

endangered

by Sarah Comer



Noisy scrub-bird

Although rarely seen, the endangered noisy scrub-bird (*Atrichornis clamosus*) attracts attention from bird watchers and naturalists around the world. The scrub-bird conservation story spans more than 45 years since its rediscovery in 1961.

Scrub-birds can be thought of as evolutionary relicts from an early radiation of the Australasian songbirds. Their closest relatives are the lyrebirds. They have no wishbone, the structure which is the attachment for the large flight muscles of most birds. Their short wings are not capable of sustaining flight and most of their muscle power comes from their thighs. Scrub-birds require long-unburnt habitat, with a well-developed leaf litter and associated invertebrate fauna. The female lays just a single egg each year, so recruitment can be very slow, although in optimal habitat high chick survival rates can offset this low fecundity.

From the 1920s to 1961 the noisy-scrub bird was presumed extinct. Following its rediscovery at Two Peoples Bay near Albany, conservation activities have concentrated on protecting habitat

and learning more about the biology and ecology of the species. Exclusion of fire was a key strategy for conservation of scrub-bird habitat and by the mid 1970s birds were dispersing from Mount Gardner to other areas in Two Peoples Bay Nature Reserve.

In 1983 and 1985, 31 scrub-birds were captured on Mount Gardner and relocated to Mount Manypeaks. This was the first step in a translocation program that has now seen more than 200 scrub-birds relocated to areas between Dwellingup, Walpole and Albany in an attempt to establish additional breeding populations. This program was very successful and by 2000 populations of scrub-birds had been established on Bald Island and between Cheynes Beach and Norman's Inlet. However, scrub-bird translocations to the west of Albany were not so successful. Birds were also translocated to the Darling Range between 1997 and 2003 and monitoring of these birds continues. In 2006 a small number of males was released in Porongurup National Park, but a wildfire in February 2007 burnt all the release site habitat.

Thanks to translocations and habitat management, the

scrub-bird population has grown from estimates of less than 100 individuals when it was rediscovered, to more than 2000 birds by 2001—a 10-fold increase from the beginning of the translocation program.

From 2000 to 2005 a series of wildfires in the Two Peoples Bay–Manypeaks area resulted in the loss of significant areas of scrub-bird habitat. Most devastating was the wildfire on Mount Manypeaks which started from lightning in late December 2004 and burnt more than 4500 hectares of scrub-bird habitat resulting in the loss of 55 per cent of the population. Despite this, sub-populations of noisy scrub-birds persisted in the original area on Mount Gardner and also (thanks to the translocation program) on Bald Island and the Cheynes Beach area. This demonstrated the need to avoid having all our eggs, or scrub-birds, in a single basket.

Anyone wanting to take part in the recovery program should contact the Department of Environment and Conservation's Albany District on (08) 9842 4500.

Photos by Sarah Comer and Alan Danks

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