

CREATING A HABITAT TO ENCOURAGE BIRD LIFE

As a nature conservation initiative, this article was drafted for TSC permanent site lessees to assist with choices of plants that will encourage bird-life to their sites.

To truly garden with birds one must have plants. Flowers, shrubs and trees have several functions in the tenuous life of birds and a major one of these is the provision of food in the form of fruit, berries, seeds, nectar and perhaps, the flowers themselves. Go indigenous if you can – it is very close to home for birds. Plants and birds have a partnership in an ecological enterprise, which has assured the survival of each over a period of millions of years. The complexities of these interrelationships have only partially been unravelled. When bird gardening we are really concerned with what plants can do for birds.

Suitable trees and shrubs for encouraging bird-life to your garden are listed below:

- Birdflower (***Crotolaria***) – provides nectar
- “Blinkblaar” (***Rhamnus prinoides***) – provides berries
- The Carnival Bush (***Ochnaserrulata***) – provides seeds
- Tree Fuschia (***Halleria lucida***) – provides berries
- Wild Peach (***Kiggelaria africana***) – provides berries
- Olive Tree (***Olea africana***) – evergreen, provides berries
- “Gwarri” (***Euclea crispa***) – evergreen, provides berries
- Wild Fig (***Ficus***) – evergreen, provides fruit
- White Stinkwood (***Celtis africana***) – provides excellent shade
- Pyracantha – provides berries
- Cotoneaster – provides berries
- Mexican cherry (***Prunus capuli***) – provides berries
- Wild dagga (***Leonotus leonuris***) – provides nectar
- Aloe (***Aloe ferox***) – provide nectar
- Cape honeysuckle (***Tecomaria capensis***) – provides nectar
- Proteas and ericas – provide nectar
- Karee (***Rhus species***) – provide berries
- Tamarisk tree – fresh shoots and nectar
- Grass (***Setaria chevelierii***) – provides seed

Which plants provide cover, shelter, natural nesting sites and nesting material for birds? By choosing the right ones, one can condense into a garden the habitat requirements of a surprising number of bird species, and still have a garden in the accepted sense of the word. We are concerned of the type of vegetation rather than the variety, so there is still room for individual taste in selecting the plants. Your favourite annuals are not incompatible with birds!

The materials for bird garden development are trees, shrubs, climbers and grasses – the same things that nature uses in the wild.

Naked new gardens need trees to attract birds; without them the birds will roost elsewhere and be little more than “day boarders”. There is a tendency to

turn to the fast-growing Australasian trees such as Tipuanha (*tipu*) and the ***Acasia elata*** or the ***A. longifolia*** for quick results, unaware perhaps that there are attractive indigenous trees that will do the job. The Tipuanha is indeed a good starter for bare gardens if its long shoots are cut back by about two-thirds to promote denser growth. It is an evergreen tree with a spreading canopy and an ideal shelter for roosting birds. T

he White Stinkwood (***Celtis africana***), indigenous and recommended for its berries, is a quick-growing roosting tree and a shade tree, for your own enjoyment, in summer. Acacias or thorn trees are also popular bird trees. Masked weavers suspend their nests from the slender terminal branches; shrikes lodge their cup nests within the forks, which abound in a typical tangle of branches. In flower, thorn trees attract a host of food insects. The Sweet Thorn or “Soetdoring” (***Acasia karoo***) and the “Wag-’n bietjie” (***A. caffra***) are the most common thorn-trees, but why not experiment with the picturesque Paperbark (***A. sieberiana*** var. ***woodii***) and the “Apiesdoring” (***A. galpinii***). A creeper can be draped about the branches to form more secluded nesting places for robins and fly-catchers. The Karee (***Rhus lancea***) and other species of ***Rhus*** are also very suitable trees. Many are evergreen and their branches contort into a maze of potential nesting sites. These trees are hardy, drought-resistant, easy to grow, and quite attractive in their modest way. Most bare edible fruits. Olive thrushes will seek out a gently-sloping lateral branch with supporting fork about 2 to 3 metres up in a Karee for their nests.

The Firethorn (***Rhus pyroides***) supports hundreds of caterpillars in the summer, which are delicacies for cuckoos and other birds. The Wild Peach (***kiggelaria africana***) feeds a butterfly caterpillar in the Cape, which in turn also adds to the diet of cuckoos and other species. Don’t spray these caterpillars with insecticide if you are attracting birds.

Many of the slow-growing evergreen indigenous trees such as the Wild Olive (***Olea africana***), Blue Bush or “Gwarrie” (***Euclea crispa***) and “Kasuur” (***Pittosporum viridiflorum***) attract birds with their fruit in later life, but are attractive shelter shrubs when small. Garden trees raise their shelter high above the ground, shrubs fill the space in between. Bird gardener shrubs do not spring as individual bushes from neatly punched holes in a lawn carpet, unless the garden is very small and the shrub very large. An interwoven self-sustaining belt of greenery perhaps hugging a wall or hedge and extending from ground level upwards to a height of 2 metres is much more effective.

Robins and thrushes find their food among the decaying leaves beneath the sheltering vegetation. Prinias and white-eyes search for tiny insects on the closely woven stems where the texture protects them from predators.

The mass is like a loosely-knitted hedge, in contrast to the closely-trimmed variety which is too dense to be of much use to birds. Hardy, less ornamental shrubs such as the Sage Bush (***Buddleia salvifolia***) and the ragged, red-berried Pyracantha could occupy a secluded corner, with the tormented “Deurmekaarbos” (***Ehretia rigida***) filling an intermediate gap.

Fiscal shrikes and “Bokmakieries” use this tangled shrub for their nests. More refined shrubs and juvenile trees can be intermingled and extended to the more popular parts of the garden designed to impress your friends (not the feathered kind!). Dense evergreen creepers such as the honeysuckle and the ivy can hang from trees to form nesting sites for small birds that do not require strong supporting branches for their woven, in-situ nests. The Cape Honeysuckle (***Tecomaria capensis***) and the blue-flowered Plumbago (***Plumbago auriculata***) do not climb but sprawl across other shrubs to fill the spaces. Pruning encourages bushiness in most shrubs and provides more forks for nest-supports.

Grasses, including reeds and bullrushes, are valuable suppliers of nesting material. Weavers strip “thread” from the long parallel-veined leaves to create their own masterpieces. The seeding heads of grasses are the autumn granaries for many seed-eaters. Pampas Grass (***Cortaderia selloana***) is one of the giants of the grass family and is sometimes chosen as a nesting site by prinias. The sharp-edged leaves and sheer density protect the eggs and young birds from predators, very effectively. The plumage of this grass is used to line nests. Warblers attach their nests to the stems of bullrushes (we have many around Beele’s pond). Red bishops and Cape weavers also build their nests in reeds.

The practise of “topping” trees such as pines, beefwoods and black wattles create a new look because of lateral growth from the “cropped” tree. Should the tree die, the stump may be covered with a creeper like the Zimbabwe creeper (***Podranea brycei***).

Many established gardens may not conform to any of the requirements and suggestions above, but there is never a garden without any birds. You can be sure that some birds will make the effort to adapt. A bird-friendly garden should place emphasis on the type of vegetation rather than the variety. A loosely-woven continuous band of vegetation allows birds to move under cover if they have to.

The skill in bird gardening lies in gleaning information from the birds themselves by experimenting and observing. Birds are madly adapting – you just help them along!

Acknowledgement:

***“Gardening with Birds” by Tom Spence (Delta Books)
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