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Birds of remnant vegetation on the Mornington Peninsula, Victoria, Australia: the role of interiors, edges and roadsides

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Habitat loss and fragmentation on the Mornington Peninsula, Victoria, Australia, has resulted in a mosaic of forest patches, forest edges abutted by agricultural land and linear habitat strips amidst a human-modified land matrix. To examine the use of forest elements by the avifauna in this landscape, bird populations were sampled along fixed transects established within forest interiors, on forest edges and along forested roadsides. A total of 60 species was recorded during this study, five of which were introduced. Species richness and diversity did not differ significantly between the three habitat elements, but avifaunal composition varied considerably. The species assemblages of all habitat elements differed significantly, with forest interiors and roadsides showing the greatest difference and forest interiors and forest edges showing the least degree of difference. Forest-dependent bird species used both interiors and edges. Interiors differed from edges and roadsides in having lower abundances of open country species, predatory species and introduced species. A clear gradient of change in bird communities from forest interiors to roadside vegetation was observed. This study suggests that the interiors of medium-sized (<1 000 ha) patches may play an important role in conserving bird biodiversity on a local level as they provide refuge for forest-dependent native species in extensively cleared landscapes.