

BIRDS in BACKYARDS

You are here

[Home](#) ›

How you can help birds after the fires

Submitted by Holly on 05 Jan 2020.



The last few days, weeks and months have seen such utter devastation across huge areas of Australia. Even if you are not directly affected, the fear can be paralysing. We all want to do something, so we've compiled a few ways to help birds in the immediate aftermath of these fires and also looking into the future. Remember while we are focussed on birds here, all wildlife will need help recovering - from the smallest insects to our large marsupials.

1. Water

Whether you are close to fires or not, we are not even halfway through a long, very hot summer. Providing water in your yard that birds (and other wildlife) can safely access is an easy but important way to help out.

You don't need to go out and buy a fancy bird bath (though by all means buy one if you like). Instead, look at what you have around your home (or check out the local op shop) that you can put to use. Pot saucers, tubs, buckets, hanging pots, upside down bin lids, ceramic dishes, kids clam shell pools – all make great options (avoid metal as it can heat up too much). Different depths and types of baths provide lots of options for different birds. Be sure to:

- Place them in the shade around the garden at various heights - on the ground, on a pedestal, hanging from a tree
- Keep them close to shrubs and trees so birds can have an escape route
- Put rocks, a brick or a branch in the water, especially if the bath is smooth and slippery so anything that falls in can climb out
- Change the water daily or whenever it gets hot
- Keep cats indoors and if you have a dog, place the baths in an area where it cannot access
- Check any pools (including the skimming box) throughout the day and provide a wildlife ramp or heavy rope as an escape route if something falls in

2. Supplementary food

Birds fleeing fires are not only dealing with the stress and damage from the fire event itself but the destruction of their food sources, shelter and nest sites. If you are in towns and cities near where these fires have occurred, you can help by putting out some supplementary food for fleeing birds to help them in the immediate aftermath. There can be issues with feeding birds that you should be aware of so be sure to:

- Keep feeding stations impeccably clean. These birds will already have stressed immune systems and so will likely be particularly susceptible to disease. Clean the stations every day by removing excess food, washing the station and scrubbing it with a wire brush and either dilute bleach solution or specific wildlife disinfectant.
- Remove food after about an hour (less for nectar mixes as they spoil quickly)
- Provide a range of foods for different types of birds (and on different feeding stations). Most of the birds we tend to feed are the big and bossy ones, don't forget about the little insectivores, honeyeaters and finches that may be struggling. Try: mealworms or other invertebrates, fruit, nectar mixes, seed and either meat supplemented with calcium powder (like Wombaroo insectivore mix) or chopped up dog food rolls
- Avoid bread (its just a filler that provides minimal nutrition), honey/water mixes, straight sunflower seeds (which are very fatty) and mince. Mince is nutritionally not complete and also sticks to beaks, sometimes causing bacterial infections.
- Ensure stations are out of reach of cats, dogs and other potential threats
- Place stations in a quiet space for shy birds to use

Feeding shouldn't be a long-term solution. As habitat recovers and new plants establish, birds will be able to find food naturally and you can taper off on your feeding efforts.

3. Shade

Don't panic if birds are seeking shelter in your yard but not drinking, despite there being water available. Birds will open their beaks, drop and open their wings in order to cool down. Give them some space and allow them to rest. If you can, observe them from a distance to make sure they are OK. You can use a spray bottle to mist some vegetation and help create a cool patch (remember most of us are under water restrictions so avoid sprinklers) and put up garden umbrellas to help create some extra shady spots.

4. Helping sick/injured birds

Sadly, most wildlife, including birds, that are in the path of a fire perish. Some however can be injured by the flames, radiant heat or smoke inhalation, or they may be disoriented. Please do not go searching fire grounds for injured birds or other wildlife. It is not safe and trained wildlife rescue volunteers will search once the appropriate agencies have given the green light.

A healthy bird will generally be behaving as others of the same species do, however birds that are behaving oddly might be unwell or injured. They may be unable or reluctant to fly, making shallow, rapid breaths, head tilting, limping, not moving when approached or sitting in unusual, open places. Often other birds will also attack an unwell bird. If you see a bird that is panting with its wings open, it may just be trying to cool off, observe it for a while (from a distance) before

decided to intervene. Keep a 'rescue kit' in the boot of your car as well as in your house or garage comprised of a strong box or crate, towels, gloves, a torch and a pillowcase.

If you do find a bird that is sick or injured:

- Ensure the threat to the bird is removed and it isn't in immediate danger (and keep yourself safe too)
- Handle the bird gently but firmly (and wear gloves where ever possible or use a towel).
- For small birds, use one hand and hold the bird so its head is between your index and middle fingers. The rest of your hand will wrap about the body. For medium sized birds you will need two hands – one over each wing. Large birds like raptors and owls have large beaks and claws so avoid handling birds of this size if at all possible (contact wildlife rescue immediately and have someone qualified capture it).
- **Put the bird into a well-ventilated box and keep it dark and quiet** while you get treatment for it. This reduces the stress and shock for the bird and is the best treatment you can give it.
- **Don't feed the bird or give it water.** This could cause the bird to aspirate or delay any treatment it might need.

Contact your local wildlife rescue group or vet. Depending on resources, they may be able to come and collect the bird themselves directly or will provide you with advice based on the situation you are describing. A vet will not charge you for bringing in wildlife.

According to all state and territory legislations, you must be a qualified and licenced wildlife carer in order to rehabilitate wildlife. This means, if you find a sick, injured or young bird (that is not able to be reunited with it's parents), you must hand it over to a licenced wildlife rescue group or take it to a vet.

5. Monitor

In order to best understand the impacts of these fires on bird populations, we need people out there monitoring and recording what they see. Birds in Backyards has seasonal surveys that record what birds you have in your garden in a simple 20 min count alongside some information about what your garden is like. This summer we are specifically looking at whether gardens with bird baths have more birds visiting them than those without, but we expect to also see birds showing up in areas that they usually don't. [Never has it been more important to submit a survey.](#) Join us for a [free webinar](#) on Jan 9 to learn more about how to take part

BirdLife Australia also has 2ha x 20min surveys that you can do anywhere throughout Australia in any habitat and location. These surveys form the basis of our State of Australia's Birds reports (amongst other things). Go to <https://birddata.birdlife.org.au/> for more information on doing surveys and to help us understand the impact these fires have had.

6. Donate

Supporting organisations with financial contributions on the forefront of efforts to assist people and wildlife in these awful times is a fast and simple way to help and there are many organisations out there with bushfire appeals. Find out how you can support BirdLife Australia's

efforts to help fire effected bird populations here: <https://birdlife.org.au/current-appeal> but also consider wildlife rescue organisations such as:

- WIRES: <https://www.wires.org.au/donate/emergency-fund>
- Wildlife Rescue South Coast: <https://www.wildlife-rescue.org.au/>
- Wildlife Victoria: <https://www.wildlifelifevictoria.org.au/>
- Zoos Victoria Bushfire Emergency fund: <https://www.zoo.org.au/fire-fund/>
- Your local wildlife rescues around the country

Some wildlife rescue groups may also be in need of items such as towels and blankets as well as cash donations. Please check out their social media or webpages before taking physical donations to them. Consider training to become a wildlife carer when there are courses next available but please be patient with these rescues as they are currently inundated with sick and injured wildlife.

7. Plant

We need to get better at creating spaces for wildlife in our towns and cities. Understandably, the thought of putting shrubs and trees into our gardens may make some people nervous at the moment. However greener living spaces give us many benefits such as mitigating urban heat island effects (keeping our places cooler in rising temperatures) as well as providing important refuges for wildlife. We can do this while also minimizing fire risk to our properties. If you are in a bush fire prone zone consider:

- Avoiding creating a ladder of vegetation from ground to canopy
- Providing gaps between clumps of shrubs of approximately 5m
- Not having tree branches overhanging houses and leaving a few metres distance between shrubs and trees and the house.
- Including low fuel areas like paths, vege patches and paved/graveled areas in your garden
- Using large particle size mulches or inorganic mulches
- Plant flammability. Given the right conditions all vegetation will burn, but some types of plants are less flammable than others. Smooth-barked trees are preferred to those with stringy, fibrous or ribbon bark
- Planting local where possible. Contact your council of a list of plants native to your region and talk to their nursery staff about best options for your location and position.

See: [Bird-friendly Gardening in APZ's](#) for more details

While I never want to discourage anyone from getting out in the garden, summer is not a great time for planting. With water restrictions and the extreme temperatures, it will be challenging to keep new plants alive in the short term. Instead, use the next couple of months to research some suitable plants for your garden and map out the best locations for them. See our Creating Space section for more planting advice: [How to make your garden a safe haven](#)

The Birds in Backyards Program sends it's love and sympathy to all of those impacted by these horrific fires. We support the amazing fire fighters working hard to keep people, property and wildlife safe and thank you to all working to help getting communities and wildlife back on their feet again. Stay safe everyone.

