



## Bring back the birdbath – and tell us about it

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*In our drought-stricken cities, a bird bath or simple saucer of water can be critically important to wildlife and may even attract remarkable visitors such as this unusual lorikeet mutation.*

**W**e don't like uncertainty, and our cities reflect this attitude. One way that humans diverge from our fellow creatures is the extent to which we have distanced ourselves from the unpredictability and extremes inherent in natural environments.

This is especially obvious in urban areas, where it is now possible to live a life almost completely sealed off from the vagaries and uncertainty of 'the wild'. Safe inside our insulated, air-conditioned cocoons of ideal temperature and humidity, we graze on an overabundance of foods while watching digital visions of fabricated life on large electronic screens. This reduction in variability is also evident in the physical environment outside our homes: large cities tend to have warmer, less fluctuating temperature ranges than natural areas nearby.

Even more important, cities don't – usually – experience droughts. Of course rainfall patterns vary over time, and everywhere has dry periods when plants wilt and insects disappear. But in the city, such natural variability can effectively be reduced, or eliminated altogether, at the turn of a tap. The permanent availability of abundant water for gardens and lawns, sports field and parks is one of the assumed miracles of life in the city. All that water keeps grass green and plants lush.

It is hardly surprising that plenty of wild species are attracted to this drought-less environment. This is especially evident when droughts affect areas surrounding cities. Historically throughout eastern Australia, the occurrence of periodic droughts in inland areas has often been associated with coastward movements of numerous bird species. Influxes of typical inland nomadic species such as cockatiels, galahs and even emus into moister coastal areas were often correlated with prolonged drought in the west. In general, these movements tended to reverse when conditions improved inland. However, for some individuals, the discovery of oasis-like conditions in coastal cities appears to have led to a permanent presence. The relatively recent establishment of

urban populations of species such as crested pigeons, king parrots and galahs may have originated in this way.

Of course, sometimes droughts are so prolonged and serious that the profligate use of water outside the home is severely restricted or even banned completely, as has been the case in many cities in southern Queensland for some years now. As a result, gardens grew parched and plants used to regular and abundant watering wilted and often died. Tree ferns were particularly susceptible; many were unable to withstand the almost complete drying of the soil.

Urban skink and frog populations, already in decline, seemed to crash disastrously.

Although plant watering was strictly curtailed, urban dwellers were still able to provide water for visiting wildlife. The humble birdbath, in such times, may be of critical importance to urban species already stressed by the declining quality of their normally unchanging urban ecosystem. Anecdotally, people maintaining their birdbaths throughout the drought have reported greatly increased visitation, and many noted species never seen previously. In suburban Brisbane, for example, one birdbath enthusiast recorded little lorikeets, blue-faced honeyeaters, common koels, pheasant coucals, fan-tailed cuckoos – and even water dragons – during the extremely dry month of November 2007, despite the resident noisy miners and turtle-doves.

This spectacular example highlights how little we know about the importance of birdbaths in urban settings. Even those vigorously opposed to the feeding of wildlife concede that providing water may be potentially beneficial. However, virtually nothing is known about wildlife use of birdbaths – or any other regular source of back yard water.

In an expansion of our other studies of back yard feeding, we are starting to investigate backyard water provisioning. With so little known, we will be starting with the most basic questions: Which species visit? How often? Are the baths defended by aggressive species? Are they a potential source of disease spread? If you maintain a birdbath and notice the visitors, we would love to know. Send us an email ([d.jones@griffith.edu.au](mailto:d.jones@griffith.edu.au)) or letter (School of Environment, Griffith University, Nathan Qld 4111) and join a pioneering study of a poorly understood activity that may prove of critical importance.

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