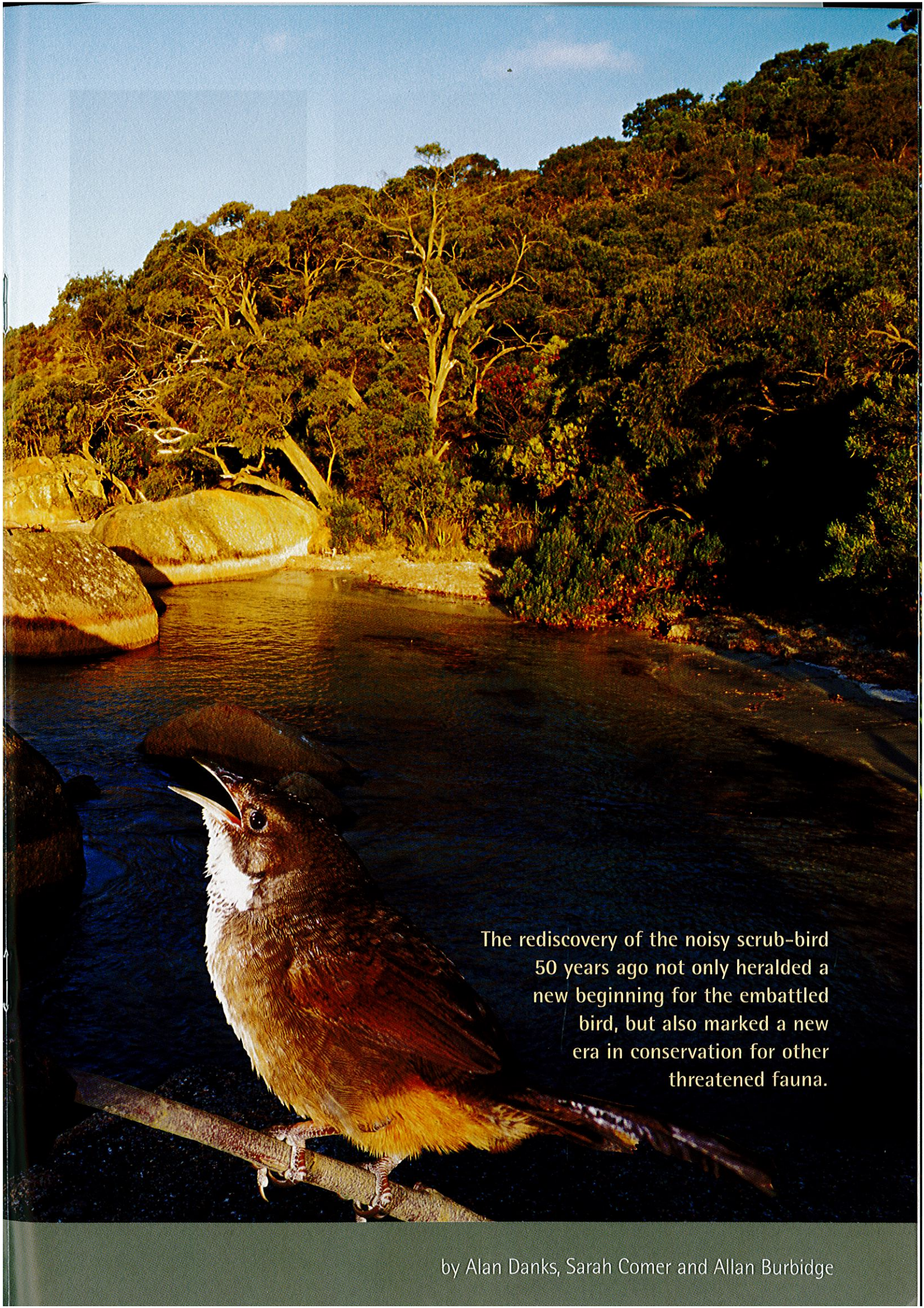




Back from the
brink:

50 years of
conservation at
Two Peoples Bay



The rediscovery of the noisy scrub-bird 50 years ago not only heralded a new beginning for the embattled bird, but also marked a new era in conservation for other threatened fauna.

by Alan Danks, Sarah Comer and Allan Burbidge

In December 1961, after a 72-year absence from the official record, a small brown bird with a big voice made an unexpected reappearance. The rediscovery of the noisy scrub-bird (*Atrichornis clamosus*) at Two Peoples Bay on the south coast was a thrilling event in Western Australian conservation history and marked the beginning of a classic threatened species recovery program.

Today, numbers of scrub-birds have increased significantly and its geographic range encompasses the area between Oyster Harbour and Cheynes Beach. This area also holds significant numbers of other threatened birds such



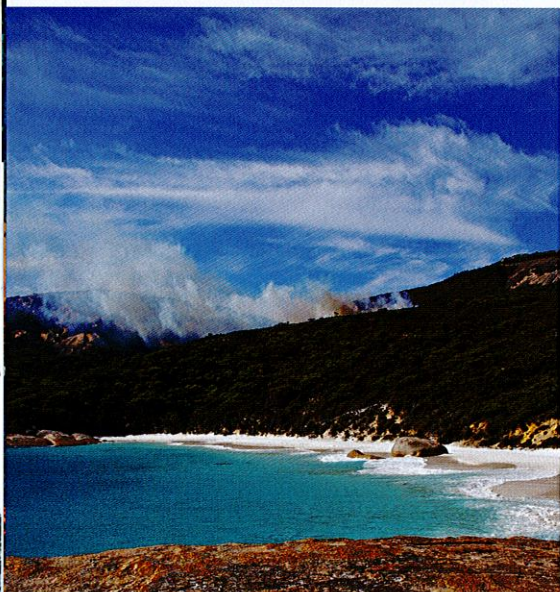
as the western bristlebird (*Dasyornis longirostris*), western whipbird (*Psophodes nigrogularis nigrogularis*) and Australasian bittern (*Botaurus poiciloptilus*) as well as the quokka (*Setonix brachyurus*), western ringtail possum (*Pseudocheirus occidentalis*) and the only population of the critically endangered Gilbert's potoroo (*Potorous gilbertii*).

In late 1842, when John Gilbert heard the loud and melodious song of the noisy scrub-bird near present-day Waroona, he realised he was listening to a bird new to European science. Gilbert sat in the rain for hours trying to get a glimpse of a bird which was making his ears ring with its intense call but which did not allow itself to be seen among the dense thickets. His patience paid off and he was eventually able to collect a specimen and confirm it was indeed something new. Gilbert marvelled at the bird's strong legs and small wings.



A handful of other collectors also obtained specimens of the noisy scrub-bird, or noisy brush bird as John Gould had called it in his book *The Birds of Australia*. But a specimen taken in 1889 near Torbay was the last scrub-bird seen in the 19th century. Despite dedicated searches by experienced ornithologists, there were no confirmed sightings and many thought the noisy scrub-bird was extinct. If true, it would have been the first Australian bird to claim the dubious distinction of becoming extinct since European settlement. It would also have been a great loss to science. John Gould considered the noisy scrub-bird, with its unusual song and strange behaviour, to be one of Australia's most interesting birds.

In the 1940s, WA ornithologist Hubert Whittell published a series of papers about the noisy scrub-bird based on specimens held in museums in Australia and overseas. Whittell's



Previous page

Main Two Peoples Bay.

Inset Noisy scrub-bird.
Photos - Jiri Lochman

Above Noisy scrub-bird.

Photo - Babs and Bert Wells/DEC

Above left In the 1970s fire management was one of the critical management actions identified to protect scrub-bird habitat.

Photo - Sarah Comer/DEC

Left The team of WA naturalists that captured the first scrub-bird on Mount Gardner in 1964.

Photo - Rika Erickson

Right The team that captured the first noisy scrub-bird on Mount Gardner at work.

Photo – Syd Erickson

Below right Bald Island.

Photo – Jiri Lochman

historical detective work resulted in a better appreciation of the noisy scrub-bird and increased its profile among birdwatchers.

Back from the brink

In 1961 staff from the WA Museum made a field trip to Two Peoples Bay, alerted by reports of a bird that might have been the noisy scrub-bird. They didn't find the scrub-bird. However, they alerted Albany school teacher Harley Webster to the possibility that the scrub-bird might be found in the area. Webster was already making regular trips to Two Peoples Bay to study the western bristlebird, which he had found nesting in the heathland there. On 17 December he heard and then glimpsed a bird that he was fairly certain was the long-lost noisy scrub-bird. Another visit resulted in good sightings and he became totally convinced.

Webster's announcement that he had rediscovered the noisy scrub-bird caused some consternation, however, as the area around the bay was earmarked for development as a town site. Ornithologists and conservationists knew that development would almost certainly spell the end for the scrub-birds tucked away in the mountain gullies. They soon rallied to the cause, and many visited Two Peoples Bay helping to carry out searches to locate and define the population, which turned out to be very small—"perhaps upwards of 50 pairs." Action was needed to protect and manage the bird's habitat and the best way to do this was to create a fauna reserve at Two Peoples Bay. There was considerable resistance to this proposal. Fortunately, the noisy scrub-bird had powerful friends, including HRH Prince Phillip, who was able to use his royal standing to put some pressure on



the WA government. Two Peoples Bay Nature Reserve, then known as Two Peoples Bay Fauna Reserve/Wildlife Sanctuary, was officially declared in 1967.

Battle to save a species

The new reserve took in all the area known to be occupied by scrub-birds on Mount Gardner as well as some of the surrounding habitat which might also support them. Once this area was secure, management could begin and formal research programs could be initiated. In 1970 a reserve management plan was drawn up which identified fire control as the critical management issue. Existing recreational use of the southern end of Two Peoples Bay was recognised and

the plan recommended developing a day-use area for visitors. The then WA Fisheries and Fauna Department initially provided part-time wardens and, in the early 1970s, a full-time on-site reserve officer was appointed.

Staff of the WA Museum carried out an extensive fauna survey of the new reserve. They soon realised that well as the noisy scrub-bird, the reserve held important populations of other fauna that were of some concern at the time: western bristlebirds, western whipbirds, quokka, mardo (*Antechinus flavipes*) and quenda (*Isoodon obesulus*). Many other species were at or near the limits of their distribution. The new reserve, in fact, held a representative sample of the fauna of

the Albany area, and protecting and managing it in the name of the noisy scrub-bird made good conservation sense.

CSIRO scientist Dr Graeme Smith undertook ecological research on the noisy scrub-bird and other rare species at Two Peoples Bay, establishing his base in a hut on the slopes of Mount Gardner. For the next decade he closely monitored population trends and studied nesting and chick-rearing, carried out by the female alone. The semi-flightless scrub-bird itself remained elusive and much research was restricted to what could be heard. Recording the location of singing males provided a means of monitoring population trends and mapping distribution. Smith and Norman Robinson used automatic recording stations to monitor changes in male song output over a year to help define the bird's breeding cycle.

Bolstering populations

By the early 1970s the scrub-bird population appeared to be stable but it was not growing any larger. No other populations had been located, despite considerable searching, and the vulnerability of a single small

Above Releasing a noisy scrub-bird as part of a translocation program.

Below A researcher examining a noisy scrub-bird captured on Bald Island.
Photos - Alan Danks



population confined to one mountain was a major concern. In 1975 Smith began a captive breeding experiment using a small number of chicks taken from nests on Mount Gardner. If the birds could be bred in captivity it was hoped that captive-reared birds could be used to establish other colonies. Although breeding did occur in the captive facilities, most of the offspring died before maturity. Only one was able to be raised to adulthood. It didn't seem likely that captive breeding was going to save the species and the program was abandoned in 1980.

Fortunately, by this time scrub-bird numbers within the reserve were showing a positive trend. The population was even expanding into some of the habitat surrounding Mount Gardner. In this more positive

environment the then Fisheries and Wildlife Department developed plans for creating new colonies through the capture and translocation of adult birds from the Two Peoples Bay population. The initial project, in 1983, was under the direction of Don Merton from the New Zealand Wildlife Service, who had considerable experience in translocating birds. Since 1983 small groups of scrub-birds have been captured and transferred to new sites. Some of these were only a few kilometres from the source population; others were more distant, including the original locality in the Darling Range where John Gilbert first saw the noisy scrub-bird.

As a result of the translocation work and some natural dispersal, noisy scrub-birds existed in five linked sub-populations spread along 30 kilometres of near-coastal country between Oyster Harbour and Cheynes Beach by 2001. They totalled around 2,000 individuals. In addition to the Mount Gardner population, a large population had developed at Mount Manypeaks. This was four times the size of the parent population. There was also a strong population on predator-free Bald Island. The rapid development of this island population was somewhat surprising as much of the habitat appeared marginal for scrub-birds compared to the mainland areas. Perhaps in the absence of predators, the birds are less dependent on dense cover and are able to feed in more open vegetation.





Above The population of scrub-birds on Mount Manypeaks was halved following a bushfire at the end of 2004.

Photo – Alan Danks

Right DEC's Adrian Wayne and Alan Danks releasing a Gilbert's potoroo fitted with a transmitter.

Photo – Jiri Lochman

The scrub-bird was looking much more secure and it was moved from the 'endangered' category to 'vulnerable', signalling greater confidence that it could be successfully managed toward recovery. The higher population numbers and wider geographic spread meant the species should be better able to withstand events such as wildfires which once could have wiped out the species in a single event.

This was put to the test in the summer of 2004–05 when lightning storms ignited a bushfire high on the inaccessible ridges of Mount Manypeaks and deep within the area occupied by noisy scrub-birds. Despite rapid deployment of a large number of firefighting crews and equipment and the extensive use of waterbombing aircraft, the fire could only be contained by back-burning. This meant the entire mountain area was burnt and half of all the noisy scrub-birds in the world perished. However, this event, although certainly disastrous, did not spell the end of the scrub-bird. The parent population on Mount Gardner remained secure and numbers were still increasing on Bald Island. The areas around Mount



Manypeaks are also well stocked with birds that will one day recolonise the mountain. In fact, five years after the fire, re-colonisation appears to be well underway.

Other species reap the benefits

Rediscovery of the noisy scrub-bird, recognition of its plight and the implementation of a conservation program over many decades has resulted in much greater security for this small cryptic bird which once hung on the edge of extinction. But conservation work for the scrub-bird

has also had wider implications. The need to secure habitat for the scrub-bird has driven the reservation of crown land in the Two Peoples Bay area. About 25,000 hectares of naturally vegetated land in the Two Peoples Bay area is now managed primarily for conservation. A fox control program has been operating across most of this area since the early 1990s and on-site rangers based at Two Peoples Bay Nature Reserve include most of this area in their care.

The need for more information about the ecology of the scrub-bird



Above Western bristlebird.
*Photo – Simon Nevill/Lochman
 Transparencies*



Top right Two Peoples Bay is home to the only naturally occurring population of Gilbert's potoroo.
Photo – Jiri Lochman

encouraged many studies aimed at other species resulting in more detailed understanding of the area's flora and fauna. Procedures and infrastructure for the capture, housing and transport of noisy scrub-birds have been used in other bird translocations, such as that of the western bristlebird. The needs of the scrub-bird have also driven advances in fire management that have benefited the whole region.

These are all very important biodiversity conservation outcomes. However, another quite unexpected development happened in 1994 when PhD student Liz Sinclair was trapping quokka on Mount Gardner and inadvertently trapped some animals that were recognised as Gilbert's potoroo. This rabbit-sized marsupial had also been originally brought to the attention of science by John Gilbert and, like the noisy scrub-bird, disappeared from view shortly afterward. It was fortunate that this little animal was rediscovered at Two Peoples Bay, where many decades of research had already occurred, a fox control program had been operating for a number of years, and there was a management presence and much infrastructure which could immediately assist the tiny population—estimated at the time as around 30 animals. Several potoroos were quickly taken into captivity at Two Peoples Bay using facilities built to house and care for noisy scrub-birds. Once a dedicated facility was built, these animals formed the basis of a captive breeding program. Within a couple of months of rediscovery a draft recovery plan had been written and a Gilbert's Potoroo Recovery Team

was established. The community-run Gilbert's Potoroo Action Group and its members' tireless efforts to assist with the conservation efforts have played an important role in increasing awareness and raising funds for the recovery program.

Captive breeding in the end was not successful for the potoroo, although several young were born in captivity. Despite considerable effort, a cross-fostering program, using long-nosed potoroos as surrogate mothers, was also unsuccessful (see 'Cross-fostering Gilbert's potoroo', *LANDSCOPE*, Autumn 2008). However, as with the noisy scrub-bird, translocation to Bald Island proved spectacularly successful. The potoroos rapidly increased their numbers and the island is providing



Right Western whipbird.
*Photo – Rob Drummond/Lochman
 Transparencies*

animals for a new colony in a predator-free fenced area on the mainland.

Around 100,000 visitors enjoy the natural attractions of Two Peoples Bay each year, and learn something of a conservation success story which began 50 years ago when the noisy scrub-bird hopped out of its dense hiding place and back into history. Without this rediscovery it is highly likely that the other endemics in this part of the world, including Gilbert's potoroo and the western heath subspecies of the western whipbird, would have not had a future.

Alan Danks worked as project leader for the noisy scrub-bird recovery program at Two Peoples Bay Nature Reserve from 1986 to 1998. Before retiring from the Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC) in 2009 he was the south coast regional leader of nature conservation. He can be contacted on (08) 9842 2459 or by email (alandanks@westnet.com.au).

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