



## *The Avicultural Society of New South Wales (ASNSW)*

*(Founding in 1940 as the Parrot & African Lovebird Society of Australia)*

# The Casuarinas (Bird) Plant of the Month

*(ASNSW Meeting - 20th October 2013)*

**By Janet Macpherson**

In Australia the Casuarina is more commonly known as the She Oak or the River Oak. Early Australian settlers sometimes referred to them as the Australian Pine because of their wispy pinelike foliage and their small fruits that (with a little stretch of the imagination) bear some resemblance to miniature pine cones.

Casuarinas are native to Australasian countries including parts of India and the islands of the South Pacific. There are a number of different species within this genus which range from evergreen shrubs through to trees of approx. 30-35 metres in height.

The Casuarinas provide a rich habitat for a wide variety of our native Australian birds and as such might be more aptly described as the (Bird) Tree of Life rather than the (Bird) Plant of the Month as we describe this section of our meeting each month.

Where I live in north western Sydney we have a large grove of Casuarinas growing naturally in our garden. They are a very hardy species and whilst they are most commonly found growing along river banks, large groves of trees grow along Australia's sandy coastal areas and in some of the harsher climatic areas of our Australian inland.

My first experiences with the Casuarina were with the trees in our garden. I found that their pine needle-like foliage formed a great mass of very thick mulch which could quite literally be rolled up like a carpet. I used it to establish azaleas and camellias and other plants in the garden. It became an invaluable provision in the dry and very hot summer months, especially in times of drought and water restrictions, for maintaining the moisture content in the ground. I was able to constantly gather up as much as I needed and the Casuarinas constantly supplied more.

I noticed that a number of small birds nested in these trees in my garden and one in particular, the [Eastern Yellow-breasted Robin](#), which built its very neat cup-like nest quite low in the branches, sometimes less than a couple of metres from the ground. There was also another little bird that built a hanging nest from the branches. I don't know the species of the bird but it sang like a canary. I thought it might have been some kind of native canary but have never identified it.

Then along came "Burkett" an Eastern Rosella baby who had fallen from his nest with no parents around to take care of him. We took him in and hand-raised him.

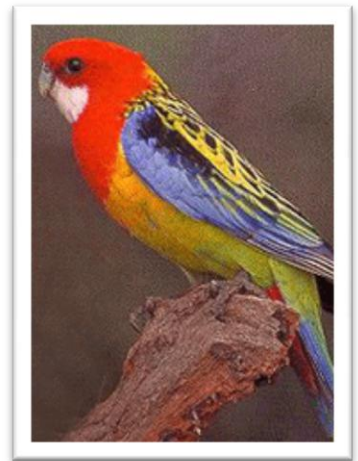


Casuarina (Cunninghamiana)  
Tree in flower. File courtesy  
of [Wikipedia](#)



Immature seedpods. File  
courtesy of [Wikipedia](#)

As his feathers grew and he became independent we did some research on the feeding habits of the Eastern Rosellas in the wild only to learn that the tiny winged seeds of the Casuarina are a major source of nutrition for them. So we harvested the seed and tried it out on Burkett. He loved it and it became his special treat! Burkett was quite a feisty little bird and used to bite (the hand that fed him) if he could. Then he would fluff up his chest and chirp away in delight. When he saw us coming with the Casuarina seeds he would suddenly become very meek and mild and we could put a single seed on our finger tip and offer them to him one at a time with no fear of being bitten.



Eastern Rosella (not Burkett)  
Photo Copyright © Stan Sindell



Winged seeds of the Casuarina

The Casuarinas are such a great source of food for so many of our native birds that it was not hard to research and find dozens of photos on the internet of the different species that feed on them either directly or indirectly, or nest in them, or rely on them for shelter and camouflage.

An indirect feeder is the [Mistletoebird \(\*Dicaeum hirundinaceum\*\)](#) which feeds on the [Casuarina Mistletoe](#). The Casuarina Mistletoe so closely resembles its host that if it was not for the presence of the Mistletoebird feeding on its fruits it may not be easily detected. The Casuarina Mistletoe flowers provides nectar and attracts insects for other indirect feeders such as [honeyeaters](#) and [insect feeding birds](#), and the mistletoe berries in turn attract other birds such as our [Bowerbirds](#) and the list goes on and on.

Small birds such as the [Red-browed finch](#) and other native finches would not be able to crack the seed but they are able to pull the seed from the seed pods as they begin to ripen, or they will pick up the seeds as they drop onto the carpet of Casuarina mulch on the ground. They will also use the pine-like needles of the Casuarina to build their nests as shown in this link which shows a [Beautiful Firetail](#) finch's nest built almost entirely of these needles. Our editor, Paul Henry, mentioned to me that he finds that his finches prefer the stronger needles rather than the finer needles of some Casuarina varieties.

As well as our finches, a wide range of other birds will nest in the Casuarinas and use the needles and other materials to build their nests. I found photos of our smaller and larger varieties of softbills, honeyeaters, [kites](#) and [osprey](#); all with a range of nests from very neat cup-like or hanging structures held together with cobwebs and lichen, through to the platform like larger nests of [raptors](#) and [salt](#) and [freshwater birds](#), supported in the forks or even across several branches, in the larger varieties of Casuarinas.



Channel-Billed Cuckoo (*Scythrops novaehollandiae*) young fledgling still being fed by its foster mother, a Pied Currawong (*Strepera graculina*). You can see the drooping needles of the Casuarina they are in, in the background. This photo was taken at Glenwood NSW. Thank you to Swarnie for sharing this photo with us.

I have seen [Tawny Frogmouths](#) in my Casuarinas camouflaged in the branches as they roost through the daylight hours. Earlier this year while out walking I noticed a pair of Tawny Frogmouths nestled tight against a branch with a fully feathered fledgling between them. I think that they realised that their cover was blown as the next day they were not there. Sadly the land owner where this grove of Casuarinas has been growing (for over 40 years to my knowledge), suddenly decided to take the whole lot out and another grove further across on their land, and the dead trees are now laying in heaps on the ground ready for burning during the coming winter season. All that is left is scrubby grass which it would appear this land owner prefers to the natural habitat of our birds.

Lorikeets such as the [Rainbow](#) and [Musk](#) Lorikeets (although nectar feeders), will also feed on the seeds of the Casuarina. Just a quick browse on the internet a couple of days before the meeting and I was able to find photos of some of our smaller and larger parrots such as [Red Rumps](#), [Blue Bonnets](#), [Princess Parrots](#), [Rosellas](#), [Twenty-eights](#), [Galahs](#), [Yellow-tailed](#), [Red-tailed](#) and [Glossy Black Cockatoos](#), [Sulphur-crested Cockatoos](#), [Major Mitchells](#), [Corellas](#), and [Gang Gang Parrots](#), to name just a few, all feeding on the tiny winged seeds of the Casuarinas.

I could list many more birds in this article but as I mentioned before, it is not difficult to surf the net and find photographs of all these beautiful native Australian birds feeding or nesting in the Casuarinas and a myriad of other Australian native birds as well. I just used Google and typed in two words, "Casuarina birds". I invite you to do the same and when you complete your search I am sure you will agree with me that the Casuarina could be described as one of Australia's very valuable (Bird) Trees of Life.

If you have room in your garden for one of these trees why not plant one and enjoy the birds that feed in them as they grow to maturity and start producing their seeds. Remember they come in smaller varieties as well.

In closing I should also mention as an aside that the Casuarinas also feature in Australian folklore and bush poems, and in Aboriginal legend for the mystical sound of what some have described as the "She Oaks softly sighing in the breeze".

["The Tree and Its Voices: What the Casuarina Says" by Barbara Holloway](#)

## 'Mapooram'

**Rowland Robinson (1912-1992)**

*(as related by Fred Biggs, Ngeamba tribe, Lake Carjelligo)*

Go out and camp somewhere. You're lying down.  
A wind comes, and you hear this *Mapooram*.  
You go and find that tree rubbing itself.  
It makes all sorts of noises in the wind.  
It might be like a sheep, or like a cat  
or like a baby crying, or someone calling,  
a sort of whistling-calling when the wind  
comes and swings and rubs two boughs like that.

A *Wirreengun*, a clever-feller, sings that tree.  
He hums a song, a *Mapooram*:  
A song to bring or close things up, or bring things out,  
a song to bring a girl, a woman from that tree.  
She's got long hair, it falls right down her back.  
He's got her for himself. He'll keep her now.

One evening it was sort of rainy-dark,  
they built a mia-mia, stripping bark.  
You've been out in the bush sometime and seen  
them old dry pines with loose bark stripping off.  
You get a lot of bark from those old dry pines,  
before they rot and go too far, you know.  
That woman from the tree, she pulled that bark.  
It tore off, up and up the tree. It pulled her up,  
up into the tree, up, up into the sky.

Well, she was gone. That was the end of it.  
No more that *Wireengun* could call her back.

'*Mapooram, Mapooram.*' "What's that you say?"  
Why, that's two tree boughs rubbing in the wind.  
([Reference: Google Books](#))

### The Australian Sunrise James Lister Cuthbertson

The Morning Star paled slowly, the Cross hung low to the sea,  
And down the shadowy reaches the tide came swirling free,  
The lustrous purple blackness of the soft Australian night,  
Waned in the gray awakening that heralded the light;  
Still in the dying darkness, still in the forest dim  
The pearly dew of the dawning clung to each giant limb,  
Till the sun came up from ocean, red with the cold sea mist,  
And smote on the limestone ridges, and the shining tree-tops kissed;  
Then the fiery Scorpion vanished, the magpie's note was heard,  
*And the wind in the she-oak wavered*, and the honeysuckles stirred,  
The airy golden vapour rose from the river breast  
The kingfisher came darting out of his crannied nest,  
And the bulrushes and reed-beds put off their fallow gray  
And burnt with cloudy crimson at dawning of the day.

([Reference: http://users.tpg.com.au/dandsc/op/op46.htm](http://users.tpg.com.au/dandsc/op/op46.htm))

[River Sheoak \(Casuarina cunninghamiana\) - A tree for all reasons](#)

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