

Callum Brae Woodland

Photo by Jenny Bounds



Callum Brae woodland is part of a wider woodland complex in the Jerrabomberra Valley in central Canberra, which includes Red Hill and the Mt Mugga Mugga woodlands, Isaccs – O'Malley Ridge, and the Jerrabomberra Grasslands Reserve that includes a substantial patch of woodland. These woodland remnants are interspersed with cleared and partly cleared farming land grazed by sheep and cattle, which extends south to the Hume industrial area.

A former grazing leasehold, Callum Brae woodland became a nature reserve in 2004, and preserves a large patch of endangered Yellow Box (*Eucalyptus melliodora*) and Blakely's Red Gum (*E. blakelyi*) community. This woodland merges into natural temperate grassland on the valley floor to the east, and into dry eucalypt forest on hilltops.

The larger trees remaining on Callum Brae are chiefly Yellow Box, Blakely's Red Gum, Scribbly Gum (*E. rossi*) and Red Box (*E. polyanthemos*). There is an area of Broad-leaved Peppermint (*E. dives*) on the southern slopes. There is little native shrub under-storey, the main shrubby growth being introduced woody weeds, such as *Pyracantha*, African Boxthorn and Blackberry. These are being progressively cleared under the management regime for the park.

The lower, flatter areas of Callum Brae have a mixed ground layer, including native grasses, daisies, lilies, and forbs, which give a nice ground display in the spring. When under rural leasehold, some parts of Callum Brae were only moderately grazed, which allowed patches of eucalyptus saplings to spring up, mainly *E. blakelyi*. This patchiness of structure is important for birds, especially smaller bush birds.

Birds at Callum Brae

On Callum Brae, there are many large old trees, some with large hollows. This makes the area valuable for birds that need hollows for nesting, including Nankeen Kestrels, which regularly raise young in the area. Kestrels like 'spouts', which are hollow limbs, usually with a wide sloping entrance.

Little Corellas have used the area for roosting and nesting for several years. They tend to make daily commuting flights to feeding areas in the inner suburbs. One theory for the origin of these birds in the Canberra area is that they escaped from the (now closed) Mugga Lane Zoo. However, as large aggregations appear from time to time it is likely that they occasionally move into the Canberra area from elsewhere in their natural range.

Recently, the Little Corellas have been joined by at least two pairs of Long-billed Corellas that probably derive from caged birds. The Little Corellas and Long-billed Corellas associate with one another at nesting hollows. There is also a large roosting group of Sulphur-crested Cockatoos; they can be deafening on early morning bird surveys.

The woodland complex, although close to suburbs, has been used in recent years by several nesting raptors, including Wedge-tailed Eagle, Little Eagle, Brown Goshawk, Collared Sparrowhawk, Nankeen Kestrel, Brown Falcon and Australian Hobby.

Every few years, large numbers of White-browed and Masked Woodswallows visit Canberra. Callum Brae is then a good place to see these birds. Typically, a main group of a hundred or more will feed in the area over a few days before moving on. Usually, in such years, a few pairs of White-browed will stay to nest and raise young, before leaving before the end of summer.

Feature Birds

Diamond Firetail
Little Corella
Red-rumped Parrot
Eastern Rosella
Varied Sittella
Speckled Warbler
Double-barred Finch
Nankeen Kestrel
Little Eagle (recorded in the wider woodland complex)
White-winged Chough
Brown-headed Honeyeater
Noisy Friarbird (spring/summer)
Dusky Woodswallow (spring/summer)
White-browed & Masked Woodswallow (some years in spring/summer)

The Noisy Friarbird, a summer visitor, usually builds a number of nests in the woodlands. Nests are easily found as the birds draw attention to their activities with noisy calls, and the adults fly directly to the conspicuous, hanging nests. Friarbirds are very noisy when chasing predators, which they seem to do frequently.

One hundred and twenty-three species of birds have been recorded at Callum Brae woodland. Some kinds of birds can and do range widely over the woodland areas, while others tend to be confined to small pockets where the vegetation type and structure is most suitable for them.

Diamond Firetail



Both bird photos by Geoffrey Dabb

Diamond Firetails are often seen on Callum Brae. This boldly marked finch is one of the woodland birds on the declining lists in south-eastern Australia, although it has shown a resurgence in some burnt areas around Canberra post the January 2003 bushfires.

However, Diamond Firetails do not appear to remain in the woodland year-round, and their movements are something of a mystery. Sometimes they appear in summer, sometimes in winter. A good sighting was a pair with four immature birds in the 2005-06 spring/summer season.

The Diamond Firetail, when flushed from the ground, will fly up into a tree or shrub, displaying a brilliant red rump. They often call, a rising whistle, from a perch in a tree, such as a dead branch. They build a bulky, domed nest, sitting like balls, in a dense shrub or small tree, and occasionally they can be seen carrying long grass stalks to build their untidy nests.

Usually found in the more open woodland habitats with a grassy understorey, in pairs or small flocks, Diamond Firetails feed on the ground, taking mostly grass seeds, other plant matter and some insects. They need a range of native grasses providing seed across the year. Loss of key food plants due to clearing/grazing and invasion of exotic grasses is believed to be a factor in their general decline.

Conservation and Management Issues

Callum Brae and its surrounding woodlands and grasslands, need to be managed for good conservation outcomes. Woodlands and grasslands in good condition on surrounding leaseholds should have appropriate provisions in their lease agreements, which might include retaining large trees, and grazing for conservation outcomes.

Control of woody weeds, such as Boxthorn, *Pyracantha* and Blackberries is important. However, this should be managed to retain the vegetation structure for birds, by replacing woody weeds over time with suitable native shrubs, eg acacia, *bursaria* and heath species. Targeted replanting of some native shrubs in patches would improve the habitat for small birds like Speckled Warbler and Double-barred Finch.

Maintaining a north-south ecological connectivity of the woodland complex from Red Hill to Fadden and Waniassa Hills is important for the movement of birds and other fauna.

Canberra Ornithologists Group



Canberra Ornithologists Group (COG) is dedicated to the study and conservation of native birds and their habitats.

See the COG website for more information about COG and the COG Woodland Bird Project at: www.canberrabirds.org.au

About the COG Woodland Bird Project at Callum Brae

COG started systematic bird surveys in 1998 in selected woodland areas south of Hindmarsh Drive, within the broader woodland complex which includes Callum Brae, as part of an ongoing project to monitor birds in grassy woodlands around the ACT.

The present survey area, known as 'Symonston', takes in the woodland section of what is now Callum Brae Nature Park and a woodland area to the west of Mugga Lane used by a riding school.

This section of the site has more varied vegetation with several eucalypt species, a number of exotics, including Hawthorn, and some relatively dense *Bursaria spinosa*. Unlike most of Callum Brae, there is some mistletoe growth plus Drooping Casuarina (*Allocasuarina verticillata*) on upper slopes.

The survey area originally included the northern slopes of the O'Malley ridge, an area that was subsequently developed for housing.

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