

Feather Fascination!

with local Birdwatcher,

Jim Butler

'WASTAGE' AND COCKATOOS

I REGULARLY walk at Gap Creek and encounter scattered piles of fresh eucalyptus sprigs on the tracks. Sulphur-crested Cockatoos in the canopy above the tracks severed these sprigs. Gravity did the rest! A friend recounted her shock as Cockatoos snipped the tops off most of the plants in her garden. These related foraging behaviours—one ancient



and wild, the other modern and suburban—appear to be 'wastage'. But in reality, they are ecologically significant and illustrate the interconnectedness and purposeful complexity of the phenomenal avian world.

Cockatoos are plant predators and they typically 'waste' as much food as they consume. Their large beaks allow them to bite and crush with immense force, and they then extract with their large mobile tongues, the nutrients from every type of plant tissue: flowers, stems, bark, bulbs, roots and hard seeds. When feeding they discard entire fruits and denuded seeds as well as fruit pulp, seed fragments, flowers, leaves, sprigs and bark. The resulting 'rain' of discarded plant parts from big flocks of Cockatoos creates an abundance of food below the fruiting trees for other frugivores, herbivores and seed predators and the large amounts of plant matter and faeces enhances the nutrient content of the soil below the tree. 'Wastage' feeding provides food subsidies to other organisms in large, clumped quantities. This foraging behaviour damages the Cockatoos' food-plants but reciprocally provides ecological benefits to them and to large numbers of other organisms.

Cockatoos play a profound role in shaping plant and animal communities. They interact with and help their food-plants through complex mutualistic interactions enabling seed and pollen transfer, seeds for secondary dispersal, food for numerous organisms, plant healing through predation of parasites and localised soil enrichment. Evolutionary forces have selected 'wastage' feeding as advantageous to Sulphur-crested Cockatoo survival.

About my friend's garden! There was a happy ending, months later the plants had thrived from the pruning!

Admire the 'wasteful' Cockatoos' food subsidy program helping diverse living communities

~ Jim

Contact Jim: beautifulbirds@y7mail.com Image: Sulphur-crested Cockatoo
Digital Bird Guide: <http://www.moggillcreek.org/> Ed Frazer at Brookfield