

Where is the clamour and clutter of introduced birds?

I write this editorial in the hope it will elicit some response from the conservation readership to produce papers on introduced birds. There is a dearth of research on introduced birds. Why? There is an obvious litany of reasons that spring to mind: 1) they are more drably coloured than native birds, but this is not to say they are ugly; 2) they occur too frequently in suburban habitats, which are less interesting as holiday destinations for field work; 3) they are perceived as less interesting biologically, which is an erroneous perception; 4) they are not endangered and not in need of urgent study; in short, they lack glamour and are uncharismatic—they are not cute and cuddly.

Having said that let me argue to the contrary. 1) They are more drably coloured than some natives, although they are on close inspection more colourful than you might think. Common Myna *Sturnus tristis*, a bird introduced to many countries around the world, have a black head, neck and upper breast above a chocolate body with a white underbelly that contrasts markedly with their tear-drop shaped bright yellow eye-patch and bright yellow beak, which are set off by a gemstone crystal-yellow eye. 2) I agree, I do not want to holiday in the city where I live. However, suburban habitats have the decided advantage of being close by and accessible, even by public transport, minimising logistical complications. When calculating how much food and water to carry into the desert an adjacent supermarket seems rather luxurious. 3) Uninteresting biologically! The Rock Doves (feral pigeons) *Columba livia* on Penguin Island (10 minutes from my house) cannot drink there, because there is no fresh water. They stop at a nearby freshwater lake to drink and bathe, and they avoid human contact on the island where they have reverted to a natural state breeding in the cliffs. They have the potential to spread disease to the many breeding birds on the island and the lake including Little Penguin *Eudyptula minor*. There is significant scope for more research on these introduced birds. I have little doubt research projects are easily found for introduced birds in cities, a little looking and reading will unearth these. 4) While, in themselves, they may not be endangered their presence may endanger other birds and other biota—as such I find them far from uninteresting. It is true though that Common Myna lacks glamour and charisma compared to yellow robins. However, anyone that has ever

had a Common Myna as a pet would know they make affectionate and intelligent companions. A familiar characteristic of introduced birds in suburbia is their high abundance, which is a quality making them rather glamorous to a student with limited time to complete a study.

Recently the Australian Broadcasting Corporation ran a small online competition to find a new national mascot, in Australia. Thus, with the ideas above in mind I submitted the following piece to challenge community perceptions about introduced birds. It won! I include it here (without alteration) to aid in the provocation of more research on introduced birds. This piece draws from an original poem *The Indian Myna* by C. J. Denis (Denis 1935).

National Mascot

What animal should stand (or perch) beside the kangaroo and Emu as the Australian National Mascot? Cane Toads and cockroaches immediately come to mind. The Kookaburra is far too clichéd. And in any case it just laughs at us. So why not put up an introduced species since not all the humans here are indigenous anyway. Most folks live in the city – so perhaps the cockroach could easily please. But, we can't seriously have a bug. It's just not done. C. J. Denis, an Australian literary icon, liked the Indian Myna:

“Gimmie the town an' its clamour an' clutter

For my cobbles are coves of the gardens and gutter-”

Well most city folk can at least conjure a picture of a Myna to their minds. What of an iconic native never found in the towns? Try the Platypus—the paradox pus! An egg-laying, venomous, duck-billed, beaver-tailed, otter-footed marsupial: easy to explain. Even its scientific name is confused *Ornithorhynchus anatinus* from the Latin *Ornitho-* meaning bird, the Greek *rhunkhos* meaning bill and the Latin *anatinus* meaning duck-like. But, let's not get too technical. Or we could choose the porcupine; damn what's its Australian name again? However, we must not forget the icon of icons – the animal that all the tourists want to see – like waltzing Matilda no Aussie tourist campaign could do without it! The Koala: It's cute. It's cuddly. It's iconic. It can sit quietly (asleep, still and lifeless) beside the Emu and jump-steak, I mean kangaroo. But let me get back to back to

C. J. Denis and the city and a few words from the Indian Myna.

"I ain't very fond of the bush;

[I prefer] A tough metropolitan push.

I ain't never too keen on the countrified life;

It's the hustle and bustle for me an' me wife."

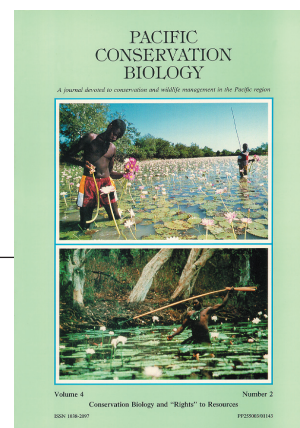
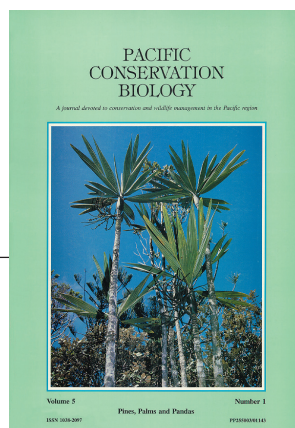
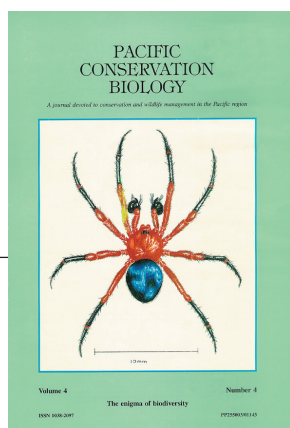
The Indian Myna: a new chum that we can relate to, a citified bird, without the posh, and no red neck, a multicultural marvel that now calls Australia home.

REFERENCE

Dennis, C. J., 1935. The singing garden. Angus and Robertson Limited, Sydney.

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