



Case Study: Birds in Focus

Connecting students to birds through art

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Executive Summary



Birds in Focus is an innovative initiative connecting young South Australians to local birdlife through the transformative power of nature-based art, with student wellbeing at its core.

Developed by Nature Play SA and funded by Green Adelaide, the project empowers students to explore the habitats, traits, and resilience of local birds, particularly vulnerable species like the Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoo, while also nurturing their own creativity and emotional resilience.

With research showing that early, meaningful connections with nature strengthen both conservation values and personal wellbeing, Birds in Focus addresses urgent declines in regional bird populations by turning observations into creative engagement. In outdoor settings, students participated in art-based activities - drawing, painting, journaling, that not only deepened their ecological understanding but also supported mindfulness, self-expression, and social connection.

Robust evaluation demonstrated clear impact: the majority of students reported feeling calmer, prouder, and more connected both to nature and to each other. Teachers observed improved focus, emotional regulation, and a stronger sense of belonging. The program bridged a critical gap in existing resources by making student wellbeing and creative agency central to environmental learning. The resulting student-created bird guide and educational resources will extend these benefits to many more children and schools.

By integrating art, science, and wellbeing, Birds in Focus supports Green Adelaide's vision for a cooler, greener, wilder, and healthier future. The program offers a compelling, replicable model for cultivating lifelong stewards of both local ecosystems and personal wellbeing.

Project Snapshot

Project Name: Birds in Focus

Location: Hallett Cove South Primary School and Upper Sturt Primary School

Target audience: Students from reception to year 6

Funding source: Green Adelaide

Date/Timeframe: 1 July 2024 to 30 June 2025

Program Type: Art and Science

Partners Involved: Hallett Cove South Primary School and Upper Sturt Primary School

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I. Context

Across the Adelaide and Mount Lofty Ranges, many native bird populations, including much-loved species such as the Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoo, are in decline due to habitat loss, climate change and reduced biodiversity. This trend is more than an environmental concern as it signals the gradual loss of an irreplaceable part of South Australia's identity and natural heritage.

Reversing this decline requires more than conservation strategies alone. It depends on nurturing the next generation of environmental stewards. Research shows that early, hands-on experiences in nature can spark curiosity and care for the natural world, while also laying the foundations for lifelong conservation values. For children, especially in a world that is increasingly urbanised and technology-driven, meaningful opportunities to connect with local wildlife are becoming increasingly rare.

Art provides a powerful bridge between young people and nature. Creating art in outdoor settings encourages close observation, patience and emotional connection while at the same time fostering self-expression and wellbeing. When done with intention, it can transform a passing moment into a lasting relationship with the species, habitat and place.

Birds in Focus was created in response to this need. It combines nature-based art with student wellbeing and links personal dispositions such as curiosity, resilience and creativity to the traits of local birds. This approach helps to “humanise” the birds, fostering empathy, emotional connection and a personal sense of responsibility for their protection. In doing so, the program builds children's artistic skills, deepens their ecological literacy and plants the seeds for future advocacy and action.

At a time when both the health of our ecosystems and the wellbeing of young people are under significant strain, Birds in Focus offers hope. It shows that creative, cross-disciplinary approaches can both protect biodiversity and strengthen resilience, belonging and care within the next generation.





2. Objective

The key objective of the Birds in Focus program is to:

Develop a unique art, nature and wellbeing program that demonstrates improvement of student wellbeing and fosters deeper connections to nature through a focus on local birds.

Strategies to achieve objective

To achieve the objective the below strategies were developed:

1. **Increase connection to nature:** Foster meaningful, lasting bonds between students and the natural world by engaging them in immersive, creative outdoor experiences. Through direct observation and artistic exploration of local birds, students will develop a deeper sense of place and stewardship for their environment.
2. **Strengthen student wellbeing:** Enhance student wellbeing by integrating nature-based art activities that promote mindfulness, emotional regulation, and social connection. Research shows that time spent in nature and creative expression together support resilience, reduce stress, and build a stronger sense of belonging.
3. **Improve understanding and awareness of local birds:** Increase students' knowledge of the diversity and ecology of local bird species by connecting personal dispositions to bird behaviours. Through connecting to, and learning about, local birds, students become more informed and empathetic advocates for local biodiversity.
4. **Hone artistic skills:** Develop students' artistic abilities by encouraging experimentation with various mediums, including lead pencil, coloured pencil, and watercolour. Through guided observation and creative practice, students will learn to express their ideas and experiences, building confidence and pride in their artistic achievements.





3. Our Approach

The program was delivered in term two for seven weeks, with lessons from 50-60 minutes in length. Each session began with a connection story of a bird that related to wellbeing. As an introduction students explored sketching feathers from local birds including threatened species such as the Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoo.

Each student was to select a local bird from a pool of twenty that they wanted to be their 'Bird in Focus'. To select a bird, first students needed to answer a series of questions focused on dispositions they hold such as curiosity, creativity and resilience. When they identified three dispositions that best reflected themselves, they then received three birds that also shared those dispositions. For example, if a playful disposition was selected then a Rainbow Lorikeet (also playful) would form part of their three birds. This then began the journey of students connecting with birds through art.

As each lesson progressed we focused on different aspects of the birds such as heads, beaks, eyes, in flight and roosting. We also explored different mediums (lead pencil, colour pencil and watercolour) and techniques such as blending pencils and layering watercolour. There was no step-by-step process as we wanted each child to find their own style and artistic rhythm. The key message for the program was: art isn't about the end product, it is about how you feel when you are creating it.

With each lesson that passed students became more confident and took more risks with their artwork; each iteration stored in their own personalised folder. Students gravitated towards a particular medium and with the techniques they utilised, created a final piece of the bird that they were most like. It was truly evident how much pride students had in their work as many were excited to share their work with their peers and parents.



“The key message for the program was: art isn't about the end product, it is about how you feel when you are creating it.”

3.1 Implementation

Sessions were planned to support curriculum and wellbeing goals and were gently facilitated by educators and artists. The following table outlines the program.

Session One: Introduction to local birds of the Adelaide and Mt Lofty Ranges	
Overview	Art medium
Journalling basics, bird identification, and sketching details using local feathers from threatened and common bird species	Lead pencil with blenders
Session Two: Bird features and exploring dispositions	
Overview	Art medium
Exploring dispositions of birds and the similarities between students. Selection of three key birds that reflected their preference for dispositions.	Coloured pencil with blenders
Looking closely at, and sketching/colouring, bird head features such as beaks, eyes, shape and patterns.	
Session Three: Bird body shapes and watercolour techniques	
Overview	Art medium
Introduction to watercolour painting and techniques with a focus on three local birds aligned with each student	Watercolour paint (various techniques)
Sessions Four to Seven: Experimentation and final art pieces with mixed mediums	
Overview	Art medium
Experimentation with different mediums continued, feature bird selected based on closest alignment of dispositions, final art works created and student reflection.	Mixed
Celebration: Exhibiting to occur	
Overview	
Student artworks celebrated through an exhibition in the October School holidays.	





4.i Evaluation

Qualitative reflections highlighted how creating art in natural settings promoted mindfulness, relaxation, social connection, and a sense of freedom to experiment. Students connected personally to birds such as the Eastern Spinebill, White-plumed Honeyeater, and Rainbow Lorikeet, and expressed eagerness for deeper learning opportunities such as exploring bird behaviours and habitats more thoroughly:

Did you connect with any special birds during the project?		
“One of the birds I chose to draw was the White-plumed Honeyeater, and even though it was difficult to draw, I felt connected to it.” <i>Student</i> 	“The welcome swallow mostly and I loved painting it. And I fell in love with the Eastern spinebill.” <i>Student</i> 	“I loved when I saw one of my birds in real life [rainbow lorikeet]. I feel like I had a connection.” <i>Student</i> 

To further understand the impact of our programs on individuals in relation to their connection to nature, an evaluation case study has been developed. It provides an overview of survey methodology, analysis and recommendations.

In the example of Birds in Focus, key findings from the evaluation case study included:

- The Birds in Focus program strongly supported wellbeing and nature connection among participating students.
- Sixty-five percent reported feeling calm while creating art outdoors, and forty-three percent felt happy, with many also **feeling proud, curious, and excited**.
- When asked if the program was **good for their wellbeing**, 78% responded “yes” and 26% “a little bit.”
- An overwhelming 91% felt a special connection to a particular bird during the project, demonstrating the program’s success in **fostering empathy** and **deeper connection to nature**.
- Artistic development was significant, with 96% of students reporting improved skills.

The full evaluation report is available at the Supporting Documentation web link for this reporting period.



4.ii Qualitative evidence

The program's blend of environmental education, art, and wellbeing aligned closely with holistic educational goals and supported the development of resilient, nature-connected young learners.

In addition to student feedback, teachers that were directly involved were also surveyed with results indicating strong outcomes for student wellbeing and connection:

Do you believe the Birds in Focus project supported student wellbeing?

"Students were able to learn both in and about nature. Utilising the physical environment as both inspiration and a regulation tool supported their wellbeing which ultimately deepens their learning experience."

Teacher

"The learning was not rushed and allowed for numerous drafts and edits of their artwork. This intrinsic motivation is key to wellbeing and connects with Self Determination Theory where the intertwining of Autonomy, Competence and Relatedness are fundamental to human motivation and wellbeing."

Teacher





Pippin's Spinebill

When first introduced to the Birds in Focus program, Pippin selected three bird species that reflected his self-perceived dispositions: Rainbow Lorikeet (curious), Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoo (brave), and Eastern Spinebill (playful). After considering the behavioural traits of each bird, Pippin chose the Eastern Spinebill as his Bird in Focus.

With each lesson, Pippin's artistic style evolved, and his engagement remained high. His drawings of the Eastern Spinebill grew in detail, as did his pride and sense of achievement, each piece uniquely his own. Over time, Pippin developed not only as a young artist but also grew in confidence and connection to not only the Eastern Spinebill but other local birds.

The flexible, open-ended nature of the program gave Pippin the time and space he needed to explore his identity and express himself creatively. Gentle facilitation provided guidance and encouragement, but students were mostly free to experiment and create in ways that reflected their own instincts and styles.

Pippin's journey illustrates how nature-based art activities can foster wellbeing, mindfulness, and a deeper connection to the natural world while nurturing each student's sense of self.



Pippin's first drawing of a spinebill



Pippin's second drawing of a spinebill



Pippin's third drawing of a spinebill



"I really loved drawing the Eastern Spinebill, it made me feel proud"



5. Challenges, Reflections & Learnings

Key challenges	Action taken	Outcome
Determining the selection of birds	20 native birds were selected based on a number of factors including localised data about common species and likelihood of encountering them in a school/urban environment. (Selecting the Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoo was based on its threatened status and although not encountered in schools, it is iconic of the Adelaide and Mt Lofty Ranges and it was important to incorporate conservation messages of declining bird species.)	Most birds, at some point in the project were encountered through either sound or sight.
Incorporating learner dispositions in an accessible way	Each bird was assessed against eight dispositions (curiosity, adaptability, playful, teamwork, resilient, brave, observant, calm) and assigned those that aligned with their behavioural traits. They were then categorised under each disposition.	Once students identified their own preference for dispositions (i.e. playful) they selected a bird that also shared the disposition (i.e. Rainbow Lorikeet). Students moved through this process swiftly without complication.
Student absenteeism	As the program was a sequence, when a student was absent they would skip a medium. The project duration was 7 weeks which intentionally provided a buffer for students to have a sufficient amount of time to complete a final piece.	All student produced final artworks including those who were absent one or more lessons.
Accessibility	Adjustable tables were used and set up in outside areas that were deemed accessible. Several students were colour blind and labelled supplies were integrated into the art kits.	All participating students were able to create freely with no accessibility issues identified.

Learnings

- Success looks different for every child and when it comes to art, having agency and creative choice is paramount
- Having the lessons outside (with exception of inclement weather) was a key factor to students feeling safe, calm and connected in and with nature
- The use of learner dispositions supported the students to develop a deeper connection to birds as it helped them identify themselves in an animal
- Consistency and duration of the project enabled students to grow their skills, connection and build a sense of belonging with the group

Recommendations

1. Continue to refine dispositions and develop supporting resources to enable students to connect more deeply with more than one bird at a time
2. Given the success on student wellbeing expand the program to sites including schools in areas of disadvantage
3. Given the success on student connection with nature, continue the program across more sites and continue measuring outcomes
4. Consider expanding the program to other cohorts of children and young people such as those in care or with a care experience
5. Develop teacher and student resources to support connecting with birds through art
6. Incorporate storytelling through the use of props to deepen wellbeing impact
7. Look at other impact tools such as the Wellbeing Engagement Collection data in public sites (where relevant)



6. Next steps

Several next steps are either underway or in a planning phase:

- Three sites have been engaged for term 3 with another 2 currently being determined for Term 4
- At the completion of Term 4 the program will again be evaluated with the view of continuing and expanding in 2026 with the diversity of birds set to expand.
- Resources using student illustrations are in development including posters, identification resources, and fact sheets
- We are set to trial teaching resources with those involved in the project over Term 3 and 4
- The planning for an exhibition of students work is currently underway

7. Conclusion

Birds in Focus has set a new benchmark for nature-based education by placing student wellbeing at the heart of environmental learning. Through art and outdoor exploration, students were given a safe space to express themselves, develop mindfulness, and foster a genuine sense of connection, both to their peers and the natural world. The positive changes reported in calmness, pride, and emotional resilience underscore the value of creative agency and time spent in nature as essential ingredients for wellbeing.

These personal shifts extend far beyond the classroom. By connecting dispositions like curiosity and resilience with the behaviours of local birds, students not only learned about biodiversity but also discovered new ways to understand themselves and their community. Teachers observed improvements in social relationships, focus, and sense of belonging, demonstrating that nature-based art doesn't just support learning, it cultivates the emotional foundations of lifelong stewardship.

The lasting outcomes of enhanced student wellbeing, increased environmental literacy, and the creation of vibrant, student-led resources reflect the unique power of this approach. As Birds in Focus expands, it aims to inspire even more young people to care for their environment and themselves, directly advancing Green Adelaide's vision for a cooler, greener, healthier, and more resilient city. With student wellbeing as a guiding principle, this program sets a replicable standard for future projects rooted in both the care of nature and the care of our young people.

Australian Magpie
Luca, 10 yrs old



Noisy Miner
Aurora, 12 yrs old





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