



Birdwatcher's Monitoring Kit – Mount Alexander Region and beyond

Prepared by Tanya Loos, Connecting Country, Dec 2015

Why monitor birds?

Birdwatching is a relaxing and enjoyable activity. It becomes bird monitoring as well as birdwatching once you start documenting your sightings. As a birdwatcher, writing down what you see and hear hones your skills in observation and identification.

Keeping records over time helps you build up a picture of the birds in your area, or on your property; and you will also get a greater sense of the differences in bird diversity between different locations, habitats and times of the year.

Contributing your sightings to the BirdLife Australia's Atlas of Australian Birds takes it up another level again! By surveying birds on your property, your local bush reserve, or anywhere you like – and then submitting your findings to the atlas - you will be adding to the knowledge about the distribution and abundance of these species locally and across the whole of Australia.

Connecting Country bird surveys

Connecting Country is in the process of becoming an affiliated organisation of Birdlife Australia – which means there will be a data sharing agreement between the two organisations. The data we collect as part of Connecting Country's monitoring programs will be fed into the Atlas. Connecting Country will also be able to access all documented observations from the Atlas in the local area, which includes records going back to 1999.

Connecting Country has been regularly monitoring birds at 50 locations across the Mount Alexander Region since 2010. The purpose of these surveys is to track the health of woodland birds across the region over time, and to also evaluate the differences between bird diversity within relatively intact woodlands, lightly treed farm paddocks and areas that are being actively regenerated with native vegetation. For a summary of the work done so far, go to [monitoring woodland birds](#).

The Ten Year Woodland Bird Action Plan

In 2013, Connecting Country developed a detailed 10-year Woodland Birds Action Plan for the Mount Alexander region with the assistance of external experts.

The ambitious and exciting plan aims to increase the extent and condition of woodland bird habitat in eleven identified priority zones across the region through an approach using on-ground works on private land such as weed control, rabbit control, supplementary planting, environmental fencing and grazing regime management. The Stewards for Woodland Birds project aims to support local conservation planning in each of the 11 zones – via community planning workshops in 2016.

The focal species for the Ten Year Woodland Bird Action Plan have been dubbed 'the feathered five'; ground-foraging woodland birds known to occur in the local area. These plucky yet endangered species are as follows: Diamond Firetail, Jacky Winter, Hooded Robin, Brown Treecreeper and Painted Button-quail.

Information on the feathered five is on the back page of this kit, and further info on Connecting Country's website [here](#).



A Jacky Winter on a wire fence, one of their favourite perches.

Photo by Patrick Kavanagh



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Getting started with bird monitoring

How you get involved at this point depends on your skill set.

'Experienced birdwatchers' - If you feel you can identify most local bird species confidently, why not become an "atlasser" – a volunteer who contributes comprehensive bird survey data directly onto the Birdata website : www.birdata.com.au or by sending the results to the BirdLife Australia office on an official hard-copy atlas datasheet. Once you are registered as an atlasser, you can submit the results of bird surveys conducted on your property or anywhere else in Australia and its territories.

Connecting Country has created a number of *Group atlas sites* across the Mount Alexander region. A Group atlas site is a defined location (usually 2 hectares in extent) that is set up so that anyone can go surveying there for birds in a consistent, repeatable manner.

Group atlas sites are incredibly important because they can give a detailed picture of the changes in bird diversity and abundance over time at one particular location – which can then be compared to changes over time at other specific locations. These Group atlas sites are registered on the BirdLife website and also clearly explained on the Connecting Country website. The Group Sites will help us carry out our bird monitoring activities evenly across the region.

'Beginner Birdwatchers' - If you are not quite confident with your bird ID skills, or do not have the time to undertake comprehensive monitoring surveys, but are still observing rare, threatened or unusual species such as Diamond Firetails on your property, then you can still contribute your sightings.

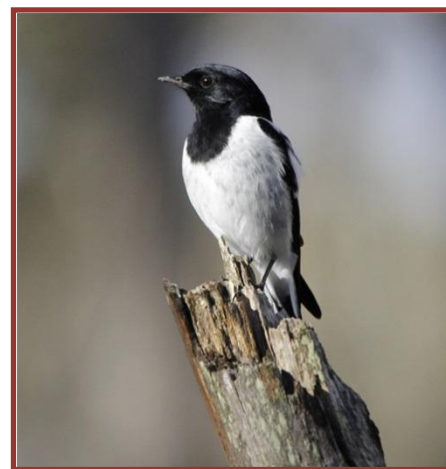
The Feathered Five Sightings sheet is an example of an Incidental Search form has been created to allow landowners and birdwatchers in the Mount Alexander region to record the five target bird species for Connecting Country's program (Hooded Robin, Diamond Firetail, etc). However, it can also be used to start recording any birds that you may have seen on your property, or while you are out and about.

Options for sending in your data

To submit your observations, you can either:

- Register with BirdLife as an Atlasser, and send data directly to BirdLife Australia (new portal and app coming in 2016!)
- Fill in one of Connecting Country's hard copy datasheets, and then post them to us
- Enter your data onto one of Connecting Country's Excel spreadsheet templates, and then email the results to us periodically.

The data will all end up in the same place – the Connecting Country bird monitoring data base, and the Bird Atlas.



A male Hooded Robin surveys his territory.

Photo by Geoff Park



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How do I know if I am a beginner or not?

Connecting Country recently hosted workshops for both beginners and intermediate birdwatchers, and the skill level of the participants was very good at both workshops! It is important to remember that even very experienced birdwatchers need to use the tips and tricks for identifying new birds if they move into a new habitat type or area. Birdwatching is such a great hobby, because you just never stop learning.

If are able to identify 50% or more of the bird species in your local patch by sight and sound, and most or all of the remainder by using your field guides and bird apps – then you have probably moved passed the 'beginner' phase. However, if there are quite a few birds that you see or hear that you cannot identify confidently, even with the help of field guides or phone apps, then you probably still fit in the 'beginner' group.

There's a grey zone in between, where you can identify most birds by sight and field guide, but there are still some groups that cause confusion (e.g. thornbills, birds of prey).

Sometimes we are better at some groups of birds than others. If you can identify most or all bush birds, but have difficulty with raptors, for example, you are not alone! Just omit the raptors that you cannot identify from your survey – and make a note at the bottom of your datasheet that there were some extra birds of prey that you couldn't identify.

If you are unsure about most of the thornbills, and perhaps the swiftly moving honeyeaters, or the hard to find calling cuckoos, it is probably best to consider yourself a beginner, and so consider sending us your data first.

How can I learn the bird calls?

Learning bird calls is a fantastic way to improve your birdwatching. It takes time and patience, but it is such a wonderful feeling to walk through bushland and be able to know who is out and about calling, without even looking up.

Try starting with the birds you know first, rather than trying to identify unknown calls. If you learn the calls of the most commonly seen birds, then it becomes easier to recognise when you have heard a new call. Everyone learns differently, but I found sitting near the bird bath with binoculars, field guide and a notebook a great way to start.

Watching the bird making the call, then writing it down phonetically at the same time uses both senses. Also writing what the sound reminds you of can help – I always remember the call of the Buff-rumped Thornbill because it reminds me of a squeaky toy.

The bird apps and websites with bird calls are helpful also. The apps are great for reminding yourself in the field whether you are hearing a Rufous Whistler or a Golden Whistler, but not so helpful if you are trying to identify an unknown call from scratch.

There are presently no "Shazam" style bird apps that allow you to record a bird call and then it identifies it for you – that only works with cheesy pop tunes from the 1980s! Bird calls are so varied – they have simple calls, and more complex songs – and there are different sounds for flying, for feeding together, for alarm calls or territorial display. Perhaps in the future we will have apps like that but there are none as yet.



A group of birdwatchers in Castlemaine Botanic Gardens watch an Eastern Yellow Robin

Photo by Janet Barker



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Types of Bird Monitoring

(modified text from the *Atlasser Starter Kit*. More detailed text from *Birds Australia* available in the [Bird Atlas starter kit](#))

As we discussed earlier, recording your bird observations can be personally fulfilling, reinforce your own knowledge, and contributes to scientific understanding of birds at the local scale and more broadly. The four ways in which we encourage you to undertake bird surveys are

- Incidental searches,
- Two hectare searches,
- Area searches
- Group atlas site searches.

These are described in greater detail below. As a minimum, you can record just the presence of bird species for each of these surveys – but it is more useful to also record the numbers of individuals and any observations of breeding activity (e.g. nest building, sitting on eggs, feeding fledgelings).

i. Incidental search

An Incidental search can be undertaken at any time, and for any period of time. Typically, this survey technique would be used in the following situations:

- When you are a beginner birdwatcher, and you are not able to identify and record many of the birds that you see during a search.
- When you have a one-off sighting of an uncommon or unusual species. For example, as you are walking to work in a hurry, you see a rare bird flying overhead such as a White-bellied Sea-eagle. This is a notable observation worth adding to the database, but is not part of a broader survey of all bird species seen at this time. An Incidental Search would be used in this example.

We are encouraging landholders and birdwatchers of all skill levels to send us any opportunistic observations they make of the 'feathered five' bird species using the Incidental Search form.

- When you are undertaking surveys of a specific group of birds. For example, many birdwatchers visit wetlands and coastal areas to record all of the waders and other waterbirds seen – but do not document any other bird species.

If you see an unusual bird, you may be asked to complete an Unusual Record Report Form, so take a note of how you identified the bird and how you eliminated similar species.

ii. Two hectare search

The Two hectare search is Birdlife Australia's preferred method for bird surveys: the 'Gold Standard'. This involves recording all birds seen and heard with a defined two-hectare area for a period of exactly 20 minutes. This includes birds only seen flying over top of the search area. The recommended shape for the two hectares is 100 metres x 200 metres (but other shapes are okay, such as a circle with a radius of 80 metres, or a strip 400 metres long and 50 metres wide).

Though it is tempting, you should not automatically choose a site which you think will yield the most birds. Occasionally choose a site where birds may not be as prevalent; as this provides a good cross-section of data.



A Yellow-rumped Thornbill, one of four species of thornbill in the Mount Alexander region.

Photo by Geoff Park



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Try to introduce a degree of randomness into your site selection. A good way to do this is to choose a site on a map before you arrive so Also, if there are a number of sites with similar habitat and management conditions, choose one randomly for your 2-ha search area.

Nevertheless, your site should be representative of the particular habitat you are surveying. As much as possible, avoid mixing habitat types (e.g. half grassland/half forest, or half grazed/half ungrazed) in the same 2-ha search area. If you are surveying two nearby 2-ha areas on the same day, make sure that the centre of the two areas are at least 400 metres apart, so there is no overlap between them.

iii. Area search

The Area search is more flexible than the Two hectare search — you can search any area for a period of at least 20 minutes (but not more than one week), listing all of the birds seen and heard around a central point. As it is Connecting Country's aim to learn more about the birds of the local area, we would prefer if you did a small Area search (which is within 500 metres of a central point), rather than a large one (that extends beyond 500 metres but is within 5 kilometres of a central point). You must indicate which size of area you searched when submitting your results (i.e. within 500m or within 5km or a central point). The search area can be any shape.

iv. Group Atlassing

Group atlas sites encourage people to establish survey sites which other birdwatchers can visit, to optimise the amount of data that can be generated at individual sites.

Connecting Country has a number of Group atlas sites across the Mount Alexander region, and the information on these sites is available on both on the Connecting Country website, and the Birddata website: www.birddata.com.au

Summary of Kit contents:

- This fact sheet
- Bird list for the Mount Alexander region
- Hard copy data sheet
- Excel data sheet
- Feathered five incidental sheet

Whether you are a beginning or experienced birdwatcher, we hope that you will enjoy contributing your sightings to Connecting Country and BirdLife Australia. There are further resources available on the Connecting Country website

connectingcountry.org.au

The Connecting Country website and blog will have regular bird monitoring updates, and we do hope you can join us on one of our bird monitoring outings.

Please do not hesitate to contact Tanya Loos, Woodland Birds project coordinator with any questions.

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Diamond Firetail

The Diamond Firetail is a type of finch that relies on abundant seeding native grasses for food and nesting.

When it is courting time, the males display to females by holding a grass stem in their bill and doing little push ups.



Jacky Winter

Jacky Winters used to be called 'postboys' because they are so often seen on fence posts.

These small greyish birds perform intricate song flights to mark their territories, a bit like Skylarks.



Hooded Robin

Hooded Robins are often seen in family groups; black and white male, with a greyish female or younger bird.

Part of their Latin name *Melanodryas* means 'black wood nymph'.



Brown Treecreeper

Brown Treecreepers spend a lot of time foraging on the ground – searching for insects on fallen logs and branches.

Brown Treecreepers breed co-operatively, which means that the young from previous years help raise the next lot of nestlings.



Painted Button-quail

Painted Button-quails are the shyest of the feathered five. As they forage, they leave behind circular marks in the leaf litter known as platelets.

The brightly coloured female is actually the one who attracts the males, and the males raise the young!

Finding the Feathered Five...

Many landowners in the Mount Alexander region are lucky enough to have these species living on their bush blocks; if so, we would love to hear from you.

Many thanks to Geoff Park and Patrick Kavanagh for the use of their bird photos.