

Feather Fascination!

with local Birdwatcher,

Jim Butler

SURVIVAL MIMICRY

THE Brown Thornbill is a small (10cm) hyperactive sedentary bird with a tiny black sharply-pointed bill, found throughout Brisbane. It lives in habitats that provide a large area of adjacent shrubs, one to five metres high. It hops among foliage and along twigs foraging through each shrub before flitting to the next. Insects and seeds are picked from leaves and under bark. Pairs are long-lasting and hold territories of a quarter to five hectares all year round, advertising them with regular singing. An individual may live for 10 years or longer.

Two of the Brown Thornbill's survival adaptations to counteract the pressure of predation, are of immense interest.

Firstly, Brown Thornbills adults often survive a particular predator by strategically using their ability to mimic the alarm calls of other bird species. When a Brown Thornbill detects the direct threat of a Pied Currawong, counter-intuitively the Thornbill starts calling loudly!

However, not its own call. The Thornbill mimics the "hawk" alarm call of a larger bird species, tricking the Currawong into thinking its own predator, the Brown Goshawk, is nearby. And the stratagem works! The Currawong often leaves the area. The tiny Thornbill survives



by effectively deceiving its large predator.

Secondly, Brown Thornbill parents that encounter a predator in the nest vicinity face a very common dilemma between saving themselves and saving the chicks. About 50% of Thornbill nests are raided. Life-history Theory predicts that parents in long-lived species will be more concerned about their own survival, compared with the lives of their current brood, in order to better protect future reproductive opportunities; whereas the opposite pattern will be found in short-lived species. Research has found that the alarm calls of Brown Thornbill parents are mainly used as a form of self-defence by the breeding pair rather than being directed at protecting the nestlings as other species do.

Go bush and marvel at this tiny, entertaining and sophisticated bird.

~ Jim

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Image: Brown thornbill by
Ed Frazer at Brookfield