

Birds of the Innerwest Edit 3 Compressed @ 320kbps.mp3

[00:00:15] Welcome to our Birds of the Inner West podcast produced by Inner West Council libraries. Before anything else, I want to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which this podcast is produced the Gadigal and Wangal People of the Eora Nation and to show my respect to the elders past, present and emerging and to all first Australians with us today. Enjoy the conversation.

[00:00:41] Hello, everyone. My name is Pilar Angon I am the Environment Officer of the Urban Ecology Planning and Policy Team at the Inner West Council. My role is to coordinate education and engagement related to wildlife, water and nature in our local area. Today, we welcome Dr Holly Parson and Joe Blackman in conversation about the birds of the Inner West. Dr Holly Parsons is the Urban Bird Program Manager at BirdLife Australia Discovery Centre. If anyone knows how to attract birds into a garden, Holly, does. Jo Blackman is a long - term resident of the Inner West and has been a member of the Inner West Environment Group, also known as IWEG for almost 20 years. This podcasts will cover the seasonal changes in birds during migration, COVID 19, the lock down and its impact on the birds of the Inner West and how to attract the birds in your backyard and gardens. I'm very, very excited to talk about birds. I'm a bird watcher myself, and I know there are very prominent wildlife residents in our cities. They capture a local's attention, whether it is because of their colours, their songs, or perhaps even because they are on our way when we are hanging around in open spaces, our backyards or balconies. This is a good opportunity for us to explore what is happening in our local area.

[00:02:22] So I'd like to start with something very simple, and I would like to address this question first to you Jo. So I would like to know what fascinates you about birds, maybe if you could share a nice story or something very prominent that you have in your interactions with the birds in the Inner West.

[00:02:42] Thank you, Pilar. I was new to bird watching and it was very exciting when the former Marrickville Council asked IWEG to start this bird surveys. And I've been really amazed at the number of small birds that we have here in the Inner West. Also, the bird song, often when I was walking to work in the morning or in the late afternoon in the spring, the birds somewhat would be deafening. And that was really after that really

magic. A couple of special bird sightings for me is the Tawny Frog mouth. And we often see pairs nesting in the trees along the Greenway. And they're very special to see Tawnys because they're very hidden. Of course, with the bark. And often if they hear you or see you there very just slowly, lazily open up their eyes and stare at you just to let them to let you know that they've seen them. It's just a special moment. The other wonderful thing is that around this time of the year, we see the yellow tail black cockatoos flying along the Greenway from the Cooks river up to Hawthorne canal. And it's just wonderful to be in the bushcare sights, just pulling out weeds. And all of a sudden it's like you hear the flap of their wings and you hear their call and look up and see them crunching away on a hakea seed. You see, it's it's a very special moment.

[00:04:04] Yeah, that's true. I don't know. Tony Frog mouths They're special, like I can tell you that the first time you can't because they can be in front of you and you don't really notice as they look like the bark of the tree. So it's amazing when you see it for the first time. Now, I would like to ask you, Holly, the same question. What fascinates you about birds? But maybe if you have an experience in the Inner West, we would love to hear about it.

[00:04:35] Sure. Look. Oh, what fascinates me about birds? It's actually a really hard question. It's kind of everything. I wasn't a bird watcher as a kid. As such, it wasn't sort of a hobby I had. But I do have fond memories of my Dad in particular, sort of showing us a lot of wildlife. And it might be something that he sort of came across near home. I can remember him pointing out like an echidna. And I have this really vivid memory of us looking after a small bird of prey at one point. And I think it was a Nanking kestrel going back just when I can remember seeing in my head. And, you know, it's it was something it got injured just a couple of doors down from us. And so we looked after it for a few days until it could be released. Now, I would never, ever encourage anybody who's not with wildlife rescue to be doing that, to be taking in an injured bird and looking after it yourself. But it was this amazing experience that I look back on now. And, you know, I'm quite in awe of the fact that we had this beautiful creature that we helped release. I fell back into birds, I guess, at Uni I was looking for I was doing a biology major and I was, you know, interested in doing ecology. And I was, you know, I had a range of wonderful experiences. One of the things that got me hooked was a summer session I did where I went to Barren Grounds which is just down past sort of Jamberoo on the south coast. And we were assisting some people who are banding ground

parrots and ground parrots are these kind of oversized budgies. They occur in sort of heathland. They are a threatened species. And I can remember setting up these mist nets and then helping check them to catch these birds and sort of going, oh, look, we only call it like five five.

[00:06:35] That's you know and the banders are looking at us like totally five. Are you kidding? Like, that's amazing. We have never caught five ground parrots in one sitting before.

[00:06:46] So it just really showed how rare this bird is. And this is a species that, you know, used to be found throughout Sydney. And it is very, very contracted in its range now. And it has not been seen in Sydney in a very, very long time. But that really got me excited about birds again. And I just fell into a project which was on urban birds and I found my calling. I'm incredibly grateful. I know I have a quite unusual job, you know, doing some bird research and talking to people about birds. But it's something I'm very, very, very passionate about in terms of, you know, Inner West birds.

[00:07:23] You know, I admit I don't get to spend a lot of time in the Inner West, but I do love, you know, even the common birds. Like I love seeing an Ibis. I know they're not for everybody. I love seeing a brush turkey.

[00:07:35] But one thing that really excites me about the Inner West is that even though, you know, you were so close to the CBD, it's a very built up area. There are threatened species that get recorded. We run a Powerful Owl project in the urban birds team BirdLife Australia. We train and work with know amazing citizen scientists that go out and keep an eye on powerful owls throughout Greater Sydney and particularly focused on where they're breeding. You know, these are really big birds. They are nocturnal. They are about one point five metres across wingspan, which is, you know, kind of a social distancing arm's length that you're supposed to keep now. They feast on possums. They've got these mostly taking tree dwelling prey. And we're seeing these guys pop up in Balmain, in Ashfield, in Annandale, you know, a threatened bird species, a top order predator, you know, still, you know, still being seen and still holding its own in Inner West. It's amazing.

[00:08:35] Yeah. Oh, my God. Powerful Owls. Don't get me started. I love Powerful Owls.

[00:08:42] Like I go to the Botanical Gardens, Botanic Gardens in the city quite often. And when you see them, they're like eating the possum in the morning. It's just amazing. It's an amazing thing to witness. And so, so close to the city. My favourites are that small birds. I have to confess.

[00:09:04] The Fairy Wrens and the Finches and the Silver eyes going in a big flux.

[00:09:11] That's probably my favourite. In along the Cooks River, you have a lot of those because we have a lot of those little bushes where they can hide and they can hang around. Now, this is taking me to the next question, which is more about the birds and their importance. And perhaps, Holly, you could talk to us a little bit like you introduce that a bit with the Powerful Owl, but perhaps you could talk in general why birds are so important.

[00:09:41] Oh, look. Great question. So birds occupy every every niche in an ecological system they've found pretty much everywhere. And, you know, if we focus particularly on urban areas and urban Sydney there's now finally this recognition that urban spaces can and are vital for wildlife as we continue to damage natural areas. We take up, we urbanise. Urban spaces can be a refuge for some birds, not all but but a good number of them. And so we shouldn't be we shouldn't be viewing an urban landscape as something that's separate from the wild or a place that is not worth giving a second glance to, because it's not. We know we can create great habitats in urban landscapes. We know they can be important refuges. It might not always be ideal habitat, but it is valuable nonetheless. And, you know, we know things coming out of some of the threatened species hubs of showing things like 30 per cent of Australia's federally listed threatened species and not just birds, but overall are found in cities. So urban areas, you know, can support substantially more threatened species and even rural landscapes. It's a really valuable habitat. And birds are a key member of that environment in the urban landscape. And they tend to be what we see and interact with because they are so visible. There's so many of them. They are loud and gregarious a lot of times they're very in your face. They're quite obvious. And we've got great tools to be able to I.D. them as well. And, you know, you throw in the recent situation we've had

with the terrible bushfires, we know we're seeing an increase in sightings of some of these less common birds that do pop up in urban areas, things like lyrebirds and Gang Gangs, you know, and they are not common birds by any stretch.

[00:11:38] But we know that we are seeing some more of them in urban landscapes than we we usually do. And that's likely because so much of their natural habitat has been damaged and they are coming into urban spaces as refuges. And I think alongside the urban environment being important for birds and birds being such a valuable member of the ecology of any ecosystem, because, of course, they disperse seeds, they scavenge and clean up prey. They keep a handle on pests. You know, they perform lots and lots of functions. Birds are also really important for us. And I think we can be afford to be a bit selfish and say it's good for us to have birds around. We know that nature and our experiences in it are beneficial for our physical health and also for our mental health. You know, there's lots of research coming out now looking at this and as I said, bird of the wildlife that people interact with most commonly around their homes. And so it's their dose of nature. So for those of us that love them, whether we know their names or not, they're a great stress relief. They're engaging they're colourful. They're happy. And for the most part, they're fun to have around. Of course, there are exceptions. They are sometimes birds that don't behave as well as we would like to. But for the most part, they're really they're really fun and obvious part of ature that we can connect with daily.

[00:13:01] Well, we'll touch a little bit more on the bushfires and the birds that have found some refuge in the cities. But before going there, I would like to ask you, Jo obviously you've been part of the Birdos at the Greenway for quite a long time. So what do you think is the importance of birds in that particular setting?

[00:13:28] I'm always surprised at the number of people that stop when we're doing a bird survey and say, oh, what are you doing? We say bird surveys and what we've seen. And it's just that people sometimes have surprising knowledge of birds. And that's always very heartening. And they stop for a few minutes and look up and see things that we can, you know, that we're also seeing, which is which is fantastic. For IWEG the information that we record gets put into the Australian Wildlife Atlas database. So it's open data for sharing. And we've also used it as part of environmental impact statements. There's so much development in the West now. And often when a new

residential development is being built, they don't actually do their own study. They just rely on these databases. So unless we have the information there, it's very hard to say, oh, you're damaging the environment. And so they say, well, where's the evidence? And collecting this citizen science data helps to protect these special areas.

[00:14:32] And that's a very, very good point. And I guess BirdLife Australia is one of those organisations that collect all that information and make it available for the rest of the community that perhaps are not aware of things. So perhaps limited in their interactions with nature. So I would like you, Holly, to tell us a bit about what BirdLife Australia's aims are.

[00:14:59] Sure. So BirdLife Australia is the country's largest organisation, which is devoted exclusively to the future of protecting Australia's native bird life and its habitats. So we're a science based conservation organisation. I guess you'd say. So bird monitoring, bird surveys are at the core of everything that we do. So we have you know, we do on ground conservation. We do research projects. We do education and engagement on birds. And, you know, it's not only staff, but we work with this huge and amazing pool of citizen scientists, volunteers, bird watchers who go out and do bird surveys. And they feed that data into our data portal bird data, which gets shared amongst other portals as well. So, you know, we're not only about keeping that data to ourselves, you know, like Atlas of Living Australia, you know, a lot of our data feeds into that portal as well. So it's about getting that information out there. And based on good science and good good monitoring, whether it is on, you know, a huge range of birds from Shorebirds that spend their winters in Australia and then migrate to Siberia. Oh, sorry. The other way round, they spend their summers in Australia and then migrate north. We've got little grass Wrens in arid Australia that we work with. You know, we work in the urban space. So we're not always focused on threatened species, but on the birds that occur in our urban landscapes, in our gardens and our parks and our urban patches of bush as well. And so BirdLife Australia is this combination of two very old organization. So Birds Australia and Bird Observation and Conservation Australia, they were both over 100 years old and we merged in 2012 to form BirdLife Australia. So as I said, it's all about monitoring and using that good science to inform what we do and what others should be doing to protect birds.

[00:17:01] Thank you, Holly. So that's very interesting. And it's interesting to understand how the changes in seasons and the changes in the environment have impacted the behaviour of birds that are usually in different places. I would like you to talk to us a little bit about those changes in due to their bushfires or due to the COVID 19?

[00:17:24] What are those changes in the behaviour of birds in the city that is in urban settings?

[00:17:33] So, you know, these bird surveys are still coming in all the time, and our knowledge of how birds as a whole have been impacted by the fires is still very much evolving. You know, the fires happened. We had to you know, we had volunteers who were just, you know, chomping at the bit to get back out and, you know, identify where the potential refuges are. They were people putting out supplementary food and all sorts of things once they got clearance. But then, you know, just as people were able to actually get out COVID 19 happened. And so everybody got locked down again. And so that immediate response of where birds are in fire regions, you know, barely got underway before we had to sort of stop again. And, you know, we're starting to get out there a little bit now. But again, that may change very quickly.

[00:18:23] What we know, though, is that we've seen a real increase in the in the data that's coming into us from people who are birding at home. So, you know, no longer can birders go out into their favourite big patch of bush or head out to the National park.

[00:18:38] So instead, they were sending us in data from their own gardens, which for a lot of BirdLife Australia stuff might have been a bit frustrating. For me who runs a Birds in Backyards program? I was pretty happy with it. And so we've seen this sort of tenfold increase in sightings coming into the data, into the birds in backyard surveys from, say, comparing April last year to April this year. But in terms of how the birds respond, as I said, we're still teasing through that data. And we but we think that, you know, we might not necessarily be seeing birds moving to entirely new areas, but instead we can see that within their normal distribution, they're probably coming into sort of the extremes of their range.

[00:19:24] And so, you know, a couple of birds where we're seeing this sort of increasing reporting is with superb Lyre birds and with Gang Gang cockatoos. We've

seen something like a at least a doubling of recordings of this species for this time of year. So and they seem to be in sort of more urban areas. In terms of the Inner West. You know, Jo will be able to talk more about what changes she's seeing on the ground. But, you know, just in going through our bird data portal, I've been really excited to see an increase in sightings of Powerful Owl. Again, when I talked about before, we had only a couple of records last year. We've now seen, you know, quite a few more coming in of locations of these birds popping up. And these are not, I don't think, breeding birds.

[00:20:09] These are ones that are moving through the Inner West and feasting on some yummy possums and probably some flying foxes, too. Powerful owls or one of the birds that we are concerned about after the fires, because, you know, while we have a reasonable, strong hold of them in Sydney, you know, we have something like 10 percent of the population of all powerful owls occurring in the Sydney region. But we know we lost 30 per cent of their distribution of the habitat they live in, in the fires. So it's a huge amount. So the urban population we've gotten these sightings that come coming in might be bolstered by birds that are moving in to Sydney. But just as likely and just as importantly, it's likely that the Sydney population is going to be an important source. So it's going to be replenishing birds lost from natural areas. So the birds that breed here can potentially be moving out into natural areas when those sites regenerate. So, you know, in in in the West, we're seeing, you know, I think we've got about 43 three bird species that we've got in our database for this year. And it includes some really nice, exciting things. So Sacred Kingfishers, we've got a sighting of a Bubble Cow . We've got the good old Fairy Wrens and they one of my absolute favourites as well. So there's a good mix of, you know, the really common guys Rainbow Lorikeets, Noisy Miners, common Miners. As you know, they're our urban winters across the board. But, you know, there's some good diversity there. There's Willy Wagtails. There's New Holland Honeyeaters. There's this this suite of small birds that really struggle in urban landscapes. But it's still holding on in the Inner West.

[00:21:46] Mm hmm. Thank you, Holly. Jo, can you just quickly talk to us about how the COVID 19 situation has changed the way your IWEG group works?

[00:21:58] We I guess we're working from our backyards, as Holly said, during COVID 19. We also spread through our networks the wonderful work that Birds in Backyards were doing and the podcast that they were doing. And we had feedback that that was

just amazing, especially for families with young kids. That was really excellent and really encouraged kids a real, you know, exciting thing to do during the day. We noticed, I guess, the bird, the birds extending their range a little. We had a Golden Whistler. Normally we just see them in one spot in Western Street, but now we're seeing them close to down to Dulwich Hill Station, which is exciting, a lot more new Holland Honeyeaters around. Also, the drought, of course, so terrible. Did we notice less birds last year? So it's exciting to see the numbers coming back to what we've seen in previous years.

[00:22:55] Yeah. We would always be surprised how many bird are around in winter. Now, we are in winter in Sydney. In the end, just to finish off this conversation, I would like you for both of you, maybe, Jo, you can start with a few tips of how people like. Obviously, you've got a lot of people doing birding in their backyards and trying to getting to that sort of action while they were stuck at home. So some tips that you can give people to attract birds to their backyards and get those spaces much better for them to come along and do things. Yeah.

[00:23:40] Thanks, Pilar creating habitat. And I'm sure Holly will speak about that, creating habitat is safe habitat for birds is is really important. And also to hanging onto the weedy spaces that we have left along the light rail and little corners in factories, street scaping, so important for the small birds, especially for them to feel safe and protected. Of course, when it's it was so hot I would be leaving out water for them and to be a responsible pet owner is so important as well. Keeping your cats in at night time, making sure they have a bell. They're all critical. And also to plant some species, switch the small birds love not the large grevilleas, but things that have small flowers are the ones that the honeyeaters loves, especially we notice around the Greenway. We have a lot of bottle brushes that were planted perhaps 20, 30 years ago now, and they're very much a favourite and the flowering gums as well. They're all really important. And just put away a small corner in your garden, you know, where you can plant some flowering shrubs. The nursery will give you advice there as well. And not only for our birds, but also for our native bees. It's a really special thing to be able to plant.

[00:25:01] Sure. Look, I think Jo's done an amazing job of covering off everything that I would suggest really as well. So I think one thing that comes out of the Birds in Backyards surveys that we do is we record not only the birds that are visiting in people's

gardens, but what their gardens are like. And so that helps us understand the different habitat preferences that birds, some of our native species have. And Jo's spot on for the most part, you know, where we would encourage people to try and create the types of gardens that we don't see much anymore. And because they're the ones that are going to attract the small birds. And so that's gardens with the nice shrub layer with lots of native plants in it. And, you know, really sort of anything from two meters down. If you can get some more vegetation, that's fantastic. So even if you don't have a lot of space, there's always things you can put in. You can use pots, you can use hanging plants, you know, get a bit creative. It might not provide a lot of shelter for birds, but it can be some food or it could be some food for their food. So it could attract lots of insects and things, which is going to benefit birds as a whole. As Jo said, there's two great nurseries in Inner West Council have that you can access at Marrickville in Rozelle Bay depending on what the restrictions are like.

[00:26:17] So you can get local site-specific advice and get locally native plants and a really good price as well, which is always handy. And think about other things like putting in a birdbath. We know that gardens, that putting birdbath tend to get more birds coming to visit them. You can think about a nest box as well to help out some species of birds that use hollows. We can replicate with a nest box. Just ensure that you are putting in a box for the birds that you want to attract because different shape boxes attract different birds and you need to keep an eye on it and monitor. So we don't have things like the common or the Indian Miner moving in. You need to be able to make sure it's supporting the right birds. Keep your cats indoors or, you know, cat run as well. And as Joe said, have a safe space in your garden that may be away from the dogs as well that the birds can enjoy. I'd also encourage people to not only, you know, create great habitat, but tell us about it. So please do surveys. There are many different options out there. We run the Birds in Backyard surveys and our winter survey is open at the moment. So even if you don't know the names of the birds, there's all sorts of features built in there to help you out with your I D.

[00:27:33] So knowing what's around and what your gardens are like helps us enormously in understanding how Sydney birds and Australia wide urban birds are being impacted.

[00:27:44] Thank you very much, Holly. Well, there are a lot of things we can do to attract birds to our backyard, so native plants in nurseries are not open to the public at the moment, but we are working on opening them very soon. They are with the Emergency Management team trying to get things ready. So keep an eye on our website. We have a nurseries Web site. We also have a Web site on habitats and how to create them. If you want to have a look at there, there's a few links and a few tips that you can check. And also, if you have any specific questions, perhaps you can shoot us an e-mail. We have our urban ecology e-mail. So you just have to type urbanecology@inner.nsw.gov.au

Our team has access to that. And we can answer your questions as soon as we can. Our capacities for it also, don't expect us to be there right away, but we will do our best to answer all the questions. I would like to thank you for listening to this conversation on Birds of the Inner West, look out for upcoming digital content through the West Library, Watson and social media channels. Thank you very much and have a good day.