

Feather Fascination!

with local Birdwatcher, Jim Butler

Contact Jim at: beautifulbirds@y7mail.com



WHY DO BIRDS BATHE?

When birds bathe in water or dust they are actively maintaining their plumage. They are doing it to keep healthy and airy! Where water is available (backyard swimming pools, bird-baths) bathing is most common; otherwise dusting is more often observed. But many birds use both processes.

Water baths remove dirt and parasites from feathers. Birds such as swifts and swallows, which spend most of their time flying, dip into the water in flight, thus getting their baths "on the wing." Noisy Miners and Kookaburras dive from perches into the water. Lorikeets stand in shallow bird-baths and splash the water over themselves. After bathing, birds dry themselves by vibrating wings and tail and ruffling their feathers.

Many birds have an oily substance on their feathers that repels water, so dust can be a better cleaner. Dust absorbs excess oil and removes dry skin so that the feathers stay sleek and efficient. Birds create dust

wallows by scraping the ground. The dust is worked through the feathers and then shaken out. Butcherbirds and Magpies are known to dust. Quail use dusting to maintain an optimum amount of oil on their feathers. If quail are prevented from dusting, their feathers quickly become oily and matted. Dusting may also help to discourage bird lice.

Some birds follow a water bath with a dust bath. However, all birds normally follow bathing with extensive preening where they work to put each feather into its proper shape and into its proper position. The amount of time and effort birds put into bathing and dusting indicate how critical feather maintenance is. Feathers are marvellous and intricate tools, but keeping them perfectly functional so the bird is aerodynamically optimal requires constant care.

Happy Birding!

~ Jim

Image: Brown Quail by Tom Tarrant ©