





Monitoring Matuwa and Kurrara Kurrara: *a labour of love*

What started as a bird count at Matuwa 16 years ago, has developed into a multi-dimensional program that involves traditional owners, school students, *Bush Rangers* cadets, CSIRO Science pathway, DBCA scientists, Parks and Wildlife Service Goldfields staff and BirdLife WA. Run by a small group of dedicated volunteers and led by bird-lover Neil Hamilton, the project continues to deliver an array of environmental and social benefits, and opportunities to build and maintain relationships with neighbours.

by Rhianna King

Located in the heart of the Gascoyne Murchison, Matuwa is a 240,000-hectare former pastoral lease. Its red earth, dotted with mulga scrub, water holes, creeks, claypans, sand dunes and rocky country, give rise to expansive skies. At night, away from the light pollution found in townsites and near other infrastructure, the sky comes alive with the twinkling of millions of stars.

For more than 40,000 years, the area has been home to the Martu people, who recognise the songlines of the *pikuta* or euro, which created the creeks as it travelled around the landscape. In more recent years the area was used for pastoralism and was known as Lorna Glen and Earahedy, until the leases were purchased by the State Government in 2000. In 2015, an agreement was forged between the Commonwealth Government and the Tjarlka Matuwa Piarku Aboriginal Corporation to dedicate Matuwa and the nearby Kurrara Kurrara as an Indigenous Protected Area (see 'A sacred partnership', *LANDSCOPE*, Summer 2015–16).

A LABOUR OF LOVE

DBCA senior technical officer Neil Hamilton first visited Matuwa in 2003. Neil travelled to the area as part of a project with principal research scientist David Algar and senior technical officers Mike Onus and John Angus, to trial baiting for feral cats and foxes as part of the department's *Western Shield* program. This program aimed to stop the carnage of the area's precious native animals to introduced predators (see 'Into the wild: restoring rangelands fauna', *LANDSCOPE*, Winter 2009), which faced a dire future.

While on this visit, Neil and others documented the numbers and species of birds they saw, to get an idea of the health of the area and to provide a baseline by which any changes in population brought by the baiting and trapping could be measured. The area is home to more than 154 bird species, in particular medium, low and ground-dwelling bird species, including malleefowl, bush stone-curlew, quail thrush, a couple of quail species, spinifex



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Main Matuwa enjoying 'boom time' brought by rain.

Photo – Neil Hamilton

Inset left White-plummed honeyeater.

Photo – Sallyanne Cousans

Inset right Neil Hamilton with Martu rangers Rita Cutter and Lena Long.

Photo – Marion Massam

Above Simon Cherriman measuring chicks at Lorna Glen.

Photo – Neil Hamilton

birds, wrens, hooded robins, red-capped robins and other song birds.

Since his first visit, Neil has travelled to the area in this own time three or four times a year. He has been accompanied by fellow collaborators Tegan Douglas, Aneta Creighton, Bruce Greatwich, Marion Massam and others, who, like Neil, have been motivated to participate by their dedication and passion.

Over the years, he has observed a change in the landscape, including the department's successful reintroduction of brushtail possums and bilbies to Matuwa, and the establishment of a 1100-hectare enclosure, which protects golden bandicoots, boodies and mala. Along with others, he has also observed a recovery of ground-dwelling and mid-dwelling birds and reptiles thanks to targeted baiting and trapping of feral cats and foxes. Species that occur close to the ground are easy targets for predators, so eliminating the threatening processes in the area is

necessary to secure their survival. Baiting and trapping have also led to an increased number of mulgara, bandicoots, brushtail possums and bilbies outside the enclosure.

Neil also describes that Matuwa has been in a state of 'boom time' since 2011, with an abundance of plants, plenty of feed and lots of water. This is a far cry from the landscape he witnessed during the drought years of 2003–05 where the hostile, barren environment challenged the survival of even the hardiest species until the rains of 2006.

COLLABORATIVE APPROACH

What started as a side project in 2003 has now been expanded to a collaborative partnership. In 2015, Neil was joined by consultant and founder of Inside Ornithology Simon Cherriman and long-time collaborator WA citizen science project coordinator Dr Tegan Douglas from BirdLife WA. Simon and Tegan were keen to work with Neil to realise



his vision of monitoring bird movements in the area. Since 2015, the trio has been supported by Parks and Wildlife Service Kalgoorlie Region staff, BirdLife WA, the Martu people, the community, pastoralists and as part of the Australian Bird and Bat banding scheme. This collaboration is multi-faceted and aims to contribute data about the health of the area's birds, carry out scientific research, engage students in conservation, partner with the local Martu people for two-way learning and encourage citizen science.

A highlight of the project was in October 2017 when Neil, Simon, Tegan

and other members of BirdLife WA travelled to Matuwa for two weeks. This built on a similar trip that was held in the previous October. In the first week of the 2017 trip, *Bush Rangers* cadets from Rossmoyne Senior High School travelled to the area. Cadets were given the opportunity to work alongside the local Martu rangers, who showed them the traditional land and taught them about plants and animals. The cadets, who ranged from 12 to 15 years old, were also shown how to effectively monitor birds, including how to use apparatus such as binoculars and mist netting.

According to *Bush Rangers* Coordinator Richard Olive, the experience was life-changing for a number of 'city kids' who have had never experienced the outback.

"They had the opportunity to experience culture in such a unique way – on Country and with traditional owners – and step right out of their comfort zones and extend themselves mentally and physically," he said.

"And it was also a great experience for the Martu people, who are incredibly proud of their culture and knowledge of the land and are keen to share it with others."



Top left The trees at Matuwa teem with birdlife, including zebra finches.

Above *Bush Rangers* cadets from Rossmoyne Senior High School at Matuwa.

Left Students from Wiluna Remote Community School with Tegan Douglas.
Photos – Neil Hamilton

Do it yourself

Matuwa is located 150 kilometres north-east of Wiluna. Accommodation is available in the Lorna Glen homestead, an ideal camping location with self-contained bunkhouse accommodation and facilities. For more information visit parks.dpaw.wa.gov.au.



The students took part in bird surveys, night-time spotlighting, introduced cactus removal, weeding and owl pellet analysis.

In the second week, the group was joined by students from Wiluna Remote Community School. The students took part in a camp where they spent time on country with Martu people, many of whom they were related to. For Neil, Tegan, Simon and others, it was uplifting to watch the connections that were being strengthened by this opportunity.

“It was amazing to see the kids engaging with their relatives, who in some cases are training to be rangers themselves,” he said.

“We all learnt from each other sharing things and understanding their Country.

“The students also learnt about bush tucker and medicine, and heard about what plants and animals occurred on the land when their relatives were kids.”

A highlight for this group was when they heard from Simon about his work researching birds of prey. Simon demonstrated how he examines nests and the students were dazzled when he deftly climbed a tree to check on a whistling kite’s nest to measure the brood it was housing. The students also had an opportunity to give Martu names to two wedge-tailed eagle chicks. They named the male ‘Djootabay’, which means ‘wild and free’ and the female ‘Karibatu’,



Above Neil Hamilton, Tegan Douglas and Martu rangers at Lorna Glen.

Photo – Bruce Greatwich

which means ‘hungry’. They also named a satellite tagged chick ‘Yapu’, which means ‘rock’ and another male they called ‘Kapiburror’, which means ‘rainy day’.

CONTINUING THE WORK

Neil is grateful to Tegan and Simon for their continued support and is pleased to provide the people of Wiluna school, the Martu community and other partners with a common project to come together on Country. In the meantime, he hopes that visitors from other parts of Australia and the world will make the long, but very worthwhile trek to Matuwa in order to appreciate true beauty of the Australian outback and engage with the Martu people and the Wiluna community.

Top and below The expansive beauty of Matuwa is quintessentially Australian ‘outback’.

Photos – Neil Hamilton



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