

Notes on Tawny Frogmouths

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The following notes are from observations made from surveying Tawny Frogmouths *Podargus strigoides* across the Maitland Local Government Area during a seven-year period spanning 2019-2026.

Diurnal roosts

Mostly I have found Tawny Frogmouths roosting diurnally in trees although there have also been several examples of them using man-made structures. The latter include: steel structures such as beams and pipework, aluminum scaffolding set up against the side of a building, a timber ladder leaning up against a brick wall, a timber window frame and a stormwater downpipe (located under building eaves) (**Figure 1**).



Figure 1. Tawny Frogmouths at some artificial roosts. Left: A female bird on an old timber ladder left leaning against a stone wall, Morpeth, NSW. Right: A male on a water sprinkler pipe under a warehouse roof, Maitland, NSW.

They have used many types of trees for their diurnal roosts. My observations have identified the following roost trees: Lemon-scented Gum *Corymbia citriodora*, Tasmanian Blue Gum *Eucalyptus globulus*, Sydney Red Gum *Angophora costata*, Brush Box *Lophostemon confertus*, River Red Gum *Eucalyptus camaldulensis*, Swamp Mahogany *Eucalyptus robusta*, Flooded Gum *Eucalyptus grandis*, Prickly-leaved Paperbark *Melaleuca styphelioides*, Narrow-leaved Paperbark *Melaleuca linariifolia*, Broad-leaved Paperbark

Melaleuca quinquenervia, Coastal She-oak *Casuarina equisetifolia*, Forest Oak *Allocasuarina torulosa*, River She-oak *Casuarina cunninghamiana*, Peppercorn *Schinus molle*, White Cedar *Melia azedarach*, Jacaranda *Jacaranda mimosifolia*, Willow *Salix spp*, Norfolk Island Pine *Araucaria heterophylla*, Lilly Pilly *Syzygium smithii*, Macadamia *Macadamia integrifolia*, Silky Oak *Grevillea robusta*, Moreton Bay Fig *Ficus macrophylla*, Rough-barked Apple *Angophora floribunda* and London Plane *hybrid plane*, *Platanus × hispanica*.

The bird's age and sex seem not to be factors in the choice of a roost. However, their territory location has a great influence on which trees they decide to use. The size of the tree is also a consideration. At one location, where there is a small stand of small, telegraph pole-sized Coastal She-oaks (estimated trunk diameters 10-25cm), the birds prefer larger trees that offer combinations of height, trunk size and foliage – choosing to use mature Moreton Bay Figs or a mature White Cedar.

Previous authors have asserted that a Tawny Frogmouth will only roost in the same tree for 1-3 days before changing to a different one (Körtner & Geiser 1999; Kaplan 2021). This may be so that predators cannot track a bird frequenting the same tree over a longer period of time. However, I have found otherwise. For example, in 2024 at an urban location in Telarah, NSW, a male Tawny Frogmouth roosted during the day in the same tree for 38 consecutive days including on the same perch for 13 consecutive days. During the 38 days, he changed perch eight times, using four different ones. The perches were less than 1.5 metres apart. His female partner roosted in the same tree as him for a total of 32 days, with 18 days on the same perch. During that 32-day period, she changed perch five times, using four different perches all of which were less than 1.0 metre apart.

As another example, in 2025 in a peri-urban location at Morpeth, NSW, a pair of Tawny Frogmouths roosted together in the same tree for 11

consecutive days. The male roosted over the 11 days on four different perches with the most days on the same perch being eight days (although not continuous) and the least days spent on two different perches both shared with the female bird was one day each. The female roosted over the 11 days on three different perches with the most days on the same perch being nine days (not continuous) and the least days spent on two different perches both shared with the male bird was one day each. The same female bird also spent nine days in a row in a different tree from the one above, with all nine days at the same perch.

Without further study, one cannot say if this difference in reported behaviour is because of a lack of predators; however, in any case there are predators in urban areas including snakes, lizards, cats and possums. It is interesting that Briggs (2023) reported similar findings for eastern Australian birds.

Nest trees

I have found 24 nests, as listed in **Table 1**. Both birds helped with the nest construction, with the trees chosen for nesting varying greatly from location to location, in woodland and urban areas alike. Some nests have been in the fork of up to three sub-trunks (sometimes only two) coming up from the main trunk which forms a neat bowl shape. The sub-trunks offer shelter from strong wind. Other nests have been in a fork of a horizontal branch, sometimes with a broken branch that had fallen across the fork which added extra stability for the nest materials. Other nests have been on a semi-horizontal or horizontal branch that had a naturally formed depression on the upper part of the branch. Some Gums and Moreton Bay Figs had this feature. It is known that Tawny Frogmouths choose nest locations so as to optimise both thermoregulation and cryptic concealment (Rae & Rae 2014).

No tree in particular seems to be chosen for protection from predators as most nests were in quite open locations. However, some of the trees chosen for a nest site were deciduous: Jacaranda; Narrow-leaved Ash Tree *Fraxinus angustifolia*; London Plane. In those cases, the nest usually was constructed whilst the branches were bare but egg-laying and then incubation usually did not begin until foliage had started to re-emerge on the surrounding branches. Presumably that foliage helped in sheltering the nest from weather and predators.

Nest and nest tree heights

I estimated nest and tree heights by taking an angle reading with a digital angle gauge and measuring out the distances with a tape measure, then calculating the height using trigonometry. Results are summarized in **Table 1**. Most nest trees were 15-30 m in height (average 19.8 m), and the smallest one was 9.4 m. Nest heights varied between 5.5 m and 12.3 m (average 8.6 m).

Nest materials

Materials used for nesting varied from site to site, apparently depending on what was on offer and regardless of the tree species the nest was being constructed in. Generally, most nests were a two-part structure of soft, filling materials on the bottom in the bowl, fork or depression, followed by sticks and twigs to create the top platform of the nest. Some nests simply consisted of a platform of sticks and twigs. Some examples are below.

- In a Prickly-leaved Paperbark Tree, the nest materials were sourced from the host tree and surrounding casuarinas for the base of the nest, with sticks and twigs used for the top platform.
- In an Ironbark, the nest materials were a combination of long casuarina fronds placed so they lay through the fork of two sub-trunks like matting. Then sticks and twigs were added to form the top platform of the nest.
- In another Ironbark, the base layer was made up of Prickly-leaved Paperbark fronds from nearby trees. Sticks and twigs were then added to make the top platform.
- In a Jacaranda, the base of the nest consisted of sticks and materials from the host tree, with sticks and twigs for the top platform.

After each layer has been added, especially during the stick platform construction, the male or female bird would sit on top of the nest, using their weight to help form a dish shape. The finishing touch was a thin layer of cushioning material, often from the host tree or from adjacent suitable trees, similar to the bottom section of the nest.

Table 1. Details of Tawny Frogmouth nests located in the Maitland area 2019-2026: tree type, height and years used; nest height; female's furthest recorded roost distance from nest; other species nesting nearby.

Nest No.	Suburb	Nest tree	Years used	Tree height (m)	Nest height (m)	Female roost distance		Nearby nests, distance away
						Largest (m)	Smallest (m)	
1	Telarah	Prickly-leaved Paperbark <i>Melaleuca styphelioides</i>	6	18.3	10.1	–	–	Black-faced Cuckooshrike <i>Coracina novaehollandiae</i> , 3 m
2	Telarah	Coastal She-oak <i>Casuarina equisetifolia</i>	3	15.3	7.0	60	5	Australian Magpie <i>Gymnorhina tibicen</i> , 20 m
3	Bolwarra	Flooded Gum <i>Eucalyptus grandis</i>	3	29.8	11.1	64	50	Red Wattlebird <i>Anthochaera carunculata</i> , 17 m
4	Bolwarra	Flooded Gum <i>Eucalyptus grandis</i>	2	24.0	7.8	50	–	Red Wattlebird <i>Anthochaera carunculata</i> , 15.5 m
5	Bolwarra	Swamp Mahogany <i>Eucalyptus robusta</i>	2	22.1	7.9	–	–	–
6	Morpeth	Coastal She-oak <i>Casuarina equisetifolia</i>	3	17.6	7.1	10	–	Magpie-lark <i>Grallina cyanoleuca</i> , 10 m
7	Morpeth	Forest Oak <i>Allocasuarina torulosa</i>	1	14.7	7.7	91	5	Grey Butcherbird <i>Cracticus torquatus</i> , 20 m
8	Morpeth	Narrow-leaved Ash Tree <i>Fraxinus Angustifolia</i>	2	17.4	9.9	40	8	Australian Magpie <i>Gymnorhina tibicen</i> , 31 m Australian Magpie <i>Gymnorhina tibicen</i> , 42 m Magpie-lark <i>Grallina cyanoleuca</i> , 5 m Magpie-lark <i>Grallina cyanoleuca</i> , 20 m Crested Pigeon <i>Ocyphaps lophotes</i> , 35 m
9	Morpeth	Gum <i>Eucalyptus sp.</i>	1	15.4	6.7	–	–	–
10	Morpeth	Moreton Bay Fig <i>Ficus macrophylla</i>	1	17.9	6.4	–	–	Australian Magpie <i>Gymnorhina tibicen</i> , 16 m
11	Morpeth	Moreton Bay Fig <i>Ficus macrophylla</i>	1	14.0	5.8	–	–	–
12	Morpeth	Moreton Bay Fig <i>Ficus macrophylla</i>	1	14.6	5.5	3	–	–
13	Morpeth	River She-oak <i>Casuarina cunninghamiana</i>	1	24.4	10.5	30	5	White-faced Heron <i>Egretta novaehollandiae</i> , 16 m
14	Morpeth	River She-oak <i>Casuarina cunninghamiana</i>	1	29.8	12.3	18	–	Willie Wagtail <i>Rhipidura leucophrys</i> , 18 m
15	Morpeth	Ironbark <i>Eucalyptus sp.</i>	1	9.4	6.0	21	–	Australian Magpie <i>Gymnorhina tibicen</i> , 29 m Australian Magpie <i>Gymnorhina tibicen</i> , 41 m
16	Morpeth	Ironbark <i>Eucalyptus sp.</i>	1	18.9	10.1	3	–	Grey Butcherbird <i>Cracticus torquatus</i> , 24 m

Table 1 cont.

Nest No.	Suburb	Nest tree	Years used	Tree height (m)	Nest height (m)	Female roost distance		Nearby nests, distance away
17	East Maitland	Ironbark <i>Eucalyptus sp.</i>	2	20.0	11.7	–	–	White-winged Chough <i>Corcorax melanorhamphos</i> , 11 m
18	East Maitland	Ironbark <i>Eucalyptus sp.</i>	2	22.6	10.1	21	19	Noisy Miner <i>Manorina melanocephala</i> , 12 m
19	East Maitland	Ironbark <i>Eucalyptus sp.</i>	1	20.8	7.0	–	–	Australian Magpie <i>Gymnorhina tibicen</i> , 17 m
20	East Maitland	Ironbark <i>Eucalyptus sp.</i>	1	24.5	11.7	60	4	Australian Magpie <i>Gymnorhina tibicen</i> , 7 m
22	Maitland CBD	Jacaranda <i>Jacaranda mimosifolia</i>	1	15.0	8.9	52	9	–
23	Maitland CBD	London Plane <i>hybrid Platanus × hispanica</i>	3	22.5	10.2	30	19	–
24	Walka Water Works	Forest Oak <i>Allocasuarina torulosa</i>	2	14.5	6.5	–	–	Australian Magpie <i>Gymnorhina tibicen</i> , 29 m* Australian Magpie <i>Gymnorhina tibicen</i> , 7 m
25	Walka Water Works	Spotted Gum <i>Corymbia maculata</i>	1	32.3	11.3	18	–	–

*There also were several small old nests, all within 20 m of the Tawny Frogmouth nest



(a)



(b)

Figure 2. Two Tawny Frogmouth nests. (a) A nest in a fork of a tree showing a bed of casuarina fronds laid out through the fork, with the traditional stick nest built on top of the bed, East Maitland, NSW. (b) A traditional nest of small sticks and twigs built where two branches fork from the trunk of a tree, Morpeth, NSW.

Distances between the female Tawny Frogmouth and the nest

Once the nest has been made and eggs have been laid, the female bird often roosts a considerable distance from the nest, only approaching at dusk to swap incubation duties with the male. However, when the eggs are due to hatch, she often roosts closer to the nest. **Table 1** indicates the furthest and nearest distances from the nest that I observed for roosting females.

When the eggs have hatched the female bird will most often roost in the nest tree within 3 m of the nest, or in an adjacent tree very close to the nest tree.

Interactions with other species

Often I have found other species nesting close to a Tawny Frogmouth nest (see **Table 1**). It is interesting to note that, whilst at other times some of these species can be antagonistic towards roosting Tawny Frogmouths, when the two species are both breeding an unlikely truce is called.

When the Tawny Frogmouth fledglings are ready to leave the nest or have already moved into nearby trees, they become fair game for some of the other species once their own young have fledged. Noisy Miners and Australian Magpies have shown this behaviour towards the Tawny Frogmouth fledglings, in particular 1st or 2nd year magpies. When the magpies or miners move off temporarily, I have seen the Tawny Frogmouth fledglings move to another tree and adopt the broken branch position (“stumping”). When the magpies or miners return to the last known roost for the fledglings and can’t find them, they lose interest and move on. But if the frogmouths change position again and the magpies or miners notice, the mobbing behaviour starts again. I have not witnessed any antagonistic behaviour towards the Tawny Frogmouth whilst sitting on a nest, or when the chicks or nearly fledged young birds are on the nest – it only happens after they have left the nest altogether and moved into another tree.

At one site, a Noisy Miner was searching for food near a male Tawny Frogmouth that was perched in a Moreton Bay Fig. The frogmouth at one point uttered several warning barks at the Noisy Miner which completely ignored it, coming as close as 50 cm to the frogmouth while it continued looking for food.

At another site, two Noisy Miners were searching for food around a Tawny Frogmouth sitting on a

nest, approaching as close as 1.0 m from the nest. There also were two recently fledged young Noisy Miners perched approximately 1.5 m from the frogmouth’s nest waiting to be fed. The Tawny Frogmouth was silently and intently watching the Noisy Miners, changing its position on the nest six times over 11 minutes. He opened his beak (presumably as a warning gesture) only if the Noisy Miners came too close.

CONCLUSION

With urban sprawl and commercial development continuously encroaching on natural bush and prime habitat, Tawny Frogmouths are displaying incredible resilience to adapt to their ever-changing environment. They are willing to push the boundaries of what a suitable tree species may be for their nest and will nest in whatever suitable tree is available, rather than looking for the stock-standard Eucalypt species noted in various publications (e.g. BirdLife Australia 2023).

These birds are more widespread throughout our urban and peri-urban environment than people realise. Many people do not realise they have just walked below a roosting or nesting Tawny Frogmouth who appears content to just sit and watch the world pass beneath their feet.

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