

Living with brush-turkeys

The least stressful way to live with brush-turkeys is to simply acknowledge how lucky we are to have such birds living in our local areas. It has been found that around 75 per cent of people tolerate them in their back yards.

We can do things to ensure that the destruction in our gardens is minimised. However, remember that the brush-turkey is a protected native animal and attempts to harm the bird or trap it without the appropriate permit are illegal. This includes damaging or destroying the eggs in a mound.

More turkeys than ever?

In many parts of the east coast, including leafier urban areas, people are seeing an increase in brush-turkeys, and many will be seeing them for the first time in their area.

When we create lush gardens with lots of trees, shrubs and mulch, we create the ideal environment for brush-turkeys to move into. They will also be attracted to gardens where there are open compost heaps and pet food, such as cat and dog biscuits or chicken pellets.

Large-scale fox control has been carried out in some areas, such as the Sydney region, in the past few years. With lower fox numbers, it is likely more brush-turkeys have been able to survive and move back to their former haunts.



Your garden and brush-turkeys

Discouraging them from choosing your garden

- Firstly, reduce food sources—don't leave food out for other native species or household pets.
- Keep piles of spare mulch and leaves covered with tarpaulins.
- Cover the compost.

Encouraging them to relocate their mounds

Don't waste time trying to destroy a well-established mound or chase the bird away. Once a mound is established, waging war on a brush-turkey will be fruitless as you both will expend a lot of energy and nothing will change—so relax and enjoy!

However some people have had success in forcing the birds away from their yards in a number of non-harmful ways. You can encourage a resident brush-turkey to change location, by trying one of the following:

- **When the mound is not in use and/or containing eggs, cover it with a heavy duty tarpaulin, black plastic or shade cloth.**
- **Carry-out selective pruning of the shade-producing vegetation above the mound to let in a good bit of glaring light.** Brush-turkeys require suitable shade to help maintain their mounds at optimal temperature. By reducing the shade cover, they may move elsewhere.
- **Encourage the bird to use a different part of the garden by building a compost mound under good shade cover.** The brush-turkey may be attracted towards the area, and may eventually take over the compost mound as its nesting mound.
- **An idea that has been effective for some people is the strategic placement of a large mirror.** The bird may move on after a couple of days of fighting its image (another perceived male in its territory).

Tips for damage control

Once well established, a garden is not as vulnerable to destruction as newly planted and mulched areas.

When planting and mulching new areas, the best way to deter brush-turkeys is to make it really hard for them to rake the ground. The following suggestions may help prevent destruction of newly planted or mulched areas.

- **Time your work between when the brush-turkey has ceased to tend the mound and before he returns** to reuse this mound or create a new one (between February and August). His need to rake is not so great during this period.
- **Place small rocks at the base of plants, or use tree guards** to prevent new plants from being dug up.
- **Try covering the area with large heavily branched sticks and tree loppings.** These may make it difficult for the bird to get into the area and rake.
- **Use heavier mulches which are not easily raked.** Landscapes with rocks combined with heavy planting of low growing species, such as prostrate *Grevilleas* or clumping plants like *Lomandra*, can provide thick cover.
- **Develop the garden in stages, protecting plants at each stage.**
- **Place a layer of diamond-wire or chicken-wire below the surface of the mulch** to deter brush-turkeys raking. Allegedly they detest the feel of raking wire, thus will seek optimal habitat elsewhere. However some birds persist, and this can be distressing to watch.
- **Provide the bird with its own mulch supply** to take the pressure off your garden. Bring in extra mulch from elsewhere. Perhaps friends or neighbours have leaves, wood chip etc that they want to get rid of?



A bird to admire

Brush-turkeys (*Alectura lathami*) are 'mound builders'. Their closest relatives now live only on islands of Indonesia, the Philippines, New Guinea and the Pacific region. Australia is lucky enough to have three "mound builders"—the other two being the orange-footed scrubfowl and the mallee fowl.

Small children love the brush-turkey with its large size and unusual appearance. It is easily recognised by its deep black plumage, bare red head and neck and its broad, flat, fan-like tail. The bird's wattle (a fleshy lobe hanging down from the base of its neck) varies in colour with its age, gender and location.

Breeding occurs from August to December or January. The male brush-turkey builds a very large mound of decomposing vegetation, leaf litter and soil. This can be up to 4 to 6 m wide and 1 to 1.5 m high. The females are attracted by a well-maintained mound and one or more birds will then lay eggs inside the mound. The eggs are a bit larger than a chicken's egg and are laid in intervals of two to three days.

The decomposition of the vegetation in the mound produces heat. The male brush-turkey checks the temperature of the mound by digging holes and inserting his bill. He then removes or adds layers to the mound to ensure the optimum temperature is maintained being between 33° C and 35° C.

Mounds are re-used every year with the dominant male bird maintaining the best locality. Males defend their nest and the territory around it from other males. However, quite often the eggs that the male tends in his mound have been fertilised by another male.

Incubation and temperature regulation is the only assistance the parents provide to their offspring. After around 50 days, the young brush-turkeys hatch. They are fully feathered and able to run and even fly. However their first job is to dig their way through the layers of the mound, into the open air. This can take a few days. Newly hatched young resemble quail.

Eggs and chicks are vulnerable, and losses are high. Animals such as large goannas often raid the mounds, stealing the eggs and disrupting the incubation temperature. The chicks fall prey to goannas, snakes, birds of prey, foxes and domestic cats and dogs.



More information:

Learn to embrace brush-turkeys. Find out more.

- Wildlife Queensland
www.wildlifeqld.com.au
- Birds in backyards
www.birdsinbackyards.net
- Mound-Builders (2008) by Darryl Jones and Ann Goth. CSIRO Publishing



Brush-turkeys



in your garden

Produced by the Habitat Network
Connecting people and habitat

www.habitatnetwork.org
info@iewf.org

Love them or hate them, they are birds full of character ...

The habitat of choice for a brush-turkey may be a backyard.

Some residents feel they are being invaded—seeing them as large, boisterous birds, determined to destroy the garden by moving mulch all over the place and uprooting new plantings.

However, many people have come to admire and enjoy these birds, and there are ways to make life easier if one chooses your garden.



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