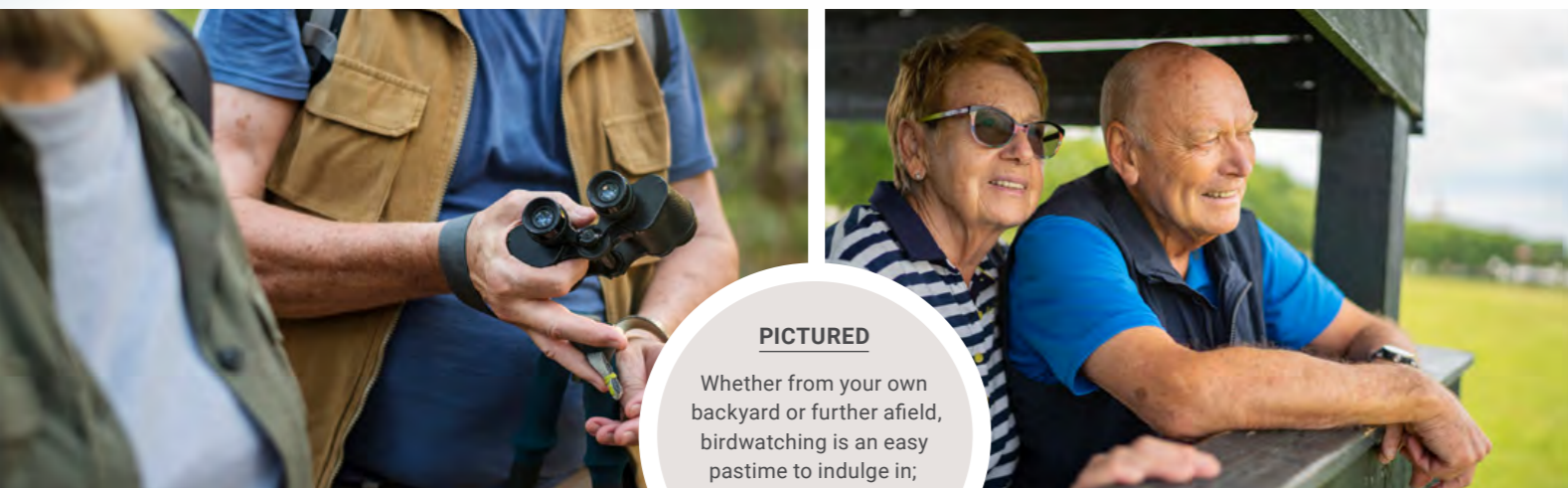


Eyes to the skies

Whether it's for personal interest, scientific benefit or social connection, birdwatching can be an engaging and satisfying pastime

WORDS Alegria Alano



PICTURED

Whether from your own backyard or further afield, birdwatching is an easy pastime to indulge in; (opposite) a red-tailed black cockatoo.

It's easy to forget that we're part of the natural world, but connecting with nature can be comforting, especially when we feel isolated. If you look up or listen out, you'll be reminded of the creatures that we live with – few more captivating than birds.

Birds in our backyards

"We have a dazzling array of birds that live with us," says Dr Holly Parsons, Urban Bird Program Manager at BirdLife Australia.

Of the (more than) 850 bird species endemic to Australia, about 600 can be found in urban areas.

Birds in New South Wales and Victoria come in a variety of colours, shapes and sizes. "Superb fairy-wrens or silvereyes – tiny birds that will pop through in a flurry – are always entertaining," Dr Parsons says. "In the middle of the Melbourne CBD (for example) you get peregrine falcons and other big birds of prey like brown goshawks scour outer suburbs as well. There's a type of bird for anybody's interest."

We also don't need to venture far from home, if at all, to see them. "Rainbow lorikeets are the most common bird seen in backyards across much of coastal Australia and there is nothing dull about them," Dr Parsons says. With such diversity, it's no wonder a practice devoted to watching our feathered friends exists.

Become an amateur birdwatcher

There is no single way to partake in amateur birdwatching, which is a big part of its appeal. Some enjoy observing; others might photograph or identify birds; and twitchers (a type of birdwatcher) are committed to sighting rare species.

Birders might take on a 'big year', an informal challenge of identifying the greatest number of birds in a calendar year. Others prefer group expeditions with a club or association for the social aspect of discussing a common interest – with the added benefit of spending time outdoors. There's no right or wrong – you simply need to be looking for birds to be birdwatching. »

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Birdwatching toolkit

Your birdwatching style will determine the necessary equipment. Some bushwalking gear can make a walk beyond your garden more comfortable.

Consider:

- + comfortable walking shoes
- + layers of sun-smart clothing
- + a local bird field guide for identification (a book or a mobile phone app)
- + pen and paper to take notes
- + binoculars
- + water





Connecting to nature has huge benefits for helping us feel relaxed, occupy our brains, contribute to science and have a purpose.”

DR HOLLY PARSONS,
BIRDLIFE AUSTRALIA

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Getting started

Timing your outing with bird activity will make things easier. “It’s best to go birding in the early morning, especially in summer, as birds will be quiet by 11am. In winter, birding can start between 8.30 to 9am,” Elisabeth Karplus, Committee Member for Birding NSW, says.

For your very first session, Dr Parsons suggests a relaxed approach. “Simply go outside and take notes. Listen, watch and see what’s going on in your space, wait for things to come to you, relax and enjoy it.” You’ll slowly start to notice features that differentiate species like shape, size, feather colours or interesting behaviour to help with identification.

Joining a club can also help sharpen your birdwatching skills. As well as social connection, clubs like Birding NSW offer the benefits of guided outings, expert talks and the opportunity to learn from more experienced birders.

Birdwatching for science

BirdLife Australia programs allow birdwatchers to contribute to science. The Aussie Backyard Bird Count is a great way for people to get involved in birdwatching – as all that’s involved is counting birds using a mobile app for 20 minutes. Last October, more than 100,000 Australians joined the citizen science project and counted more than 4 million birds in total.

“If you want to take that next step, we have Birds in Backyards surveys that are available year-round. We ask people to tell us a little bit about what their garden is like, as well as what birds are visiting,” Dr Parsons says. Data from both programs is used by local councils and researchers for conservation, for planning and to better understand environmental health.

Bird-friendly gardens

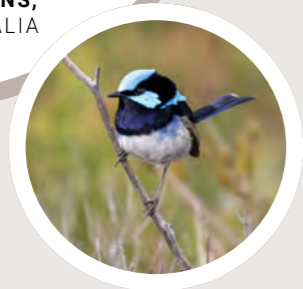
Another way to connect with birds is to create a bird-friendly garden. “We’re continuing to change and remove natural habitats, but we should also be looking at the role we can play in our own spaces to help as many birds as we can,” Dr Parsons says. “Each garden is a piece of the puzzle, which means that we don’t have to be too prescriptive about what makes a bird-friendly garden.”

Dr Parsons suggests adding shrubs for shelter and providing clean water in birdbaths to help give birds the resources they need to thrive.

“Connecting to nature has huge benefits for helping us feel relaxed, occupy our brains, contribute to science and have a purpose,” Dr Parsons says. “With birding or bird-friendly gardening, we’re not only doing it for the birds, but we’re doing it for our own benefit too.” ●

Website resources:

- birdlife.org.au/all-about-birds
- aussiebirdcount.org.au
- birdingsw.org.au

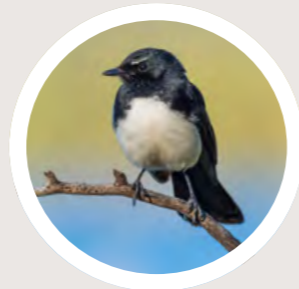


Backyard birds

Superb fairy-wren
Commonly found in urban gardens and parks (as well as dense shrubland) throughout eastern Australia, Tasmania and the south-eastern corner of South Australia. The male has blue and black plumage on its head, throat and neck, while the female has a light-brown head and wings (with a white chest). Both male and female are small and can be seen flitting about quickly from branch to branch.



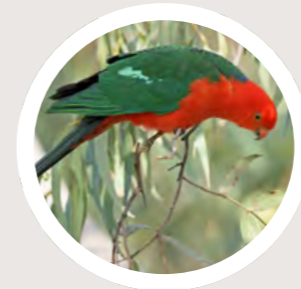
Blue-faced honeyeater
Aptly named, this bird is easily identifiable from the striking blue colour above its eye. The wings, tail and throat of the honeyeater are olive green, with a black head and white chest. Mostly found in tropical and sub-tropical locations, you may spot them in your backyard when trees and shrubs are in flower.



Willie wagtail
This little bird can be identified by the wiggle-waggle of its shiny black tail plumage. It’s one of Australia’s most widespread (and well-known) fantails, found throughout the country, except Tasmania. These birds have a black head, wings and tail, with a distinctive white belly.



Laughing kookaburra
The joyous call of this iconic bird is one of its most identifying features. This Australian native can be found throughout the eastern states of the country. One of the largest members of the kingfisher family, they have a large beak and recognisable brown eye-stripe through the face (as well as a white chest with brown wings and tail).



King-parrot
This remarkable parrot can be found along the east coast and ranges (mountainous regions) of Australia – from Cooktown to Port Campbell. The males can be identified by the red head and body, and forest-green wings and tail feathers. The females, however, have a green head with the same red chest and green wings and tail as the males.