

## Chapter 4

# The understorey

In a woodland, the understorey can be critical for the existence of other plants and wildlife. The understorey provides feeding and nesting sites for many birds and mammals. It also provides them with shelter from heavy rain and extreme temperatures and gives them cover from potential predators. In some places it plays an integral role in contributing to the productivity of woodland ecosystems, particularly through the nitrogen-fixing capabilities of understorey plants such as wattles.

A simple definition of an understorey is the layer of vegetation occurring below the tree canopy. In woodlands the understorey can be comprised of shrubs, wattles, young eucalypt saplings and other kinds of plants that are shorter than the canopy trees.

RIGHT: This Blakely's red gum woodland has an understorey of hedge wattle. Hedge wattles often form extensive thickets, with each tree having an intricate network of branches armed with fine thorns – making them ideal places for small birds to build a nest protected from predators. The deep golden flowers and large seed pods are also a valuable food source for animals.



LEFT: This box-ironbark woodland has an understorey of *Dillwynia*, also known as the 'egg and bacon' plant. The seeds of 'egg and bacon' plants are long-lived – they can survive a drought and recover well when wetter conditions return.