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Australia's Western Ground Parrot: Will it Survive the Ravages of Introduced Predators and Bushfires?

Very few people are aware of the Western Ground Parrot, an enigmatic and unusual bird that occurs only along the south coast of Western Australia. Like many parrots in many parts of the world, this species is very close to extinction.



Photo credit: Brent Barrett, DEC

Western Ground Parrots are not as flashy as some parrots, but those lucky enough to have a close encounter with them can appreciate their gorgeous green and gold colours, flecked with black, and capped with a red splash across the forehead—and you do have to be very lucky to see one! In addition to being so rare, their colours provide excellent camouflage in their shrubby habitats, and their behaviour makes them difficult to find.

Can you spot the young bird in the picture below?



Photo credit: Brent Barrett, DEC

Rock Parrots and the Elegant Parrots, which are much more common in the area, are often mistaken for Western Ground Parrots because they also feed on the ground. However, they lack the red forehead and the fine black flecks.



Right: Rock Parrot (photo credit: Stephen Fryc); Left: Elegant Parrot (photo credit: Joan Bush)

Like many of the world's rare birds, the Western Ground Parrot has not been well-studied. Its cryptic nature makes it a challenging species to work with. In fact, despite searching, no nest has been found since 1913! However, in the past few years, some insights have been gained in the behaviour and breeding of these birds through radio-tracking and field observation. Methods have also been developed to monitor

population size. Additionally, recent genetic work has shown that it is actually a **separate species** from the ground parrots of Eastern Australia, after having been separated from each other for about two million years.



Team sets up an automatic recording unit (photo credit: Allan Burbidge, DEC)

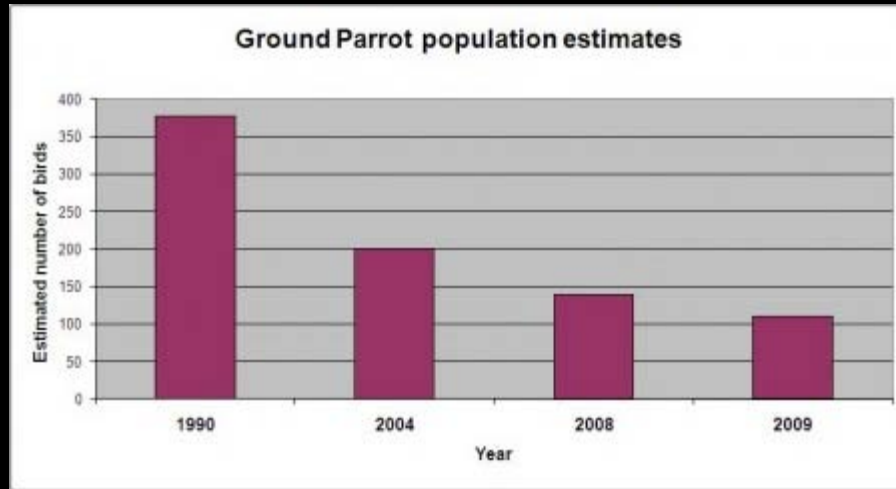
The Recovery Project is overseen by the Recovery Team and contributed to by staff from Western Australia's Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC), the Friends of the Western Ground Parrot, and many volunteers. In recent years, the team has observed a rapid decline in Western Ground Parrot populations, which has alarm bells ringing. According to Dr. Abby Berryman, one of the team members battling to save the species, there are likely now less than 140 birds in existence.



Juvenile Western Ground Parrot (photo credit: Alan Danks)

"The Western Ground Parrot could be facing imminent extinction, and

could become the first contemporary bird extinction on the Australian mainland," explains Dr. Allan Burbidge, a principal research scientist with the DEC. "And to make it worse, we are concerned that the marked decline of the Western Ground Parrot in the 330,000 ha Fitzgerald River National Park, in the heart of a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, could be a classic case of a 'canary in the coalmine'. This reserve is home to eight other listed threatened animal species and a host of rare or threatened plant species. We are concerned that the decline of Ground Parrots in this area may be suggestive of the threatening processes impacting on this landscape."



The low shrubland vegetation that the Western Ground Parrot depends on is very prone to fires, which have regularly swept through the area, destroying the bird's habitat. Extensive bushfires, and those occurring too frequently, have been quite a challenge for managers entrusted with the protection of ground parrot habitat. Although these disasters remain an ever-present risk, the managers' many hours spent in collaboration with the recovery team and volunteer data collectors has yielded improved fire management. However, it is now becoming clear that fire alone has not been responsible for the decline of this species.



Bushfires can render habitat unsuitable for a number of years (photo credit: David Chemello, DEC)

Though the Ground Parrot can fly well, it feeds, roosts, and nests on the ground, making it vulnerable to introduced predators, such as cats and foxes. These skilled predators were brought to Australia from Europe and have wreaked havoc on the native fauna. It would seem a simple thing to do would be to just go out and control the numbers of these animals, but it's not that simple in practice. First, the animals themselves are cunning, and often avoid traps or baits. Second, the removal of predators can have unforeseen consequences, including unpredicted changes in numbers of prey species, some of which might compete with the species we want to conserve.



Photo credit: Brent Barrett, DEC

"We are doing our best to unravel this puzzle, but it is proving extremely

difficult to pull together sufficient resources to implement this ambitious program of integrated predator control and monitor the results," says Sarah Comer, Chair of the recovery team.



Researcher, Abby Berryman, with a Western Ground Parrot caught for radio-tracking (photo credit: Arthur Ferguson)

We now realize that we need to come to grips with the impact these predators are having on Ground Parrot populations, and what the consequences might be if they are not removed. Understanding the influences on the endangered birds' population size can best happen through controlled experiments and careful documentation. There can be no quick fix for this exacting work. It is slow, but at the same time urgent. Additionally, control of feral predators and setting up a captive breeding program will not come cheap. Currently, this species is listed under the Australian Commonwealth's Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act (1992) as Endangered, but a nomination to change the classification to Critically Endangered is now being considered.



Measuring a Western Ground Parrot as part of ongoing research (photo credit: Neil Hamilton, DEC)

Brenda Newbey, Chair of Friends of the Western Ground Parrot says, "The Western Ground Parrot is a feisty survivor. Our community group is doing its best to support the Recovery Team but we are extremely concerned that insufficient funding will hamper efforts to conserve this unique species. However, we do strongly believe that with help now, the Western Ground Parrot can make a comeback."



Photo credit: Brent Barrett, DEC

This means that you can help the Western Ground Parrot! Please visit the website of the Friends of the Western Ground Parrot (click [here](#)) to find out more about this unique bird. Or click [here](#) to make a donation.



Photo credit: Brent Barrett, DEC

Watch as biologist Brent Barrett leads us through the activities of the rarely observed Western Ground Parrot (*Pezoporus flaviventris*):

The Western Ground Parrot was featured in Bush Warriors' "Saying Hello: Ten New Species Discovered in 2010", after it was found to be a genetically distinct species from the Eastern Ground Parrot. Click [here](#) to see the article!




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One Response to “Australia’s Western Ground Parrot: Will it Survive the Ravages of Introduced Predators and Bushfires?”



david Says:

January 28, 2011 at 6:47 pm

an excellent article- what a beauty- somewhat pheasant-like, with that sweeping tail

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