

Where do butterflies go in a cyclone?

A few days after cyclone Yasi I saw perfectly formed butterflies, with no wing damage, searching for nectar in the few flowers that were left in my garden

As the clean up from cyclone Yasi continues, it is important to remember that animals use tree hollows and fallen logs wherein to take shelter and build nests.

Cyclone Larry left a number of broken trees on my property and in the last five years, I have been delighted to watch fig parrots burrow a hole into the dead trunk of an old sarsaparilla tree. A broken branch on a paperbark has left a hollow and a family of sugar gliders now makes it their home.

A family of frogmouth owls have found hollows in one of the trees on the hill behind my house and have had several successful breeding seasons over the last few years. For some unknown reason they often perch on the tall gate post at night; they are there to greet me when I come home after an evening out.

After TC Yasi I searched for my animal friends and found them all safe in their hollows. These trees that were damaged by TC Larry miraculously survived Yasi.

Alan and Stacey Franks who build nest boxes for wildlife say that "in Australia there are approximately 114 different species of birds, 83 mammal species, 79 reptile species and 27 amphibian species that use tree hollows for nesting and or shelter."

When cleaning up after a cyclone like Yasi, it is not necessary to remove broken or fallen trees from forested areas.

In fact, the debris is integral to the resilience of the forest. Rain and humidity will work with fungi and micro organisms to convert leaves, branches and fallen tree to humus.

This is a vital part of the nutrient cycle in the rainforest. Small trees which are saplings of primary rainforest species, sometimes dormant on the forest floor for over 100 years, will be stimulated into growth by the sunlight and the changed micro climate: they will start to reach for the sky no longer inhibited by the dense shade of their parent trees. Clearing tree debris in the forest will damage these sapling trees.

Seed held in the branches of the trees that fell to the wind will sprout and be nourished by the abundant nutrients released from the cyclone debris. In a few years seedlings and saplings will grow to form a new forest canopy. It only takes that long.

Clearing by machine or fire will break the natural cycle and the subsequent rainforest will not have the resilience or diversity in tree regrowth or animal habitat that the natural system would recreate if left alone.

Some branches will fall into rivers and creeks and create a habitat for aquatic fauna. A few branches in a creek will slow the flow of water in flash flood events. However too much debris in waterways may dam the water and cause flooding upstream. Always seek council advice before clearing streams or waterways.

Vegetation management laws still apply to cyclone-damaged forest however when uncertain, contact the appropriate authority before you get started.

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