

# backyard buddies™

get more enjoyment from our native plants and animals



**B-mail is the monthly e-newsletter for Backyard Buddies.**

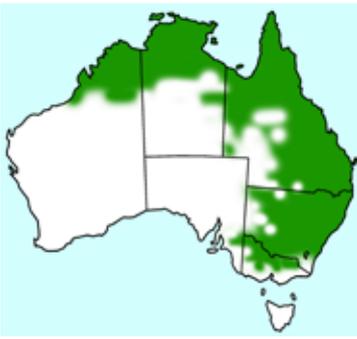
**Backyard Buddies is an initiative of the Foundation for National Parks & Wildlife.**

## June B-mail 2012

### Walking in a Winter Wonderland

It may be cooling down but your Backyard Buddies are still getting up to plenty of action outdoors.

### A Hungry Visitor Wants Your Honey!



Distribution map of the Little Friarbird, *Philemon citreogularis*.

It's June and Little Friarbirds may be out and about near you. If you've got a Grevillea or a Banksia in your garden or local area, listen out for a noisy, harsh sounding 'ar-cooo, rockety crook-shank!'

It could just be the Little Friarbird calling from the trees as it feeds.

[Click to hear the call of the Little Friarbird.](#) (This sound file is copyright Fred Van Gessel.)

These birds love water and rarely stray far from it, so look out for them playing and bathing if you've got a bird bath, water trough or sprinkler in your garden. If you put in a bird bath or pond, make sure it's next to trees or dense shrubs so that birds have somewhere close by to hide from predators. Keep your cat indoors or think about installing a cat run if possible so that birds like the Little Friarbird are safe.

[Watch a video of a Little Friarbird calling here.](#)

Little Friarbirds live in Broome Western Australia, across the north of Australia and all the way down the east coast and into South Australia. Little Friarbirds love open forests and woodlands near waterways.

As the weather cools down, Little Friarbirds in southern areas migrate north in search of more abundant food and warmer weather. Northern Little Friarbirds are locally nomadic and travel from place to place in search of flowering Eucalypts, Melaleucas and other native trees in bloom.

Little Friarbirds also love to investigate orchards for food, so look out for Little Friarbirds if you pass one.

Little Friarbirds are honeyeaters, and love to eat the nectar of native plants, insects, fruits and seeds. You won't see them on the ground as they feed almost entirely in the trees. You might see one feeding by itself, or a pair or a mixed flock making jumbled notes together as they squabble for food.

[Download a free factsheet about the Little Friarbird here.](#)

You can tell a Little Friarbird from a Noisy, Helmeted or Silver-crowned Friarbird, because the Little one doesn't



A Little Friarbird looking for nectar. Little Friarbirds are grey and grey-brown with a blue tinge, and have a blue-grey face. Photo: [Lance Degilbo \(flickr\)](#).

have the characteristic bump (called a casque) on its bill like the others. Like most honeyeaters, the Little Friarbird has a downward-curving bill.

Breeding season is from about August to March each year. Little Friarbirds form monogamous pairs. Both parents together create their deep, cup-shaped nest out of fine grass, shreds of bark, and rootlets interwoven with cobweb, silky cocoons and occasionally hair. This structure is so delicate that it is almost see-through! The nest is usually built near or overhanging water.

The female alone sits on the eggs but when they hatch both she and her mate work together to feed their young. Parents fiercely defend the territory around their nest and chase away much bigger and more powerful birds, such as Magpies.

#### TIP

Honeyeaters like the Little Friarbird love our gardens because they provide lots of colourful flowers with nectar. Native plants provide the best food for them, so why not ask your local nursery to recommend some local native Banksias, Grevilleas, Melaleucas or Eucalypts that you can plant in the garden to attract birds? You'll get to enjoy the calls, colours and antics of birds, and the lovely flowers of these plants, too.

#### DID YOU KNOW

There are over 180 different types of Honeyeaters in the world. They live in Australia, New Guinea, New Zealand, the Pacific Islands and Bali. About 90 Honeyeater species live in Australia, and they play an important role in pollinating many of the country's native plants.

[www.backyardbuddies.net.au](http://www.backyardbuddies.net.au)

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## A Tiny Secretive Garden Visitor



Distribution map of the Eastern Pygmy-possum, *Cercartetus nanus*.

You may have seen or heard Ringtail and Brush-tailed Possums, but there may be another little possum in your garden you didn't even know was there. An Eastern Pygmy-possum grows to about 7-9 cm long with a tail of 8-11 cm long.

Eastern Pygmy-possums are quite secretive. They live in the trees, and are

most active at night when they come out to feed. During the day, the Eastern Pygmy-possum sleeps in one of the many cosy nests within its home range.

The nest could be inside a tree hollow, rotten stump, in an abandoned bird's nest, ringtail possum's dray or even in a hole in the ground. Eastern Pygmy-possums keep their nests nice and warm by lining them with shredded bark.

[To find out how to build your very own Eastern Pygmy-possum nest box, click here.](#)

Now that it's winter and food is scarce, Eastern Pygmy-possums are settling down to sleep it out until warmer weather returns. Inside the nest they tuck their noses into their chests, cover their eyes with their ears and curl up into a ball. Their heartbeats slow and their body temperatures drop almost to the temperature of the air around them.

During this state of 'torpor' they don't eat or drink. Unlike hibernation, torpidity generally only lasts a few days at a time. Eastern Pygmy-possums conserve their energy until the weather warms up and they can go out and feed again.

Eastern Pygmy-possums love to eat the nectar and pollen of Banksia, Bottlebrush and Eucalyptus flowers. They even have a brush tipped tongue which helps them extract nectar from flowers. Eastern Pygmy-possums are important pollinators of native plants such as Banksias.

These gorgeous little animals are also good backyard buddies because they help keep your insect numbers down. They eat insects when there are no flowers around, and will munch on the occasional soft fruit too.

Eastern Pygmy-possums breed from August to April. They usually breed twice a year, though can breed a third time if there is lots of food around.

The tiny Eastern Pygmy-possum is a marsupial, which means it has a pouch to keep its even tinier young safe in as they develop. Mum Eastern Pygmy-possum is pregnant for about a month before she gives birth to around four young.

The babies spend another month or slightly longer sheltering in the pouch, and are weaned another month after that. They stay with mum for only another 10 days before they become independent. At this stage they weigh about 10 grams, which is equal to the weight of 10 paperclips.

Eastern Pygmy-possums live for up to 5 years in the wild.



An Eastern Pygmy-possum baby found amongst the veggie patch. Eastern Pygmy-possums live in south-eastern Australia from southern Queensland to eastern South Australia, and also Tasmania. Photo: [Janet Mayer](#).



A baby Eastern Pygmy-possum in the garden. Eastern Pygmy-possums are fantastic climbers. Their tail is prehensile, which means it can curl and grip branches like another hand. Photo: [Janet Mayer](#).

[Click to watch a video of an Eastern Pygmy-possum that was rescued and brought back to health by a wildlife carer.](#)

### DID YOU KNOW

Once the weather warms up, Eastern Pygmy-possums fatten up. They eat as much as possible so that they can survive the winter months by living off their fat stores. When there's plenty of food Eastern Pygmy-possums eat so much that the base of their tails become swollen and carrot shaped.

### TIP

Eastern Pygmy-possums are sometimes mistaken for a rat or mouse! Owls, quolls, foxes, dogs and cats prey on Eastern Pygmy-possums, which hiss loudly when provoked. Avoid putting out mice and rat traps, and keep your cats indoors or install a cat run so that your cat can go outdoors without being a worry to cute animals like the Eastern Pygmy-possum.

## When is a Frog's Favourite Time? When it's a Leap Year!



Distribution map of the Western Banjo Frog, *Limnodynastes dorsalis*.

With winter chills gripping the land, Western Banjo Frogs or Pobblebunks are getting set to 'bonk' all the way through the night in south-western Australia. If you're in Perth, listen for their banjo-like calls coming from the backyard, especially if you've got a pond or are close to a wetland or waterway.

Around your area, you may hear a single explosive 'bonk' ring out from a hidden spot in the dense undergrowth at edge of a stream, lake or other body of water - almost any water will do. These calls can carry quite a distance, and they need to. Mr Pobblebonk calls to entice a female to his watery paradise!

Calling begins as early as May for northern Pobblebunks, and from June-August in and around Perth. [Listen to the Western Banjo Frog's amazing call!](#) To hear their distinctive 'bonking' in action, visit this page and click 'frog sound' on the top right above the photo. The Pobblebonk makes a fantastic, funny call!

During the warmer months, Pobblebunks burrow underground to keep cool and moist. During winter they hide in densely growing shrubs at the water's edge to keep safe from predators. You're more likely to hear their call than you are to catch a glimpse of these remarkable little frogs.

If you are lucky enough to spot a Pobblebonk as it moves in the undergrowth, you will be able to recognise it from a number of distinct markings. They can be pale brown to dark chocolate with areas of deep green or olive. They also have big glands that look like lumps on their back legs.

[Click to see a video of a Western Banjo Frog that was found in a backyard.](#)

When a female likes the sound of a male's 'bonk' she hops with him to the water's edge, to a spot hidden by overhanging leaves and plants. She beats the surface of the still or slowly flowing water as she lays her eggs into a floating, foamy raft-like structure, and the male fertilises them.

When the eggs hatch, the tadpoles fall through the foam and into the water below. They can be up to 6.5 cm long. Pobblebonk tadpoles develop very slowly, and turn into little froglets from early summer through to April.

Avoid touching frogs you see around your area or moving them to different ponds, as this could spread diseases between different groups of frogs. Keep your pets indoors so that frogs are safe to keep your insect numbers down and be good backyard buddies.



A startled looking Western Banjo Frog. Photo: [Laura West](#).



A startled looking Western Banjo Frog. Photo: [Laura West](#).

To encourage frogs or other animals in your backyard, put out a container in the garden and let it fill with rainwater. Almost anything will do - even an old bathing pool that the children no longer use. [Click here to find out more about putting a frog pond in your garden.](#)

### TIP

Having frogs in and around your backyard is a sign that the local environment is healthy. Avoid using pesticides or chemicals in your backyard as rain will send the run-off into waterways. Frogs absorb moisture through their skin and can get sick if they absorb chemicals along with moisture.

### DID YOU KNOW

Western Banjo Frogs or Pobblebunks live in the southwest and adjacent arid zone in Western Australia, from lower Murchison River south and east to Wattle Camp, inland to Galena, Moorine Rock, Lake Cronin, Peak Charles and Coragina Rock. They can live in forests, swamps, grasslands and the wheatbelt.

## Little Troublemaker - Roley Poley Landlubbers

Have you ever lifted a pot plant or scraped back some mulch and found some curious little 'Roley Poley' bugs underneath? These are slaters, also known as Roley Poles, Pill Bugs, or Wood Lice.

Just like worms, slaters are great for your garden as they eat organic matter and return nutrients to the soil. Having a few slaters around will keep your plants happy and healthy, as the soil will have more nutrients in it.

Slaters need moisture and mostly come out at night when the risk of drying out is low. You'll find them under logs, rocks, leaf matter, compost, pot plants and amongst mulched areas of your garden.

You'll recognise the oval-shaped flattened bodies of these bugs, which are about 6 to 12 mm in length and grey in colour. Their bodies have 14 segments, 7 pairs of legs and two pairs of antennae, though the second pair is small and hard to see.

Slaters navigate with specialised equipment! They have two tail-like 'uropods' at the end of their bodies which help them to find their way around.

Did you know that a female slater has a pouch? It's under her body and she keeps her eggs in it and her babies for a short time after they hatch. Young slaters look like adults except they have one less body segment and pair of legs.

Slaters grow by moulting. A new skin grows underneath their tough, outer skeleton, which splits into two pieces. One half comes off over a few days, and the other half takes another few days to come off. The skin underneath then gradually hardens. During moulting a slater is very vulnerable and needs to find a safe place to shelter as it grows.

Every now and then, slaters might munch on young plants. Slaters are beneficial for your garden, so you don't want to get rid of them, but you can easily distract them. Put some hollowed out orange halves or seedling punnets filled with potato peelings out in the garden for the slaters to munch on instead. Remove these when full of slaters.

You can also stop slaters from having a munch by growing plants like strawberries in pots or on structures that keep the leaves and fruit off the ground. When sowing seed, keep mulch clear of the furrow as slaters don't like venturing far from cover. Older plants with tougher stems are less attractive to slaters than young seedlings.

Avoid using chemicals or baits in the garden as they can affect insects other than the ones you're trying to target, and birds and other animals can get sick if they eat a contaminated insect.

If slaters are taking over, you can easily make the garden less favourable to them. Disturb your compost and mulch by raking it frequently during hot, dry days. Chickens or ducks also love to eat slaters, which provide good protein for egg production.



Slater may be hiding under mulch or pot plants. They're great for the garden because they return nutrients to the soil. [Photo: Jean & Fred Hort.](#)

### TIP

Slaters occasionally come inside the house. They don't bite or sting so just sweep them up and put them back outside if you find one exploring inside.

### DID YOU KNOW

Slaters are crustaceans and are related to crabs, lobsters and prawns. They are one of only two groups of crustaceans that left the water on a permanent basis, and still need some moisture to survive. They have changed very little since they first got a foothold on the land. Slaters have uropods just like other crustaceans for navigation.

## Snow Skinks In the Big Backyard

**Snow Skinks live in Tasmania in alpine areas, where they forage for insects amongst boulder fields, rocks and low growing shrubs and plants.**

In 2012, the Foundation is providing funding to a project in Tasmania that seeks to investigate the impact of climate change on animals, focusing on Snow Skinks as a model species.

This research seeks to produce a model of species extinction risk under various climate change scenarios, and mitigating and confounding factors.

You can play a part in this project and protect and conserve our amazing native species and their habitats. Donate today and help save Australia's threatened species, such as those vulnerable to changes in our climate, before it's too late.

**Donate online** or by calling 02 9221 1949. All donations over \$2 are tax-deductible and we will send you a receipt.



A northern Snow Skink found among rocks near Pine Lake, Central Plateau, Tasmania. [Photo: Nuytsia@Tas \(flickr\).](#)

Every donation, no matter how much, helps make a big difference to saving threatened species.

It is only through donations from people like you that the Foundation can fund such crucial research to help preserve threatened species.

## The Turning of the Fagus

by Iona Mitchell, Coordinator [Gardens for Wildlife](#) and Land for Wildlife, Department of Primary Industries and Water. [Visit GFW Facebook.](#)

**Have you heard a chirpy little visitor in your garden of late, at night or during the day as rain approaches? It could be Mr Black Field Cricket!**

In Tasmania, a ritual for many hardy souls in Autumn is to rug up and head for the alpine regions to see what is commonly known as 'the turning of the Fagus'.

Fagus, also known as deciduous beech (*Nothofagus gunnii*), is an endemic plant species to Tasmania and is the only cold weather deciduous tree or shrub in Australia. It also only grows in areas of high rainfall of at least 1,800 mm per year.

The leaves are small, rounded with prominent veins and a pleated or crinkled appearance and a bright green colour. However, in autumn the leaves undertake a stunning change of colour turning from green to beautiful hues of red, orange and yellow.

This is the time when people visit the central and western mountain regions of Tasmania as the trees look glorious against a snow background or green of the surrounding rainforest.

It is well worth the effort bushwalking into some areas of Tasmania's National Parks, such as the Tarn Shelf at Mount Field, along the lake at Lake St Clair, or around Dove Lake at Cradle Mountain. Against a rugged backdrop of scree, rainforest or reflected in still tannin-coloured tarns, lakes or streams, the sight and colours are extremely beautiful.

As the leaves fall, they create a golden carpet on the ground. The falling of the leaves is a response going back millions of years ago to long cold dark winters where the leaves could not adequately photosynthesise.

To preserve their energy and reserves, the shrubs (or trees) shutdown and remain dormant until spring. As a deciduous shrub, fagus plays a valuable role in the ecology of rainforests with the falling of the leaves. As the leaves rot down, they return valuable nutrients back to the soil.

The foliage and form of fagus can vary with altitude and exposure. It is a subalpine to alpine shrub generally growing to two meters, but can grow to a small tree of around 4 m.

Fagus have a lovely form with intertwined wiry branches spreading outwards. At higher altitudes where they are exposed for longer periods under snow they are more spreading low shrubs rather than trees.

Much of the area where fagus is found and protected occurs within the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area and National Parks outside of this area in the central to western mountainous region of Tasmania.

### TIP

For next year, the best time to see the spectacular sight which is 'the turning of the fagus' is around the ANZAC day long weekend. Remember the date!



The turning of the fagus at Tarn Shelf at Mt Field. Photo: Trevor Norris.



Deciduous Beech in autumn colours. Photo: Toni Fish (flickr).

### DID YOU KNOW

*Nothofagus* is an ancient plant and species of *Nothofagus* most closely related to fagus have been found in South America and New Zealand. This has strongly supported the suggestion that Tasmania was part of Gondwana, the ancient supercontinent which joined what now has become South America, New Zealand, Australia and Antarctica over 100 million years ago.