

Merri Creek Nest Box Pilot Project

Year 1 Summary



Introduction



In 2019-20 community donations to the Merri Creek Environment Fund (MCEF)¹ helped to install and monitor artificial hollows for small birds and micro bats in a pilot project at Merri Park in Northcote. Over the last four decades the lower Merri Creek has been revitalised by the work of volunteers revegetating open space and improving biodiversity. This revegetation has seen a dramatic increase in the number of bird species observed using the creek corridor and associated parklands. However, many bird and micro bat species require tree hollows to nest in and breed. It can take up to 70 years for small hollows to form in trees and 100 years for large hollows, meaning some species are absent or need to leave the Merri to breed.

Artificial hollows have been used successfully elsewhere in Melbourne to provide habitat for hollow-dependent wildlife in the absence of natural tree hollows. Background research and a [feasibility study](#) in 2018 identified Merri Park as an ideal site for a pilot project to install artificial hollows for microbats and small birds such as Pardalotes. Moderate-sized hollows can be quickly occupied by the invasive Common Mynah, so choosing small hollows makes this occupation less likely.



Installation of nest boxes

Generous donations to the MCEF and a grant from the Hazel and Arthur Bruce Bequest funded the installation of 12 natural log hollows and 20 constructed nest boxes for microbats and pardalotes by professional arborists in Merri Park in Spring 2019.

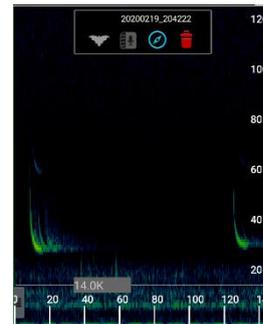
Community monitoring of nest boxes

After an introductory project information session, the artificial hollows were monitored by volunteers over Spring and Summer 2019-20. Inspection cameras were used at a series of day-time events and animal activity around the hollows was also monitored by community members at several twilight 'Sunset Watch' events throughout the summer. All up, seven monitoring events were held attended by a total of 87 people. In addition to general community members, Conservation & Land Management students from Melbourne Polytechnic and staff from the Intrepid Group contributed to the monitoring.

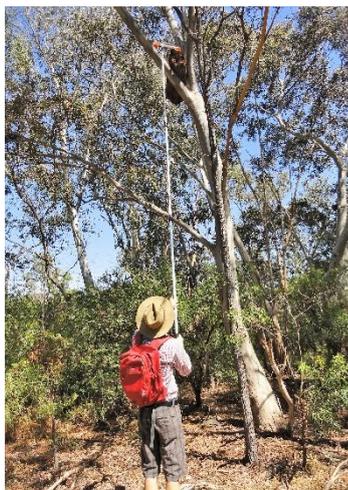


¹ The Merri Creek Environment Fund is a registered fund set up by Merri Creek Management Committee to accept tax deductible donations from the general community.

Watching nest boxes and hollows around sunset – when birds are settling in for the evening and microbats leave for a night of foraging – is a non-invasive way to monitor nest box and log hollow use. These events are a good way to monitor boxes and logs that were installed high in the canopy, where fauna are far enough away to feel safe from predators but too high to be monitored by an inspection camera. During the December event, two volunteers were able to watch a lorikeet pair enter a log hollow where a nest had been seen in previous monitoring events. In April 2020, a possum (likely a ringtail) was observed in this same log hollow.



This was the only native activity observed from nest boxes and hollows, but there were many bird species observed in the area during the December event, and a nearby Gould’s Wattled Bat was recorded by an [MCEF-funded Echometer](#) at the February event.



Low occupation of nest box and hollows is to be expected in the first few years of installation as many small birds and microbats need time to discover new roost and nesting sites. However, it is possible some nest box activity went undetected due to monitoring challenges with this project.

Lessons Learnt

Some of the nest boxes were inadvertently installed too high to be safely monitored with inspection cameras. Warping of some nest boxes meant inspection cameras could not fit through inspection holes. We’ll be doing some rectification work in the coming months. Happily, Common Mynah activity was not detected in any of the artificial hollows, but ants were quick to occupy some of the Pardalote boxes. Fortunately, the ants don’t seem to have persisted but it’s one reason to keep up the monitoring.

Next Steps

Valuable lessons have been learnt in the nest box pilot program. These will enable us to continue more effectively with the project. In June this year, a further 30 log hollows and cavity creations will be installed, with log hollows at a monitorable height. Larger species such as Powerful Owls will be targeted, accompanied by larger Possum log hollows installed nearby to provide owls with a source of food. Powerful Owls have been seen in the general vicinity of Merri Park, as close by as Merri Creek Primary School only 0.5km away, and also slightly further afield in Fairfield Park.

A small number of chainsaw hollows aimed at Sugar Gliders will be cut into suitable trees. Sugar Gliders have recently moved in to nearby Darebin Parklands. We hope these monitorable hollows will be useful in aiding the detection of potential movement of Sugar Gliders into the Merri Park area.



Microbats and Pardalotes will continue to be targeted through hollow creation in maturing trees and stags and we plan to recommence community monitoring of hollows in spring, as Covid-19 restrictions are lifted and in time for Spring nesting by birds.

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Acknowledgments

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- The Arthur and Hazel Bruce Bequest for their grant towards the nest box project
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- The 24 people who attended the information session and the 84 who assisted with nest box monitoring
- Peter Wiltshire from the Darebin Creek Management Committee for generously sharing his experience of the nest box program in Darebin Parklands
- Ann McGregor, Coordinator of the Friends of Merri Creek quarterly bird surveys, for sharing her knowledge at the information session
- Photographers: Peter Mollison - Spotted Pardalote, Bill Jackson - White-striped free-tailed bat.



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