

[In Depth \(/science/indepth/?site=science \)](#) > [Science Features \(/science/indepth/indepthfeature/ \)](#)



Birds versus bees

Honey bees are not so sweet when they escape into the Australian bush.

European honey bees are not native to Australia but they play a very important economic role, not just as producers of honey, but also as pollinators of valuable agricultural crops.

Yet when honey bees escape their hives and go wild in the bush, they become lethal competitors to some of Australia's most beautiful and endangered native birds.

In this 2003 story from ABC-TV's [Catalyst](#) (<http://www.abc.net.au/catalyst/>) program, reporter Jonica Newby highlighted the feral bee threat to the cockatoos the live in forests in the southwest of Western Australia.

The tree hollows that these birds use to make their nests also make perfect homes for feral bees, and the fledgling chicks have little defence against the invading swarms.

The hollows in Australian hardwood trees are not plentiful. They are formed by fungi, fire and termites and take a very long time to create. (One large study of nesting birds did not find a single nest hollow in any tree less than 200 years of age).

Baudin's cockatoo, the forest red-tailed black cockatoo and the Carnaby's cockatoo are all endangered, but Baudin's have the smallest range and are the most at risk.



A Carnaby's cockatoo on the lookout
(Source: ABC)

Related Stories

- [Celebrating 50 years of ABC Science \(/science/articles/2014/09/01/4076259.htm \)](#) , Science Online, 01 Sep 2014

[^ to top \(#top\)](#)

2015 update

After this story was first broadcast, feral bee colonies were identified in almost every part of Western Australia from Kunnunurra in the north, to the forests of the southwest.

The polyethelene pipe artificial nest hollow featured in this story has proven to be a successful alternative for some bird species and bees don't generally compete for them.

Trials of the exclusion grills designed to prevent the queen from swarming from a managed hive show that the method is effective, but the grills are still not widely used by beekeepers who use national parks, meaning that fresh feral colonies are still being formed.

There has been no co-ordinated strategy for the use of pesticides to destroy or target feral bee colonies, partly because of the risk to managed hives, and partly because of public sensitivity to the use of chemicals.

Quite apart from the risk to native birds, the feral bee problem remains something of a timebomb. Australia is one of the few parts of the world where bees are free of infestation by the damaging varroa destructor, a parasitic mite which is thought to be associated with bee colony collapse disorder.

However if, (some say when), the varroa mite arrives in Australia, the widespread existence of feral bee colonies will make the job of controlling or eradicating varroa next to impossible.