



The Search for the Western Bristlebird

by

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The western bristlebird of putjeritj (*Dasyornis brachypterus longirostris*) is extremely rare and restricted to southern coastal areas of Western Australia near Albany.

The shy retiring nature of the bird together with its preference for dense coastal scrub habitat combine with a brown camouflage to make it an extremely difficult bird to observe. It is a weak flier and tends to seek out the thickest cover for protection.

The western bristlebird probably had a widespread range from Perth to Esperance at the time of European settlement, as the bird was first found in reeds near Perth in 1839. Since that time it has only been observed in the Albany region on the south coast. Its rapid decline has been attributed to the clearing of the dense coastal scrub and increasing frequency of burning of the scrub, its natural habitat.

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Curiously, a closely related species, the western rufous bristlebird (*Dasyornis broadbenti*) which has a bright rufous brown head, was discovered by

A. W. Milligan in October 1901 at Ellensbrook, Western Australia, and further reports of sightings were received from the Cape Naturalists to Cape Leeuwin area. It is now presumed extinct as it was last recorded in 1940.

Western Australia now possesses only remnant populations of the western bristlebird, but fortunately, a population is located within the boundaries of Two Peoples Bay Nature Reserve. In 1965 another colony was discovered at the Waychinicup River some 17 kilometres to the east of Two Peoples Bay by Julian Ford and a further population was found in the Fitzgerald River National Park in 1976. However, it is likely that the total population does not exceed 250 pairs.

It is in the Two Peoples Bay Nature Reserve that resident Reserves Officer Graeme Folley together with volunteer observer Lesley Harrison have undertaken a systematic search for the western bristlebird.

This reserve is well known for its colony of the very rare noisy scrub-bird (*Atrichornis clamosus*) but also contains other rare species of birds including the western whipbird (*Psophodes nigrogularis*) and the western bristlebird. Graeme commenced his search of this important nature reserve in 1981 and he soon confirmed that the western bristlebird is



The nest is hidden in the centre of the clump (usually nests are 400 millimetre above ground level).



Centre: Typical south coast heathland habitat of the western bristlebird. The observer is pointing to the nest site in a *Dasypogon bromeliifolius* plant. Mount Gardner is in the background.

Above: Bristlebird nest showing size and construction from woven grass. Note the landing platform at the entrance. This is the first photograph of a western bristlebird nest for 50 years.

extremely difficult to deal with. It can rarely be seen in flight as it is a very poor flier and inhabits only the densest closed heath habitat which provides the ideal hiding place for this bird with its shy secretive nature. In these areas it is often difficult for observers to walk, let alone see the birds. Nevertheless, Graeme's patient search is beginning to yield valuable results.

After 640 volunteer hours of patient searching there was much excitement when finally Lesley found a nest in a *Dasypogon bromeliifolius* plant. Graeme was naturally delighted as he was able to take the first photograph of a western bristlebird nest for 50 years. The nest was positioned in the centre of the clump about 300-400 millimetre above ground level and was constructed of woven grass, complete with a landing platform area. A population size of 80 pairs has now been estimated.

The western bristlebird lays two eggs, dull brownish-white in colour with purplish-brown blotches and spots. Unfortunately, the shy nature of the bird results in ready desertion of the nest at the slightest disturbance. It would therefore be necessary to close areas of the reserve from human interference during the breeding season.

The fact that Graeme only observed the birds in areas of the densest closed heath suggests that fire may have been one of the reasons for their rapid decline in other areas. It takes at least eight years for closed heath to regenerate sufficient cover after a fire on the south coast. The shorter burn intervals that are commonly utilized by the farming community in the region would render farmed coastal areas unsuitable as western bristlebird habitat.

The survey is continuing, but the results to date will aid in securing existing colonies of western bristlebird against further decline by helping to ensure that suitable habitat management techniques are developed. In the long term it may even be possible to reintroduce the species into parts of its former range where its habitat requirements can be met. Some success has already been achieved in re-establishing a colony of noisy scrub-birds on Mount Manypeaks (see SWANS Vol. 13 No. 2). The decline of the western bristlebird may have ceased and its fortunes changed due to the work now being undertaken by Graeme and Lesley.

Further Reading

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Contents

Rediscovering Mountain Bells
Greg Keighery..... Page 3

The Hamersley Range —
a photographic essay
Cliff Winfield..... Page 11

The Lane-Poole Jarrah Reserve
*Wayne Schmidt and
Peter Kimber*..... Page 19

The Search for the Western Bristlebird
Malcolm Taylor..... Page 29

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Front Cover

Wildlife is a term that applies to both fauna and flora in their native environments, and includes the smallest insect, the largest mammal, the daintiest flower and the tallest tree. Co-ordinated land management will keep our wildlife everlasting, like these everlastings *Helipterum craspedioides* and *Helichrysum davenportii* which, every spring, carpet the semi-arid regions of Western Australia in profuse colour. Photo: Cliff Winfield

Minister's Message

Western Australia's land is among the most ancient in the world, and because of our isolation and climate, much of our flora and fauna is unique — evidenced by the 8000 plant species that are indigenous to this State.

The Western Australian Government has a responsibility to protect our unique landscape for our current use and, in particular, for the use of future generations.

To help us achieve our objective the Government has amalgamated the Forests Department, the National Parks Authority and the Wildlife Branch of the Department of Fisheries and Wildlife to form the Department of Conservation and Land Management.

The new Department will co-ordinate the functions of its predecessors and will utilize the combined resources at its disposal to encourage effective and lasting land management practices in Western Australia.

To operate effectively the Department of Conservation and Land Management will encourage public participation in its operations and at the same time will keep the public informed of its practices.

The publication of this magazine — Landscape — will play an important role in keeping the public and staff informed about the valuable scientific work being carried out in Western Australia by the Department.

The publication of this, the first issue of Landscape, indicates the success that can be achieved through the combined efforts of people who were previously employed by the amalgamated Departments.

I commend them on the success of this magazine and I look forward to reading future editions.

Ron Davies
Minister for Conservation and
Land Management
Western Australia

