



Rescuing

a cockie in crisis



A rescue effort to free a Carnaby's cockatoo from a tight spot also demonstrated the value of rehabilitation and ongoing monitoring for this endangered species.

by Rhianna King and Matt Swan



On Tuesday 15 October 2019, a call came into DBCA's Wildlife Protection Branch in Kensington from a colleague at the nearby Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development (DPIRD) offices to report there was bird stuck in one of the building's exhaust chimneys. Staff had heard scratching and squawking from within the eight-to nine-metre-tall metal chimney for up to 24 hours and had observed another bird – a male Carnaby's cockatoo (*Calyptorhynchus latirostris*) – hanging around the entrance of the cylinder.

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Main Carnaby's cockatoos mate for life.

Photo – Rick Dawson/DBCA

Insets from left The sound of a bird scratching and squawking inside a chimney was detected in Kensington; DBCA staff used a drone to assess the location of the trapped bird; a cherry picker provided access to the top of the chimney; an improvised tool was used to remove the bird.

Photos – Matt Swan/DBCA and Riley Carter/DBCA

Above A male Carnaby's cockatoo was spotted around the entrance of the chimney.

Photo – Matt Swan/DBCA

Above right Accessing the chimney was a challenge overcome with the help of fire crews.

Photo – Riley Carter/DBCA

“... what captured the attention of the team was the silver band on her right leg and the orange and red ones on her left ... she had been rescued before.”

Knowing that Carnaby's cockatoos mate for life, it seemed likely that the bird stuck inside was a female who had been prospecting for a safe place to nest.

CALLING IN THE CAVALRY

DBCA wildlife officers Matt Swan and Riley Carter travelled to the site and liaised with the building's maintenance managers to workshop ways to safely rescue the trapped bird. By listening at the side of the chimney, Matt and Riley determined the bird was still alive. But, because the shaft was so tall, assessing the bird's situation and accessing it was a challenge.

The next step was to deploy a drone above the cylinder to get a better picture of the structure and its accidental inhabitant. The footage provided a clear picture of a miserable-looking female Carnaby's cockatoo that was trapped about a metre down from the entrance. Wildlife officers then enlisted experts in human rescues from the nearby Kensington Fire Station. A fire crew arrived on site, but they were not able to create a safe working environment to rescue the bird. So, they called in another

crew to bring in their cherry picker, to provide deeper and safer access. Armed with an improvised tool fashioned to extract the bird, Matt ascended on the cherry picker, leant over the edge of the chimney, hooked the tool around the bird and lifted it to freedom.

On initial inspection, the bird did not appear to have any obvious sign of injury or trauma, but a health check and flight test at Perth Zoo would confirm that. Instead, what captured the attention of the team was the silver band on her right leg and the orange and red ones on her left. These bands indicated that this was not the bird's first time in trouble; she had been rescued before.

BANDED BIRD

The bird was transported to Perth Zoo where it was confirmed that she had not sustained any injuries. The Perth Zoo assesses and treats more than 250 endangered wild cockatoos each year that have been hit by cars, shot, injured in accidents and even electrocuted.

Those that can be rehabilitated are cared for by registered wildlife carers and



Top Drone vision revealed that the female Carnaby's cockatoo was wedged about a metre down the chimney.

Photo – Peter Nicholas/DBCA

Above DCBA wildlife officer Matt Swan with Fire and Rescue crew members.

Photo – Riley Carter/DBCA

Above right Male Carnaby's cockatoos have a red ring around their eyes, while females have a dark ring.

Photo – Rick Dawson/DBCA

Right The rescued Carnaby's cockatoo was assessed by vets at Perth Zoo.

Photo – Matt Swan/DBCA

Far right Kensington is a known roost for Carnaby's cockatoos.

Photo – Rick Dawson/DBCA

released back into the wild. But, before they're set free, they are fitted with a uniquely numbered leg band.

Perth Zoo Science zoologist Peter Mawson, who has been researching Carnaby's cockatoos since 1996, checked the database for the numbers on the leg bands of the rescued bird, and identified her as 'Female 320-01494'.

Mates for life

Black cockatoo species can live for 30 to 40 years in the wild and they partner with a mate for life. They reach sexual maturity at as young as three years old and typically lay two eggs a year. Usually both eggs hatch, but only one survives to fledge at about 10 weeks. The chick stays with its parents until the next breeding season.

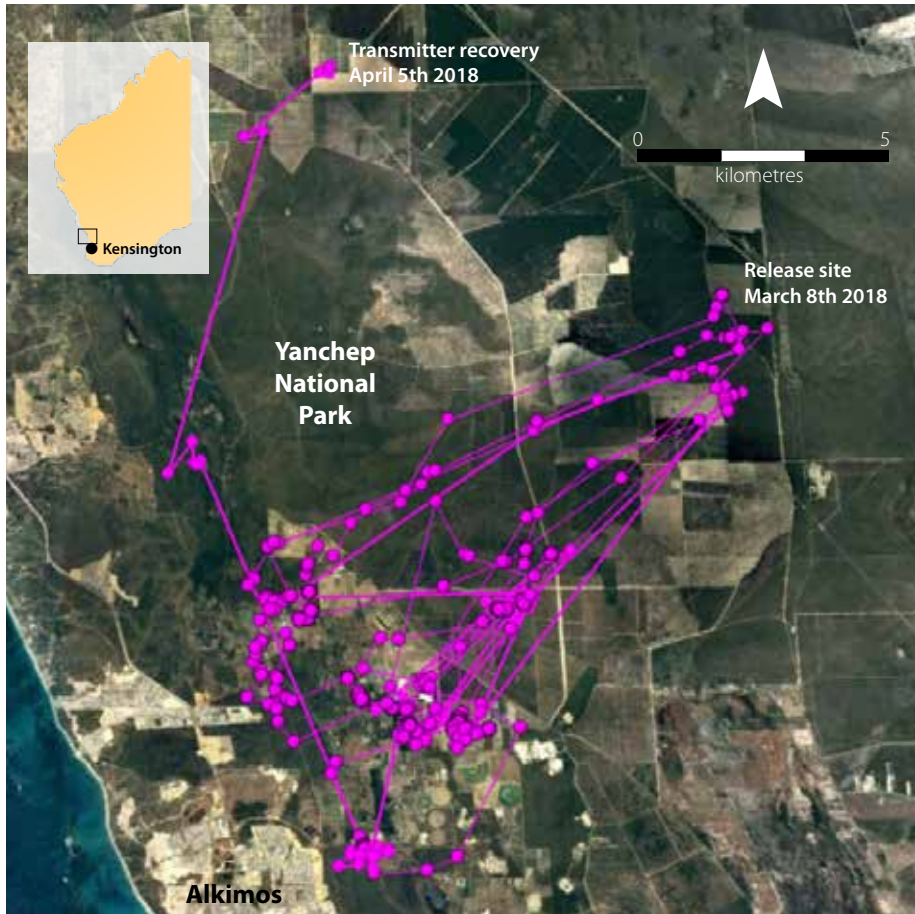
Interestingly, when Perth Zoo vets examined Female 320-01494, they found food in her crop (a pouch for storing food near the throat). This suggests that her mate was bringing food to sustain her while she was trapped.



Hear more about the rescue

Scan this QR code or visit Parks and Wildlife Service's 'LANDSCOPE' playlist on YouTube.





Left Female 320-01494's flight path, which was tracked between 8 March 2018 and 5 April 2018 by a satellite transmitter that was fitted to her tail feathers.
Map courtesy of Karen Riley/Murdoch University

Above Female 320-01494 was released at Pinjar pine plantation on 8 March 2018.
Photo – Karen Riley/Murdoch University

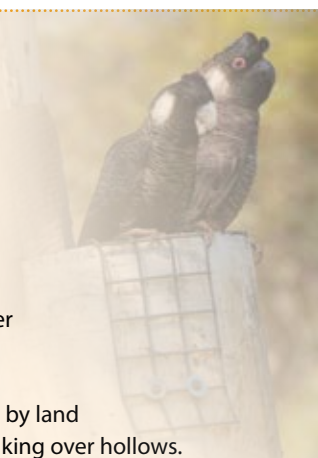
Below left Artificial hollows have been developed and installed in areas where Carnaby's cockatoos are known to breed.
Photo – Matt Swan/DBCA

Artificial hollows

In his early research on Carnaby's cockatoos, Dr Denis Saunders observed that females return to the same hollow each year to breed, provided it is available and their last breeding attempt was successful.

However, as part of long-term research at Coomallo Creek – an area north of Badgingarra, which is one of the State's most important cockatoo breeding sites – Denis, Rick Dawson and Peter Mawson observed that the number of hollows available were declining. Carnaby's cockatoos were having to compete with other bird species, such as galahs and long-billed corellas, that were being displaced by land clearing, and with feral European honey bees that were taking over hollows.

The research team, ably assisted by volunteers from Palm Beach Rotary Club, got to work to restore derelict natural hollows and expand their focus and experiment with artificial ones to establish if availability of breeding sites was limiting the size of the breeding population. The team worked with Francis Schmidt and volunteers from Serpentine-Jarrahdale Landcare to refine the design and procure the most suitable materials to build hollows that would be large enough for the female to lay and tend to her eggs and nestlings but provide protection from the elements. Denis, Rick and Peter established that breeding sites were a limiting resource. Since the team began the project in 2011, the number of breeding attempts in the area has doubled from 53 in 2011 to 107 in 2018. In the breeding season of 2018, artificial hollows provided 46 per cent of available hollows and 60 per cent of breeding attempts were made in them. Breeding success of birds nesting in artificial hollows is the same as those using natural hollows.



CHECKERED PAST

Female 320-01494 was first rescued on 24 September 2016, when she was less than five years old. She was found caught in a wire fence outside a now-closed restaurant in Caversham and had minor injuries, from which she recovered fully during a stint at Kaarakin Black Cockatoo Conservation Centre.

On 8 March 2018, a satellite tag was fitted to her tail feathers and she was released as part of a Murdoch University PhD research project trial at Pinjar pine plantation. On 4 April 2018, the satellite tag was recovered from Gnangara pines; it had most likely been shed as part of her annual moult. She had not been recorded again until she reappeared in the Kensington chimney.

After a quick visit to the Perth Zoo, where she was given a clean bill of health, the bird was returned to Kensington where, after a couple of squawks, she flew off to reunite with her mate.

It is encouraging to observe that Female 320-01494 has recovered from



Above Carnaby's cockatoos are experts at biting and tearing open seeds and cones.

Right Carnaby's cockatoos differ from Baudin's cockatoos by the length of their bills.

Below right Carnaby's cockatoos can often be heard before they are seen while flying overhead.

Photos – Rick Dawson/DBCA

Species in decline

It's not uncommon for landholders to describe how in the early- to mid-1900s, flocks of Carnaby's cockatoos would blacken the sky as they flew overhead filling the air with their raucous screeching. During the 1960s and 1970s they were considered vermin, for their impact on apple and pear orchards, almond crops and pine plantations. In fact, they were considered such a nuisance that, for a time, they even had a bounty on their beaks.

However, in the late 1960s and most of the 1970s, Carnaby's cockatoo breeding and feeding habitat was cleared for agriculture at a rate that Dr Denis Saunders puts at 400,000 hectares per year.

By the mid-1980s, the species had disappeared from more than 30 per cent of its range and numbers had declined so dramatically that it was declared 'endangered' at state and federal level.

Nowadays, their range is believed to be half of what it was and the species continues to be impacted by habitat loss, competition for hollows (see also 'Artificial hollows' on page 26), bushfire and risks associated with living among humans.



her 2016 injuries, found a mate and is demonstrating breeding behaviour; this proves that every rehabilitated bird can be an asset to the wild population. However, according to Dr Denis Saunders, who has been surveying the species for more than 50 years, this is the first recorded attempt of a Carnaby's cockatoo to nest this close to the CBD.

We know that female Carnaby's return with their partners to the area in which they were born. So one theory for why she became trapped in the chimney was that she was searching for a suitable nest hollow but has not learned the traditional migration path inland from her mother, because she entered rehabilitation at the start of the 2016 breeding season so missed the first migration.

KEEPING THEM WILD

Carnaby's cockatoos typically nest in remnant woodland vegetation in the inland parts of their range, where the annual rainfall is between 350 and 700 millimetres and the trees are estimated to be 100 to

200 years old. Around suburbia there is not the availability of food that is needed to nurture young during the breeding season. That is why attempts to support their breeding through artificial hollows are focused in natural habitat in regional areas, such as at Coomallo Creek, and why nesting hollows are not installed in and around the city (see 'Artificial hollows' on page 26). If this practice were to be adopted, we would disrupt their natural nesting patterns and behaviour, and compromise the species' survival. In the same way, feeding native wildlife is an offence under the Biodiversity Conservation Act, because if we encourage birds to eat from backyards they will lose the instinct for finding their own food.

So, while Female 320-01494 enjoys her third chance at life, DPIRD is taking steps to cover the top of the chimney, and members of the public are encouraged to provide details of any banded cockatoos they see and report any sick or injured ones to the Wildcare Helpline.

Have you seen sick or injured native wildlife?

Please contact the Wildcare Helpline on (08) 9474 9055.

The Wildcare Helpline provides a service for the public who find sick or injured native wildlife and are seeking advice on what to do or where to find care for the animal.

You can download the Wildcare Helpline app to your smart phone by visiting the App Store or Google Play Store.



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