NOISY SCRUB-BIRD

RECOVERY TEAM

ANNUAL REPORT

1994

by

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for

The Noisy Scrub-bird Recovery Team

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SUMMARY

In 1994 most of the actions specified in the Scrub-bird Recovery Plan were addressed. A new release site was selected at Torndirrup National Park and five males were released there. Female scrub-birds were added to the Mermaid area and additional females taken to Bald Island. A study of invertebrate abundance and availability in known scrub-bird habitat was begun and the radio-tracking project was continued. More blood samples were collected for a genetic assessment project.

All current release areas were monitored and the entire population of singing males was censussed. The total number of singing males reached 474 and the estimated number of individuals would be in the order of 1100. The population as a whole consisted of two large sub-populations (Mt Gardner and Mt Manypeaks), three small (Angove, Lakes and Mt Taylor) and three not yet beyond the release area stage (Bald Island, Mermaid and Stony Hill). Except for the Lakes area the trend was positive in all sub-populations and Mt Manypeaks showed a remarkable 43% increase over the previous year. Altogether scrub-birds occupied 4330 ha in the Albany area.

One disappointing note was the destruction of a large portion of the Mt Taylor sub-population and its habitat in a wildfire shortly after the 1995 New Year.

The final version of the Management Plan for Two Peoples Bay passed through both CALM's Corporate Executive and the National Parks and Nature Conservation Authority by the end of the year. It will be published shortly together with an updated version of the Scrub-bird Recovery Plan. Two Peoples Bay and the Scrub-bird Recovery Plan attracted considerable media attention during 1994.

INTRODUCTION

This report addresses those actions specified in the Scrub-bird Recovery Plan, which were carried out in 1994. The Scrub-bird Recovery Team met on 25 March at the WA Wildlife Research Centre, Woodvale, and discussed a range of matters including the selection of a new release site. The Team met again at Two Peoples Bay on 22 November to discuss the results of the year's translocation, research and population monitoring work.

In general it was an interesting year in which a number of significant achievements were made. Continued expansion of the scrub-bird population at Mt Manypeaks has confirmed the importance of this area for the species. The scrub-birds at Mt Taylor release area also continued an upward trend and appeared set to expand into the available habitat. However, a wildfire has now seriously depleted this sub-population. Although the fire occurred in 1995 it is included in this report so that its implications can be addressed at an early stage. It was the first time fire seriously affected a scrub-bird population in 30 years.

The rediscovery of Gilbert's Potoroo at Two Peoples Bay Nature Reserve in December was a major event in the history of the Reserve. This animal was last officially reported more than a century ago and, in a series of uncanny coincidences with the scrub-bird story, has now made a reappearance. The presence of the potoroo further raises the already high profile of the Reserve as a refuge for threatened species is likely to have a major impact on management and research activities on the Reserve.

RECOVERY PLAN STATUS

The Noisy Scrub-bird Recovery Plan which was approved by CALM Corporate Executive in its draft form is currently being updated and will be presented again to Corporate Executive before being published. Publication of the Plan has been awaiting final approval of the Management Plan for Two Peoples Bay. The intention is to publish both documents at the same time.

RECOVERY PLAN ACTIONS - PROGRESS IN 1993

The Recovery Plan outlines the following actions:

4.1 MANAGEMENT OF TWO PEOPLES BAY NATURE RESERVE

4.1.1 Preparation of a management plan for Two Peoples Bay Nature Reserve

After closure of the period for public submissions to the Draft Management Plan the 130 submissions were analysed by the Planning Team and a final version of the Plan presented to CALM 's Corporate Executive in September 1994. The final version of the Plan was presented to the National Parks and Nature Conservation Authority with minor amendments and a commitment to a change to National Park. The plan was accepted at the Authority's meeting on 6 December 1994. The Plan awaits Ministerial approval before it can be published.

4.1.2 Implementation of management plan

Between January 1993 and December 1994 a total of 34 600 people were estimated to have visited the Reserve. Management actions relevant to scrub-bird management included fox baiting, weed eradication, and road and track maintenance. The replacement of some of the fire control water tanks on Mt Gardner was begun and boundary and internal firebreaks were maintained by slashing. A start was made on broad scale slashing of parts of the low fuel buffer area which was previously maintained by regular patch burning. A major improvement in dieback hygiene facilities on the Reserve was achieved with the installation of a dieback wash down station.

4.1.3 Review of management plan

There has not been a formal review since the Plan has not yet been finalised.

4.2 MANAGEMENT OF OTHER LANDS

4.2.1 CALM-managed public lands

Waychinicup National Park: This area, including Mt Manypeaks Nature Reserve and the unvested land to the north, contains a large and rapidly expanding scrub-bird population (see results of population monitoring below). Its protection and management will be increasingly important in the survival and successful recovery of the species. Over the past few summers a mobile ranger has been stationed at Cheyne Beach on the eastern and of the Park. The ranger provided a strong presence in the area over that time of the year when the Park received most visitors for camping, picnics, maronning, etc. This summer no mobile ranger has been available and the area has had to be covered by Albany District rangers and the Two Peoples Bay ranger on a part time basis.

Fire management in Waychinicup National Park, especially in the western sector, has been discussed with Albany District operations staff. A prescribed burn in the western area would provide some protection to both the scrub-birds and the neighbouring land owner. Further on-site inspections and discussions to assess the practicality and desirability of such a burn will be necessary before a decision can be made to go ahead.

In February part of the Park north of Cheyne Beach Road was burned in a wildfire which originated from a neighbouring farmer's paddock. No scrub-bird habitat was affected.

Torndirrup National Park: Noisy Scrub-birds were released into this National Park for the first time in 1994 (see below). Although a popular tourist park with over 100 000 visitors each year, the areas where the scrub-bird are receive little or no attention from the public. A wildfire occurred in the western part of the Park in December 1994. This area is well to the west of the release site.

4.2.2 Other Public Lands

A wildfire occurred at Mt Taylor within the unvested Gull Rock "National Park" on 8 January 1995. This was probably caused by lightning strike but arson is also a possibility. Fire control was largely in the hands of the local brigade with the assistance of CALM. A total of 800 ha of scrub and gully forest were burnt. About half of this was scrub-bird habitat. Early monitoring indicates that probably nine occupied territories have been affected. This means about 75% of the known population (based on counts of singing males) probably perished. Some sightings of scrub-birds during the fire were reported. Monitoring of both the burnt and unburnt areas will continue. Vegetation plots may be established to monitor plant recovery. A fox baiting program will be

established in the Gull Rock area which should improve the survival chances of scrub-birds and other animals in the area.

The fire highlighted the need for better protection of translocation sites where a large investment of time and resources have been made. CALM has been seeking the vesting of the Gull Rock "National Park" but community objections have held this up. There is probably a need for greater involvement of the local community in management and monitoring of these areas.

The fire reminded everyone of the precarious nature of the scrub-bird populations. Lightning strikes and arson - against which there is no defence - are not uncommon events on the south coast. But it also provided a demonstration of the rationale behind the creation of new scrub-bird populations, as laid down in the Recovery Plan. The Mt Taylor fire had a huge impact on that sub-population but a minimal effect on the population as a whole.

4.2.3 Private Lands

Tandara, the private property bordering Two Peoples Bay Nature Reserve which contains about eight scrub-bird territories, is currently for sale and moves are being made to encourage CALM to purchase all or part of the property for conservation. Approximately 300 ha of uncleared native vegetation currently provides habitat for several threatened species and corridors for movement between the major Reserves of the area. Rehabilitation of some of the cleared land would provide additional habitat and improve management of the wetlands within Two Peoples Bay Nature Reserve.

Liaison was maintained with the new lessee of the Tandara property who is generally positively disposed toward scrub-bird conservation. The owner of the Manypeaks Homestead property on Betty's Beach Road, which this year was supporting five scrub-bird territories, was also very supportive of the Recovery Program.

4.3 TRANSLOCATIONS

4.3.1 Research into release area selection

Invertebrate pit-trapping in scrub-bird territories on Mt Gardner was begun in February and extended to Lake Gardner in April. These areas were sampled four times during the year to provide data on the availability of invertebrates in scrub-bird diet. Most of the samples have yet to be analysed but the first sample contained a surprisingly large quantity of invertebrates - certainly more than the following samples. The pit trapping will be continued through next year. The results of this study should eventually enable the comparison and selection of release sites based on invertebrate availability.

4.3.2 Release area selection

Early in 1994 a number of Reserves to the west and near Albany were examined for their potential as release sites. The surveys included Torndirrup National Park, West Cape Howe National Park, Millbrook Nature Reserve, Sleeman Creek Nature Reserve and the Mt Lindesay area (proposed National Park) north of Denmark.

The best of these areas was considered to be a site within Torndirrup National Park where it is possible that 15 - 20 territories could be established. The vegetation appeared to be 15 - 20 years old and fire management plans already in place for the National Park provided protection to the central areas. After discussions with CALM Albany District staff and the South Coast Regional

Manager, the Recovery Team prepared a Translocation Proposal, which was submitted to the Director of Nature Conservation and approved.

4.3.3 Carrying out translocations

Five male scrub-birds from Mt Gardner were taken to the Stony Hill site in Torndirrup NP during June. The releases were attended by interested members of the local community, CALM staff and the local media. Up to three males were heard singing at the site shortly after the releases. However, none were heard on a visit in November. Intense monitoring of the release area (possibly with help of a local naturalist group) will be carried out in April/May 1995.

Two females were transferred to the Mermaid release area. Only one male was heard defending territory in the Mermaid area in the 1994 breeding season and the females were released within his territory. Both females were radio-tracked after release (see later).

Another two females were added to the Bald Island group in August. These were flown to the Island with the help of Perth TV Channel 10 who produced a short news item about the event. Channel 10 have been very generous in donating the use of their helicopter for scrub-bird translocations. This year's Bald Island release was the third time the TV company has been involved. The release, initially planned for July 13, was delayed, first because no birds were on hand at that time and then, when they were, the trip had to be postponed again due to atrocious weather conditions.

The male birds were generally responsive to tape recordings and five were captured without great difficulty. All the males came from the Hill 700-Wave Sign-Gardner Gully area. Many of these capture sites have consistently provided males for translocation over the last five to ten years.

Searches for nests were initially conducted at Mt Manypeaks, because during the previous season capture success had been very low at Mt Gardner and a new capture area was seen as a possible solution to this problem. Only one active nest plus one old nest, possibly from the previous season, were found on Mt Manypeaks. Only a small fraction of the likely nesting areas were searched, however. Suitable nesting habitat was seen in most of the gullies surveyed and in many places this was extensive.

Searching known nesting areas on Mt Gardner provided eight active nests. Four females were trapped after five attempts on these nests. The success of these female trapping efforts suggests that the females were probably naive, ie ones which had not previously experienced the nest trap.

4.3.4 Genetic assessment

Blood samples were successfully collected from eight of the nine birds captured and were stored for later analysis. A total of 12 Noisy Scrub-bird blood samples are now available for DNA analysis.

4.4 MONITORING NOISY SCRUB-BIRD NUMBERS

4.4.1 Post-release monitoring

Four sites where scrub-birds have been released in the Albany area were monitored this year.

The Mt Taylor area was found to contain at least 12 singing males. The new territories were in the gully system to the north and north west of the original release sites in Herald Gully. Vegetation here was very dense and probably 20+ years old. The 1994 result confirmed the indications of local breeding in the release area and the population appeared set to expand into the available habitat. A deliberately lit wildfire in April prior to the 1994 census burnt some areas around Gull Rock Lake but the burn was patchy and occurred under mild conditions leaving most of the wetter lake margin vegetation (potential scrub-bird habitat) somewhat reduced but largely intact.

A wildfire in January 1995, on the other hand, had a direct impact on the population reducing the number of singing males (and therefore the total population) by about 75%. Three known territories, and presumably their inhabitants also, survived intact. Early monitoring indicates at least two singing males are present. It is possible that some additional birds may have survived by moving into the refuge area ahead of the fire. This might have been possible for birds in the Upper Herald and Ben Dearg Gullies where the fire apparently burned slowly downhill.

Three trips were made to Bald Island this year. Boat access was obtained early in the season and again in November. The helicopter transfer of two females in August also allowed a monitoring crew to cover the difficult southern part of the island. Altogether scrub-birds were heard singing in six locations on the island. Two of these were in the same positions as in the previous season. Four were new. It is interesting that three of the males were singing from the dense, somewhat swampy sedge formations that occur along the spine of the island.

Monitoring of the Stony Hill release area in the weeks following the release of five males showed at least three males defending territories. A brief inspection in November, however, failed to hear any territorial song. This was late in the season and the day was hot - not ideal conditions for scrub-bird song. The area will be closely inspected in April/May 1995.

The two females released at the one remaining Mermaid site were fitted with transmitters (<2.0 g) and their movements followed during the initial period after release. One moved away from the residential male into the next gully on the first day and remained largely in that gully for the next 17 days. There was no apparent interaction with the resident male. The other female stayed close to the release site and near the male for the whole of the tracking period. There appeared to be some interaction with the male.

4.4.2 Parent population monitoring

The number of singing males on Mt Gardner this year increased slightly from 172 to 179. As has been apparent for several years the increase was confined to areas surrounding the southern sides of the summit. Areas to the north and north east remained stable. The five males captured and removed for translocation were replaced within days of capture.

4.4.3 Lakes area

Another decline in the number of singing males was recorded in the Lakes area in Two Peoples Bay Nature Reserve in 1994. Over the last two years there had been a slowing down in the rate of decrease but this trend did not continue. Previous declines coincided with heavy rainfall and

flooding of the lake margins and swamps. However, the winter rainfall of 1994 was lower than average and there was no flooding. Although flooding of scrub-bird habitat may have been responsible for initiating the decline, other (unknown) factors may now be important in the continuing reduction in number of scrub-birds in this area.

4.4.4 Total population

The total Noisy Scrub-bird population, which included the above areas as well as the Angove/Normans and Mt Manypeaks sub-populations, contained 474 singing males in 1994. This is a 19.7% increase from the previous year. The strong increase was fuelled mainly by a dramatic rise in the number of singing males at Mt Manypeaks which increased by 43% to a total of 223. The rapid rate of increase at Mt Manypeaks which has been apparent for several years shows no sign of slowing down.

The Mt Gardner area (where the number of singing males is still increasing, albeit very slowly) now has fewer singing males than the Mt Manypeaks area. Despite this it is still possible that the parent population contains more *individual* scrub-birds than Mt Manypeaks because of the known tendency of young males to remain in subordinate roles on Mt Gardner. This situation will not continue for long if numbers of singing males continue to increase at the present rate. The amount of habitat still available and the rapid rate of increase make the Mt Manypeaks sub-population the driving force in the recovery of the Noisy Scrub-bird. Its protection will be increasingly important for the species' welfare. Management guidelines for the area are currently being reviewed.

4.5 EDUCATION, PUBLICITY AND SPONSORSHIP

4.5.1 Education and publicity

One edition of the newsletter *NSB NEWS* was produced in April 1994. A second issue was planned for late in the year but, unfortunately never eventuated. No further progress was made on the proposed brochure 'Birds of Two Peoples Bay'.

On the other hand several newspaper articles were produced about aspects of the scrub-bird recovery program; a television item was produced and shown on local, metropolitan and eastern States channels and also went overseas. A number of local and Perth ABC radio interviews were also made. The rediscovery of Gilbert's Potoroo in December 1994 also focussed a great deal of attention on Two Peoples Bay, its many endangered species and the success of scrub-bird conservation project.

4.5.2 Grants and sponsorship

No grants or extra sponsorship for the Scrub-bird Recovery Program were sought during 1994.

CONCLUSION

Most of the actions specified in the Scrub-bird Recovery Plan were addressed in 1994. Release site surveys, translocation and population monitoring absorbed most of the year's effort. Field work alone for these activities took eight to nine months of the working year for two people plus the time of many volunteers.

The major achievements for Noisy Scrub-bird Recovery in 1994 included the selection of a new release site at Torndirrup National Park and the release there of five males; the overtaking of the

parent population by the Mt Manypeaks population in terms of the number of singing males present and the apparent breeding success of the Mt Taylor birds. There was a high level of community involvement, especially in the translocation program and also a high level of public awareness of the success of the program through the publicity given to it by the media.

Acknowledgments

The dedicated efforts of Technical Officer Leigh Whisson, who has been invaluable in the general running of the recovery program and was responsible for most of the field work associated with population monitoring this year, were greatly appreciated. Drew Griffiths, CALM District Manager Albany, gave the project valuable general support and dedicated a week to learning the art of the slater hunter. Many other people helped in various ways during the year. I thank CALM officers Kelly Gillen, Dave Wilson and Martin Lloyd for their assistance. A special thank you to New Zealand Department of Conservation Senior Conservation Officer Derek Roozen and fellow Kiwi Sacha Baldwin for their efforts. The enthusiasm and good company of volunteers Laurence Cuthbert, Jessica Dyer, Joan Bush, Tony Bush, Otto Mueller, Peter Cale, Vic Smith, June Smith, Tim Hunt and Aiko, Max Pam, Judy Genat, Tim Booth, Wayne Stead were an important part of the success of this year's project.