

# Australian Brush Turkey – FACT SHEET----8



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**5441 6200** This fact sheet contains information sourced from members of Tweed Valley Wildlife Carers, members of other groups, independent advice and research.

## **Backyard mound-builder (*Alectura lathamii*)**

Whether building nesting mounds or just scratching around, the Australian brush-turkey is a common resident of many rainforest national parks and an occasional visitor to suburban gardens. The brush-turkey is one of three Australian species of mound-building birds, or megapodes. The other two species are the mallee fowl and the orange-footed scrubfowl. All are descendants of birds once found in the ancient land mass of Gondwana. Their closest relatives now live only in Papua New Guinea and South America. While the brush-turkey is common in areas of good habitat, its numbers have declined dramatically in several areas. For the brush-turkey to survive in urban areas, people must respect its natural behaviour. With proper precaution, brush-turkeys can live in urban areas without destroying much-loved gardens. Besides, watching a brush-turkey build and take care of its nest is intriguing and can give people in the city an insight into the life of a unique Australian animal.



### **What does it look like?**

A large bird, the brush-turkey is 60–75cm long and has a wingspan of 85cm. Males and females are a similar size. Coloured blue-black, the brush-turkey has an upright fanlike tail and grey-edged breast feathers. It has strong legs and a naked deep red head and neck. The male has a large, bright yellow wattle while the female's is smaller and paler. Chicks don't look much like their parents, as they're small, plump birds with rich brown feathers. They grow fast though, and within a few months a chick will have the dull blue-black plumage of the adult and the characteristic upright tail. Also, its head and neck will have become a featherless rich pink.

### **Where does it live?**

Brush-turkeys live in rainforests near the coast and in scrubs further inland. They spend most of their

time on the ground but roost in trees at night. Found from Cape York Peninsula in far north Queensland to Gosford on the central coast of New South Wales, the brush-turkey spends most of its time alone. Naturally shy in the bush, the bird becomes used to people when living in the suburbs. While the bird may look slow while scratching among leaves looking for food, it can run fast when disturbed. A quiet bird, the brush-turkey can sometimes be heard making soft grunts. Males have a deep three-noted booming call.

### **What does it eat?**

Brush-turkeys eat insects, native fruits and seeds. Adult birds feed throughout the day. Young birds forage for food in the pre-dawn light and in the twilight to avoid predators.

### **How does it breed?**

The brush-turkey will build a mound and breed at any time, although breeding is concentrated from September to December. The male brush-turkey builds a mound of plant litter and soil, adding or removing material to keep it at a constant temperature of 33 degrees. A mound is usually about 2–4 metres across and 1 metre high. The male spends many hours building his mound. He will defend his mound and will only allow a female onto it when he thinks it's at the right temperature. The number of different females and the number of times they visit depends on his skill in keeping the mound at the right temperature. If the mound is the right temperature, females will return many times to mate and lay eggs. Both sexes have highly accurate heat sensors inside their upper bill. A brush-turkey will take a large mouthful of the mound to check whether it's at the right temperature. When the temperature is too high, the male will rake material off the top to allow heat to escape. If too low, the male will heap more material onto the mound to build its insulation. Eggs are put into holes about half a metre deep in the mound and then covered. Between 18–24 eggs are laid, each taking about 50 days to hatch.

The male keeps watch while the eggs incubate, making sure the temperature is just right and keeping any predators at bay. Chicks have to fight their way out of the mound when they hatch, and are independent as soon as they get out. Since brush-turkey chicks have to feed themselves, the chance of death is high. A bird's chance of survival to adulthood is as little as one in 200! Natural predators such as snakes, foxes, domestic cats and dogs, and in-ground swimming pools all make life hard for young brush-turkeys.

### **Threats to survival**

The Australian brush-turkey is common but is threatened by habitat destruction. Its preferred habitat of rainforest has largely disappeared from many areas in Queensland and is under continuing threat. In some areas of its pre-European settlement range, the bird is locally extinct. Predators such as goannas, domestic cats and dogs, and foxes also have an impact, mainly on younger birds. Areas of its natural habitat must be looked after if the bird is to survive in its natural habitat.

### **Protection**

The Australian brush-turkey is fully protected in Queensland and is considered common. Maintenance of natural habitat and respect for the animal in urban areas is important if the brush-turkey is to continue to have a secure future in Queensland. In urban areas, the survival of the brush-turkey depends largely on the goodwill of householders.

### **How can you help?**

In recent years, the community has shown a greater awareness of the environment and the need to conserve our native wildlife. The Brush Turkey is now accepted by most people as a part of backyard birdlife. In many areas, people appreciate the brush-turkey and have left birds in peace to build their backyard mounds. A few simple measures can be taken to ensure brush-turkeys survive in your area without destroying your garden. These include fencing your garden and leaving a piece of natural vegetation somewhere in your yard for the Brush Turkeys to nest. They are fascinating to observe.