Cocky Notes

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2025 GREAT COCKY COUNT WRAP UP: LOW NUMBERS A CAUSE FOR CONCERN

Merryn Pryor
Black-Cockatoo Project Coordinator

On Sunday 6th April over 660 registered volunteers, along with friends and family, headed out in the evening to count black-cockatoos as they flew into their evening roost site as part of the annual Great Cocky Count (GCC). The 2025 event was the 15th Great Cocky Count since its inception in 2010.

A total of 448 roost sites were surveyed from Chapman Valley in the north to Esperance in the southeast (Figures 1 & 2). Of the 448 roost sites surveyed, 275 of these were occupied, giving an overall occupancy rate of 61%. 124 of these roost sites recorded Forest Red-tailed Black-Cockatoos only roosting, 103 recorded White-tailed Black-Cockatoos (Baudin's and/or Carnaby's) only, and 48 recorded both White-tailed Black-Cockatoos and Forest Red-tailed Black-Cockatoos roosting.

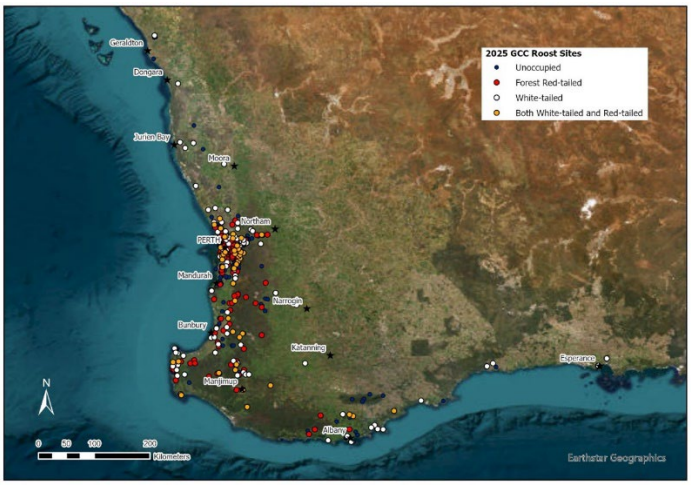

Figure 1: Black-cockatoo roost sites counted during the 2025 Great Cocky Count.

A total of 15,786 White-tailed Black-Cockatoos (WTBCs) were recorded overall, with 6,298 individuals recorded on the Perth-Peel Coastal Plain, 1,148 recorded on the Northern Darling Scarp and Plateau, and 8,340 recorded in regional areas (Figure 2).

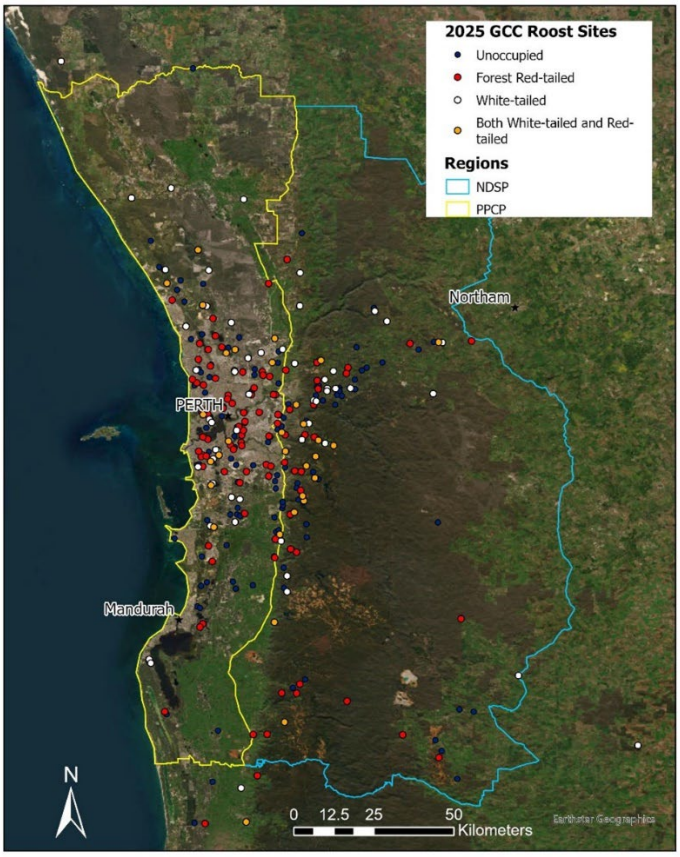

Figure 2: Black-cockatoo roost sites on the Perth-Peel Coastal Plain (PPCP) and Northern Darling Scarp and Plateau (NDSP) during the 2025 Great Cocky Count.

This was the lowest recorded total number of WTBCs since 2015, as well as the lowest recorded count for the Perth-Peel Coastal Plain and the Northern Darling Scarp and Plateau since 2015. Roost sizes ranged from 1 bird to 1,420 birds. The largest roost site of 1,420 birds was recorded in Nilgen, followed by two roost sites of 1,386 and 781 birds in the pine plantations at the Pinjar Motorcycle Area, giving a total of 2,167 birds in the area. The roost that has traditionally been known as the Mega Roost, located in the northern area of the Gnangara-Pinjar-Yanchep Pine Plantations, recorded only 282 birds, the lowest count recorded for this site.

A total of 4,194 Forest Red-tailed Black-Cockatoos were recorded overall, with 2,095 birds recorded on the Perth-Peel Coastal Plain, 976 birds on the Northern Darling Scarp and Plateau and 1,123 birds in regional areas (Figure 3).

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Roost sizes ranged from 1 bird to 150 birds, with the largest roost site located in Mungalup. The second largest roost site of 141 birds occurred in the Pinjar Motorcycle Area. Over the last few years more FRTBCs have been recorded at roost sites in the northernmost suburbs of Perth and northern pine plantations, indicating that the range of Forest Red-tailed Black-Cockatoos may still be expanding on the Perth-Peel Coastal Plain.

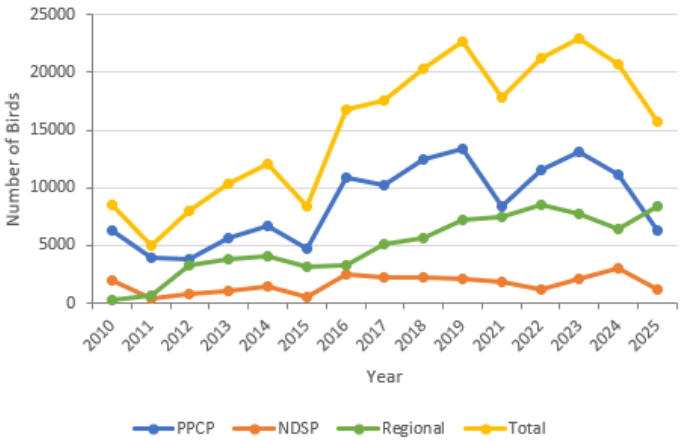

Figure 3: Counts of White-tailed Black-Cockatoos from 2010 to 2025, showing the proportion of birds counted on the Perth-Peel Coastal Plain (PPCP), Northern Darling Scarp and Plateau (NDSP), in regional areas and in total each year.

A total of 4,194 Forest Red-tailed Black-Cockatoos were recorded overall, with 2,095 birds recorded on the Perth-Peel Coastal Plain, 976 birds on the Northern Darling Scarp and Plateau and 1,123 birds in regional areas (Figure 3). Roost sizes ranged from 1 bird to 150 birds, with the largest roost site located in Mungalup. The second largest roost site of 141 birds occurred in the Pinjar Motorcycle Area. Over the last few years more FRTBCs have been recorded at roost sites in the northernmost suburbs of Perth and northern pine plantations, indicating that the range of Forest Red-tailed Black-Cockatoos may still be expanding on the Perth-Peel Coastal Plain.

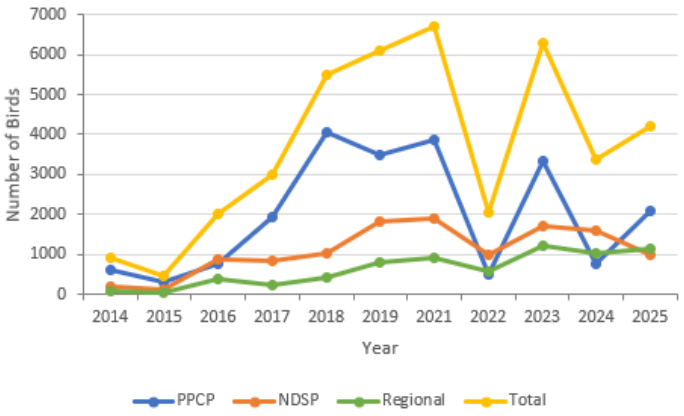

Figure 4: Counts of Forest Red-tailed Black-Cockatoos from 2014 to 2025, showing the proportion of birds counted on the Perth-Peel Coastal Plain (PPCP), Northern Darling Scarp and Plateau (NDSP), in regional areas and in total each year.

The low numbers recorded this year, particularly for the White-tailed Black-Cockatoos, is concerning.

While it is impossible to pinpoint the exact reason behind the drop, several factors may have contributed. The low count of 282 Carnaby's Black-Cockatoos in the Mega Roost, which traditionally records several thousand birds each year (average of 4882 birds from 2016–2024), had a significant impact on the overall WTBC count on the Perth-Peel Coastal Plain. Although harvesting of the Gnangara-Pinjar-Yanchep Pine Plantations ceased at the end of 2023, we are likely witnessing a delayed impact of the loss of thousands of hectares of foraging habitat from previous years, affecting the number of birds the remaining pines can support. While it is possible these Carnaby's have moved on to new roost sites yet to be discovered and counted in the GCC, it is also possible that this broadscale clearing of most pine plantations has caused a direct reduction in the Carnaby's population.

Another factor may be the lasting impact of the widespread drought and heatwave conditions in southwest WA in 2023–2024. The dry, hot conditions not only caused widespread plant deaths, but also affected seed set months later in surviving native plants, including key black-cockatoo foraging resources like banksias and eucalypts. This reduced cockatoo food in both breeding and non-breeding areas and may have impacted this year's count. As roost site use is generally linked to foraging resource availability, birds may have shifted away from previously preferred roosts if surrounded by less food. More sinisterly, the lower numbers are likely in part a direct measure of real population decline, following both a widely acknowledged poor breeding season (so fewer new birds joining the population) and an unknown amount of adult mortality due to starvation, as evidenced by Carnaby's admitted to Perth Zoo in poor body condition between July and October.

This year's GCC results emphasise the importance of long-term consistent monitoring in detecting changes to threatened species populations over time. BirdLife, along with many Natural Resource Management (NRM), Landcare and conservation groups, are already working on projects delivering on-ground conservation actions including revegetation, artificial hollow installation, maintenance of natural and artificial hollows, provision of water sources, and protection of critical habitat. It is hoped these results will galvanise further on-ground conservation action, habitat protection and stronger nature laws to support black-cockatoos across southwest WA.

Further analysis of the Great Cocky Count data is now being undertaken, and a full report will be released later this year. Thanks again to all the wonderful volunteers that took part and made the 2025 Great Cocky Count possible.

The Great Cocky Count is supported by funding from the Western Australian Government's State NRM Program.

BAUDIN'S BLACK-COCKATOO UPLISTING REJECTED

Benjamin Barrett
Black-Cockatoo Recovery Coordinator

In July, the WA Government rejected a nomination to uplist the conservation status of Baudin's Black-Cockatoo from Endangered to Critically Endangered under state legislation.

This decision comes in sharp contrast to the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), which already recognises the species as Critically Endangered.

BirdLife WA's 2023 nomination set out clear evidence of a 90% population decline in 40 years, with as few as 2,500 mature birds remaining. Yet, after 18 months, the WA Threatened Species Scientific Committee rejected the bid, citing "insufficient data".

The rejection means Baudin's will continue to receive weaker protections under WA law, with fewer safeguards against habitat loss and reduced offset requirements for developments. Much of the pressure on the species comes from clearing in the Northern Jarrah Forest, where mining proposals overlap with key non-breeding habitat.

BirdLife WA has called on the State Government to review the decision and align its listings with the IUCN's assessment.

HOPE IN A HOLLOW – FIRST RECORDED USE OF AN ARTIFICIAL NEST BY BAUDIN'S COCKATOO

Dr. Simon Cherriman
The ReCycOlogy Project
Photos by Dr. Simon Cherriman

In March this year I was thrilled to confirm a successful breeding event by Baudin's Cockatoo (*Zanda baudinii*) in the Shire of Augusta/Margaret River, which I believe is the first record of this species successfully using an artificial hollow.

The 'top entry' nest-box, built using measurements provided in 2011 by Ron Johnstone from the WA Museum, was made from recycled form-ply with hardwood offcuts attached to the entrance and a hardwood chewing post fitted vertically inside, and installed on private land along with 4 other identical boxes in early 2018. The box had been monitored seldom since installation, however more detailed checks in 2023 and early 2024 confirmed neither it nor the other 4 boxes had been used by any black cockatoo species (no external or internal chewing, or scats) to date.

In the second half of February 2025, I received information from land-owners that adult white-tailed cockatoos had been observed perching on/near and entering box regularly during evenings in late January and early February 2025. After receiving an audio recording of the parents on Monday I drove from Perth to the property early one March morning and observed a large, juvenile white-tailed black cockatoo perching at the box entrance about 1500h. When it had re-entered the box, I climbed up using rope access and photographed the large nestling inside the box (~1645h).

At ~1845h a pair of adult Baudin's Cockatoos arrived and perched in the nest-tree adjacent to the nest. The male sat on the distal end of a horizontal limb c. 10m from the box, and the female perched adjacent to the box. Soon after this, the female flew to the box, leaned into the entrance, and was seen and heard feeding the nestling.

The pair remained in the vicinity for some time, flying between the box and a nearby perch, with contact calls made by the female clearly being the 'wicha-wicha' call characteristic of this species. After one more feed by the adult female, the pair left and the nestling descended into and remained inside the box. By then it was nearly 1930h.

This finding is significant because it proves the same nest-box design is suitable for all three species of endemic black cockatoos in south-west WA (I based the 'top entry' box on a design I sketched in my bird-

watching notebook more than 25 years ago). It also provides proof that such hollows can assist with the species' recovery, provided they are used strategically and are monitored and maintained regularly.

However, Carnaby's cockatoo has successfully bred in artificial hollows for many years, but this has not led to an improved conservation status. The species (endangered under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999) is still declining due to ongoing habitat loss. We have a lot of work to do to improve this situation.

COMMUNITY FOR COCKIES

Corrina Ossinger
Wilson Inlet Catchment Committee

The Wilson Inlet Catchment Committee (WICC) is delivering a landscape-scale program to conserve all three species of Western Australia's threatened black cockatoos: Forest Red-tailed, Carnaby's, and Baudin's. With over 60% of the catchment area cleared for agriculture decades ago, black cockatoos have lost critical habitat, particularly their nesting hollows and food sources.

To address this, the Community for Cockies program has so far:

- Built and installed 44 nesting boxes suitable for cockies in strategic locations across the catchment
- Protected priority bushland using 20 km of livestock-exclusion fencing
- Collected local native seed in collaboration with an Aboriginal Ranger group
- Grown multi-species native seedlings
- Planted cockatoo-friendly species
- Commenced revegetation of 20 hectares of bushland (to be completed by mid-2026)

The project began in February 2024 and will continue through to the end of 2026. The program also launched in four local schools across Mount Barker and Denmark, with guest presenter Simon Cherriman, whose passion for cockatoos proved infectious. Students first learned about these iconic birds before building nest boxes using recycled materials. Simon then installed one of the boxes high in a tree at each school, offering a memorable hands-on experience.

Earlier this year, the students joined WICC staff to collect native seed, propagate plants, and establish cockatoo gardens beneath the installed boxes. Each site now includes creative signage to help current and future students understand and take pride in their contribution to local conservation. These school-based sanctuaries serve as lasting examples of how young people can take meaningful action to support the survival of these iconic species.

The planting of cockatoo food trees - like marri, banksia, and hakea - alongside nest box installation is vital to keeping these birds fed and breeding successfully. While red-tailed black cockatoos tend to remain near their breeding sites, white-tailed species like Carnaby's and Baudin's migrate seasonally across the region, foraging in places like Bremer Bay or Collie to nesting in tall karri or marri hollows in Denmark and Mt Hallowell. Volunteers have played a big role. Nest boxes were built by Walpole Work Camp and Denmark Men's Shed and local farmers are generously volunteering their time for tree planting and fencing work.

This project is made possible thanks to the generous support of Lotterywest and the WA State NRM Program.

NICKY SHELTON: CAPTURING AUSTRALIA'S BIRDLIFE ON CANVAS

Benjamin Barrett
Black-Cockatoo Recovery Coordinator

Nicky Shelton is a Western Australian artist whose oil paintings of native birds have earned her recognition both nationally and internationally. Based in the lush Margaret River region, Nicky's work is a celebration of Australia's avian diversity, rendered in a style that blends realism with emotional depth.

After a successful corporate career, Nicky made a bold transition in 2012 to pursue her passion for art full-time. She studied fine art and oil painting techniques, quickly developing a signature style that focuses on the intricate detail and expressive character of birds. Her subjects range from the iconic magpie to endangered species like Carnaby's Black-Cockatoo, each painted with precision and reverence.

Nicky's studio, aptly named The Aviary, is nestled in nature and open by appointment. It serves as both a creative space and a hub for conservation. A committed member of BirdLife Australia, she donates a portion of proceeds from each original painting to support bird conservation efforts. Her art is not only visually stunning—it's a call to protect the fragile ecosystems these birds inhabit.

Her work has been featured in prestigious exhibitions, including the Holmes Art Prize for Realistic Australian Bird Art, and she regularly participates in the Margaret River Region Open Studios. One of her standout pieces, Soul Mates, depicting a pair of Red-tailed black cockatoos, recently won "Best in Show" at the Grey Cube Gallery USA, sixth international Animals art show.

To discover more about Nicky and her work please visit her website www.nickyshelton.com.au or follow her on social media nickysheltonartist.

'Party of Four' by Nicky Shelton.

Nicky Shelton with 'Chick Pea'.

'Soul Mates': Best in Show 2025, Grey Cube Gallery USA.

COCKATOOS VS. LASERS: CAN SCIENCE HELP KEEP THE PEACE?

Kaarissa Harring-Harris
Black-Cockatoo Project Officer

Orchardists have long waged war with fruit-loving parrots, with the battlefield lined with juicy, nutrient-rich apples and pears – who could resist? For farmers, the losses are more than just a few bites; parrots arriving in flocks can quickly clear a tree in very little time.

The gold standard of crop protection is permanent netting – it works, but at significant cost. Many growers simply cannot afford to cover every tree. Instead, a patchwork of "defences" has been trialled over the years including gas guns, sound cannons, visual deterrents (such as bird of prey replicas) and drones. Yet the birds, clever and persistent, often adapt and return to feed.

Among the culprits is Baudin's Black-Cockatoo. Despite legal protection, evidence suggests hundreds may still be illegally killed each year in the name of crop protection. This puts farmers in a difficult position: caught between protecting livelihoods and a species teetering on the edge of extinction.

So, could there be a middle ground? Enter the laser trial.

Bird-scaring lasers project a green beam across orchards throughout the day. The light isn't harmful, but the movement appears unnatural, making birds wary of approaching, in theory. Over two years, BirdLife Australia partnered with local growers to test whether lasers could reduce orchard damage without harming cockatoos. The trial included three lasers and three control sites across four properties in Dwellingup, using automated recording units to detect Baudin's calls.

The early results were promising, with farmers reporting that lasers scared birds away, at least initially. However, over two growing seasons the overall Baudin's presence remained unchanged, though they spent less time in orchards protected by lasers compared to control sites.

While the lasers did not keep Baudin's out entirely, the duration of visits where lasers were installed was 17% shorter, about 3 minutes less.

Unfortunately, the birds often remained nearby and returned to feeding shortly after. Strong seasonal variation between the two seasons suggests external factors also substantially influence bird pressure in orchards, particularly flowering and fruiting of surrounding native vegetation.

Overall, while laser deterrents may offer temporary relief, particularly during peak fruiting season—the findings suggest they could become part of a more bird-friendly "toolkit" for growers. Long-term control will require a more adaptive management strategy. By reducing conflict, farmers can protect crops without putting additional pressure on a species already in decline, and for the Baudin's Black Cockatoo, every step towards coexistence is a step away from the firing line.

THE COCKY CONSERVATION TEAM

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