

Faunascaping your Garden

October 2018

Presenter: Ron Litjens

Ron began his presentation by thanking our group for the invitation to speak, and stating he is “not a gardener”, so the talk would be “fauna-centric”. Ron went on to say that he has worked with Euroa Arboretum and Cathy Olive to set up their Garden for Wildlife project.

“Faunascaping” is a word made up by Ron, and he has been told that if you use new a word with “authority”, if it catches on and people like and continue using it, it may well end up in the Oxford Dictionary. Ron joked that he would be using “faunascaping” with authority tonight and went on to ask: ‘Why would you want to “faunascap” your garden?’

Some reasons might be that you:

- Wish to increase biodiversity
- Are a latent zookeeper
- Like frogs
- Like birds
- Like seeing a variety of fauna

A further question to think about is: What do you mean by garden? A ¼acre, a bush block, a 15 acre lot, or a balcony garden etc. Gardens come in all different sizes, types and situations.

Ron and his partner have a 29acre bush block in Flowerdale, and 14 years ago started “faunascaping” by working from a list of “Gazetted Weeds”, focusing on removing 1 weed species per year. In 2009, the Black Saturday Bushfires went through the property and in the process, also killed out the remaining weed species on the property. 2 years ago, they also purchased a 4acre abandoned factory site in the Yea township. The 4acre plot was a grassy site with a few trees and weeds including *Agapanthus* and *Prunus* species, etc.

The next question posed to consider when “faunascaping” is: What fauna do you wish to attract? Is it:

- Frogs – you may wish to include a “Frog Bog”
- Birds
- Animals – such as Possums, Phascogales etc.
- Reptiles
- Insects

Ron advised, we should feel free to modify “faunascaping” ideas to suit our own particular gardens.

If you are interested in bringing fauna to your garden there are a couple of citizen science programs that you may also find of interest, and wish to become involved in. The first is the **Aussie Backyard Bird Count** which is facilitated by Birdlife Australia and held in October each year. It is easy to participate, and involves observing and recording the birds in your back yard (or other area) for a 20 minute period, then submitting an observation count. All the observation records are then collated, and the resulting statistics and information is made publicly available. In the 2017 count, over 72,000 people participated, counting nearly 2 million birds (Click [here](#) for the 2018 results). Ron suspects that most bird survey participants would come from urban areas. Further statistical results from the 2017 count were: The Rainbow Lorikeet was the most sighted bird Australia wide with the top 10 birds being:

- Rainbow Lorikeet
- Noisy Miner
- Australian Magpie
- Sulphur-crested Cockatoo
- Galah
- House Sparrow
- Silver Gull
- Welcome Swallow
- Common Myna
- Red Wattlebird

In Victoria the top 3 were:

- Australian Magpie
- House Sparrow
- Sulphur-crested Cockatoo

Ron pointed out that this top three fall in the category of “bully birds”, which will bully and chase off other species. In Yea, Sulphur-crested Cockatoos are considered “nuisance birds”.

The second citizen science program mentioned was the **Wild Pollinator Count**. This count is held twice per year, in spring and autumn, and involves watching a particular flower for 10 minutes and recording the flower’s visitors. See the Gardens for Wildlife, Links page for more information on this program.

Something to be prepared for when you attract fauna visitors to your garden is: What those visitors will do in your garden or back yard... There will be lots of, eating, drinking and yes, even fornicating in your garden! For example: If you attract butterflies, expect & be prepared for caterpillars to end up munching the leaves (and or other parts) of your plants.

Maslow’s Triangle was brought to our attention, which, is a triangle graphic showing what motivates us humans. Ron doesn’t know what the self-fulfilment and psychological needs of fauna may be, but all basic needs are similar, so can also be applied to attracting animals etc. (see image from <https://www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html>)

Taking a cue from the bottom of Maslow’s triangle, the key to attracting fauna is to meet basic physiological and safety needs by providing: Food, water, shelter, safety and security.

Water in the garden...

Ron’s 29 acres of bush block is located on a spur where little water is naturally available, so a birdbath was installed. The birdbath ended up quite deep and needed a branch across it, also rocks placed in it to provide a safe perching point and prevent drownings etc. Initially, a solar powered fountain was also included in the bird bath, which, the birds would flock to. So many birds used to be attracted to the fountain that they would block the solar panel and stop the fountain running. When the fountain stopped the birds would fly off again, so, of course the fountain would then restart. The result was birds constantly flying in and out to such a degree that they became confused and “psychotic”, eventually necessitating the removal of the solar fountain.

Even without the fountain, this water source creates a focal point for bird & other fauna watching. Birds can come and go so quickly that Ron and his wife would often end up arguing about what species a particular visitor might have been, so motion sensing cameras were purchased and set up.

These cameras have been a great addition, providing a photographic record that makes identifying visiting species much easier. The cameras have been set to take 3 photographs each time they are triggered, and have removeable SD cards that Ron and his wife swap and check each evening – they love making lists so now have a comprehensive record of all the fauna that uses their bird bath.

Some of the bird species observed and photographed have been:

- New Holland Honeyeater
- Grey Butcherbird
- Pied Currawongs (in family groups)
- Rosellas (also in family groups)
- Nankeen Kestrel
- Red-browed Finch
- Sacred Kingfisher
- Grey Currawong

Another bonus of using a motion sensing camera is that they take photo's after dark, also providing a record of nocturnal visitations.

Different species among these nocturnal visitors have been: Ringtail Possum, Brushtail Possum, Sugar Glider, Agile Antechinus, Brushtail Phascogale (at least 7 visit), and a Southern Brown Tree Frog that has been nicknamed Wally. Now Wally is not big enough to trigger the camera by himself, so each night time photograph is an opportunity for Ron and his wife to play their own version of "Where's Wally".



A reliable, safe water supply will inevitably bring wildlife into your garden. However, it needs to be:

- Clean
- There all the time
- Deep enough not to completely evaporate during a summer day
- Safe



Something else to remember is that water is for washing as well. Along with birds, animals wash too. "Mr Prickles" (an Echidna), is a regular visitor to a dam on Ron's property, he wades in, washes and scratches in the shallow waters edge.

A bird bath placed at ground level will be used by birds and animals. However, a note of caution to remember with all bird baths: A water source becomes a Bio-hotspot, also attracting predators such as cats etc. If you set up a water supply, a variety of clever predators will turn up as well, so consideration of how to manage these will also be needed.



Food in the garden...

The greatest food supply is plants, but there are some things to remember: Many people often inadvertently set their gardens up for Honeyeaters alone. However, Honeyeaters can number among the aggressive bully birds, and other species such as Wrens and Thornbills will disappear. A good idea is to have a *Hakea* and *Grevillea* corner in your garden for the more aggressive birds, and plant different food sources in other areas. Within the bird family, there are a range of different beak types. Each different beak type indicates what sort of food a particular bird species eats.

One food source discussed was Psyllids and the shelters they create – lerps - which Pardalotes feed on. Psyllids suck sap on Eucalyptus leaves, primarily they are after protein from the sap, but Eucalyptus leaves are also high in sugar. Psyllids must continually suck sap to obtain enough protein and then extrude the sugar they take in. The sugar they extrude forms the house or shelter they live under, which is pure sugar. Pardalotes, when feeding on lerps, also eat the little insects underneath. Some birds - notably Bell Miners - just eat the lerps and leave the insects to continue sucking sap.

When butterflies come into a garden, this also means plenty of caterpillars too. Caterpillars will be eating leaves in your garden and also becoming food for birds and other creatures in your garden. The Emperor Gum Moth caterpillar and Gumleaf Skeletoniser (moth larvae) are 2 examples. A main point to remember is: If you provided the food source, be prepared for the various animals to eat it!

Shelter and security...

For many of our native fauna, shelter and security is found in tree hollows. Natural tree hollows can take 80 or more years to develop, so nest boxes can be an alternative. Following the 2009 fires, residents of Yea and surrounds were provided with a range of nest boxes donated from the City of Knox Men's Shed. Now, these were a range nest boxes made in different, shapes, sizes, with different hole placements and sizes. Each different box is designed for a particular species and it is very important to monitor any installed nest boxes.

After installing a number of nest boxes and providing requisite monitoring, Ron and his wife followed some very interesting findings. A nest box designed for Rosellas proved to have an interesting list of residents.

This nest box's first resident turned out to be a White-throated Tree Creeper.

Continuing on through the first year, further residents were an Owlet Nightjar, a baby Brush-tailed Possum - nicknamed "The Chubster".

Chubster kept returning until he outgrew the Rosella nest box, in fact the last photo taken of Chubster showed him stuck trying to get in the box. Fortunately, he was able to extract himself, never to return.



Through this all, there was "no Rosella in sight". After Chubster departed the next resident was a Ringtail Possum. Every year now, the cycle of changing residents continues.

Rosellas liked the Sugar Glider nest box, although its entry hole was a bit too small. Each year they return in summertime and nibble the hole a little larger during every visit. Meanwhile, a Sugar Glider takes residence in a Phascogale nest box (Phascogale nest boxes have an entrance hole in the rear). Ron has found that simply having a place where animals feel safe is enough for them, and individual species will find what suits them.

Another anecdote was the building of a nest box designed for Powerful Owls. This box measured 1m x 750mm x 750mm and was inspired by a display by the City of Melbourne. It was big and cumbersome, needed a wheelbarrow to move it and a winch to get it hoisted in place. After all this...No Owl! Ron's neighbours call it "Ron's Folly", but Ron says "Taj Mahal".



Nest boxes bring wildlife in, but one downside is that they can attract bees and other undesired residents, which, is one of the reasons why nest boxes require monitoring.

There are also boxes specifically designed for Bats, these boxes have entry slits at the bottom and grip strips underneath the entry. Bats are a very beneficial creature to attract to your garden as they eat large numbers of mosquitos.

Not all birds nest in hollows, some birds build nests and are often opportunists. A few of Ron's observations are:

- Thornbills like prickly, mid-storey bushes.
- A Grey Shrike Thrush nesting in an upturned bike helmet.
- Black aggie pipe placed in rafters attracts nesting Pardalotes.

Shelter can be provided to attract insects, making or buying and providing a “Bee Hotel” is one option. Blue-banded Bees are a species that may be attracted. The females build or burrow into wood or mud to nest. Males however, are left to fend for themselves. Instead of nesting they have large jaws and use them to fix onto twigs and stems. Some other Bee species huddle together in groups.

Location...

Another point to consider when “faunascaping” is the location and local environment. There are different species that will inhabit woodland as opposed to grassland. An example is: on a wooded property you will see Grey Fantails, but not one Willy Wagtail- as Willy Wagtails are residents of open grassland.

Further location factors to consider are local migration and geography. During the period Ron was travelling to and from Euroa and Yea to work at the Euroa Arboretum, he observed that Blue-faced Honey Eaters were in Euroa, yet were not found in Yea. Likewise, White-plumed Honeyeaters were found in Euroa, but not in Yea. In short, be aware of the range and habitat of the particular species you are trying to attract.

Connectivity...



Connectivity within a landscape is also a factor that needs to be taken into account when “faunascaping” your garden. Bio-corridors are important as some species will not cross an open or cleared area etc., so vegetation links are needed. In Yea, Ron has been encouraging and assisting local residents to “green up” and plant up their gardens in order to bring fauna in. They have been trying to gain council approval to establish a bio-link corridor to

nearby remnant vegetation. Unfortunately, Yea Council said no, claiming such plantings would adversely affect roadside mowing. Strangely enough, plantings keep appearing (complete with tree guards etc.) and mowing around the plantings continues without issue.

In summary, Gardens for Wildlife programs provide a range of ideas to help with “faunascaping” and as long as you provide food and shelter, the wildlife will come – They want what we want: Food, shelter and water.

In closing, a brief Q & A revealed a little more information regarding birdbaths...

Ron’s bird bath is placed on an upstanding log (stump) and establishing it has been a process of trial and error. The birdbath is rather deep, and sometimes birds couldn’t get out. Sometimes birds would just dive right in. Rocks have been added at different depths, and a branch has been added across the water and tied back to a tree beside the bath. Ron has made sure that this branch is not

big enough for a cat to travel along it. Ron uses a bucket to keep water up to the bath and makes sure to empty it out and refresh the water regularly. All sorts of containers and methods of refilling can be used for birdbaths, Ron cited seeing a wheelie bin set up under a gutter overflow as another example.

Transcribed by: Jeanine Petts