

Canberra Indian Myna Action Group Inc

Patron: Dr Chris Tidemann

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Tackling the Indian Myna Problem

by Bill Handke, President of the Canberra Indian Myna Action Group Inc.

Australia is now under another serious environmental threat. It is from the Indian Myna (or Common Myna) — *Acridotheres tristis* — which has built up in such numbers along the east coast and inland to become a major threat to Australia's wildlife. Hollow-nesting birds, such as our parrots, and small arboreal mammals, such as sugar gliders, are particularly at risk.

Indian Mynas were introduced into Melbourne's market gardens in the 1860s in an effort to keep down insects. They were then taken to Cairns and other places in far north Queensland to control insects in cane fields. Whether they were successful in doing this we don't know, but we do know they were highly successful invaders. The Australian urban environment and urban fringe is well suited to Indian Mynas — large gum trees provide plenty of nesting hollows and urban areas provide an abundant food source. With their aggressive nature they have taken over nesting hollows from native birds and mammals and are now often the predominant bird in urban areas all along the east coast. In Cairns in far north Australia, the population density is estimated at between 750 per sq km - 1200 per sq km. Not much other small bird life there now.

The arrival of the Indian Myna in Canberra, the nation's inland capital of 300 000 people, was a hundred years later in the 1960s when a profoundly misguided newcomer from Sydney brought and released a dozen birds into the Canberra environs because he missed hearing their call. From such small beginnings we have the problem before us: it is now estimated that there are some 250 Indian Mynas per sq km in the urban area of Canberra. This then is a 150 000 feral population out-competing our native birds and arboreal mammals for nesting sites, preying on eggs, chicks and mammal young. Their habit of blocking the entrances to other nesting hollows in order to deny them to native birds mean that the already limited number of tree hollows for native birds — the legacy of urbanization and agricultural land clearing — is exacerbated. Their flocking and mobbing behaviour drive native birds, gliders and even large possums from gardens and nature reserves.

Canberra birding records indicate that the number of native bird species and the number of native birds coming into Canberra gardens is now much less than a decade ago. This, we assume, is the result of the parallel rapid increase in Indian Myna numbers.

In addition to the threat they pose to our wildlife, mynas — being bold and assertive — forage around shopping centres and on tables at outdoor cafes and build messy nests in roof cavities. This also poses a human health and a property fire risk.

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In an effort to tackle this serious threat, a non-profit community action group — the Canberra Indian Myna Action Group Inc. (CIMAG) — was formed mid-April last year. The Group now has around 340 people as members, with membership rapidly growing.

We see the choice as quite stark.



We can have this:



or we can have this:



and this:



but we can't have both mynas and native wildlife.

CIMAG has developed a broad ranging strategy that includes 3 core elements:

- raising public awareness that this bird is a serious environmental threat, not just a nuisance in our backyards and shopping centres;
- reducing the spread of the bird by restricting its feeding, roosting and nesting opportunities through an information program to businesses and households about better waste and pet food management, closure of any roof cavities and preferred backyard plantings; and
- reducing the population through a humane trapping program.

While all three elements need to be given equal weight, the initial primary focus has been on a trapping program while we develop information packages and public education material.

Other aspects of the CIMAG Strategy include monitoring the results of our activities (particularly any positive impacts on native birds); building alliances with like-minded groups and working with stakeholders; being involved in research activities; and supporting the establishment of similar community-action groups elsewhere in Australia.

The backyard trapping program has proven a great success. Using a simple, compact, easy-to-use but highly effective two-chamber trap, members of the Group have now removed 12,400 Indian Mynas (and some 1,400 Starlings) from the Canberra environment. Currently there are 320 members with traps, although not all operate them all the time. The traps, made from cage mesh to our own design, are relatively easy to make. Workshops are held periodically for people to build their own, or traps are

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supplied to members for the cost of materials, and the blueprints are provided to those interested.

Trappers are responsible for the management of their traps and for the disposal of trapped birds. Animal welfare concerns are covered through a Protocol on Animal Welfare that each trapper must sign: the protocol has been cleared by the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) and covers matters such as the treatment of trapped birds, the feeding regime to avoid luring native birds into the trap, the release of any trapped non-targeted birds, and the requirements for disposing of trapped mynas and starlings.

The local RSPCA Centre has entered into a collaborative arrangement with the Group: they now euthanize and dispose of trapped birds free to our members.

Heavy trapping in areas has resulted in a massive drop in myna numbers in the immediate area and the return of more native birds — especially small and mid-sized birds — to gardens.

We will probably never get rid of Indian Mynas from the Australian landscape: but unless we start to reduce and control their numbers we risk losing many of our native birds — particularly parrots — and small mammals. Community action can play a real part in reducing Indian Myna numbers through backyard trapping, but the effort to tackle the myna problem will need to be concerted, coordinated, and sustained at a landscape scale.

Life in the Canberra — the Bush Capital — would not have the same appeal if we lost this fight.



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