow. It is presumed that it is normally found amongst mangroves.

Large-billed Warbler (*Gerygone magnirostris*), also found in the Top End of the Northern Territory and Western Australia, where it inhabits

mangroves, rainforests, paperbark swamps and heavily vegetated riverbanks. The nest is an untidy pendant-shaped dome found near water.

Fairy Warbler (*Gerygone palpebrosa*), common in mangrove areas rainforests and woodland in central and northern eastern areas of Queensland. The form variation is evident in threecolour variations in this bird being found only in the males. This difference is noted in the colour and patterning around the head and eye areas. The females are the same colouring.

White-throated Warbler (*Gerygone*

*olivacea*), is found over much of the eastern half of New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland, areas of the south-east of South Australia, the Top End of the Northern Territory and Western Australia. The colouring is a bright shade of lemon-yellow and white on the underparts and tail. These birds inhabit forests and woodlands and are uncommon in some of their range.

Brown Warbler (*Gerygone mouki*), can be found in rainforest, mangrove and wet sclerophyll forests of coastal New South Wales, Queensland and eastern Victoria. Two forms occur in this bird, the southern (race *richmondi*) and northern (race *mouki*) being distinguished again by a slight variation in colouring.

Mangrove Warbler (*Gerygone laevigaster*), is a resident in mangrove areas from north east New South Wales, much of eastern Queensland, the Gulf country of Queensland continuing into coastal areas of the Northern Territory and north west Western Australia.

Western Warbler (*Gerygone fusca*), is fairly widespread although it is more commonly found in the western areas of its range than in the east. It can be found in woodland and open forest from Victoria, through New South Wales, Queensland, the Northern Territory, Western Australia and a small population in southern South Australia.

Green-backed Warbler (*Gerygone chloronata*), prefers the tropical monsoon forest, mangroves and thickets in the Top End of the Northern Territory and Western Australia.

Dusky Warbler (*Gerygone tenebrosa*), is found in mangrove areas in the north-east to central coastal areas of Western Australia., with the colouring varying to paler grey-brown in the south of its range.

The nest structure of the Warblers is usually a pendant shaped dome varying with vegetation type, bird, habitat and other available resources. Eggs vary from blotched pink to white and speckled and average around 2 to 3 per clutch.

The Arctic Warbler (*Phylloscopus borealis*), a

migratory warbler from the northern hemisphere has been noted in remote areas off the Kimberley coast in north west Western Australia, as has the Eastern-crowned Warbler (*Phylloscopus coronatus*). These are infrequent visitors and not often seen.

Warblers are insect eaters and are often seen fluttering on the outer extremities of shrubs, trees and bushes in search of insects. They have also been observed flying in small groups in pursuit of insects above the tree canopy.

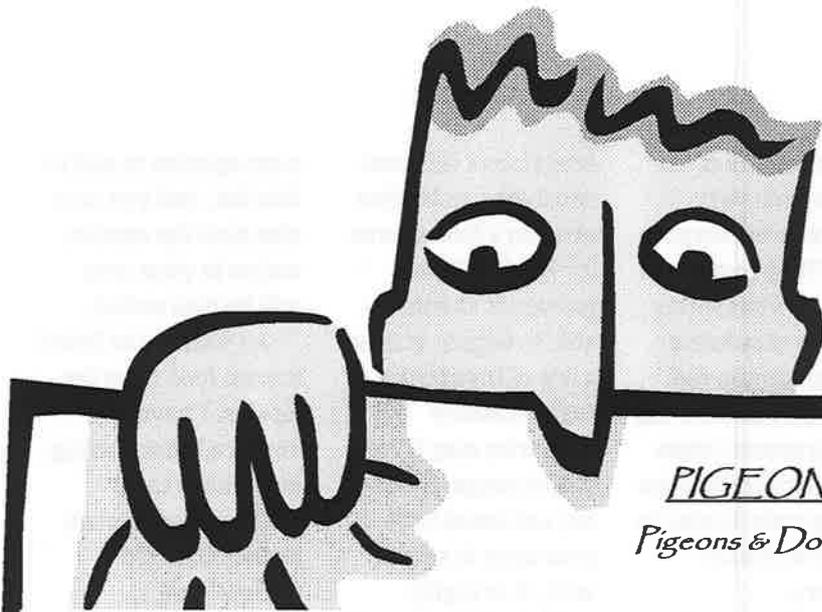
Suburban gardens containing a number of shrubs, larger trees and flowering plants will attract insects and this in turn can attract the Warblers if they are present in the area to start with. As with all birds, cats are a number one enemy, so the number of birds present in the garden will be limited by the presence of cats.

In the area of bushland surrounding my home I have observed the White-throated Warblers going about their daily business of hunting insects and emitting their beautiful melody.

As the majority of the Warblers in

Australia prefer the mangrove areas around the coastline, it would be safe to assume that unless you have mangroves growing in your garden you will only occasionally see these tiny birds when they venture from the safety of the mangroves. The Warblers that do have a greater habitat variation, such as the Western and White-throated Warblers, will be visitors to the garden if there are plenty of shrubs, trees and insect attracting plants around (and a distinct absence of pussy-cats).

Similarities occur between the Warblers and the Thornbills and Scrubwrens, although distinctions can be observed upon closer inspections such as noting the length of the bill which is longer in the Warblers than in the Thornbills for instance. Colouring is also another distinguishing feature.



## *PIGEON POWER!*

*Pigeons & Doves in Australia.*

### FEEDBACK.

Recently I received a letter from Alan Baker, a member from New Zealand who asked several questions regarding birds.

New Zealand is a fascinating place and many of the bird species found there are unique. Alan asks about pigeons in Australia.

There are at least twenty six types of bird frequenting Australia which are referred to as 'pigeons'. This number includes the introduced and feral species such as the Feral Pigeon *Columbia livia*, Spotted Turtle-Dove *Streptopelia chinensis*, Laughing Turtle Dove *Streptopelia senegalensis*.

The range of habitats for these birds is varied and their distribution is widespread. From the arid inland desert regions to the coastal tropical rainforests there is a member of this large group of birds.

Fruit Doves inhabit the forests mainly of the eastern Australian coast and northern regions of the states of Western Australia, the Northern Territory and Queensland, extending down the coast of New South Wales as far south as Victoria.

Not all fruit Doves and Pigeons exist throughout this entire broad range. Different species require different living and feeding conditions. As a result, species like the Banded Fruit-Dove *Ptilinopus cinctus* occurs only in the rainforest remnants of the Arnhem Land escarpment in the Northern Territory. The Torresian Imperial Pigeon *Ducula spilorrhoa* inhabits the northern extremities of the states of Queensland, the Northern Territory and Western Australia. The White Headed Pigeon *Columba leucomela* is a common resident throughout eastern rainforests and surrounding woodland areas. It is one of the more noticeable of the fruit eating pigeons encountered close to gardens and was said to be very good eating by early European settlers. The Black Collared Imperial Pigeon *Ducula mulleri* is a rare visitor from New Guinea and frequents the Torres Strait Islands in the north of Australia.

The Topknot Pigeon *Lopholaimus antarcticus* is a resident of rainforest & eucalypt areas in the eastern coastal areas of Australia.

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## **KOALAS & EUCALYPTS.**

Koalas (*Phascolarctos cinereus*) family *Phascolarctidae*, are one of Australia's best known animals.

The distribution range of Koalas is from eastern Australia including much of New South Wales, Queensland and Victoria, and parts of Western Australia, South Australia and including Kangaroo Island. They are not overly common in any of their range and there are variations in size and depth of fur covering depending on environmental conditions.

Koalas eat only eucalypt leaves. Of the 600 eucalypt species found throughout Australia, the Koala's diet consists of only about 35 of these species.

They are a highly prized visitor to any backyard or garden, but it is unlikely that they would stay around more than a few days, unless you are fortunate enough to live on a large property with a Koala colony resident nearby. Koalas need

large amounts of foliage from very particular eucalypt trees. They may, as in our case, visit young saplings of suitable trees to sample the wares and also during mating season when movement is common among male Koalas in search of female partners.

Dogs frequently attack Koalas who are on the ground. Koalas only leave the safety of trees when travelling in search of food or a mate. This is when they are most vulnerable to dog attack.

They are nocturnal animals and if seen during the day are usually curled up in a ball in the fork of a tree or slowly nibbling on some leaves.

Mating calls from Koalas are often a scary sound to the uninitiated, especially at night. The crescendo of grunting and squealing sounds something like a mob of wild pigs!

Koalas are wild animals, not cuddly pets, and they have the ability to bite and scratch causing severe injuries to the unwary.

The trees listed below are a general

selection of different eucalypt species that provide a food source for Koalas. Plant nurseries should be able to supply at least a few of the species, State Forestry nurseries may have a larger range. If Koalas are not noted to be in your area to start with, it is highly unlikely that you will be able to attract them to your property.

### **Suggested species of Eucalypts.**

*Eucalyptus viminalis*  
*E. globulus*  
*E. grandis*  
*E. robusta*  
*E. rubida*  
*E. tereticornis*  
*E. punctata*  
*E. resinifera*  
*E. regnans*  
*E. racemosa*  
*E. pryoriana*  
*E. propinqua*  
*E. polyanthemus*  
*E. moluccana*  
*E. nicholii*  
*E. ovata*  
*E. pilularis*  
*E. paniculata*  
*E. obliqua*  
*E. microcorys*  
*E. haemastoma*  
*E. maculata*  
*E. goniocalyx*  
*E. drepanophylla*  
*E. ssp. saligna*  
*E. ssp. botryoides*  
*E. camaldulensis*

Further research will provide the observer with several

more species to add to this list, and you may also note the species native to your area will be best suited.

As well as the listed known food trees for Koalas, I have observed them eating, or perhaps taste testing, species such as the imported radiata pine, Paperbark (*Melaleuca quinquinervia*) and Casuarina (*Casuarina sp.*).

Koalas are not very active, so you could be sitting watching them for many hours before seeing even a minor movement such as the turning of a head or the shifting of the rump to a more comfortable position in the fork of the tree. Spot lighting at night provides viewing of more activity (although only slightly), but remember to hold a strong spotlight beam on an animal for only a few seconds at a time as the strong light can damage their eyes and disorient them. Strong beams at very close range can also become very hot and cause burns.

# The 'Dead Heart'

Central Australia is often referred to as the 'dead heart' of Australia.

This well used title couldn't be further from the truth!

The 'dead heart' gives the impression of a place where nothing lives or grows, a place where nothing could survive.

Having spent some time living and working in Central Australia, I can honestly say that the desert is definitely not the 'dead heart' of Australia.

It is a very beautiful, exciting and, often, unusual place, full of life day and night, and changing from season to season.

Springtime is definitely one of the most colourful seasons, especially after rain. Although, anytime substantial rain falls in the desert regions, an explosion of colour and greenery emerges quickly from the red earth.

Red sand dunes, smoothly rippled by the desert winds, support fluffy clumps of white Tangled Mulla Mulla (*Ptilotus latifolius*), maeve and white Desert Fringe Myrtle (*Calytrix longiflora*) and brilliant rich deep pinkish purple Parakeelya (*Calandrinia polyandra*). 'Soft' Spinifex (*Triodia pungens*) and Feather-top Spinifex (*Plectrachne schinzii*) are prominent along the dunes and sand plains. These plants flourish in the harsh conditions.

Growing a successful garden in Central Australia is not really as difficult as it might first seem.

The success depends on the types of plants selected, the amount of water provided and whether those plants are naturally occurring in the area.

Attracting desert wildlife is not difficult either.

The Pink Cockatoo (*Cacatua leadbeateri*), the Budgerigar (*Melopsittacus undulatus*) and the Cockatiel (*Nymphicus hollandicus*) are attracted to the large Desert Oaks

(*Allocasuarina decasneana*), the White Cypress Pine (*Callitris glaucophylla*) and the wide variety of Wattles (*Acacia ssp*) found throughout the central desert regions.

The Pink Cockatoos feeding on the seeds of acacia and cypress pine and utilising these trees for shelter.

The Cockatiels using the trees for shelter, feeding on grass seeds at intervals.

The Budgerigars, maintaining a nomadic lifestyle, foraging for grass seed wherever it is most abundant, while using the trees for shelter.

The hollows in the older trees are used for nesting sites by most parrots and cockatoos.

Wherever there is vegetation of any description or size, there will be wildlife using it to their advantage in some way. That may be as a food source, nesting or breeding area, shelter from the elements or predators or as a good place to sit and wait for dinner to arrive.

Many species of gecko, snakes, skinks and dragons exist in

all the arid landscape environments, from the rocky boulders to the open sandy dunes and plains.

Although you may not think frogs could survive in the arid regions of Australia, they are there.

Usually, frogs will be heard after prolonged rain storms which fill the ephemeral water holes.

The Trilling Frog (*Neobatrachus centralis*) for example, spends much of its time buried under the ground awaiting the heavy summer rain. Any natural areas and ground depressions that you can leave in your garden could become a haven for the burrowing frogs.

A variety of marsupial mice and rodents will appreciate the cover, food source and nesting material provided by the wide variety of native vegetation suitable for growing in a central Australian garden.

A desert garden won't look anything like a heritage cottage garden full of flowering blooms. But it will have a uniquely Australian charm and usefulness about it.

Flowering plants intermingled with attractive foliage, grassy seed heads and edible berries, will hold the interest of any gardener who appreciates native Australian plants.

Your garden could be providing nesting materials, shelter and a restaurant for birds, mammals, reptiles, insects, spiders and humans.

You will be comforted in the fact that you are helping to preserve some of the native Australian wildlife of that area. And you might also like the taste of some of the plant products yourself!

### **DID YOU KNOW?**

Kangaroo Paws, (*Anigozanthos*), are being extensively used in Australian native plant style cottage gardens. Australia's many species of nectar-feeding birds are very attracted to them!

## **GOOD BOOKS.**

Molyneux, B. and Forrester, S. 1993. *The Austrafloa Guide to Choosing and Growing Australian Plants*, Kangaroo Press Pty Ltd, Kenthurst.

An excellent guide on choosing native plants, from trees to grasses, and everything in between.

The authors have listed specifics for individual plant species such as soil types, climatic conditions, height and width of plants. This provides the reader with easy-to-find

details on specific plants, and gives a reasonable idea of how they may be expected to grow in the garden.

The authors have also included a section on the basics required for

successful gardening.

A handy guide for the native gardening enthusiast to purchase.

Holliday, I 1989. *A Field Guide to Australian Native Flowering Plants: Melaleucas*, Lansdowne Publishing Pty Ltd. Sydney, Australia.

The author of this guide and many others, Ivan Holliday, is a life member of the Society for Growing Australian Plants.

This particular guide describes, in detail, the Melaleucas of Australia. The text is interspersed with full colour photographs and black and white illustrations throughout. An excellent reference book and handy garden guide.

### **DID YOU KNOW?**

The peeling bark on the trunks of many Australian eucalypts and other species provides shelters and breeding places for many insects, small reptiles and spiders, including the large, insect-eating Huntsman spider (*Heteropodidae* and *Selenopidae*). Australian Heteropodidae consist of 13 genera and 94 described species. Australian Selenopidae consist of only one species within a single genus. These spiders are often referred to as 'tarantulas', and are found Australia wide.

*continued from*  
**page 3.**

The Bronzewings are a group of ground - feeding pigeons, of which there are several types of varying distribution range and status.

The Crested Pigeon (*Ocyphaps lophotes*) is probably the most widely distributed, being found over most of the Australian continent.

It is abrownish - grey, with a hint of dusty pink in colour. The sunlight focusses your eyes on irridescent patches of blues, greens and purples. It has a small crest of feathers on its head. Crested Pigeons are common visitors to country and suburban gardens and feed on seeds, grains and occassionally fruit, and prefer easy access to water.

The Spinifex Pigeon (*Petrophassa plumifera*), is a similar looking bird to the crested pigeon, but slightly smaller and with a reddish - bronze colouring.

It is frequently seen at campsites and near suburban gardens in the arid regions of spinifex country in the Northern Territory, western Queensland and Western Australia.

The Squatter Pigeon (*Petrophassa scripta*), of Queensland and the northern and central west areas of New South Wales, is considered to be a rare and uncommon

bird in its range. As is the Partridge Pigeon (*Petrophassa smithii*), of north Western Australia and the top end of the Northern Territory.

The extensive loss of suitable habitat and introduction and rapid spread of feral species such as foxes and cats, have been contributing factors in the rapid decline of such interesting Australian birds.

The Flock Bronzewing (*Phaps histrionica*), once common throughout the northern Australian plains and woodland forests, has also suffered a sizeable reduction in population size. Flocks of these birds can still be seen in open country or around watering holes at sunset and dawn.

All the Bronzewings feed on seeds and grains deposited on the ground from grasses, shrubs or trees.

The Common Bronzewing (*Phaps chalcoptera*), is distributed Australia - wide, except for the very tip of Cape York in far north Queensland.

Its irridescent patches on the feathers are evident in sunlight and the brownish - shades of the body feathers assist in camouflage in the foliage.

Other species include the Chestnut - quilled Rock Pigeon (*Petrophassa rufipennis*), located in the limited

region of sandstone country in the Northern Territory.

The White - quilled Rock Pigeon (*Petrophassa albipennis*), found in the far north of Western Australia and extending into the Northern Territory.

The Brush Bronzewing (*Phaps elegans*), rare in its range from coastal areas of southern Queensland, through NSW, Victoria and South Australia and the south-west corner of Western Australia.

The Wonga Pigeon (*Leucosarcia melanoleuca*), found along the east coast of Australia from central east Victoria through to central east Queensland.

Cliff faces, crevices and the occasional tree hollow are nesting habitats for these birds.

Large amounts of grass seed and native fruit or berry producing plants will attract the birds of this type that are resident in each district.

They are a favoured food of Aboriginal people, and were hunted extensively during the early years of European settlement.

Birds of Prey find them a delicacy also, and can be observed circling above roosts or swooping amongst flocks to strike a meal.

Planting of native grasses will encourage seed - eaters to the garden, and provide a new and attractive

feature to the home garden.

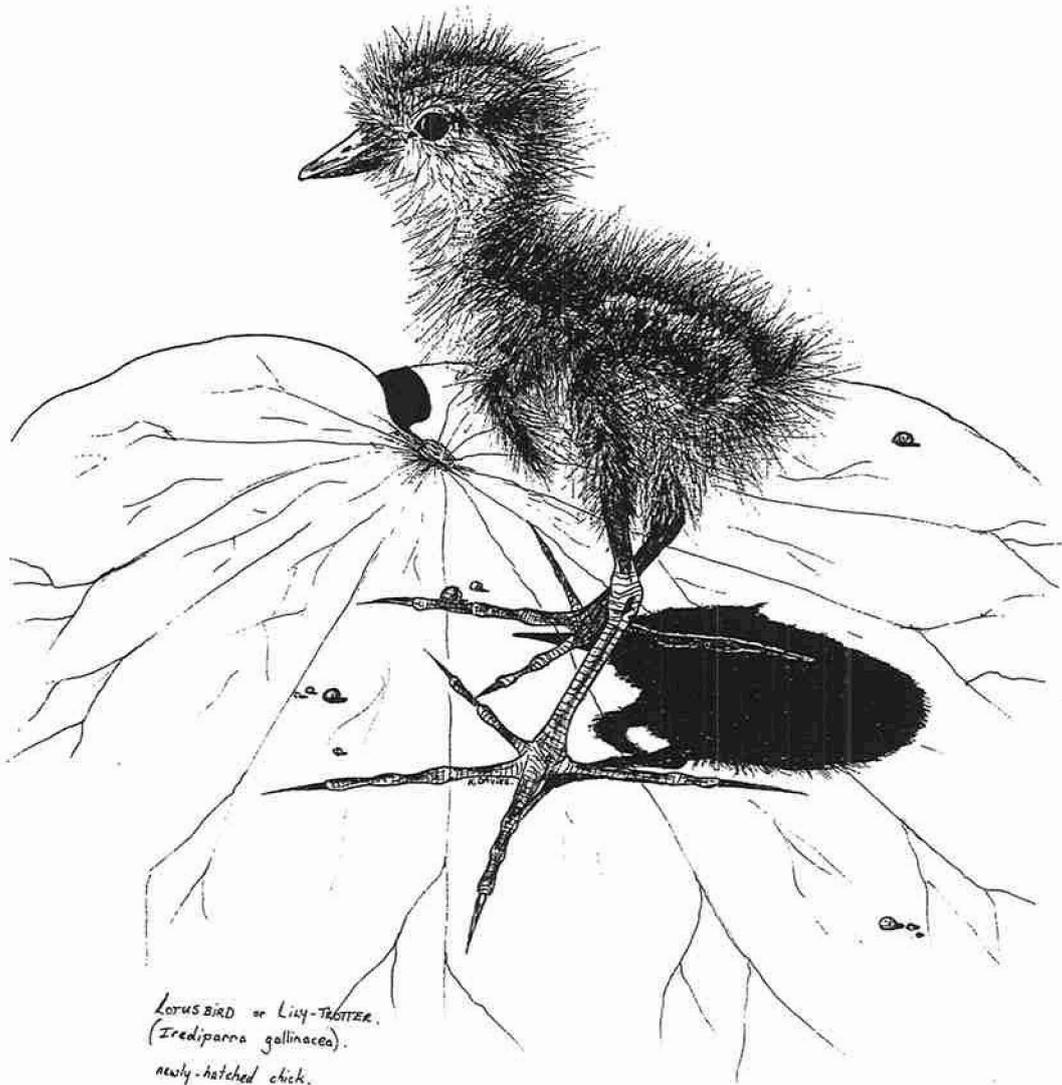
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LOTUS BIRD or Lily-TROTTER.  
(*Irediparra gallinacea*).  
newly-hatched chick.