

The History & Impact of Common Mynas in the Cairns Area

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Common Mynas are native to the Indian subcontinent and south-east Asia. However, humans have introduced them to many other regions of the world either deliberately or by the escape of caged birds. As a result, Common Mynas are now well established in Africa, Madagascar, Australia, New Zealand, the Arabian Peninsula and throughout the islands of the Indian and Pacific Ocean. Populations are now also found in parts of Europe, China, Japan, the United States of America and even Russia.

Their initial introduction to Australia was by deliberate release in Victoria in the 1860s and 70s, with releases in NSW also around this time. Birds from Melbourne were bought to North Queensland in 1883 and released at Townsville, Ingham and Innisfail to control locusts and cane beetles. They spread to Cairns, and by 1918 mynas taken from Cairns were used to start populations in Toowoomba. By 1931 Common Mynas had established in Atherton.



Common Mynas are extremely invasive birds that quickly dominate an area. The International Union for the Conservation of Nature lists the Common Myna as one of only three birds in its 100 most invasive species worldwide. They are extremely territorial and aggressive, and will often attack other species or their nests, even without an apparent motive. In time they become the most abundant bird in the area, further increasing their ability to exclude other species through mobbing.

Common Mynas often nest and roost around buildings, where they cause a nuisance with loud garrulous calling at communal night roosts, the fouling of areas with excrement or nesting material blocking downpipes or creating fire hazards. However, they are a hollow-nesting species, and it is through their competition for natural nesting hollows that they have one of their largest effects on native species. Many of our native parrots, such as the Eastern and Crimson Rosella, Galahs and lorikeets are those losing vital nesting sites to the aggressive myna. Even mammals using tree hollows, such as the sugar glider, are vulnerable.

Once a native bird has established its nest, it is still not safe from attack. Common Mynas usurp or destroy active nests of other species, destroying their eggs and killing their chicks, or sometimes building their nest directly over the eggs or chicks of the original species. Active nests of parrots can be lost in this way, as can the nests of kingfishers, which utilise hollows that they excavate into termite nests. Even Australia's largest kingfisher, the Laughing Kookaburra, can have its young killed and nest taken by Common Mynas.

Often, after removing the chicks from a nesting hollow, the mynas will not even use the hollow themselves. The interference in the breeding of native birds seems to be an intentional strategy to reduce competition from other species and allow complete monopolisation of the area. The harassment of adult native birds such that they are unable to feed their chicks can similarly cause their breeding to fail and allow the Common Myna to prevail.

But the affect on the breeding success of native species goes beyond competition for nesting hollows, for Common Mynas are also known to be nest predators, feeding on the eggs or chicks of native species. This has been well documented in overseas studies. For example, Common Mynas were found to be the main predator of Sooty Tern nests on Ascension Island (accounting for 25% of failed clutches), are the major egg predators of Wedge-tailed Shearwaters in Hawaii and were found to be undermining the recovery efforts for the endangered Tahitian Flycatcher by preying on their nests. There is anecdotal evidence of mynas attacking the nests of native doves, sunbirds and other species around Cairns.

Common Mynas are a bird that lives commensurably with humans, and as such is concentrated in urban or rural habitats. For most of us, this is also the area where we have our most intimate interactions with native birds and wildlife. It is the place where we wonder at the sunbird building its intricate nest on the porch, enjoy the Willie Wagtail fussing around the back lawn or the parrots performing acrobatics in the trees at the park. As the Common Myna increases in number and extends its range, we will see less of our much loved native birds. We will never exterminate Common Mynas, but if we can reduce their numbers by trapping, it will at least give our native birds a chance to persist in our human environments and continue to enrich our daily lives.