

NEWS FEATURE

Native bird threat a myna matter

by Amanda Perry

ITS chocolate-brown coat and startling yellow eye-patch is hard to ignore, but the Indian Myna is attracting attention in the Hawkesbury for another reason.

Labelled as one of the World's Worst 100 Invasive Species by the World Conservation Union, the Indian Myna is responsible for driving many of our native birds away, and even attacking marsupials such as Sugar gliders.

Hills-based myna trap builder Garry Cunich is on a mission to eradicate these pests, which he says are killing our native birds and marsupials.

"It's an incredible problem," Mr Cunich said. "They take over other birds' nests, they will go to hollows and throw out native birds' eggs and young."

"They take over the territory and then they will patrol it and chase others away."

Mr Cunich said he has received around 40 calls from Hawkesbury residents since December, and people are reporting that they are seeing fewer native birds on their properties.

He said he is currently working with a landowner in Ebenezer who estimates that there are around 1000 Indian Mynas on his property. Mr Cunich has now helped the landowner place traps around the Chain of Ponds Reserve.

While he's dedicated to eradicating mynas, Mr Cunich said he respects their intelligence.

"I don't hate them, I admire them, I just hate what they do," he said.

Myna birds quickly learn to evade any trap set for them and if caught they will warn their comrades to stay away with loud distress calls.

Mr Cunich's Myna X traps have been very successful, catching an estimated 300,000 birds so far through a program run in New South Wales, Queensland and Victoria.

"Every 3000 eradicated means 500,000 fewer in three year's time," Mr Cunich said. "Their only real predator is us."

The Indian Myna's only known contender in the bird world is the Australian Noisy Miner. People often confuse the two birds, but

Winged menace

- The myna bird has been declared the second greatest threat to native birds after land clearing;

- They were first introduced to Australia in Melbourne in 1862 to control pests in market gardens;

- In India, where the Common Indian Myna originated, it is called the 'Farmer's Friend' because it eats insects that destroy crop plants;

- The name myna comes from a Hindi word, 'maina' meaning a bird of the starling family, Sturnidae, to which mynas belong;

- Mynas in India are also regarded as symbols of undying love, because they often pair for life;

- The Indian Myna is now a pest bird in many regions such as Singapore, and has pushed native birds towards extinction in Polynesia, Hawaii, and Mauritius.

although they have similar facial markings they belong to different families – the Indian Myna is from the starling family, while the Australian miners are honeyeaters and grey in colour. In fact, Noisy Miners are known to aggressively attack larger birds such as hawks and kookaburras.

National Parks wildlife officer Vicki Lett said mynas are attracted to urbanised areas, as thick bushland does not have the food sources for them.

They flourish wherever humans live, their populations booming around garbage tips, factories, schools, railways and shopping centres.

Ms Lett said mynas can occupy just one hollow at a time, but keep four other hollows for themselves by shooing other birds away. They have even been known to fill other hollows with rubbish to make it unliveable for other birds.

In a documented case at Kurrajong, Indian Mynas took over a hollow where Eastern Rosellas were nesting. They built their own nest on top of the Eastern Rosellas', and placed a Magnum wrapper on top of the dead baby



Pests: Myna trap builder Garry Cunich is on a mission to eradicate the Indian Myna birds.

Rosellas as part of their new nest. Ms Lett has also heard of a case where sugar gliders were attacked.

"I know of an instance where an Indian Myna dragged a family of sugar gliders out of its nest at Londonderry, there were four babies which they threw onto the ground... local WIRES volunteers managed to save one of them," she said.

Until the documented case in Londonderry, Ms Lett said she didn't realise Indian Mynas could pose so much of a threat to sugar gliders.

"If we left things exactly as they are now and did not clear any more habitat then the population may remain balanced and they probably wouldn't spread," she said.

But if humans continue to clear land, Ms Lett said it's likely Indian Myna populations will increase. "We can never get rid of Indian Mynas but we can certainly minimise their

impacts." Attracting more native species to the area and driving Mynas away is something that everyone can do, and Ms Lett said people discourage them from their yards by planting native trees and not leaving their pet food bowls out, because Indian mynas love pet food.

National Parks and Wildlife Service Richmond has purchased Indian Myna traps that they are planning to trial.

Meanwhile, Mr Cunich said he is keen to spend more time in the Hawkesbury area working with local community groups, Landcare and residents over the coming months.

Given the bad wrap Indian Mynas have been getting, The Gazette asked Ms Lett if she thought the negative press was justified.

"I think so," she said. "I'm sure people would rather see Blue Wrens living in their gardens compared to Indian Mynas."