

If Cane Toads could fly: THE myna PROBLEM

A member of the starling family, the Common Myna (*Acridotheres tristis*) is a medium-small bird with a cocoa-brown body, black head, white belly and white wing patches. Its bright yellow eyepatches match its beak, legs and feet. In India, its country of origin, *Maina* is a Hindi term of endearment meaning 'darling'. The bird is called 'Farmer's Friend' and welcome there because it acts as a natural pesticide, ridding crop plants of detrimental insects. Intelligent, adaptable, a talented mimic capable of copying human speech, it could be the sort of bird you would call 'clever', 'charming' or 'cheeky'.

Instead, in Australia, some of its more common printable descriptors are 'aggressive' and 'pest'. Simpson & Day's field guide to Australian birds even refers to its walk as 'arrogant'.

People have introduced the myna to locations all over the world, mistakenly thinking it would be as effective

Is the myna a major pest, or does it have any redeeming features? The Australian public is not charmed and is clamouring for authorities to get rid of it.

BY LEE K. CURTIS

elsewhere as it is in India. According to an IUCN report published in 2000, it is now one of World's 100 Worst Invasives.

Gobble, grab and bully

The myna is by no means a gourmet — a glutton is more like it — nor does it care if the fare belongs to someone else. Mynas are often observed bullying other birds away from a tasty treat. They will devour insects, baby birds, fruits, veggies, pet food and are

rather fond of fast food left-overs. Australian farmers deeply resent the myna's penchant for fruit and grain.

Because these birds mate for life, they are a symbol of everlasting love in India — similar to the Peace Dove in Europe. This touching loyalty does not



'So I swagger an' strut an' I cuss an' I swagger; I'm wise to the city's hard way. A bit of a bloke an' a bit of a bragger; I've always got plenty to say.' C.J. Dennis's 1933 poem 'The Indian Myna' is an apt description of a bird which, after repeated introductions to numerous locations in Australia, is now a nuisance in cities and suburbs, whether as street gangs (left), individuals (centre) or in roosts on any available structures (right), and a threat to native wildlife.



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extend to the greater myna community, however. Breeding season is fraught with violence as pairs fight aggressively over nesting sites. Their brawls are free-for-all avian cat fights replete with clawing, pecking and feather plucking. The defeated pair hobbles off to build or find another nest. Mynas lay two to six eggs up to three times a year... Scary.

Mynas are as indiscriminate in their building materials as they are in their food choices. They construct messy cup nests out of miscellaneous bits and pieces — anything from dry grass, sticks and leaves to bits of plastic, string and crumpled paper. These scrappy structures are often built in garages, building eaves or nesting boxes meant for other species. Perhaps worst of all, mynas will unceremoniously evict native birds or gliders from tree hollows. These essential home sites are already in seriously short supply due to the clearing of bushland containing older, hollow-forming trees.

Individual or gang scavengers during the day, mynas gather in large colonies at night. The cacophony of a thousand mynas roosting under city bridges, park trees or in roof voids in the evenings is deafening. Perhaps they are comparing notes and bragging about what animals they've evicted or whose young they've eaten. Sugar Gliders, rosellas, curlews. Nothing is sacred. It's no wonder this opportunistic avian has been nicknamed Flying Cane Toad, Garbage Bird and Flying Rat.

How did it get here?

In 1862, the mynas were introduced in Melbourne to control insects in market gardens. In 1883 they were exported to north Queensland to help control insects — locusts and cane beetles — in cane fields. Preferring open grasslands, these birds were only effective beetle eaters while the sugar cane was sprouting. Hence the subsequent introduction of the Cane Toad in Gordonvale, yet another

human vs nature folly. It didn't take the mynas long to move from the fields to lowland urban areas and up to the wide open spaces of the Atherton Tablelands.

Later myna releases took place in Sydney, Toowoomba and Brisbane (1940-1950s). Two releases in Tasmania and Adelaide failed. The myna established very well in Canberra in the late 1960s when, as the story goes, a dying man who had developed a fondness for the bird while in India, had some brought in and released to keep him company during his last days. Canberra myna numbers are now considered to be in plague proportions.

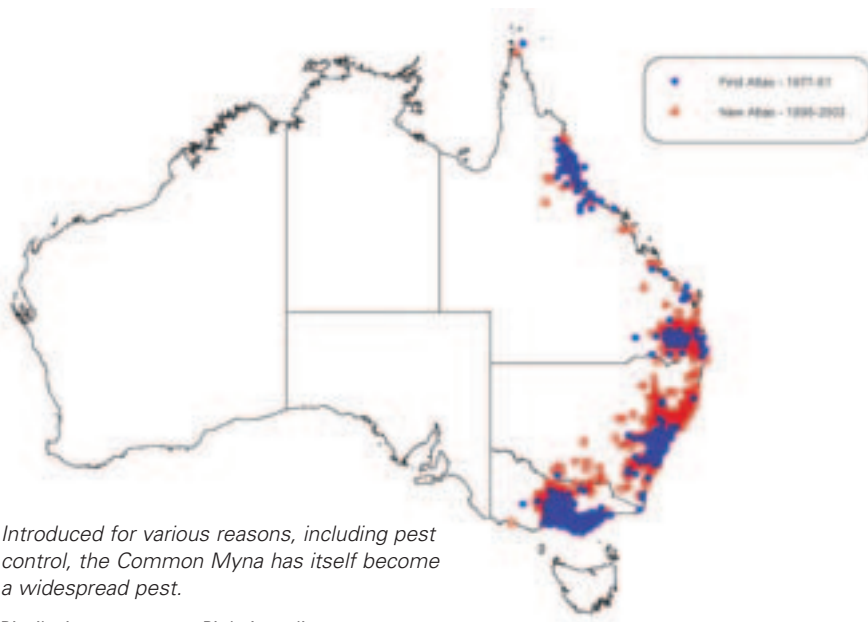
Minimising mynas

'Mynas are a big problem', says Chris Tzaros from Birds Australia. 'Their spread is wreaking havoc among the native fauna. They carry mites and pest diseases and are of no value whatsoever. They have recently become a big issue. Ever since the (July 2003) '7.30 Report' about mynas, we have received a lot of calls from members of the public reporting sightings or asking how to get rid of the pair in their back yard.'

'The myna is no friend to native flora either,' says Eva Twarkowski, Pittwater Council's Natural Resources Officer. 'The myna has an affinity for Bitou Bush, a highly noxious weed spreading dangerously along the NSW coast.' The birds feed on it then disperse the seeds.

Dr Chris Tidemann, a senior lecturer in wildlife management, conservation and monitoring at Australia National University teaches graduate courses in wildlife management, conservation and monitoring and devotes much of his time aiding communities with wildlife management issues. Tidemann has orchestrated, participated in, compiled and overseen thousands of myna surveys during the last few years. Students, volunteers, community groups and councils up and down the East Coast and in ACT continue to confirm the fact that mynas have serious detrimental effects on native fauna. His research project, Minimising Mynas, has millions of people waiting with dreams of baited traps.

Tidemann has designed a trap to deal with the urgency of this situation. This



Introduced for various reasons, including pest control, the Common Myna has itself become a widespread pest.

Distribution map courtesy Birds Australia

trap does not subject the bird to anything horrible,' he says. 'That's the way I wanted it. It is a humane trap and that is why it works. Otherwise, mynas wouldn't go near it. Once the trap is full, the birds are removed and humanely destroyed using carbon dioxide gas.'

Trapping trials in Canberra

With practical support from Environment ACT, Canberra Ornithological Group and others, as well as animal research ethical approval from the ANU and the cautious support of the RSPCA for his method of euthanasia, Tidemann is trapping at selected sites for two months with a repeat in six months. The pressing questions are:

- Can myna populations be reduced significantly by trapping?
- In what sort of areas are the traps most efficient?
- What impact does myna removal have on other bird populations?
- What does it cost to minimise mynas by trapping them?

Tidemann uses the term 'minimisation' as opposed to 'eradication.' 'Eradication is not an option here,' he asserts. 'We will never eradicate the myna population but hopefully we can control it, like we control weeds. At least we can bring it down a peg or two.'

Coffs Harbour program

Coffs Harbour City Council (CHCC) terrestrial ecologist Mark Graham says

the first six mynas arrived in Coffs Harbour in 1994. 'At the time they were not perceived to be a problem. Since then the population has increased exponentially to the point where they now number in the thousands.'

According to Graham, 80 percent of the shire is inhabited by mynas, in both urban and suburban neighbourhoods and to some extent on forest fringes. The only section spared is the eastern Dorrigo area where forests are still relatively intact. Funded by a CHCC grant, the Ulitarra Conservation Society began myna minimisation trials in February on private property using Tidemann-designed traps. If successful, the minimisation campaign will begin in earnest in the CHCC area. If not, they might consider control methods such as mist nets on colonial roosts.

'The fact that they gather in roosts at night is one identified weakness in the myna's invasion strategy,' says Graham. 'We are appealing to the community to help us locate other roosts in and around Coffs Harbour and we will be keeping close tabs on other minimisation projects undertaken in other parts of Australia. The more information we gather and share, the quicker we will be able to, if not solve the problem, stay on top of it.'

(For further details, contact Myna-minimisers@anu.edu.au and watch for updates on the success of myna minimisation programs in future issues of WAM.)

LEE K. CURTIS is *Wildlife Australia's* northern correspondent.



Myna/miner differences

The Common Myna is often confused with the Noisy Miner (*Manorina melanocephala*), a honeyeater native to north eastern Australia. Common features include yellow bills, legs and bare eye skin. The myna is brown with a black head whereas the Noisy Miner is various shades of grey. The Noisy Miner is also considered a pest in some suburban back yards. They have lost their natural habitat to land clearing so they now seek refuge in urban and suburban yards landscaped with their food plant preferences. Because the supply is limited, they chase out the smaller birds to ensure their own steady food supply. The Noisy Miner's behaviour is nowhere near as detrimental to native fauna as is that of the myna.



Native to Australia, the Noisy Miner is, like the Common Myna, noisy, aggressive and widespread. The two species are similar enough in appearance to cause some confusion.