



Endemic Birds of Tasmania

Birds are among the most conspicuous group of animals to be seen in Tasmania. Of the 325 species recorded in the State, roughly 200 can be considered to be regular inhabitants. Many other species are migratory and can only be seen during the summer months. These include the short-tailed shearwater and the swift parrot. Twelve species of bird are endemic to the State.

What is endemic?

Endemic birds are those found only in Tasmania. No birds that are now endemic to Tasmania have ever been recorded on the mainland. The table below lists those birds that are endemic to this island State.

Endemic subspecies

Tasmania has some endemic sub-species. Sub-species have diverged from their mainland counterpart after time in isolation and now differ in certain physical features. Such sub-species include:

- wedge-tailed eagle
- clinking currawong
- Tasmanian masked owl
- azure kingfisher

These subspecies have only slight physical differences from their mainland relatives, so they still appear very similar.

Feathers for flight?

Many of the characteristics which we associate with birds are intimately linked with their capacity for flight. Feathers are perhaps the most obvious of these, yet there is debate as to whether these evolved for the purpose of flight or to act as insulation—which allowed the development of warm bloodedness. Feathers are composed of non-living keratin, a material similar to that of reptilian scales and our own fingernails.

The wing acts both as an efficient aerofoil and as a means of propulsion through the air. The large pectoral muscles that power the wings can make up more than 30% of the body weight of strong flying birds such as pigeons and falcons.



Forty-spotted pardalote

Physical adaptations

Many of the physical adaptations of birds have arisen to reduce their weight. Modern birds lack teeth — the heaviest part of the vertebrate body. Instead, birds break up their food in the crop — a muscular, grinding machine that is more suitably located close to their centre of gravity.

The skeleton is composed of hollow bones that are strengthened structurally by an internal framework of struts and supports, somewhat similar to scaffolding that builders use!

The high body temperature, fast metabolism and the consistent foraging method of seeking out high energy foods — such as seeds or nectar — provide birds with the energy needed to power their flight muscles.

Other species, such as the marine albatrosses and shearwaters, are beautifully adapted to gliding. Such species are remarkably attuned to the variations in wind velocity above the surface of the oceans. The rising air produced by waves provides a way to gain height, and the birds glide downward, repeating the process.



Green rosella

Tasmania's endemic birds

Green rosella

- colourful rosella feed on the ground
- nesting on decayed wood debris, in hollow trunk or branches.
- widespread statewide particularly in dry sclerophyll forest. Found in variety of habitats from dense mountain forests to lightly timbered farming country.

Tasmanian thornbill

- found in wet forest
- sometimes covers nest with moss
- small birds about 100mm
- grey breast, white underparts

Scrubtit

- shy birds
- often found in dense wet sclerophyll and rainforest
- small birds about 115mm
- white throat and upper breast; flanks chestnut-olive

Tasmanian scrubwren

- also known as the brown scrubwren
- small (to 130mm), dark olive-brown bird with grey-white streaked throat and pale yellow eyes
- prefers dense vegetation such as wet forests, and is usually seen on or close to the ground
- eats insects and sometimes seeds. Often forage in pairs.

Dusky robin

- build cup-shaped nests in trees
- common in woodland and scrub
- small birds, about 165mm
- uniform olive-brown with whitish streak in wings

Yellow wattlebird

- the world's largest honeyeater; about 400 mm
- common in dry forest, also found in wet forest
- build large, open saucer nests of twigs and strips of bark, bound with wool and lined with grass and wool.

Yellow-throated honeyeater

- widespread throughout Tasmania and Bass Strait Islands
- blackish face and upperbreast offset by bright yellow throat.

Strong-billed honeyeater

- seen picking over trees, probing with robust bill for insects
- common in wet forest and dry forests
- grow to about 150-170mm.

Black-headed honeyeater

- 125-140mm, black head and throat with small, whitish eye crescent
- found in forests, coastal heaths and gardens
- nests are made of grass, hair and fur and bound with spiders' web.

Forty-spotted pardalote

- one of the smallest and rarest birds in Australia, classified 'endangered'. About 90-100mm long
- body is light olive green with pale yellow around the eye and on the rump and their wings are black with distinctive white spots
- only found in eastern coastal areas
- depend upon white gum eucalypts (*Eucalyptus viminalis*) where they live and feed.
Refer to the Forty-spotted pardalote Notehseet.

Black currawong

- robust black bird with a hint of white on flight feathers and tips of tail
- regurgitated seeds of the 'pink mountain berry', eaten by the currawongs, often seen on tracks (regurgitation aids seed dispersal for the plant)
- nests are large and deep, comprising sticks and twigs and lined with grass, in upright forks
- common throughout the state and the islands in Bass Strait.

Tasmanian native hen

- large flightless water hen; 440-470mm
- olive-brown and grey upper parts darkening along the underbelly
- range alone or in small family groups, and when disturbed tend to run quickly sometimes balancing with short stumpy wings
- nests are a simple dished platform of trampled grasses, rushes or other thick vegetation close to water.

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