



Natural Heritage Trust
Helping Communities Help Australia

FACT SHEET



THE THREATENED SPECIES NETWORK IS A
COMMUNITY-BASED PROGRAM OF WWF & NHT

MAKING YOUR BACKYARD BIODIVERSITY-FRIENDLY

In Alice Springs we are really lucky to have relatively natural bushland and undeveloped landscapes right on our doorstep. Where else in Australia could you expect to have easy viewing of a nationally threatened species like the black-footed rock-wallaby from your lounge room window looking out toward Spencer Hill? Or have trails of processionary caterpillars move through your garden in autumn time, or watch a bowerbird building its intricate bower construction and courting females whilst you have a cup of tea in your backyard?

The small size of our town, its relatively short period of European settlement, and its surrounding landuse of comparatively low-impact pastoralism has meant that the municipal area, particularly Iparpa Valley, still retains high biodiversity values, despite the loss of a swag of furry mammals from the region over the last 120 years.

The recent dramatic expansion of buffel grass (*Cenchrus ciliaris*) range in the Alice region may soon impact on local biodiversity – with losses of some native plants that are out-competed by buffel, or declines in plants, insects and reptile species that may not tolerate the fire regimes that develop in buffel-dominated habitats.

In trying to conserve biodiversity values in backyards around the Alice Springs municipal area there are a number of positive things that landholders can do. This fact sheet outlines those measures, and presents a backyard biodiversity checklist for you to assess the habitat value of your garden or rural block.

What lives in Alice Springs backyards?

The bulk of biodiversity in almost any land-based habitat in the world is made up of insects – in fact invertebrates make up 99% of the living animal species in the world. Besides the diverse ant fauna that Australia is famous for, Alice gardens also support a huge variety of beetles, butterflies, spiders, grasshoppers and bugs.

Some years see an explosion of grasshoppers – to the point where all that remains in some garden areas are the skeletons of once green shrubs, vegetable plants or fruit trees. Other years hundreds of cicadas emerge from backyard soils and cover walls and tree trunks with their outgrown shells.

All of these invertebrates have important roles to play in breaking down nutrients in plants to enrich soils, pollinating flowers, preying on other destructive insects, and being a food source for reptiles, birds and mammals.

Alice gardens can provide refuge for a number of native birds, particularly in areas where there are few pet cats or dogs. The most commonly seen bird species being white-plumed honeyeaters, yellow-throated miners, galahs, crested pigeons, ring-neck parrots, magpie larks, black-faced cuckoo shrikes, willy wagtails, little crows and pied butcherbirds. Other garden visitors include white-browed babbler families, peaceful doves, western bowerbirds, mistletoe birds, grey shrike-thrushes, rainbow bee-eaters (in hotter months), spiny-cheeked honeyeaters, sacred kingfishers, boobook owls and tawny frogmouths.

In recent years one non-native species is beginning to dominate the bird community around Alice – the spotted turtle dove. Like the less common introduced barbery dove the spotted turtle dove became established in Alice in the early 1990s and its numbers boomed during the wet years of 2000-2002. Limiting the spread of these feral species by reducing their access to free food like chook pellets and dog and cat biscuits is an important action all residents can take.

Amongst the reptiles that frequent Alice gardens the most prominent are nocturnal geckoes (like Bynoe's gecko or zig zag velvet gecko) or small skinks such as Grey's Menetia, fire-tail skinks or Frost's Lerista that scurry amongst leaf litter. Larger pet-free gardens or rural blocks with plenty of native shrub or grass cover and fallen logs can also support species such as the long-nosed water dragon, central netted dragon, brown snake, sand goanna or black-headed monitor.

There are only two frogs that are frequently heard calling in Alice gardens after rains - the Centralian tree frog and the red tree frog. These can survive in watered vegetable patches during long dry periods provided there are no cats to hunt them out of their hiding places.

In terms of small mammals, none of the native mice or marsupials do well around human habitations, and it is more likely that introduced house mice occupy garden niches around Alice Springs. In rural blocks where native grass and shrub cover is maintained some species like the stripe-faced dunnart or sandy inland mouse may persist, and in rocky country like that around Ilparpa or the Telegraph Station fat-tailed antechinus may live.

Larger mammals like echidnas can occasionally be seen wandering through rural blocks backing on to range country, and euros and red kangaroos often frequent properties with decent green pickings.

Plants are another key component of biodiversity and the Alice region has a rich native flora. There are 27 recognised vegetation types in the municipal region (Albrecht and Pitts 1999) and over 500 native plant species recorded. The diversity of native plant communities is under threat in some places because of the spread of weeds like buffel grass and couch grass which can displace native species or change the fuel load to favour more frequent, hotter fires.

Backyard biodiversity checklist

Habitat diversity

- Does your garden or block have mostly local natives, with a lot of variety in layers (grass, shrub, tree) and ages of plants?
- Have you retained dead trees, fallen logs, rocks and leaf litter on your property?
- Have you controlled invasive weeds like buffel grass or couch grass?
- Is there a predator-free water source available for frogs and birds?
- If you have mature mulga or witchetty shrubs do they support mistletoes that provide nectar for a range of native insects and birds?

Healthy habitats

- Do you avoid using chemical pest or weed control methods in your garden or on your block?
- Do you try to minimise water use and maximise rainwater harvest potential in your garden?
- If you own pets do you keep them inside or within smaller fenced areas to minimise their impacts on wildlife?
- Do you regularly weed out non-native plants and keep an eye out for feral ant (big-headed ants) infestations?
- Do you manage chook and pet food dispenses to avoid feeding feral doves?
- If you live on a rural block do you maintain firebreaks and manage wildfires to make sure habitats are not burnt too frequently or in very hot burns?

If you are able to answer "yes" to most questions, then you are likely to be well on your way to creating or maintaining a biodiverse backyard or rural property.

If you would like some advice to help plan gardens to maximise biodiversity or to revegetate or manage weeds on rural blocks contact the following groups or agencies:

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| Threatened Species Network: | ph 8952 1541 |
| Land for Wildlife: | ph 8955 5222 |
| Greening Australia: | ph 8953 2882 |
| Olive Pink Botanic Gardens: | ph 8952 2154 |
| Australian Plants Society: | ph 8952 2154 |
| Landcare Officer DIPE: | ph 8951 9210 |
| Weeds Officer DBIRD: | ph 8951 8195 |
| Tangentyere Nursery: | ph 8952 3257 |