

## Swift parrots: Conservation of a precious species

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The swift parrot (*Lathamus discolor*) is a native, migratory bird that inhabits forests and woodlands of south-eastern Australia. With a single population of less than 2,500 individuals, its conservation status is endangered at both the NSW and Commonwealth levels.

### *How can I identify a swift parrot?*

Swift parrots are small (about 25 cm long), fast-flying parrots. They are bright grass green in colour, with patches of red on the throat, chin and forehead bordered by yellow. They also have red on the shoulder and under the wings, and blue on the crown, cheeks and wings.

Prominent features which help to identify them include:

- The flashes of bright red under their wings
- Their streamlined body
- Their thin, pointed dark red tail.
- Their distinctive “pip-pip-pip” call, usually made while flying.

They are most easily identified by their call - listen to it online at Listening Earth ([www.listeningearth.com/blog/swift-parrotssoundsand-images](http://www.listeningearth.com/blog/swift-parrotssoundsand-images)).



*Above: Images of swift parrots, showing their vibrant colours and distinctive long tail  
(Photos courtesy of Geoffrey Dabb)*

### ***Where do they live?***

Swift parrots breed in eucalypt forests and woodlands in Tasmania during summer, nesting in old trees with hollows.

In March/April each year, the entire population migrates up to 2,500 km north, to a vast area of the southern and eastern Australian mainland. In winter the majority of the population inhabits eucalypt woodlands in the south-western slopes and coastal forests of NSW and central VIC.

Swift parrots return to their breeding grounds in Tasmania in August/September.

### ***What is their habitat?***

When in our region, swift parrots predominantly forage on nectar and lerp (carbohydrates produced by sap-sucking insects on leaves) in the canopy of temperate forests and woodlands. Their key foraging habitats in our region include communities dominated by:

- Mugga Ironbark (*Eucalyptus sideroxylon*),
- Grey Box (*Eucalyptus moluccana*),
- White Box (*Eucalyptus albens*), and
- Yellow box (*Eucalyptus melliodora*).

Swift parrots have been found to use the most mature trees in the landscape, presumably because these provide the most reliable foraging sources. They are known to return to the same foraging sites annually, depending on food availability. In drought years, when food in inland woodlands is limited, they migrate up to 1,000 km further, to wetter coastal areas.

### ***What are the threats to swift parrots?***

- ***Habitat loss and degradation:*** Swift parrots have lost much of their habitat since European settlement in 1788, in all parts of the species' broad distribution. Much of the habitat used by swift parrots in our landscape now exists as scattered remnants or isolated paddock trees, which are at risk of further loss due to dieback, and lack of recruitment due to over-grazing
- ***Competition:*** In addition to the direct impacts of habitat loss and resource depletion, the fragmentation of habitats used by the swift parrot has favoured some large aggressive species such as the noisy miner and red wattlebird, which can competitively exclude the swift parrot. Resource competition with the European Honeybee is also likely to pose a threat
- ***Climate change:*** The swift parrot is vulnerable to changes in its habitat which may result from changing climatic conditions, with possible impacts on its geographic range, migration, physiology and abundance
- ***Collision impacts:*** Urban encroachment within or near swift parrot habitats has led to increasing impacts from collisions with human-made hazards, such as reflective windows, wire mesh fences, vehicles and power lines.

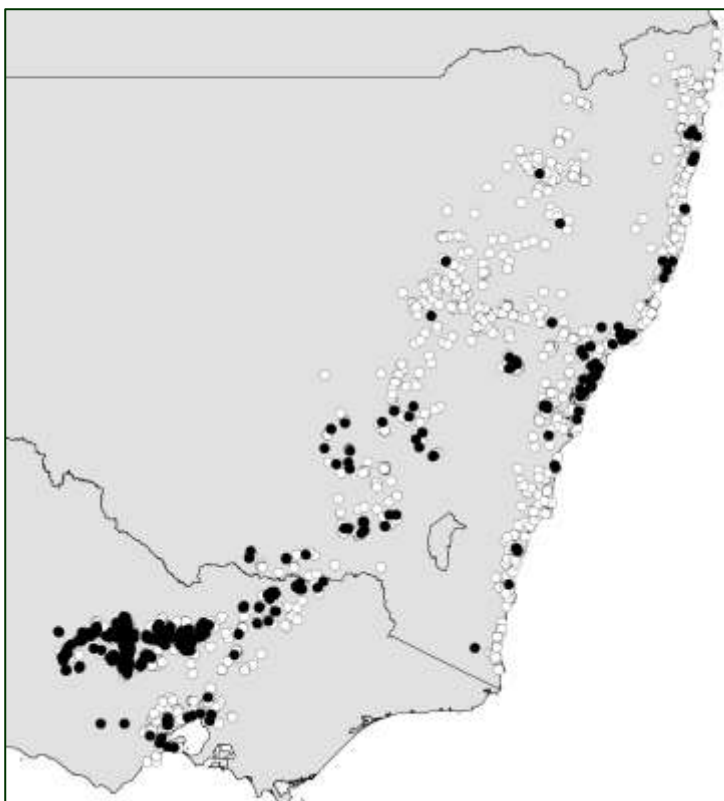
A National Recovery Program for swift parrots was established in 1995, highlighting the need for research, monitoring and education programs to increase understanding of its habitat requirements throughout the migratory cycle, and coordinate conservation management across all states within its range.

The most recent National Recovery Plan was released in 2011. This plan includes a focus on identifying and protecting priority habitats in NSW, increasing survey effort and conservation measures on private properties, and identification and monitoring the potential impacts of climate change.

### ***What can I do to help save the swift parrots?***

As a landholder, the most valuable thing you can do is to protect and enhance their habitat. In particular, retaining stands of winter-flowering feed-trees (especially large, mature trees), and revegetating or allowing for natural regeneration of these species where appropriate. Fencing off the habitat will help protect it, and allow you to manage grazing of the sites.

Another important way that you can get involved is to participate in a biannual survey, to locate the winter foraging areas of swift parrots in our region. The Swift Parrot Recovery Team relies on volunteers to identify areas the birds are visiting, and what resources they are using.



If you are interested in learning more about how to participate, please contact Caroline Wilson, the Woodland Birds & Threatened Bird Network Project Officer at BirdLife Australia (details below). Caroline will be able to provide you with suggestions for which sites to explore, along with all the necessary information and survey sheets.

*Left: A map showing where volunteer swift parrot surveys have been done previously (white circles), and where the birds have been found (black circles) across south-east Australia (Map courtesy of Debbie Saunders)*

### ***References***

Saunders D and Tzaros C (2011). National Recovery Plan for the Swift Parrot *Lathamus discolor*. Produced by Birds Australia, available at: [environment.gov.au/resource/national-recovery-plan-swift-parrot-lathamus-dicolor](http://environment.gov.au/resource/national-recovery-plan-swift-parrot-lathamus-dicolor)

NSW Office of Environment and Heritage (2016). Swift parrot - profile. Available at: [environment.nsw.gov.au/ThreatenedSpeciesApp/profile.aspx?id=10455](http://environment.nsw.gov.au/ThreatenedSpeciesApp/profile.aspx?id=10455)

### ***Further information***

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