

Feather Fascination!

with local Birdwatcher, Jim Butler



THE STRIATED PARDALOTE

"Australia has been called the land of nectar, but it is equally the land of exudates, a place where birds obtain unusual sugary and starchy treats from the dominant trees." - Tim Lowe

The day I chose the Striated Pardalote I went walking at Gap Creek Reserve. As I entered the Quail Trial, four Striated Pardalotes were calling, and along the track there were three more; an unusually high number. I felt they were celebrating "about time you wrote about us!"



The Striated Pardalote is endemic to Australia and because it is a eucalyptus forest specialist it is found everywhere. However, being very small (10cm) and foraging in the canopy, it is heard much more often than seen.

Striated Pardalotes forage on leaf surfaces, feeding principally on lerp, a sweet exudate produced by sap-sucking psyllid larvae. The larvae excrete sugar and starch because tree sap contains much more sugar than protein, forcing sap-suckers to excrete the excess sugar that must be ingested along with the quantity of protein they need. The exudate is moulded into a scale that covers and protects the larvae as it feeds. Pardalote beaks are stout and contoured for levering off the lerp. The large honeyeaters also feed on lerp and aggressively compete with the small Pardalotes. The larvae are

Image: Striated Pardalote with food for the chicks in the tunnel. By Ed Frazer at Brookfield

usually eaten along with the lerp, and the birds gain protein as well as sugar and starch. Importantly, the Pardalotes, as specialist lerp feeders, have a key ecological role in controlling damaging psyllid outbreaks in the eucalyptus forests of Australia.

Ed's beautiful photo is only possible because this is the breeding season and Pardalotes come down from the canopy to nest in deep horizontal 1m tunnels drilled into embankments. The dark cavity behind the bird is the entrance to the tunnel. The nest is made of bark and grass. The birds display on a perch at the entrance and vigorously repel other Pardalotes.

Watch your local embankment!
- Jim

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