A gardener’s invitation

This booklet is a guide to creating your own wildlife friendly garden. We all have different gardening needs and values, but whatever your gardening style, you can nudge your garden in a more wildlife friendly direction by adding elements for wildlife. The more elements you add, the more habitat niches, water and food options there will be and the greater the diversity of animals in your yard.

When you create a garden you assemble a community of interacting plants and animals. You are a composer shaping the structure and balance of your animal orchestra. Have some fun testing how far you can go increasing the diversity of flora and fauna in your local area.

Bird observers, butterfly lovers and frog watchers are reporting that not just rare species, but also many common species are declining. Gardens that provide food and shelter for even just the common species are creating arks for wildlife in the face of climate change. If our gardens are treated not as isolated islands, but as valuable links in urban habitat networks, we have the real potential to maintain populations of local species in urban areas. Residential neighbourhoods are where we have people-power. Neighbourhoods that garden for wildlife can make a real difference to conservation of biodiversity.

As you start nudging your garden in a wildlife friendly direction you will be delighted and surprised with who turns up. Whether it's hearing the night call of a Boobook owl, watching an Eastern Spinebill darting amongst your grevilleas or witnessing a dragonfly emerge from the nymph in your pond, these moments will connect you with nature and will enrich your life.

Read on to learn what elements you can add to your own garden to make it more wildlife friendly. Each element you add to your garden is an invitation to a member of the animal kingdom to share in your garden oasis. Examples given in this booklet are from the Mount Alexander Shire in Central Victoria. The principles apply to gardens everywhere.

The spectrum of garden styles

All garden styles sit on a spectrum between concrete pavement and local bushland (see illustration above). As you move along the spectrum in a wildlife friendly direction, biodiversity in your garden will increase: A lawn in a park-like garden provides more opportunities for magpies to grub than a pavement; a naturalistic garden with grasses going to seed provides more food for finches and parrots than a hard-pruned cottage garden. You may be clear about what garden style appeals to your aesthetics and needs, but you can still add elements that will make your garden more wildlife friendly. For instance, if you have a cottage garden, why not include some indigenous flowers such as daisies, lilies and bluebells, plus a few native grasses. Your garden will then support many more pollinators such as native bees, butterflies and tiny predatory wasps.
Foodweb observed in my Castlemaine garden, highlighting the importance of insects as a food source for many garden predators. This simplified web illustrates 'who eats what' and the movement of energy harvested by plants from the sun, up the food chain to larger predators. Groups of animals that face similar predators are shown in grey ellipses/circles. Cats are rarely observed in my garden. Because cats are very successful top predators they can have a huge impact on wildlife. If you have a cat, keep it inside by building a cat run. If it has to go out, the bright coloured scrunchie is better than the bell (see www.birdsafe.com).
Elements for wildlife

1. VEGETATION LAYERS

Increasing vegetation layers in your garden will dramatically increase the abundance and diversity of wildlife. Different animals prefer to live and forage at different heights in the canopy. The vast three dimensional structure of a mature gumtree, with rough bark, vertical trunk, broad limbs, fine twigs and leaves, has many more niches for insects and birds than a grass tussock... but many butterfly larvae feed only on leaves of native grasses, so why not plant both - and everything in between?

2. WATER & AQUATIC HABITATS

Install a small pond and you will be amazed by who turns up. You just need some plastic liner, a crowbar and some local wetland plants, and your garden will be zipping with dragonflies and resounding to the evening chorus of Pobblebonks and Marsh Frogs. Ponds of different depths provide habitat for different animals. Deep water is critical for frogs and fish to survive a heavy frost and hot water on a summers day. Add 1-2 Murray Rainbow fish to control mosquito populations, while leaving your frog eggs to hatch. Birds are vulnerable to cats when drinking and bathing. Plant prickly shrubs around your bird splash pond or elevate a bird bath on a pedestal or by hanging it from a tree.

3. DIRT & ROCKY HABITATS

Native Blue-banded Bees, Teddy-bear Bees and native wasps nest in shallow burrows in clay soil, particularly under or around houses. Other burrowing bees make deep nests in the ground, where immature bees can overwinter. Blue Tongue Lizards and Skinks love to bask on rocks, warmed by the sun, while Velvet and Marbled Geckos shelter under thin flat rocks that heat up. A dry stone wall or provides valuable reptile real estate. Just make sure you don't grab your rocks from the bush where someone else will be using it.

4. LEAFY & WOODY HABITATS

A deep mulch of fallen leaves, twigs and spent flowers traps moisture in the topsoil, creating the microclimate required for a host of ground dwelling beetles, ants, centipedes and spiders. These in turn provide food for lizards, birds, frogs and the Brush-tailed Phascogale. Soft bodied ant pupae & beetle larvae are a particularly tasty treat. The decomposing organic matter and fungi in mulch and litter provides food for these small creatures of the leaf litter. Lizards and frogs love living in and under logs. Many of our 1,500 native bees nest in dead, hollow stems, such as parsley stalks, so why not leave a few standing rather than spending time and energy on a thorough hard-prune.

5. NESTING INFRASTRUCTURE

Old trees with hollows are critical for many local birds and mammals to nest. If you have a mature tree without hollows, an arborist can make an artificial hollow, or you can attach nest boxes. Just remember to keep boxes and artificial hollows within reach, so you can evict unwanted visitors like the Common Myna.
Beneficial plants

Plants provide food (seed, berries, leaves, litter and nectar), shelter (from shade, wind and predators) and nesting sites. Whatever you choose to grow, can you select plants that are good for you and your animal residents?

A quick way to determine the wildlife value of a plant is to know where it comes from. Top of the list are indigenous plants, occurring naturally in your local area. These are the habitat heroes that local birds and insects will be searching for. The greater the diversity of indigenous plants, the greater the diversity of animals you will provide for. Second on the list are native plants that occur naturally elsewhere in Australia. Plant families and genera that match those in your local area can replicate many food and shelter services. Third on the list are exotics with benefits; plants from overseas that provide some food and shelter, such as non-hybridised flowers that produce nectar. Lavendar, Rosemary and Buddlejia all feed native bees and butterflies while Salvias provide nectar for Eastern Spinebills. Last on the list are exotics for ornament and green infrastructure. You may love a deciduous shade tree that allows winter light, or the sculptural form of succulents. Plant these if you love or need them, but be under no delusions about creating a garden that’s inviting to wildlife. The good news is you can still surround these wildlife neutral plants with local indigenous species for a thriving, living landscape. Plants that are environmental weeds can spread from your garden to neighbouring bushland, replacing local flora. If you have plants on the move, yank them out.