

True Spring arrives in the Wildlife Garden

A wildlife garden puts us in touch with the natural seasons of our land.

But what seasons should we observe? The dominant four-season model originating in northern Europe can be a straitjacket on our perceptions. For instance, in local bushland, the last several weeks of ‘winter’ are marked by the opening of many kinds of wildflowers and arrivals of migratory birds, forming an extended spring-like season that precedes a burst of flowering, insect activity and birdsong in September and October.

Several attempts have been made to better reflect the divisions of the local year, including ones conjecturing which seasonal events may have been significant to local Aboriginal people. In one of these, Dr Beth Gott used a system of six seasons, where we have just finished Early Spring (approximately mid July to August) and have entered True Spring (September and October).

What wildlife events mark True Spring in the wildlife garden? September is a good month for observing caterpillars – making the most of the lush green growth and humid conditions. The caterpillars of Grass Anthelid moths, often called ‘Woolly Bears’, are munching tough Spear-grasses in the depot garden. The adult moths can be seen coming to window panes around March when you might admire the extravagant plume-like antennae of the male moth.

Woolly Bear caterpillars are covered in stinging hairs, making them unappetising to most birds; however, cuckoos have learnt to eat them. The Merri is the summer home to several native migratory cuckoos; True Spring on the Merri grasslands and woodlands is heralded by the repetitive calls of Pallid Cuckoos, Horsfield’s Bronze-Cuckoo and Fan-tailed Cuckoos. Between eating Woolly Bears, cuckoos are engaged in a scam to lay eggs in the nests of songbirds, co-opting their labour to raise baby cuckoos instead of their own young.

The glimpse of a Woolly bear on the way to the front gate reminds us that this is the time of nesting songbirds and the fraudster cuckoos on the Merri. In a wildlife garden, there are so many more markers of the seasons than we might have learnt at school, and more seasons too!

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Small-leaved Clematis – one of the many wildflowers of Early Spring



Woolly Bear Caterpillar in MCMC depot garden



In late summer, the adult of the Woolly bear, a Grass Anthelid moth.



A Horsfield's Bronze-Cuckoo