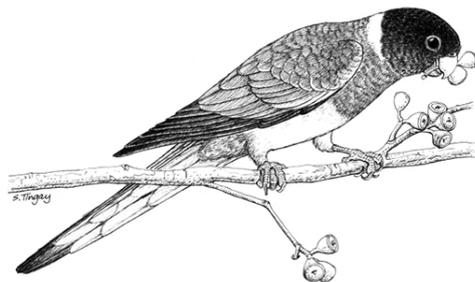


After the Fire: What Happens Next?

Helping native birds with food and shelter after bushfires



Australian Ringneck © BirdLife Australia

A bushfire has burnt through or past your property. Many of the birds that lived there will have been killed, but others survive for the time being and are perched in the trees and shrubs in your garden. They have escaped quick incineration but may have been injured by the flames, radiant heat or smoke inhalation, or they may be disoriented. How can you help these refugees?

The First Few Days...

It is unlikely that a badly injured bird will survive for very long, and any that can be caught easily without being subjected to further stress should be taken to a wildlife rescue service or vet who can assess whether it should be treated or humanely destroyed.

Clean, fresh water should be provided for surviving birds and it should be refreshed regularly. Be careful not to make the water too deep because weakened birds can easily drown. Any shallow dish will do as long as it is beyond the reach of cats and near sheltering vegetation.

Cats and dogs will readily kill birds made vulnerable by shock, or exposed by their need to eat and drink, so keep your pets indoors as much as possible, especially during peak foraging periods of early morning and evening, and discourage neighbours' pets and feral animals from using your property. Predators and scavengers such as hawks, ravens, kookaburras and currawongs will look for easy pickings after a bushfire — remember that they are also native birds, and their food supply will decrease after an initial glut and most will eventually disperse or starve.

The First Few Weeks and Months...

If you decide to help the bird refugees on your property survive until their burnt habitat regenerates sufficiently to provide for their needs again, you should consider providing food for them. By feeding them you are making a commitment to support them, at least during this period of extraordinary stress and deprivation.

Most small bush birds, such as robins, flycatchers, warblers, thornbills and many honeyeaters depend on insects and other invertebrates. Providing suitable types and quantities of insects is difficult. Put out small quantities of low-fat, high-protein substitutes such as commercial pet food (with added vitamins and minerals) or mealworms (available from pet shops), as these are readily accepted by many insect-eating birds.

Fresh fruit (especially 'soft' fruits) are eaten by parrots, honeyeaters and finches, and will also be appreciated by the possums that may have sought refuge on your property.

Nectar and pollen feeders such as lorikeets and honeyeaters can be fed on special, commercially available diet mixes. They will also enjoy a mixture of three parts baby cereal, one part raw sugar and ten parts water, and supplemented with bird vitamins available from pet shops. This should be changed daily, as the mixture will ferment, especially in warm weather. Never provide simple sugar or honey solutions, as these can cause malnutrition and spread diseases.

Be aware that although native seed eaters, such as parrots, pigeons and finches, readily eat commercial bird seed, such seed may present potential problems, as seed bells may be held together with glue of unknown toxicity, and the seeds themselves may be from weeds which can be spread by the birds. They may also attract unwanted species, such as introduced sparrows, doves and pigeons, starlings, mynas and rats.

When feeding the birds, you should monitor it and be aware of the possible ramifications. When you feed birds regularly they will quickly become dependent on your generosity, so gradually decrease the quantity of food provided after moisture conditions and new plant growth stimulate a rise in insect numbers, and production of flowers and seeds. Overfeeding can lead to wastage and rot which will attract rats, flies and European Wasps. You should only feed birds on your own property — never leave large quantities of food for birds and other animals in natural habitats such as national parks (even if they have been burnt): it can expose them to predators, attract pests and introduce exotic weeds.

BUSHFIRES MAY DESTROY OLD TREES WITH SUITABLE HOLLOWES FOR NESTS. IF THERE ARE NO (OR FEW) TREE-HOLLOWES ON YOUR LAND, YOU SHOULD ERECT NEST BOXES AS A SUBSTITUTE, AND THEY SHOULD BE MONITORED TO MAKE SURE THAT THEY ARE NOT USED BY STARLINGS, MYNAS OR FERAL HONEYBEES.

After a While...

As the bushland regenerates, your property may act as a 'stepping stone', or comprise part of a 'wildlife corridor' that will help birds and other native animals disperse into regenerating areas where the resident populations have been killed by the bushfire. The value of your property as wildlife breeding and feeding habitat will increase if you plant appropriate trees, shrubs and grasses, especially fruit-, seed- and nectar-producing and insect-attracting plants that are native (indigenous) to your area. After taking into account all recommended fire-safety precautions regarding your house and its immediate surrounds, you could try to recreate the original plant communities that were present before the fire, or before clearing or subdivision took place. The greater the variety in 1) the structural complexity of your remnant and rehabilitated habitat, 2) in the numbers of native plant species it holds, and 3) in the habitat types represented, the greater the variety of the native birds that will use it.

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