



Back from the Brink



by Alan Danks

The Noisy Scrub-bird, one of Western Australia's rarest birds, had a close brush with extinction. When it was rediscovered in 1961, 72 years after the previous sighting, the species was in a highly vulnerable position. The total population of less than 100 was confined to the Mount Gardner area near Albany. Such a small population would have soon succumbed to the pressures of habitat degradation, increased fire frequency and, possibly, to genetic problems caused by inbreeding.



TWO Peoples Bay Nature Reserve was created to protect the bird's habitat and the bird has now been the subject of management and research for almost 25 years.

The knowledge necessary to manage both the bird's habitat and population came from detailed research over many years by CSIRO's Division of Wildlife and Ecology.

Noisy Scrub-birds are small, semi-flightless inhabitants of dense scrub and thickets, and need long-unburnt bush for the protective cover and rich supply of invertebrate food that it provides. This is a specialised requirement in the fire-prone environment of the South-West, and such habitat is usually found only in protected gullies, overgrown swamps and alongside streams.

Breeding males are territorial and defend their areas with a loud song (ear-splitting at close quarters!). They are larger and more distinctively marked than the females and seem preoccupied with territorial defence and mating, leaving the hard work of nest-building, incubating and raising young to the female. Understandably, each female can raise only one chick per year.

Despite their low reproductive rate, scrub-bird numbers have substantially increased in the last two decades. Excluding fire from the Mount Gardner area has allowed further vegetation



Two Peoples Bay Nature Reserve is now managed mainly as a sanctuary for the Noisy Scrub-bird after its rediscovery there in 1961.
Photo - Tony Tapper ▲▲

The male Noisy Scrub-bird has an ear-splitting call, a loud whistle accelerating to an even louder crescendo, used to defend its territory.
Photo - Allan Rose ▲

Photo previous page - Ray Smith



growth, increasing the available habitat, and the birds have steadily occupied new areas.

The population of Two Peoples Bay Nature Reserve is now around 500 - a five-fold increase since 1970. This recovery shows that the species can build up its numbers, given the right environment and some protection. Even so, if the population remained confined to a single area, the species would be extremely vulnerable to wildfire, disease or climate change.

To overcome this "all the eggs in one basket" problem, the scrub-birds need to be more widespread. However, their poor flying ability and special habitat requirements mean they cannot cross open pasture or recently burnt bush. Although some have managed to disperse a short distance outside the nature reserve, scrub-birds need help to cover the longer distances necessary to reach more substantial habitat. A program to capture Noisy Scrub-birds from the Two Peoples Bay population and release them in areas of suitable habitat within the species' former range in the South-West began six years ago.

At Mount Manypeaks, 15 kilometres from Mount Gardner, several deep gullies contain almost ideal habitat. In 1983 Graeme Folley, former Reserve Officer at Two Peoples Bay, Don Merton of the New Zealand Department of Conservation and I began a program to capture, handle, house, and transport Noisy Scrub-birds.

This elusive bird often lives in impenetrable thickets. Working out practical and reliable ways to catch this will-o'-the-wisp consumed much time and energy during the first translocation. Fortunately the rest was easier. The birds were not too stressed by their capture, settled down well in temporary captivity and accepted being transported in padded boxes in vehicles and on our backs.

Since 1983 more scrub-birds have been released at Mount Manypeaks and at two sites to the west of Albany in the Denmark and Walpole areas. The translocation process has been refined and volunteers have joined the project - some have returned regularly and become indispensable. Many Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM) staff are also involved.

Establishing new colonies is a long-term process. Transferred birds need time to adjust to their new habitat, to find reliable sources of food and shelter, to establish territories and raise young.

The release areas are monitored each year by recording the number and location of all males defending territory. Increases in the number of territorial males, over the number of males originally released, indicate local breeding. The parent population at Two Peoples Bay is also monitored. So far the regular removal of adult birds from the area has had no negative effect.

The scrub-birds seem to like the habitat and conditions at Mount Manypeaks. Since 1986 there have been annual increases in the number of singing males and by 1988 the number exceeded the 18 males originally released, showing that breeding was occurring and the colony was expanding. The colony should continue to expand into the unoccupied habitat on the mountain for many years.



Excluding fire from the Mount Gardner area in Two Peoples Bay has caused an expansion in scrub-bird habitat.

Photo - Tony Tapper ▲

The small round wings of the Noisy Scrub-bird are not very powerful and the bird is semi-flightless.

Photo - Bert and Babs Wells ▼

Scrub-birds were released in the Walpole-Nornalup National Park in 1986 and 1987, but have been slow to establish territories. Three males were heard singing in 1986. None were heard in 1987 or 1988 but two were heard in 1989. This means some birds are still in the release area and there could be some



breeding. The slow start may be due to sub-optimal habitat - the habitat here differs more from Two Peoples Bay than does the habitat on Mount Manypeaks.

Last year a group of Noisy Scrub-birds was released in the Quarram Nature Reserve near Denmark. At the end of the translocation, four males were heard singing close to the release site - an auspicious start. However, several years may elapse before we can be certain a viable colony has been established.

Meanwhile, new release areas are being sought and further releases planned. All scrub-bird areas will be monitored regularly and some areas may need more birds to help them establish. This work will continue for many years.

Not long ago all the Noisy Scrub-birds in the world were confined to a few gullies on one mountain. Today, with a little help, the number of these intriguing birds has expanded and they have been spread over a wider area, giving them greater security than they have had at any time in the last 100 years. □

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LANDSCOPE

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Rock-wallabies threw down the gauntlet to scientists trying to trap them for research. Who ended up winning the catch-me-if-you-can contest? See page 35.



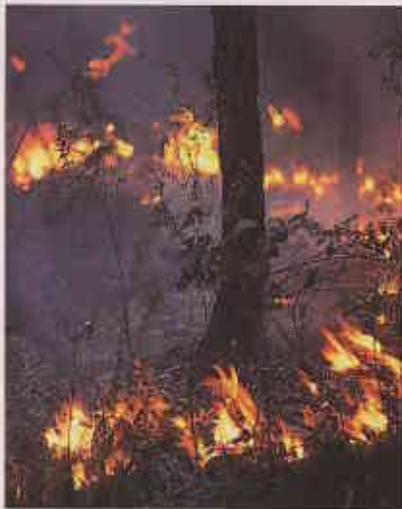
Scientists will use modern technology to restore two rare and endangered mammals to an area in the Gibson Desert from which they have become extinct. See page 10.



Shells, tiny crabs and sundry other creatures are sure to please the curious naturalist who invades the intertidal zone at low tide. Explore the place where the shore meets the sea on page 23.



Waterbirds flock to the Vasse-Wonnerup wetlands in their tens of thousands, some travelling over 10 000 kilometres from summer breedings grounds in northern China and Siberia. Turn to page 17.



It's the burning question! Is prescribed burning in spring or autumn better for the jarrah forest? Or is there another alternative? See page 28.

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The designs of desert artist Benny Tjapaltjarri show events associated with the Pakuru or golden bandicoot dreaming in the Gibson Desert. The three central roundels depict rockholes and the others represent hills. The background dots show the vegetation of the area.



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