

Aussie Backyard Bird Count 2016 Results:

Shire of Chapman Valley

Wren Package

birds are in our nature



## BirdLife Australia

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### **BirdLife Australia**

**60 Leicester Street, Suite 2-05**

**Carlton VIC 3053**

**Australia**

**Tel: (Australia): (03) 9347 0757**

**Fax: (03) 9347 9323**

**(Overseas): +613 9347 0757**

**Fax: +613 9347 9323**

**E-mail: [mail@birdlife.org.au](mailto:mail@birdlife.org.au)**

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This report was prepared by: Amy Adams.

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## Introduction

### **Aussie Backyard Bird Count (ABBC)**

In 2014, as part of Birdlife Australia's National Bird Week celebrations, Birdlife Australia ran the first ever Aussie Backyard Bird Count — now one of the largest citizen science projects of this nature in Australia.

The Aussie Backyard Bird Count provides an opportunity for everyone — from school children, senior citizens, families and community groups — to become citizen scientists for one week every October. The data collected by these citizen scientists plays a vital role in providing important information to Birdlife Australia and increases our understanding of Australian bird species that live where people live. The Aussie Backyard Bird Count also helps raise the profile of bird species throughout Australia, highlighting the importance of these species and promoting a national passion for Australian birds.

Each year this natural passion is confirmed, with the Aussie Backyard Bird Count attracting significant interest from the general public eager to be involved and help contribute to our growing knowledge of Australian birds. Public involvement has tripled in the three years the Aussie Backyard Bird Count has run, with the number of birds counted nearly doubling. Additionally, involvement by local councils increases year-on-year with more bird-focused events being held during bird week, increasing the awareness and importance of local birds within their communities. And most recently with the release of lesson plans, a record number of schools took part in 2016 encouraging students to not only participate at school but also at home.

The national focus on birds is extremely important with data showing Australian backyards have been shrinking since the 1990s, and populations of some of our most familiar birds like the Laughing Kookaburra, have also declined. Results from the 2014-2016 Aussie Backyard Bird Counts show that Australian backyards — in all their shapes and sizes — continue to attract a range of birds, giving us hope that even as the iconic Aussie backyard shrinks, many native birds can and do remain. With growing national and international concern for the welfare of these iconic birds, citizen science projects such as the ABBC can help provide an insight into how Aussie birds are faring and results can help formulate subsequent management decisions.

### **Birds in Backyards (BIBY)**

In 2000, 20 per cent of Australia's bird species were assessed as being either Threatened or Near Threatened in *The Action Plan for Australian Birds*. The 2006 World Wildlife Fund's report to the Nairobi conference on climate change predicted that 72 per cent of rainforest bird species in north-east Australia could become extinct if global warming continues unchecked. These are just two science-based messages that many of Australia's bird species are in danger. For those of us who love and value birds, these figures are appalling. However, for many in the general community they have little meaning. The Birds in Backyards (BIBY) program is a research, education and conservation initiative which was conceived and designed primarily in an effort to make these potential bird losses meaningful to the 85 per cent of Australians living in urban and regional areas, as well as gathering data to help clarify the issues. By involving local communities and citizen scientists, the general public are helping to undertake scientific research to determine trends in bird diversity and distribution

in backyards, gardens, parks and other public urban areas where the research outputs will help contribute to developing and implementing conservation strategies.

## 2016 Initial Aussie Backyard Bird Count Findings

The following statistics relate to the Shire of Chapman Valley region during the Aussie Backyard Bird Count that ran from the 17<sup>th</sup> to 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2016:

- 23 observers participated in the bird count
- A total of 374 individual birds were observed and recorded during the week (Table 1)
- 27 bird species were recorded (Table 1)

**Table 1:** The complete species list and number of individuals observed within the Shire of Chapman Valley boundaries during the 2016 Aussie Backyard Bird Count.

Bird Species	Count	Bird Species	Count
Galah	63	Torresian Crow	6
Welcome Swallow	61	Zebra Finch	6
Willie Wagtail	45	Tree Martin	5
White-plumed Honeyeater	35	Grey Shrike-thrush	3
Australian Ringneck	25	Rufous Whistler	3
Magpie-lark	21	Yellow-throated Miner	3
Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike	16	Australian Wood Duck	2
Grey Fantail	15	Laughing Dove*	2
Australian Raven	11	Pied Butcherbird	2
Australian Magpie	10	White-cheeked Honeyeater	2
Splendid Fairy-wren	10	Crested Pigeon	1
Nankeen Kestrel	9	Grey Currawong	1
Sacred Kingfisher	8	Singing Honeyeater	1
White-browed Babbler	8		

\* Introduced species

## Data Limitations

An annual backyard bird survey occurring in gardens across Australia has the potential to be an extremely valuable monitoring tool for Australian bird species and communities. Over years, data collected from regions can be used to detect population trends for target species (both native and introduced), for different species guilds and for bird communities within specific areas. For example, detection of regional and/or national changes in the abundance and distribution of species especially those of management concern, such as downward trends of native species, or upward trends of pest species. Subsequent management actions can therefore be implemented in response to the survey results.

However, some caution must be taken when interpreting the results from such a survey. The backyards that are surveyed will not constitute a random selection of backyards across Australia. Previous analyses of surveys of a similar nature have suggested that participants are more likely to be interested in birds and have more 'bird-friendly' gardens than the country as a whole (Dunn et al., 2005; Spurr, 2012). If this is correct, the number of birds reported from surveyed backyards could be higher than the average number present within a typical Australian backyard. The number of counted birds may also be over-inflated due to the potential for observers to count the same bird/s multiple times during their 20 minute survey period. Furthermore, some regions may have small sample sizes, with some areas being under-represented (or not represented at all) which will influence data interpretation and population trends within an area and across the country. Additionally, bird species that are more likely to utilise habitat associated with backyard gardens are more likely to be recorded, thus represented, in the dataset than species that are specialised to other habitat types such as forests or water bodies. The lack of presence of these species within the dataset does not imply low abundance or scarce distribution but rather their specific habitat was not represented in the survey. Survey results are also subject to temporal biases and only provide information of bird communities within a one-week period during spring. Hence, the Aussie Backyard Bird Count survey can be said to monitor population and distribution trends within the backyards of participants during the particular time period but results may not necessarily be applicable to Australia as a whole, or the entire region specifically being analysed. Furthermore, the GPS co-ordinates of surveys may not be completely accurate due to user error when selecting their location through the app, as the placement of the survey flag may not precisely fall on their true location. However, the submitted co-ordinates will provide the general location where the survey occurred.

The skill and experience of observers conducting backyard surveys in correctly identifying birds will vary and also influence the validity of the survey results. The ABBC app provided the first instance of minimising incorrect species identifications by clearly indicating to the user if a species that they had selected to include on their checklist was "unlikely based on survey location". Once the survey data was collected in the BirdLife Australia office, data was further vetted based on species distribution information. While every effort was undertaken to vet the survey data of mis-identified birds, it is still probable that some mis-identifications will be included in the dataset and caution is needed when analysing the results. However, a previous study has implied that identification of species occurring in participants backyards are more likely to be correct as these species are familiar to the observer and are likely to be relatively common species (Cannon, 1999).

## What Birds in Backyards (BIBY) Can Offer

We are fortunate in Australia to have such a diverse and colourful range of native birds that live amongst us in the urban landscape. These birds provide an opportunity for people to appreciate and connect with wildlife on a daily basis and increasingly, research is linking biodiversity with a person's quality of life. In Britain, bird life is so valued that the UK government uses information about their wild bird as a measure of the health of the environment as a whole. This environmental indicator is published alongside more familiar economic and social indicators and reinforces the point that the maintenance of biodiversity is a key part of sustainability.

But our urban bird communities in Australia are changing. Small birds, like Spinebills and Fairy-wrens, were once more common in parks or gardens are now disappearing and being replaced by large and aggressive species like the Noisy Miner and Pied Currawong. Changes in our gardening practices and increasing urbanisation seem to be largely responsible for this – the simplification of our gardens and the loss of shrubs has removed important food, shelter and nesting locations. If vegetation in gardens could be managed to promote a diversity of native bird species, it will provide a valuable secondary habitat for conserving native bird populations, particularly as natural habitat continues to be destroyed. In the urban landscape, engaging with the wider community is necessary in order to turn around this habitat loss and provides a unique opportunity to engage large numbers of the general community actively in the conservation of biodiversity.

Birds in Backyards encourages people to learn in their own space in order to establish an initial connection with the natural world in a somewhat unnatural setting. It is not simply about providing people with information about birds in their local area but it is about building on that initial interest and encouraging people to learn more and then take action for birds. The Birds in Backyards Program can work with your council to provide resources or collaborate on projects. For example:

- Hard copy materials such as A4 Backyard Birds of... posters (that can be made available in 6 languages), bookmarks, bird trading cards, gardening advice brochures
- Train the trainer workshops and associated materials or direct public workshops
- Ongoing monitoring programs for participants via our Backyard Bird surveys with feedback provided
- Regional plant lists
- Children's engagement activities and school resources
- Evaluations

For more information, please contact Birds in Backyards Program Manager Dr. Monica Awasthy - [monica.awasthy@birdlife.org.au](mailto:monica.awasthy@birdlife.org.au).

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