

Tree Hollows and Wildlife

July 2005

Tap, tap, tap: my attention was drawn to a rhythmical drumming from high in the crown of a veteran River Red Gum tree near my home. A check with binoculars showed that the drummer was a Corella busily widening a narrow opening in a long-dead hollow limb. It was using its bill first as a miniature jack hammer, then as a pick as it levered off chips of the hard, dry timber. As I watched I could see that two birds were taking turns in this painfully slow task. The work continued for the next five days. About a week after the noises stopped the birds were seen perched near the worksite. They must have been happy with their renovations for they were engaged in courting and mating behaviour.

The tree is a magnificent specimen and has many hollows and many residents. Several Brush-tailed Possums and a hive of Honey Bees are the most obvious, but we suspect others. Recent surveys have shown that around 300 Australian vertebrate species use tree hollows for shelter and nesting. This is about 15% of the total. Nearly 1 in 3 of our mammals require tree hollows. Locally, all the owl species, including the endangered Powerful Owl, all the parrot family, kookaburras, kingfishers, gliding possums, many insectivorous bats and the rare Brush-tailed Phascogale are hollow dependant. The surveys also show that there is an overall decrease in the number of hollows available for these animals throughout the country.

In our region the most notable hollow-dependant bird is the Red-tailed Black Cockatoo. Its requirements are very specific. It needs a hollow up to 2 metres deep and 30-40 cms wide set at an angle in a large tree. Such hollows are only found in very old River Red Gums and Yellow Gums and take a very long time to form. Estimates vary but, depending on the kind of tree and its life history, hollows do not generally start to appear until a tree is at least 80 years old.

There is a housing shortage for much of our wildlife. Large, old trees with hollows are most at risk of being destroyed during and after fires. They should be regarded as valuable assets and every effort should be made to extinguish them if they do catch fire. Debris at the base of these big, old trees should be cleared away before prescribed burns are started, to prevent the trees from catching alight. For the same reason, fallen timber in cropping paddocks should not be piled around the base of trees.

Before any large tree is removed an assessment of its hollow-bearing capacity and potential should be made. Even an old, scraggy tree may house many creatures and serve nature long after it dies – try and leave them standing.

Field naturalists and other conservation groups have been building and installing artificial nest boxes in areas where they are most needed. Success has been mixed, as often the target species is shy and the boxes are taken over by more common or aggressive species. The fact that any animals accept these alternatives is an indication that there are not enough of their preferred homes.

Photos:

Sacred Kingfisher at a nest hollow in a Yellow Gum (*E. leucoxylon*) at Wyperfeld.

Sugar Glider (*Petaurus breviceps*) in a hollow in a Mamma Gum (*E. viminalis*) at Mt Eccles.

