

LEWIN'S RAIL

Of the 14 animal species thought to be extinct in Western Australia, only two are birds. One of these—a WA subspecies of Lewin's rail (*Rallus pectoralis clelandi*)—belongs to a group of birds dependent on thick ground vegetation for shelter, and on swamps and rivers for food. Some species of rail are furtive, while others are easy to observe at close range. Lewin's rail is among the more furtive, and this may be why so little is known about it.

When the south-west of Western Australia was settled by Europeans, nine species of rail were present, but Lewin's rail has not been seen since 1932, and has been gazetted by the Minister for the Environment as presumed extinct.

Worldwide, there are about

120 species of rail. Lewin's rail occurs in The Philippines, Flores Island (one of the Indonesian Lesser Sunda Islands, located between Java and Timor), New Guinea, Auckland Islands and Australia. It is widely distributed and common in Tasmania and Victoria, and is also recorded in South Australia, New South Wales and Queensland.

In Western Australia, the species has seldom been observed or collected. It was first collected by John Gilbert in the 1840s (one male, locality unknown), then in March 1866, one male was collected near Albany by George Masters, and in 1874, two birds (sex unknown) were collected near Albany by William Webb. In March 1907, one male and one female were collected by Guy Shortridge near Margaret

River, and in December 1931, one bird (sex unknown) was collected from a swamp 24 kilometres south-west of Bridgetown by Hubert Whittell. The species was last observed in September 1932, in the same swamp.

Shortridge also collected around Albany, but did not record it there. He believed the species to be "fairly plentiful" but "shy and easily overlooked". It does seem, however, that the species was always patchily distributed, as many ornithologists between 1838 and 1919 failed to observe it.

More recently, surveys of the southern forests led by Per Christensen (1972-82) did not locate the species. From 1981 to 1985, CALM funded surveys of waterbirds in 197 nature

reserves in the south-west. From the 3131 surveys, which were conducted by members of the Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union (RAOU), 96 bird species were recorded, but despite the diligence of those involved, Lewin's rail was not sighted.

When searching for Lewin's rail, one needs to be aware of several characteristics: The bill is long, narrow and pink with a dark tip; the breast is olive grey (no buff band, as found in the buff-banded rail); the belly and undertail are finely barred black and white; and the head and nape are reddish-chestnut, and streaked black (no white eyebrow, as found in the buff-banded rail).

But, like the noisy scrub bird—which had been presumed extinct for 72 years when amateur ornithologist Harley Webster rediscovered it in 1961—Lewin's rail could well be 'out there,' waiting for someone to stumble across it.



The Tasmanian subspecies of Lewin's rail (Rallus pectoralis muelleri). Photo - T A White/ Nature Focus

LANDSCOPE

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The Perth Observatory celebrates its centenary this year, and during its 100 years' life it has played some major roles in the world of astronomy. Find out more on page 10.



The Cape Range, in north-west WA, is known for its harsh environment. But if you look a little closer you'll discover the vast 'Range of Flowers' that live there. See page 28.



In 1961, the noisy scrub-bird was rediscovered at Two Peoples Bay. In 1994, the Gilbert's potoroo turned up unexpectedly. Find out more about this haven for the lost and found on page 35.



John Forrest National Park has long been a popular picnicking spot for Perth residents, but this place of beauty has much more to offer. See page 16.



If all goes to plan, the Ord River area, will soon be known as a prime farming area for rare tropical timbers. Find out why on page 23.

FEATURES

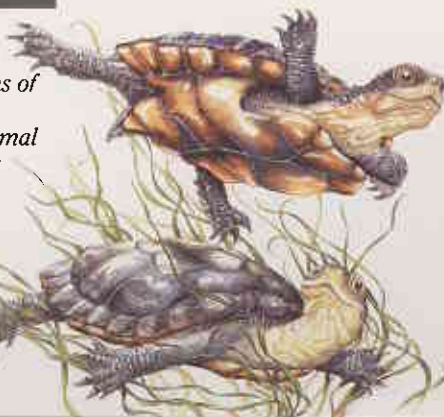
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COVER

Fox-baiting has been shown to be a major tool in rebuilding populations of native animals. Now, scientists are embarking on a Statewide feral animal control program to help bring back native species, such as the western swamp tortoise, from the brink of extinction. The project is called 'Western Shield'.

The story is on page 41.

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