

Noisy Scrub-bird — a Success Story by Clifford Young

Imagine a small two-legged athletic rat to which someone with an odd sense of humour has added feathers, a bird's beak and tail and a stubby set of wings. Now add a voice. Not just any voice mind you, but a voice full of rich and vibrant tones which at times resembles a Reed Warbler or even a European Nightingale yet at close range is powerful enough to deafen the strongest ear. Let the world have fleeting glimpses of this creature between 1842 and 1889 and then, without so much as a wave of a magic wand or a pinch of pixie dust, make it disappear. What you are left with for the next 70 years is all the ingredients for what must rank as one of the world's greatest ornithological mysteries. And the biggest surprise was still to come.

In 1961, 72 years after its disappearance, the elusive Noisy Scrub-bird as it had come to be known, was rediscovered in dense pockets of vegetation at Two Peoples Bay, under the shadow of rugged Mt Gardner, 32 kilometres east of Albany on Western Australia's south coast.

The news, announced to the world on Christmas Day, 1961, caused a sensation amongst ornithologists, and many naturalists immediately set out on the long journey to Two Peoples Bay to try to catch sight of the near flightless bird in its dense cover of dwarf eucalypts,

melaleuca, banksias and sword-rush swamps and to hear the scrub-bird's machine-gun like call of "cheep-cheep-cheep-cheepepeppp".

However, with the discovery a new problem presented itself. The area where the bird was living was precisely the area where the Western Australian Government had proposed establishing a new townsite to be called Casuarina. To the Government's credit, the following deliberations resulted instead in a decision to set the area aside as a Nature Reserve. The resulting Two Peoples Bay Nature Reserve of 4 639 hectares was subsequently gazetted in April, 1966 and vested in the Western Australian Wildlife Authority.

The Reserve derives its name from Two Peoples Bay which was named "Baie des deux Peuples" ("Bay of Two Nations") by Louis de Freycinet in 1803 because it was here he met an American brig, the *Union*, anchored in the bay.

The Noisy Scrub-bird was first discovered in Australia by John Gilbert at Drakesbrook in the Darling Range, Western Australia, in 1842. Gilbert was the field collector for the noted English ornithologist, John Gould, and it was Gould who gave the bird its name after reading Gilbert's descriptions of its remarkable calls. Gilbert noted that the bird had "... extraordinary loud notes, many of which are sweet and melodious" which it uttered while running along the ground. Gilbert went on to add that "... its notes are so exceedingly loud and shrill as to produce a ringing sensation in the ears, precisely the effect produced when a shrill whistle is blown in a small room." Obviously impressed with the bird's vocal ability, Gilbert

Extract courtesy of The West Australian Newspapers Pty Ltd.

THE WEST AUSTRALIAN, MONDAY, DECEMBER 25, 1961

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**'Extinct' Bird
Seen in S.W.**

In what is described as the most exciting news of the century in Australian ornithology, a bird believed extinct has been seen near Albany.

Albany primary school headmaster and prominent naturalist Harry Webster heard a noisy scrub-bird (*atrichornis clamosus*), pictured, calling in dense scrubland near King George Sound on December 17.

Naturalists had thought it extinct since 1889.

This weekend Mr. Webster returned to the area where he heard the calls and came within 12ft of the bird. He saw it clearly again yesterday.

Black Patch

A black patch on its throat identified it as a male bird and its description tallied exactly with the noisy scrub-bird's, he said.

Leading W.A. naturalist Vincent Serventy said the discovery was the most exciting news of the century in Australian ornithology.

The King George Sound area was where the bird was originally found and he had always hoped the species was still alive.

Expeditions to the area since 1889 had failed to find any.

Mr. Webster, who is a member of the W.A. Naturalists' Club and a committee member of the Gould League of Bird Lovers, appealed to ornithologists to stay away from the area. He said care must be taken not to frighten or harm the bird.

Journalist Plunges

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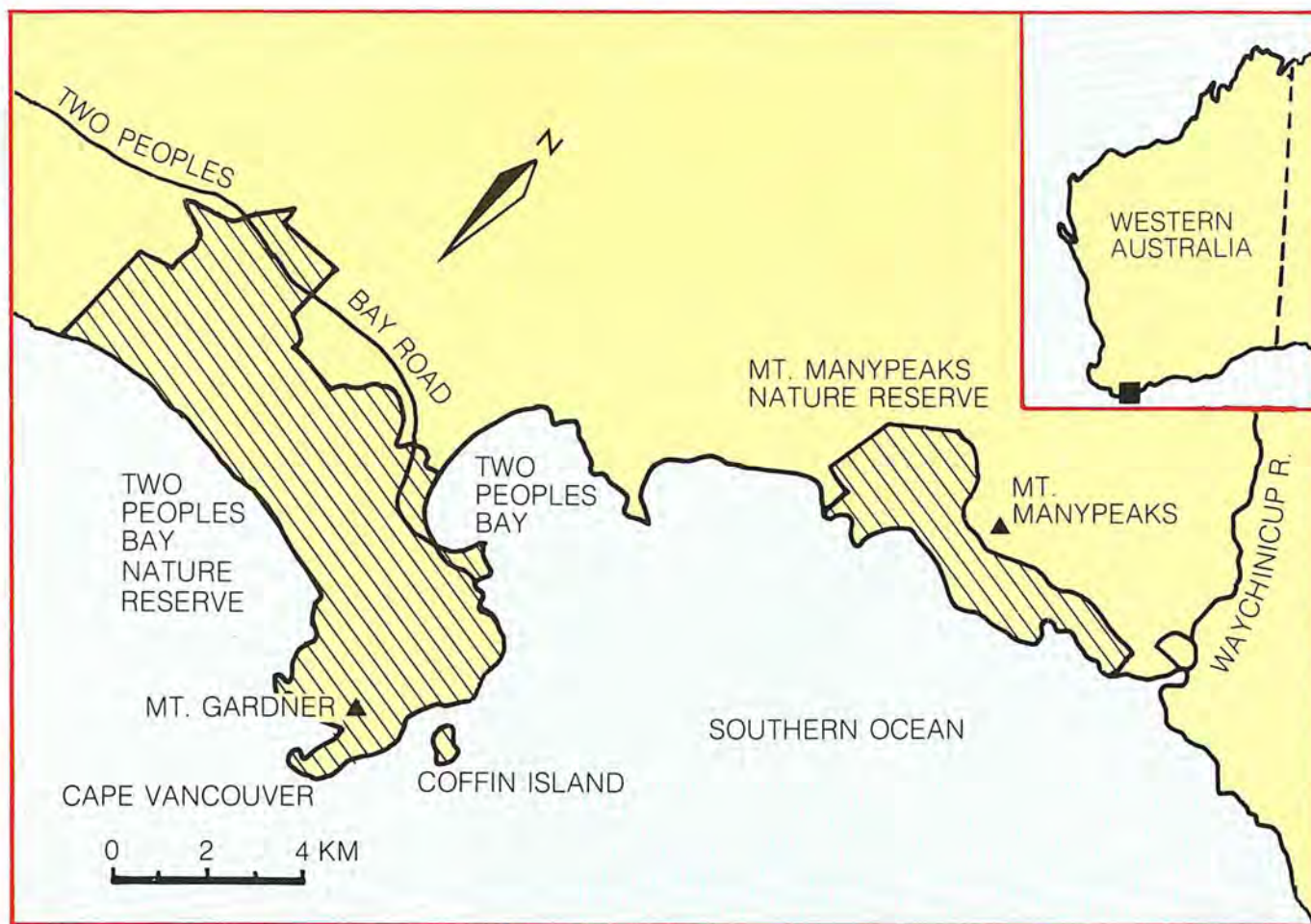
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Male Noisy Scrub-bird (Photo copyright A.G. Wells).





wrote that he considered it to be "... without exception the loudest of all the songbirds inhabiting Western Australia."

Gilbert also found the bird at King George's Sound and at Augusta, and recently discovered old documents at the British Museum (Natural History) indicate that Gilbert encountered the species as far north as Mt Barker, though in decreasing numbers. Over the next 50 years, a number of specimens were collected, mostly from around King George's Sound, but the final specimen collected was taken at Torbay in early October 1889, by A. J. Campbell. The following month, Campbell also recorded hearing the species calling at Boodjidup Lake near Augusta. However, this was the last such record and, despite intensive searches of likely habitat throughout the South-West, no trace of the species could be found. As the years went by, many naturalists considered the bird extinct making its rediscovery in 1961 even more surprising.

Why did the bird decline over most of its former range yet survive in an isolated pocket at Two Peoples Bay?

We can only guess at the reasons but it would seem fairly clear that it was related to the activities of European man. In addition to introducing such predators as the fox and cat, early settlers drained swamplands and employed frequent burning and clearing techniques for crop cultivation and improving pastures. The subsequent loss of prime habitat for the Scrub-bird, together with an extended period of drought in the 1880s and 1890s probably tipped the scales against the bird's survival throughout almost all of its former range. The Two Peoples Bay population probably survived because the area was rugged and unsuitable for agriculture and relatively immune from being devastated by any single fire. It is thought that because of the area's topography enough habitat would remain after a fire to enable the population to survive. This hypothesis has been reinforced by results obtained through a strict management policy of the reserve since its establishment.

When first rediscovered the Noisy Scrub-bird population at Two Peoples

Bay numbered about 40 breeding pairs. In 1973, a management programme was implemented which prevented burning of the reserve and since this measure was introduced numbers of the birds have almost doubled. At the beginning of this year it was estimated that there were about 72 breeding pairs plus about 20 non-breeding males holding territories. Even this number may have been an underestimate owing to the extreme difficulties encountered in any census of the population. The birds rarely can be seen to be counted and most estimates have relied on the number of males heard singing during the breeding season.

Research work carried out this year has indicated that many more birds than previously thought may be present but owing to the lack of suitable habitat for the population to expand into, these extra birds must live in other birds' territories and do not sing due to pressure from the dominant males. This increase in numbers has led to considerable overcrowding and for many years now the Department of Fisheries and

Wildlife which manages the Reserve for the Western Australian Wildlife Authority, has been examining ways of establishing extra colonies.

Although the short term survival of the species had been safeguarded by the declaration of Two Peoples Bay Nature Reserve combined with subsequent research and management, it was felt that its long term future would depend on the successful establishment of viable colonies in at least several other localities. This view took into account the possibility that fire, disease or some other form of major disaster could reduce the present population within the the Nature Reserve to the point from where it may not recover.

The Department of Fisheries and Wildlife considered this option as early as 1965 when it examined nearby Mount Manypeaks as a possible site for a second colony of Noisy Scrub-birds. Mount Manypeaks fulfilled the basic criteria necessary for the move, namely it possessed suitable habitat for both feeding and nesting, the area was large enough to permit the introduced population to expand and become viable in its own right, it was relatively close to Two Peoples Bay so as to facilitate transport etc, and the land tenure was secure, permission having been given to proclaim it also as a Nature Reserve.

However, for many years there were insufficient birds at Two Peoples Bay to risk transferring any to a new location, and by the time there were sufficient birds, a bushfire had swept through much of the Mount Manypeaks area, destroying a large proportion of the suitable habitat. In the end, any attempt to establish another population of the Noisy Scrub-bird had to be delayed until the beginning of this year.

The project finally got underway in mid-May with the arrival in Western Australia of Don Merton, a fauna conservation officer from New Zealand specialising in endangered bird species. An acknowledged expert in his field, Don Merton was 'loaned' for the duration of the project by the New Zealand Wildlife Service at the request of the Western Australian Wildlife Authority. During his 15 years with the New Zealand Wildlife Service, Don had taken a particular interest in the management of

populations of rare birds and had succeeded in establishing new populations of North and South Island Saddlebacks (a New Zealand endemic wattlebird), Kokako (another Wattlebird), Kakapo (a flightless ground parrot) and the Chatham Island Robin.

Consequently, Don had extensive experience in all the relevant techniques involved in such projects including catching the birds, holding them in captivity, transferring them and, finally, releasing them with the minimum of stress. This knowledge was to prove invaluable in the months ahead.



▲ Graham Folley broadcasts the call of the male Noisy Scrub-bird to try to lure another male into the mist nets (Photo courtesy of West Australian Newspapers Pty Ltd.)

Don Merton's partner in the project was Graham Folley of the Western Australian Department of Fisheries and Wildlife. Graham as Reserve Officer in charge of Two Peoples Bay Nature Reserve, brought an intimate knowledge of the bird's habitat to the project.

The first part of the translocation project was relatively easy. The 'Don Merton Memorial Aviary', measuring 6m long by 3m wide was constructed on site at Two Peoples Bay and divided into two separate compartments to house captured birds while awaiting transfer to their new home. So far, so good. Then came the hard part, the actual task of finding and capturing enough birds to form the initial nucleus of a new population.

Blithely unaware of the frustrations and difficulties ahead of them, Don and Graham began by setting ground-hugging mist nets across existing clearings throughout the reserve. Almost immediately it became evident that the job ahead was not going to be easy. Examining the ground around the net after a set, Graham could clearly make out the tracks of a Noisy Scrub-bird. Following them he saw the tracks led directly to the net and continued uninterrupted out the opposite side.

Initially Graham thought the bird had wriggled under the net but later it became obvious that the Scrub-bird, with experience born out of years of living and travelling through some of the thickest and most impenetrable scrub imaginable, treated the net with disdain, slipping straight through it as though it was just another thicket.

Once the problem was recognised a smaller diameter mist net was employed and met with almost immediate results. A male Scrub-bird ran full-tilt into one of the nets and became entangled. However, capture was obviously not on its day's itinerary and even as Don and Graham moved in to pick it up, the bird carefully placed its two strong and muscular legs onto the restraining net filaments and ripped them apart. Scrambling free it then continued on its unconcerned way leaving two astonished would-be captors staring after it. Round Two to the Noisy Scrub-bird.

The situation was not improved by the fact that in many weather conditions, for example in wind, rain or bright sunshine, the birds could either detect the nets by sight or would not move around during the day. However, with the introduction of a strong, non-synthetic cotton mist net of small diameter, Round Three went to Don and Graham. A total of eight male Scrub-birds were soon captured in the new mist net with a best effort of three in a single day. A further two males were caught in modified box traps set either along small lines of drift fences or at the entrances (or exits) of natural tunnels through the bush. These tunnels or runs through the scrub were much used by the Scrub-birds but also by other animals including rodents, small reptiles and a variety of other small fauna.



▲ Mist nets were used with some success to capture Noisy Scrub-birds. (Photo G. Folley).

◀ Graham Folley approaches the release area carrying a Noisy Scrub-bird in a specially designed backpack. (Photo courtesy of West Australian Newspapers Pty Ltd.)

▼ Thick scrub lined gullies provide ideal habitat for the Noisy Scrub-bird at Two Peoples Bay (Photo G. Folley).





◀ Several Noisy Scrub-birds were caught in modified traps set at the end of ground runs. (Photo G. Folley).



▶ One of the Mount Manypeaks gullies where the Noisy Scrub-bird was successfully released (Photo G. Folley).

▼ A female Noisy Scrub-bird at its nest (Photo copyright G. Chapman.)



The box traps also caught two female Scrub-birds, an event which proved most fortunate as a lack of females almost proved the stumbling block of the whole project.

Unlike the male Scrub-birds whose locations could usually be determined by their loud calls, the females made little or no sound and usually stayed hidden in dense bush. However, a method had to be found to capture them as without females the resettlement scheme would founder.

Without the fierce territorial drive of the male birds, the females could not be lured into the mist nets by playing the recorded sound of rival birds. Also, for the duration of the project, the females were mostly engaged in nesting activities and were presumably staying close to the vicinity of their nest.

Rather reluctantly, it was decided the only way to capture females in the time available was to try and trap them on the nest. However, as events proved, any fears of subjecting the females to undue trauma during the process proved groundless as the birds showed a remarkable capacity to ignore almost anything happening around them. This led to the construction and use of some quite remarkable contraptions which were fitted to the nests in attempts to trap the birds. That is, of course, after the nests were found. This was no easy task considering the habitat in which the Noisy Scrub-bird chooses to live and the fact that the females seek even thicker scrub in which to site their nests. Most of the nests found were quite close to the ground in thick rushes and near open water. The nests were roughly spherical in shape with a side opening and lined inside with a hard cardboard-like material made of decayed rush. Many of the nests also featured a short runway leading to the side entrance.

After considerable effort, a further two females were caught on the nest, one with a modified box trap placed at the entrance to the nest, and the other with a miniature mist net rigged to flip over the entrance hole when tripped by the female entering the nest.

The birds were temporarily housed in the 'Don Merton Memorial Aviary' before being carefully transported in



▲ Noisy Scrub-birds are voracious insect eaters. (Photo copyright G. Chapman.)

special wickerwork backpacks to the release area below Mount Manypeaks. Graham Folley found the birds travelled better than expected and even fed along the way on a diet of assorted insects and grubs provided for the journey.

And then it was time for what Graham and Don saw as the most crucial part of the whole project. After all the effort of catching the birds, they now had to let them go. After releasing the first two males in a suitably vegetated gully and watching them disappear into the thickets, Graeme suffered his first doubts about the project.

After spending a sleepless night immediately following the release, Graham was back at a point overlooking the release site before dawn the next day. His apprehension quickly turned to elation when, as the sun rose over the horizon, the unmistakable notes of a noisy Scrub-bird resounded down the gully, bouncing off the granite outcrops and echoing across the hillsides. The bird had found the gully to its liking and was proclaiming his new territory. Although Graham did not hear the second Scrub-bird that morning, nor for several mornings following, it too was heard calling from farther up the gully within just a few weeks. The remaining birds followed in quick succession. The Noisy Scrub-bird now had a second home.

Of course the real test of this project is still to come. Although a total of ten birds have now been released at the new site, only four were females, and some of the birds may have been immature. More birds will have to be caught and transported to Mount Manypeaks to build up the colony to at least ten breeding pairs, the minimum number thought to be capable of establishing a new population in its own right. So therefore, what has this project really achieved? The work carried out by Don Merton and Graham Folley demonstrated many practical aspects important to future management of the Noisy Scrub-bird and its habitat. Between them, they established several methods of capturing the birds with the minimum of stress, succeeded in feeding and housing them for varying periods of time, and developed means of transporting and releasing the birds at new sites. That these methods were successful is shown by the birds which have since taken up new territories at Mount Manypeaks and are now filling the area with their calls.

Future work will concentrate on building up the Mount Manypeaks breeding colony and in protecting the bird's habitat. There is still much to be done, but Don and Graham are quietly confident that the Noisy Scrub-bird is one bird, at least, that is on the road back from near extinction.