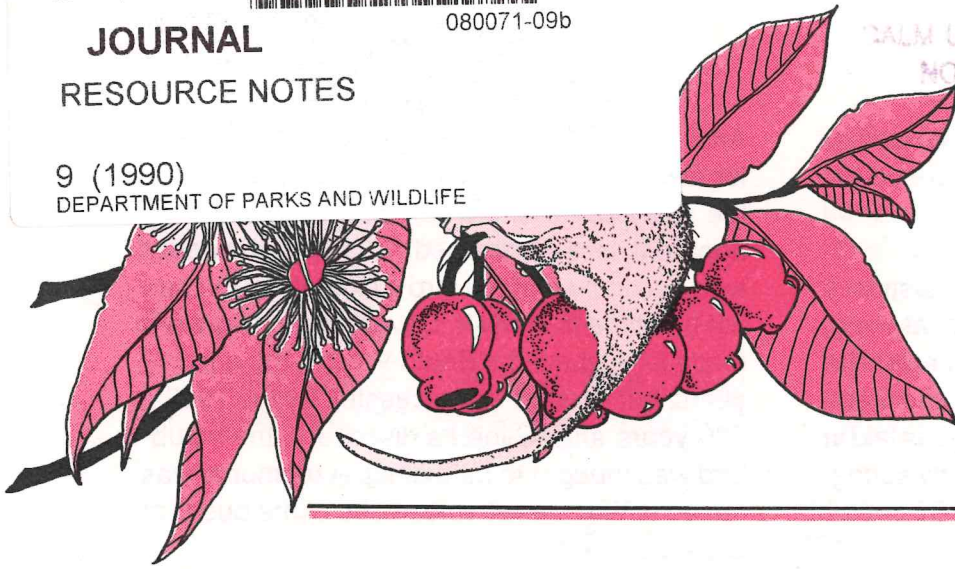




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## THE NOISY SCRUB BIRD

### Back from the brink

The noisy scrub-bird (*Atrichornis clamosus*) is a celebrated but elusive character. Celebrated because it has come back from the brink of extinction; elusive because it is only found in areas of dense scrub and overgrown swamps near Albany, Western Australia. Although it is protected by the Wildlife Conservation Act and its habitat managed by the Department of Conservation and Land Management, the noisy scrub-bird is still considered vulnerable to extinction.

### Heard but rarely seen

Spotting a noisy scrub-bird is a challenge. With their drab plumage, secretive ways, and preference for dense vegetation, the birds are more commonly heard than seen. In fact, the species earned its name from the male's loud territorial call. This far-reaching song provides a means of monitoring numbers. Singing males are regularly counted and their location recorded.

The noisy scrub-bird is one of only two members of an ancient Australian bird family. The other is the rufous scrub-bird (*Atrichornis rufesens*) which lives in the rainforests of northern NSW and southern Queensland.

The scrub-bird's nearest relatives are the lyrebirds of eastern Australia.

### A way of life

Scrub-birds feed on insects and other small creatures found in the leaf litter and on low shrubs. Analysis of their droppings reveals the remains of ants, spiders, beetles and cockroaches. Unlike many other ground foragers, scrub-birds shovel leaf litter with their heads rather than scratch it with their feet.

People fortunate enough to see a noisy scrub-bird get the impression of a fast-moving brown bird flitting tantalisingly in and out of view. If it is a male at close quarters, the intensity of its song may ring in your ears. The song advertises a male's occupation of a particular territory, his willingness to defend it against intruders, and his intention to attract a female. A loud, penetrating call is an advantage in dense scrub where visual contact is limited.

Not all adult males sing this territorial song. Some may be two years old before they are able to sing. Furthermore, some stay in their parents' territory for many years, remaining quiet and unthreatening until the dominant male

disappears or dies. Then the young male, familiar with territory and its inhabitants, takes over. This ensures continuity of breeding.

Male scrub-birds are larger and more distinctly marked than females. With no territorial song, the females are even more difficult to find. The female builds the nest, and incubates and feeds the young. A single, relatively large egg is laid in mid-winter and the chick fledges in early spring. Only one chick is raised by each pair in a year.

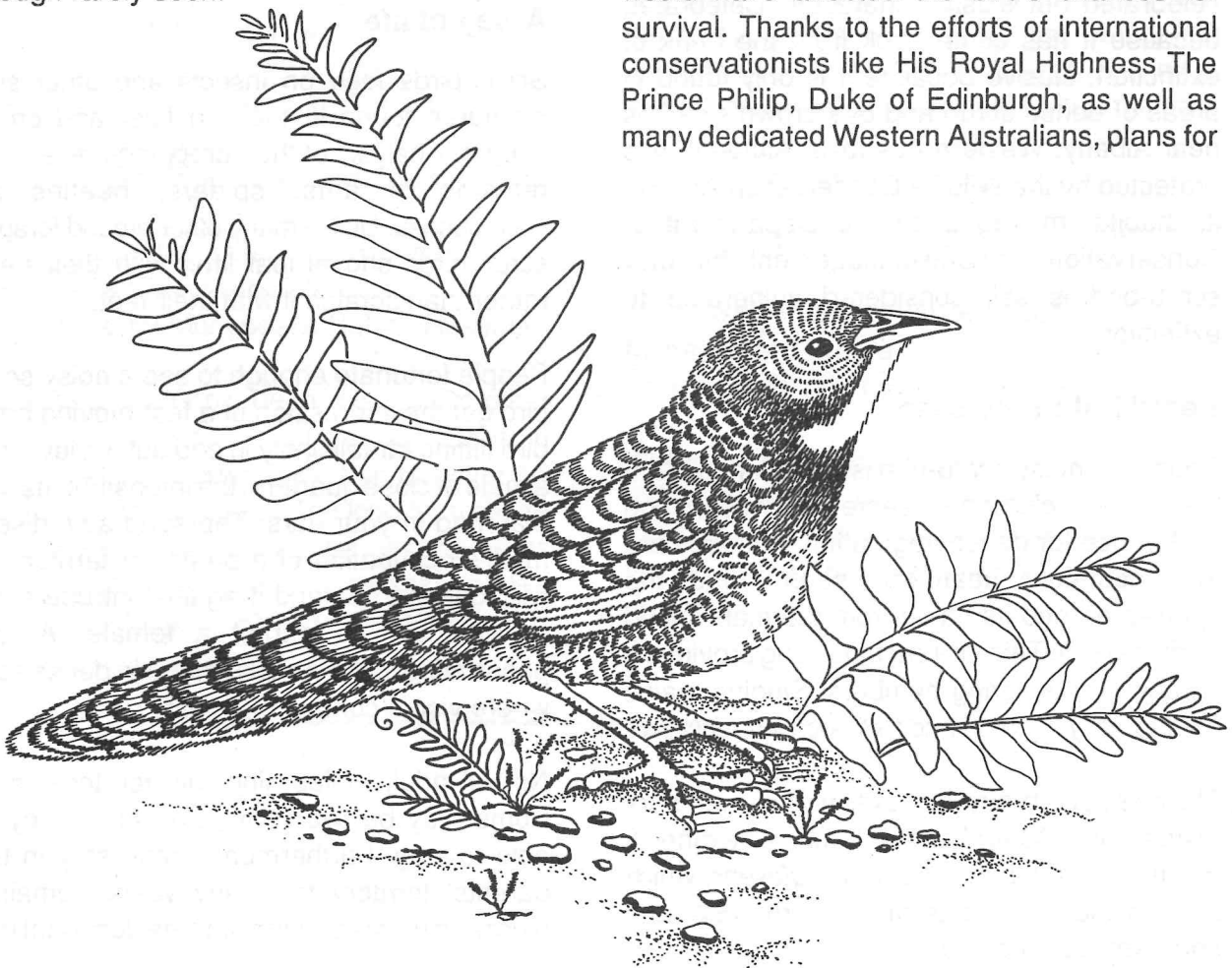
### **An historical perspective**

Aboriginal people living near King George Sound called the noisy scrub-bird Jimuluk. John Gilbert (who collected plants and animals for the famous nineteenth-century English ornithologist John Gould) recorded several birds at Drakesbrook, near Waroona, and also heard the birds at Augusta and Albany. The Albany area appears to have been the species' stronghold, and for the first 40 years of European settlement the scrub-birds may have been reasonably common, although rarely seen.

After 1889, as a result of clearing the swamps for agriculture and changed burning practices, the noisy scrub-bird was heard no more. This apparent loss concerned many ornithologists who had known of the bird's existence, but had not had time to study it. Several searches were made throughout the South-West in the ensuing years, but all were unsuccessful. By the 1940s, 100 years after Gilbert's discovery, the scrub-bird was thought to be extinct. A memorial was raised to the "sweet-voiced bird of the bush" at Drakesbrook.

### **Rediscovery**

Albany school teacher Harley Webster's claim in 1961 that he had rediscovered the long-lost scrub-bird at Two Peoples Bay caused a sensation. The population he found was very small, with only 40 singing males counted in one area around Mt Gardner, at the southern end of the Bay. Furthermore, its existence was threatened. Plans for a townsite at Two Peoples Bay were well advanced and, if implemented, would have affected the bird's chances for survival. Thanks to the efforts of international conservationists like His Royal Highness The Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh, as well as many dedicated Western Australians, plans for

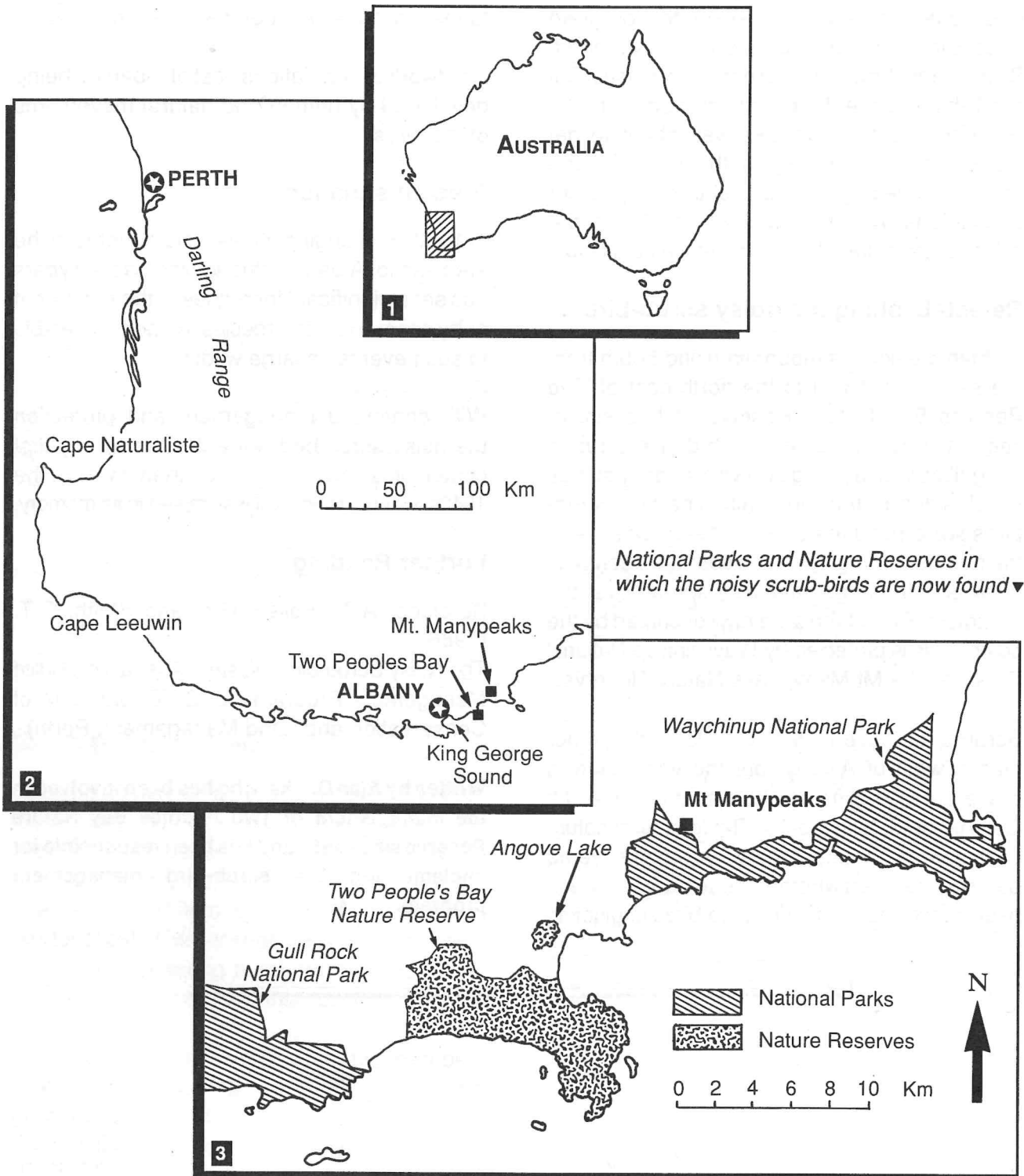


the townsite were eventually scrapped and the Western Australian Government created Two Peoples Bay Nature Reserve to protect the scrub-birds and their habitat.

### Research efforts

The CSIRO carried out research on the noisy scrub-bird in the 1960s and 1970s. The aim was

to discover the species' basic biology and find out how best to manage scrub-birds and other threatened species occurring within the Two Peoples Bay Nature Reserve. One important finding was that scrub-birds need long intervals between fires, as frequent fire destroys their habitat. Scrub-birds are most common in areas that have not been burnt for 20 years or more. Wildfire exclusion became the major



management strategy to preserve habitat at this nature reserve and this has been successfully maintained since 1970. The maturing vegetation has created more habitat for the birds. In response, their numbers have steadily increased.

Initially, the population was thought to be declining. CSIRO set up a captive breeding experiment at their Helena Valley facilities to breed scrub-birds for re-introduction into the wild. Unfortunately, funding for the program ceased in 1981 and the project was abandoned. By that time, however, a program in which adult scrub-birds were to be transferred from Mt Gardner to Mt Manypeaks was about to get under way. This lessened the need for the captive breeding work; establishing other populations by this means would reduce the risk of a single fire affecting the entire population.

### **Re-establishing the noisy scrub-bird**

Mt Manypeaks is a mountain rising 500m from the sea some 15km to the north-east of Two Peoples Bay Nature Reserve. It has similar vegetation to Mt Gardner, with dense scrub in the gullies which plunge down the rocky slopes on all sides of the mountain. The first scrub-birds were released there in 1983. Gradually, the number of singing males counted each year grew, and the birds have now spread over the mountain. Part of the area now occupied by the scrub-birds is protected by Waychinicup National Park and the Mt Manypeaks Nature Reserve.

Scrub-birds have now been released in other places west of Albany, but the vegetation in these areas is different from that of either Mt Gardner or Mt Manypeaks. The long-term nature of this work means it may be several years before it is known whether these transfers have been successful. In 1990, scrub-birds originating

from these transfers accounted for 20 per cent of the population.

The growth of the Mt Gardner population of noisy scrub-birds in the 1970s and 1980s led to the natural colonisation of suitable areas. The first such colonisation occurred along Gardner Creek and Gardner Lake. This area now supports around 60 singing males. Dispersal has continued and small numbers of scrub-birds are now found to the north and west of the nature reserve.

A network of populations east of Albany is being developed by human and natural movements of the birds.

### **Present situation**

In 1990, 276 singing males were counted in the area east of Albany. Although the past 20 years has seen significant increases in the number of noisy scrub-birds, the species remains vulnerable to such events as large wildfires.

With continued management and protection the noisy scrub-bird will enter the twenty-first century in a stronger position than it was in the 1940s, when a memorial was raised in its memory.

### **Further Reading**

Burbidge, A.A., Folley, G.L. and Smith, G.T. (1986)  
The Noisy Scrub-bird. Western Australian Wildlife Management Program No. 2. (Department of Conservation and Land Management, Perth).

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