



GINA CRANSTON BACKYARD

COME FLY WITH ME

If I ever find myself wondering what bird is that? or what I should do with this magpie lark* I found in conniptions by the clothesline, or why the scrub turkey is exhibiting such appalling behaviour, or whether I should be concerned about our resident peacock's food and water intake, I just ask my neighbour Alan Stuart. He knows these things.

Alan, a consulting metallurgist and a life member of the Hunter Bird Observers Club, took a detour on a recent Adelaide work trip to visit Gluepot Reserve where he'd had word that the elusive scarlet-chested parrot was about. He did indeed spot the lovely creature and satisfyingly notched up his 700th Australian bird species sighting.

A recent chat with Alan enlightened me about the birds in our own backyard. There is a distinct air of chirpiness about in the spring and Alan says it's more than just a general sense of joie de vivre. We hear more birds singing more often at this time of year because they're mating.

The tiny spotted pardalote (pictured), for example, has arrived. Alan says he doesn't have to spot one to know it is here, he can hear it, loud and clear, with a call that sounds rather like "I'm spotted, I'm spotted". The species is mostly found in

eucalypt forests or gardens with an established canopy of eucalypts, and nests in tunnels, hollows, earth banks, even hanging baskets. Both parents build the nest, incubate eggs and feed the young – a triumph for feminism in any species.

Magpies, kookaburras and noisy miners, of course, are more easily detected as they are larger and more vocal.

Much like the maligned common myna, which tends to roost in lit-up areas like car parks, the equally aggressive native noisy miner enjoys the habitat we create for it. Alan says noisy miners are a dry woodland bird belonging to the parts of NSW where there are gum trees interspersed with wide, open spaces.

Noisy miners – which are larger honeyeaters with grey bodies, black crown and cheeks, yellow bills and legs – are thriving in suburbia to the detriment of other species, and we facilitate this. When we plant things to attract various other honeyeaters, noisy miners get in on the action too, and bully smaller birds away from their homes. Noisy miners are sedentary, so once they find a place with a

good year-round nectar supply, good luck moving them on. Our choice of large-flowering plants with long flowering seasons to pretty our gardens is partly to blame, the presence of eucalypts is another factor. Alan says if we plant an understory of dense – maybe even prickly – shrubs, this will provide smaller birds with some shelter. "Nurseries will recommend bottlebrush, grevilleas, gordonias to attract honeyeaters but unless the overall habitat allows smaller birds to take cover, they will be harassed."

* Alan told me the magpie lark I found was a male because it had a black face and white eyebrows. I saw no traces of foul play when I found it alone and in an absolute flap but Alan, wife Margaret and my daughter took it to a native animal rescue lady



PICTURE: ALWYN SIMPLE

at Cardiff who said it had most probably been bitten by a cat. I choose not to believe it was Apples or Smokeii, but when cats bite or scratch they transmit a bacterium called pasteurella. In birds, this causes pasteurella septicemia, which means imminent death unless the bird is treated with antibiotics. More winged words next week, and keep the unorthodox cut-flower suggestions coming.

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