



Swift Parrot

Lathamus discolor

The swift parrot is a nectar feeding parrot which occurs in southeastern Australia. It is a migratory bird which breeds in Tasmania and spends the winter on mainland Australia.

Why is it threatened?

The swift parrot is classified as vulnerable because of its small population size, less than 1,000 pairs! Latest counts indicate that swift parrot numbers are still declining. This decline is thought to be caused by loss of habitat, in particular loss of bluegums on which they rely.

The swift parrot is a Tasmanian breeding endemic. This means it only breeds in Tasmania. The breeding range is largely restricted to the east of Tasmania within the range of the blue gum *Eucalyptus globulus*. There is a small breeding population in the north of the state between Launceston and Smithton. Swift parrots are commonly observed in the Hobart area feeding on flowers of introduced eucalypts, particularly pink flowering gum.

Why are blue gums important?

The nectar from the flowers of the blue gum is the main source of food for these parrots during the breeding season. The breeding season coincides with the flowering of this eucalypt. Their preferred habitat is grassy blue gum forests. The other significant food source during this time is nectar from the flowers of the black (or swamp) gum *Eucalyptus ovata*.

Nectar is a sugary water produced by flowers. In the bush, nectar is produced in the flowers of many types of plants, particularly eucalyptus trees, banksia bushes and bottle brushes.

The blue gum flower is white and develops inside a thick, ribbed, woody capsule called a gumnut. The nectar is made inside hundreds of special sacs (called nectaries) which are inside the gumnut. Each day the nectaries fill up, spilling the nectar into the gumnut ready for the birds and other animals to feed upon.

Swift parrots also feed on insects found on eucalypt leaves, especially lerps (a protective coating secreted by some insects) and manna, a sugary secretion produced in response to insect attack.

Swift parrots may be seen hanging upside down in the foliage of trees, drinking nectar from the flowers.

When they are feeding in small groups on flowers, they chatter quietly to themselves. Large feeding flocks also occur. These are noisy affairs with birds squabbling and chasing each other in and out of the trees. When the blue gums are flowering, look carefully and you may be lucky enough to see a swift parrot.

A special tool

How do swift parrots drink nectar with a beak? They have a special tongue which has little nodules on the upper surface which help hold the nectar. Swift parrots bury their beaks into the flowers, and scoop up the nectar with their tongues which can be worked into the shape of a cup. Much like when you cup your hand and fill it up with water.

What do they look like?

The swift parrot is 23-25 cm long, bigger than a budgie but smaller than a rosella. Streamlined for rapid flight, it is green with red on the throat, chin and forehead.

It also has red patches on its shoulders and under the wings. It has a blue crown and cheeks, blue on its wings and a long pointed tail.

It can be readily identified in flight by its bright red underwing patches and its 'kik-kik-kik' call. They weave through forests at great speed and can suddenly change their direction of flight.



Swift parrots can be confused with musk lorikeets which they resemble in form and habit. The musk lorikeet is also a nectar feeder and is green with a red band on the forehead running through the eye onto the cheek. However, it has a shorter tail, no red on the throat or under the wing.

The voice of the musk lorikeet sounds like a rolling screech unlike the high pitched tinkling chattering; and the piping 'pee-pit pee-pit pee-pit' calls of the swift parrot.

Breeding

The swift parrot usually arrives in Tasmania in August to nest in hollows in old trees of a range of eucalypt species. Nest sites in eastern Tasmania are usually located near the coast in dry forests on upper slopes and ridge tops.

Swift parrots lay 4-5 white eggs which take about 20-25 days to hatch. They make their nests inside hollow tree branches or trunks. Nest sites are found in very old or dead trees, and can take hundreds of years to form. They are very important homes for many birds, and animals like possums and bats.

In the breeding season, males and females form pairs. It is not unusual to find more than one pair nesting close to each other. Nest sites may be re-used but not necessarily in successive years. The use of a particular nest site depends on the availability of food in that area.

Movements

After the breeding season, in February and March, the entire population flies north. They disperse throughout Victoria and NSW where they are semi nomadic, foraging on flowering eucalypts and lerps.

Like other migratory species, swift parrots form flocks prior to migrating. Some of these can be quite large consisting of up to 500 birds. It appears they break up into small flocks of 10-20 birds to cross Bass Strait during the day.

Threats and actions

The swift parrot is a nationally threatened species. It's listed as vulnerable under both the State and Federal Acts. This means they are likely to become endangered if the factors causing them to become vulnerable continue operating. Species listed as endangered are likely to become extinct unless action is taken immediately. To prevent this from happening, it is important that we take action now to reduce the threats to this species.

A national swift parrot recovery team, involving NSW, Victorian, Tasmanian and Commonwealth conservation agencies, as well as bird conservation groups, has been formed to guide recovery actions against the identified threats.

Loss of blue gums

Blue gums are important to parrots because they flower in spring and early summer, from September to December. This is when the swift parrots lay their eggs and hatch their young. This timing means that there will be plenty of nectar for the parrots and fledglings to feed on. The blue gum also produces one of the **largest** flowers of all the eucalypts in Australia (it is up to 3 cm across). Because it is so big, a blue gum flower can make lots of nectar.

Blue gums continue to be cut down, so there is less and less food for the parrots to eat at breeding time. It is important that we retain and look after remaining blue gum forests. We also need to plant more blue gums and black gums within the breeding range of the swift parrot.

Collisions

There is a high mortality of birds due to collision with man-made objects such as windows, chain mesh fences, and vehicles in areas where they are foraging.

Hanging baskets or pots in front of windows may be effective in preventing collisions. Apply transfers or stencils to glass windows. Avoid having sight lines through houses. Put shade cloth on chain mesh fences in areas where swift parrots feed.

Loss of trees with hollows

Many old trees are being cut down for firewood or land clearing. These are crucial in providing nest sites for our native species. We need to retain old and dead trees in swift parrot breeding areas.

Contact

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