

On the prowl for the Powerful Owl

Title

BirdLife Australia (BirdLife Partner) and its Birds in Backyards program are expanding their Powerful Owl Project based on a successful pilot program. Concentrating on owls inhabiting the urban landscape of Australia's largest city, the project will monitor their breeding success and investigate other aspects of the population dynamics of this threatened species. With a wingspan of 1.4 metres, large yellow feet and talons, and a diet of possums, gliders, fruit-bats and birds, the Powerful Owl — Australasia's largest nocturnal bird — is aptly named.

They occur in eastern and south-eastern Australia and are threatened throughout their range. While they mostly occur in forests and woodlands, they are becoming increasingly visible in urban parks and gardens. Having such a large, threatened species in the urban landscape presents a unique opportunity to not only research the species but to engage with the public and actively involve them in research and conservation.

The Powerful Owl Project is monitoring breeding pairs of Powerful Owls in the urban landscape of the Greater Sydney region. A pilot program was conducted last year, with over 50 volunteer Owl Observers searching for Powerful Owl breeding territories. In addition, over 250 sightings were received from the general public. They found 15 territories where owls fledged at least one young, and a further thirteen territories were recorded, but breeding outcomes were unknown. The Powerful Owl Project has now expanded after funding was secured from the NSW State Government and BirdLife Australia fundraising events, and it will run for the next 2 years.

The project will expand its horizons to include other urban areas around Sydney and broaden its scope of investigation to monitor their breeding success, site fidelity, susceptibility to disturbance, threats and habitat requirements of the urban-adapted population. We will also focus on the development of education materials for schools and local communities, and engage land managers to formulate management initiatives. "The project will provide valuable information necessary to assess whether the Powerful Owl can coexist with people, particularly in urban environments," said David Bain, Powerful Owl Project Manager.

"Importantly it will also show the value of the general public as citizen scientists, playing an integral role in the conservation of a threatened species." Already more than 65 volunteers have signed on as Owl Observers for this season, and over 140 sightings of Powerful Owls have been reported since March. A number of pairs have already been observed mating and others choosing nesting hollows. To assist this, an online facility has been launched on the Birds in Backyards website to assist us with receiving sightings from the public throughout the

Powerful Owl's distribution. There is much to learn about the urban populations of Powerful Owls, and we are looking forward to gaining an insight into the life of this iconic threatened species living in our midst.

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