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Cape Chatter

Building your own little bit of wilderness ...

I have written about this before, but a principal aim of *Cape Chatter* is to help raise awareness and connect people with nature ... thinking about how we can be part of nature rather than on the outside looking in. Our actions as humans have an impact on the natural world—sometimes good and at times very bad. *Cape Chatter* has also set out to observe the impacts **The Cape** is having on the ‘natural world’ and the land on which it is being developed. Here, there will be winners and losers. We started with a blank canvas—from degraded agricultural pasture—evolving into a sustainable estate, retaining large sections of the property as ‘habitat buffers’ and other areas reconstructed with enhanced landscapes (such as the ponds, wetlands, small parks and streetscapes). Let’s see how it evolves!

Home gardens play a vital role in connecting with and enhancing ‘nature’ through bird friendly garden and pollinator/nectar attracting environments. Home gardens are important ‘stepping stones’ and safe havens which provide links to complement remnant vegetation corridors and reconstructed habitats. I was reminded of this as a beautiful juvenile *Eastern Spinebill*, a native Australian honeyeater, has been foraging in our garden over the past few days. This is something that would not have been possible three years ago when the area was nothing more than a weedy piece of grassy pasture. The young bird feels safe enough to explore new territory, knowing it can hide from larger bird predators which now dominate most urban and semi-urban landscapes.

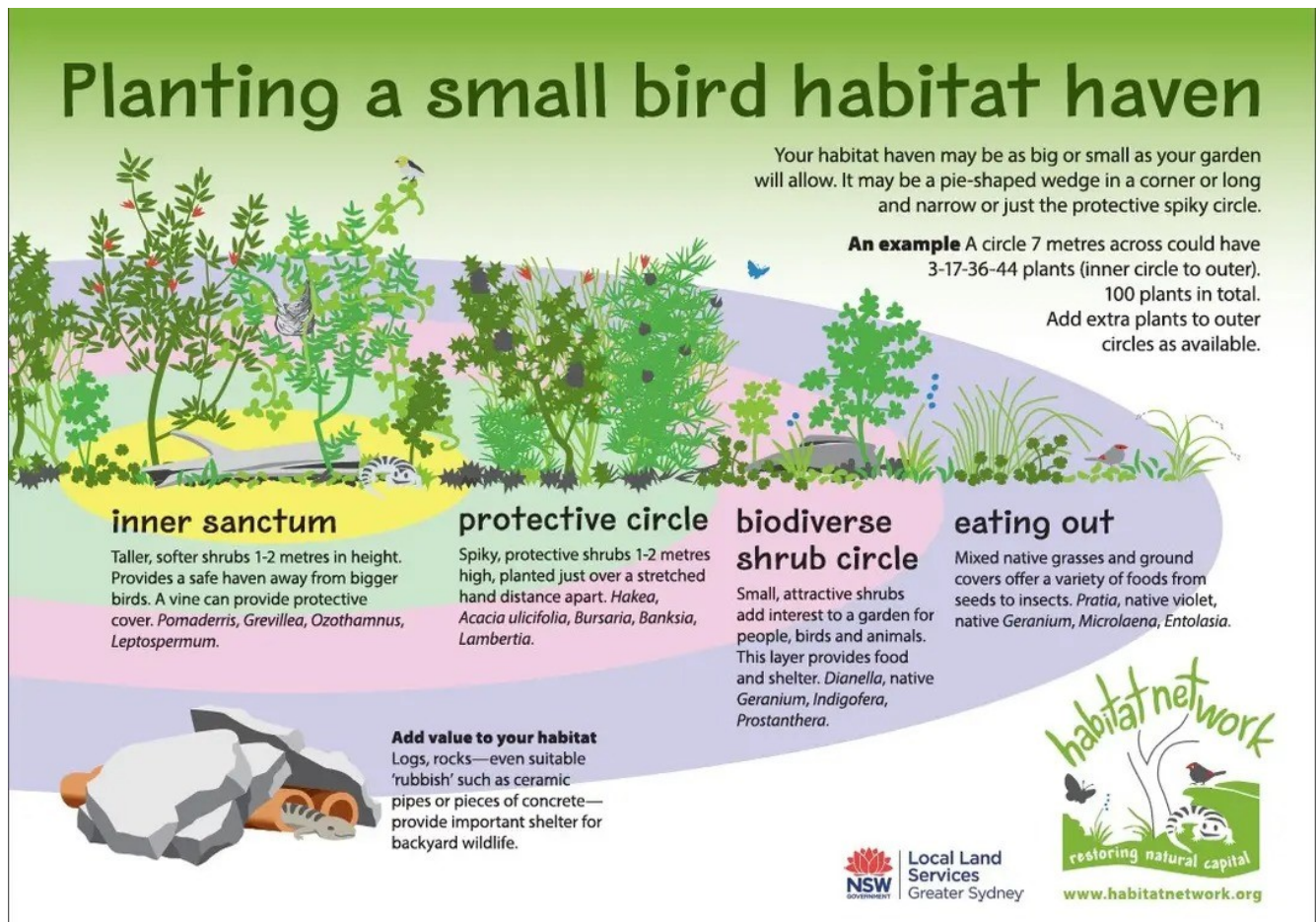


Above: Juvenile *Eastern Spinebill*, the first seen in our garden in three years, feeding among fading *Kangaroo Paws*, *Woolly Bush* and *Melaleuca*. We have had previous sightings of adult male *Spinebills*, mostly in the cooler months of June and July, so this young bird is an early visitor. They are more common in the established gardens of Cape Paterson, and over time, hopefully will be a fixture of **The Cape** birdlife. The *Eastern Spinebill* is one of **seven** honeyeater species which have now visited our three year old garden.

Building gardens for small birds ...

Many small native birds are struggling with urbanisation and are rarely seen now in built-up environments. We are fortunate to have several species residing in the nearby coastal bush and some are gradually moving into the wetlands and parks. It would be lovely to see them fluttering about some carefully constructed home garden habitats in the future.

I recently saw this wonderful schematic posted by the local Residents and Ratepayers Association (CPRRA) on social media about building a haven for small birds. It is quite informative. This style of garden provides food sources, safety and places for other small creatures like reptiles, amphibians and invertebrates which are important 'food chain' ingredients for our birds. So build your own bit of wilderness and have a go—you might be surprised what visitors you find dropping in!



Remember to add water ...

An inexpensive, simple earthen/pottery dish filled with fresh water is a must, particularly during the warmer months, allowing small birds to drink and bathe. A couple of small rocks to stand on helps as well for the real little birds. The dish should be cleaned regularly to prevent spread of disease. Place it near thick, shrubby plants for the bird to retreat too if a larger predator happens to turn up!

And some rocks and logs ...

If you can, add some 'value' to your wilderness by placing pebbles, rocks, logs, stumps and 'stags' or any leftover building materials which many small creatures such as invertebrates, reptiles, amphibians and even small mammals can use as habitat, helping to breakdown and recycle mulch and providing valuable food sources for the small birds.

Small bird gardens ...

Here is a snapshot of some of the local small bird species which have been attracted to our three year old garden habitat: *Grey Fantail*, *New Holland Honeyeater*, *Silveryeye*, *Crescent Honeyeater*, *White-eared Honeyeater* and *Eastern Spinebill*.



It would be nice to attract a few of these birds as well ...



Superb Fairy-wren, *Brown Thornbill* and *White-browed Scrubwren* are plentiful in the nearby coastal bush and have begun venturing into the thick wetland vegetation. They love thick bushy shrubs to hide, nest and forage—so see if you can entice a few of these birds into your garden by creating an important habitat stepping stone.

Natural food only ...

Some may disagree with me, but I am not a fan of artificial bird feeders or feeding birds processed food (or any animal for that matter) : unnatural foods attract unwanted species, will shorten the life of the bird and most likely spread disease. You can get just as much joy observing birds from a spot in a well structured garden providing lots of natural food sources which also attract pollinator invertebrates.



A problematic bird ... the Rainbow Lorikeet—can we stem the storm?

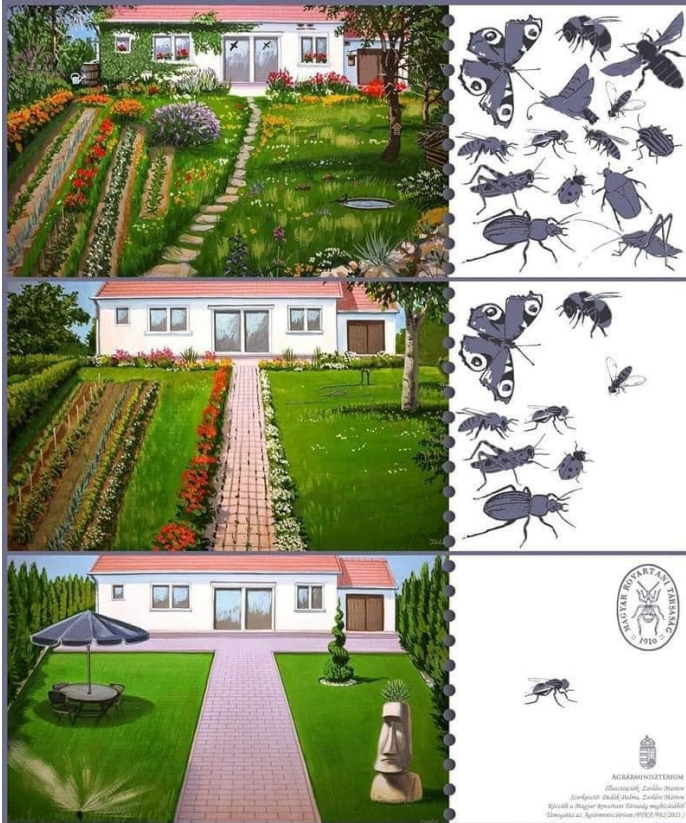
The beautiful *Rainbow Lorikeet* is a problem bird that has taken over many urban environments in southern Australia, at the expense of other bird species. It is a winner from urbanisation and is responsible for pushing many smaller native birds out of built-up environments. Fortunately at **The Cape**, these birds are not present in large numbers and are generally confined to the coastal bush where there is ample food among the *Coastal Banksia* (pictured below). Encouraging these birds to artificial bird feeders could lead them to taking over our gardens and pushing out the smaller species we are trying to attract.



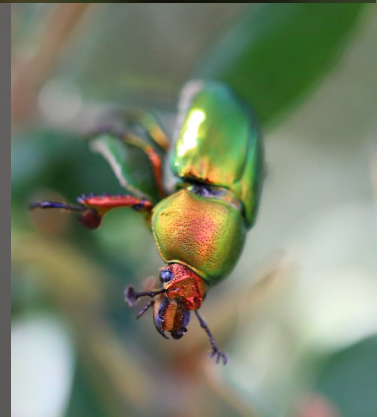
Hardy native plants that can survive the tough salt and windy coastal conditions also provide beauty within the home garden, but also provide the nectar from flowers and 'juicy fruits' which provide an invaluable food source for many small native birds. **Above:** the native *Rhagodia* with delicious fruit berries, the nectar of the *Coastal Banksia* flower head, and *Kangaroo Paws* are bird favourites in our garden.

And what about pollinators, pest controllers and recyclers you say ...

Here is another great schematic, courtesy of our wonderful CPRRA who do a sterling job maintaining and enhancing our local natural environments. This is about the important invertebrates you can attract to our garden and how best to go about it—obviously more flowering plants and structures are better rather than open areas and less plants!



Again, I have been amazed at the variety and beauty of some of the invertebrate species that have been observed in just a three year period in our garden. And most are doing a great job pollinating, processing scraps, creating edible foods in the vegie patch, cleaning up pests and providing a food source for birds and larger animals up the food chain.



Value added structure ... for all sorts of creatures



Old dried logs and stumps provide great cover and safe havens for many small creatures like *Skinks* (we have identified 4 species at **The Cape**) and *Frogs* (8 species identified). Tree stags provide instant perch points where birds can survey their surrounds. Your stumps and logs might already have naturally made crevices and holes for creatures to hide and nest, if not, drill some for instant habitat. Many of our solitary native bees rely on these spaces.



Likewise, a few large rocks, pebbles and stones strategically placed around the garden provide that extra warmth for some of our cold-blooded creatures and little pools of moisture and dampness. In our garden, we have a well placed stump and rocks which is a favourite for *Skinks* in the late afternoon sun where we sit and enjoy our wilderness!



Be aware of what you are creating!



Garden habitats are great, but be aware you need to be able to cope with additional challenges that may arise! First of all, be conscious you are not creating too much of a fire hazard. Many native plants can add to the fuel load and as **The Cape** sits next to coastal bush and heathland, we need to be alert to the dangers of having combustible vegetation too close to your house.

We also have 5-star *snake* habitat at **The Cape** and these beautiful creatures, especially the venomous *Lowland Copperhead*, would just love exploring an animal attracting garden. These are shy snakes and will move away if not provoked—so work out how you are going to share your garden wilderness with these lovely protected reptiles.

Finally, check what plants are going to do best and not become a pest or weed problem!

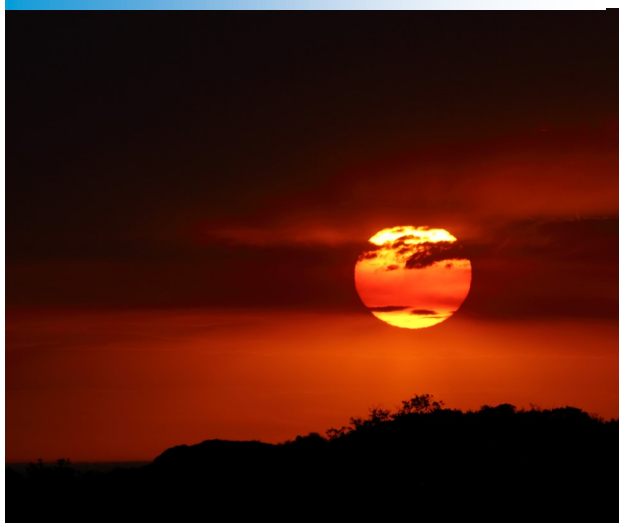
Changing seasons ...



The cool weather bird visitors are starting to arrive and there has been plenty of movement in the air with small flocks around. Apart from the solitary *Eastern Spinebill*, there have been reports of *Scarlet Robins*, and soon we should see *Flame Robins*, the first flock of five *Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoos* flew over a couple of days ago, and the *Galah* flock is slowly building in numbers ... and even they use the rocks in the garden!!



Nature Observations around The Cape



The Cape is on the traditional land of the Bunurong people

The ***Cape Chatter*** blog is a periodic newsletter produced by resident of **The Cape**, David Hartney. You can subscribe to receive it automatically by email by visiting <https://capechatter.com> and signing up. The website also contains all sorts of nature information and pictures of the ecology, flora and fauna at **The Cape**.

All photos shown in ***Cape Chatter*** are taken by David Hartney unless otherwise credited.

Feel free to contact David by email or through the website to report any nature observations at **The Cape**.

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