


Resource Notes

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 Department of Conservation and Land Management

THE NOISY SCRUB-BIRD

The Noisy Scrub-bird is well named - its song is so loud that it can sometimes be heard a kilometre away. The species has developed its loud call to communicate in the very dense scrub in which it lives. Because it is dependent on a special type of habitat, which has become increasingly uncommon, it has become very rare.

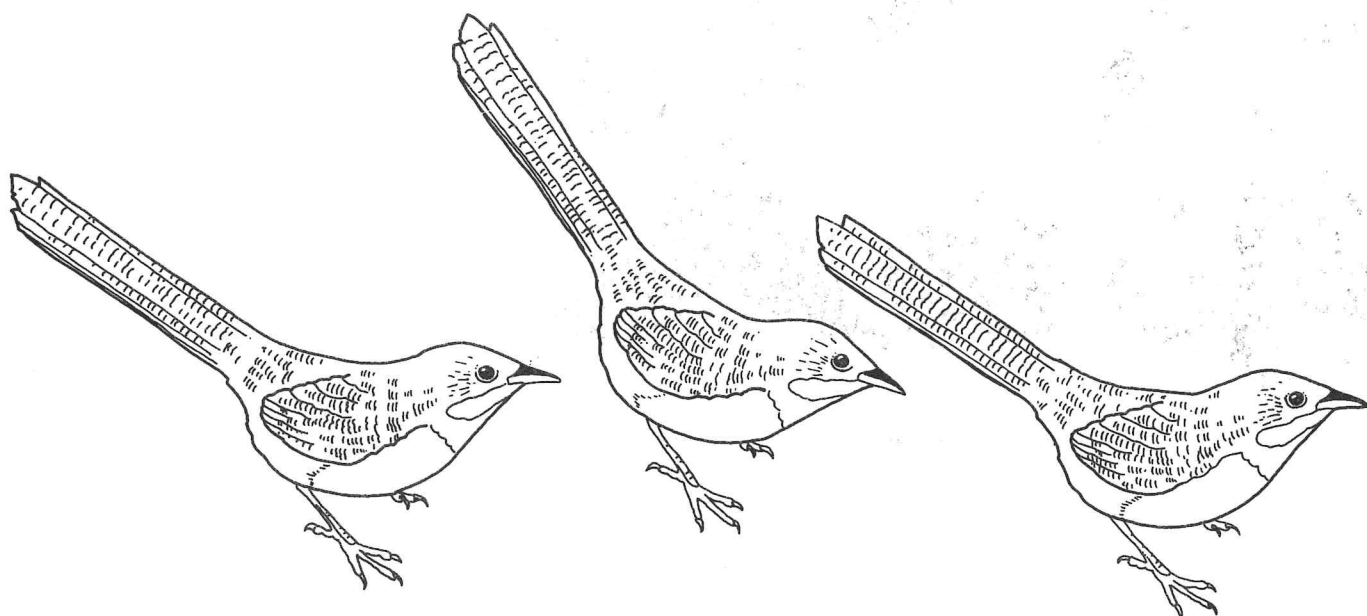
Their habitat is the margin between swamp and forest in the wetter parts of the south-west of Western Australia. The almost impenetrable layer of sedges and shrubs at the edge of the swamp provides cover as well as sites and material for nests. The forest provides feeding habitat.

Noisy Scrub-birds are small and solidly built with strong pointed beaks, long powerful legs, long graduated tails, short rounded wings and brown plumage, ideal attributes for birds that live close to the ground in dense vegetation. They are fast and agile runners but poor fliers and are not easy to see because of their camouflage colouration and the thick vegetation. They spend most of

their time on the ground and feed mainly on insects.

Males are territorial, defending their territories with their loud song, which is heard throughout the year. Females do not sing loudly and spend most of their time in a small area around the nest, which is usually near the edge of a male's territory. The nest, which is located only about 20 cm from the ground, is built from sedges and is globular with a side entrance. Egg-laying takes place in the winter. Incubation lasts 36 to 38 days and the chick is cared for by the mother for about three months.

Although the Noisy Scrub-bird with its loud call would have been well known to Aborigines for many thousands of years we now know of only one Aboriginal name - Tjimiluk, from the Albany area. The first record of the bird by Europeans came from Drakesbrook, near Waroona, in 1842, and other birds were soon found near Augusta, Mount Barker and Albany. However, after 1889 no birds were located for a long time, and the



species was feared extinct until it was rediscovered at Two Peoples Bay, east of Albany, in 1961, within what is now the Two Peoples Bay Nature Reserve. When the Noisy Scrub-bird was rediscovered there were only 40 to 45 singing males at Two Peoples Bay. By 1985, after careful management of the Nature Reserve, there were 157 singing males. The rapid expansion of the population followed a successful policy of fire exclusion.

Studies have shown that birds are unable to live in places that have been burnt in the previous four to ten years (the regeneration rate depends on how wet an area is and whether the fire destroyed the overstorey). Unburnt habitat remains suitable for Noisy Scrub-birds for a long time - well over 40 years.

For many years after rediscovery there was only one population of Noisy Scrub-birds, a situation that is fraught with danger since one catastrophe could have wiped out every bird. Then, as numbers increased, some birds colonised a new area at Two Peoples Bay and management has concentrated on preventing any one fire from affecting both areas at once. However, having only two populations very close to each other still presented a danger of losing the species, so methods were developed to establish it in completely new places.

The technology for catching, keeping and transporting Noisy Scrub-birds was developed with the help of the New Zealand Wildlife Service, who had learnt to shift rare birds to new places some years before. Between 1983 and 1985 the nucleus of a new population was established at Mount Manypeaks and in 1986 the first birds were released in the Walpole-Nornalup National Park. Some time will have to pass before it is known whether these new populations will breed and increase in numbers, and much work still needs to be done before the Noisy Scrub-bird will be out of danger.

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).

Written by Andrew Burbidge, of the Department of Conservation and Land Management, who has been involved in implementing management of the Two Peoples Bay Nature Reserve for the conservation of the Noisy Scrub-bird, and in the program to translocate the bird.