

Woodlands on the Wing

Issue 1 Spring 2012

Welcome to the Woodlands

BirdLife Australia, in partnership with The Nature Conservancy and with the generous support of the David Thomas Challenge, has recently embarked on a brand new project located in the Great Western Woodlands.

The Great Western Woodlands (GWW) is a huge 16 million hectare area covering much of the southern, eastern and western goldfields. At this size it is almost three times the size of Tasmania and is the largest remaining intact Mediterranean woodland in the world. It lies between the wheatbelt in the west and the Nullarbor Plain in the east, with a spur heading out almost to the Eyre Bird Observatory. The northern boundary lies along the mulga-eucalypt line.

The region covers a mixture of eucalypt woodland, mallee and shrubland vegetation, with scattered salt lakes and granite outcrops. Despite the low rainfall, the area is extremely biodiverse. It is known to contain over 160 different Eucalypt species; that's over 20% of all the Eucalypt species in Australia.

Many of the bird species which have declined or been lost from the highly cleared and fragmented wheatbelt region remain abundant in the GWW and hence this area provides an important sanctuary for these species, as well as providing a source population for future recolonisation of rehabilitated areas in the wheatbelt.

Currently, due to its size and remoteness, little is known about the distribution and ecology of birds in the GWW and consequently how best to manage and conserve the area to ensure the continued persistence of the bird populations that rely on it. This is where the new *Birds in the Great Western Woodlands* project plans to make a difference.

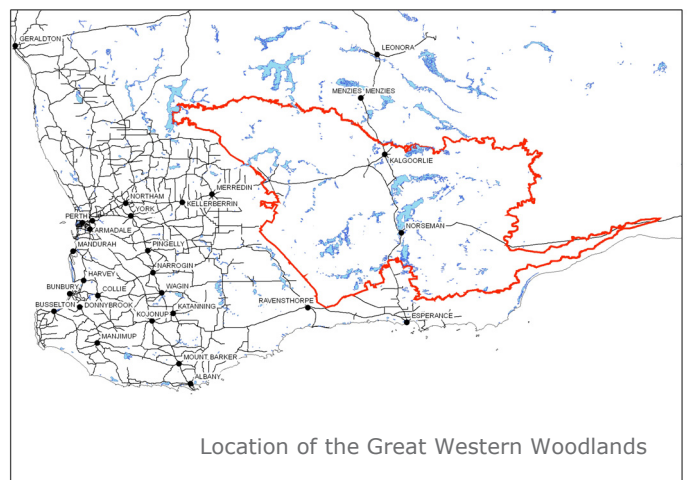
BirdLife Australia will be asking volunteers to assist with bird surveys throughout the GWW over the next two years. The results of these surveys will then be analysed to determine species distributions, habitat requirements, the impacts of disturbances such as fire, introduced species, towns and timber cutting, and important conservation areas.

Surveys will be conducted in small groups, covering all seasons and in areas both remote and more accessible. Self-sufficiency and 4WD will be required in most locations.

Liz Fox



Photo: Martin Gole



Location of the Great Western Woodlands

WANT TO KEEP INFORMED?

If you'd like more information about the GWW project or how you can get involved, please contact the Project Coordinator Liz Fox.

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GWW Easter Tagalong Surveys



To meet some of our community engagement objectives and begin the process of engaging the BirdLife Australia volunteer observer community in the Birds in the Great Western Woodlands project, BirdLife Australia organised and coordinated 'tagalong' bird survey trips to the GWW over the Easter 2012 period. The objectives of the tagalongs were to:

- Raise awareness about the GWW, its broader biodiversity values in general and its bird conservation values in particular
- Begin the process of engaging the BirdLife volunteer observer community
- Pilot the logistics of putting on ground a 'tagalong' method for distributing observers over large areas
- Encourage observers to visit parts of the GWW that they might not otherwise have visited
- Test the willingness of observers to undertake a mix of broader area (area search) and smaller (2 hectare) survey methods in a large remote region
- Increase the number of bird surveys, particularly 2 hectare surveys, in the GWW
- Increase the geographic spread of bird surveys in the GWW.



Eight areas across the GWW were chosen for the tagalong surveys pilot. These were located in different areas, with access via moderately good tracks. Observers, who had responded to publicity through BirdLife Australia electronic and print newsletters, were asked about their survey area preference and allocated a survey area. Of the 8 areas initially identified, all but one was surveyed to some

degree. Twenty three volunteer observers surveyed the 7 areas. Most areas were surveyed by small teams of 4 to 5 people; 1 couple surveyed two areas over a longer period.

A total of 1,519 individual bird records were recorded in 267 surveys. Of these, 202 surveys were repeatable 2 hectare surveys. There were a number of interesting findings. Some bird species were recorded only in the northern part of the surveyed part of the GWW: these were Major Mitchell's Cockatoo, Australian Bustard and Southern Whiteface. White-browed Scrubwren, Spotted Pardalote, and Purple-gaped and Tawny-crowned Honeyeaters were recorded only in southern areas. There was a single record of Ground Cuckoo-shrike,

recorded only in the eastern part of the GWW. A number of bird species now close to extinction or in significant decline in the wheatbelt were recorded in many areas. These were Gilbert's Whistler, Chestnut Quail-thrush and Yellow-plumed Honeyeater.

Perhaps most interestingly, in a region where many thousands of Purple-crowned Lorikeets are often audible and visible when the woodland and mallee is in flower, there were only five scattered records across all the areas surveyed. Given the geographic spread of the surveys, and the visibility of the species, it is interesting to speculate where these birds might go when the GWW eucalypts are not in flower.

Cheryl Gole

Taking Flight

INTRODUCING THE GREAT WESTERN WOODLANDS PROJECT COORDINATOR: LIZ FOX

Liz has been a lifelong birdwatcher and is thrilled to be working with the organisation she has been a member of since she was 11 years old.

Liz completed a degree in Zoology at the University of Western Australia with an Honours project on the response of birds to a predator at their nest site, and a PhD consisting of recording Willie Wagtail calls to determine if individual birds can be identified from their songs.

She previously worked as an ornithologist with an environmental consultant and as a result had the opportunity to conduct bird surveys in many remote areas of Western Australia. However, she has not yet been bird watching within the GWW! The Gilbert's Whistler is on the top of her list of birds to seek out when she gets out to the area this Spring.



Fast Fact

A total of 206 bird species have been recorded from the Great Western Woodlands.

The most recorded species in the region is Australia's smallest bird - the Weebill.



Species in Focus

GILBERT'S WHISTLER



The Gilbert's Whistler occurs in shrubby woodlands and mallee across southern Australia. Often located by their loud, far-carrying call, they are typically inconspicuous but can become quite approachable during the breeding season. The species has declined in the wheatbelt as a result of habitat loss, but can still be found right across the GWW.

They forage for insects on the ground or low in shrubs and build their deep cup nests in broombush or mallee. They have also been known to use disused babbler's nests.

Females lack the orange throat and dark lores of the male and are a uniform grey with a paler throat. They can be distinguished from other female whistlers by the lack of streaking on the breast (Rufous Whistler) and no yellow on the undertail coverts (Golden Whistler).

Previously two subspecies, eastern and western, were recognised due to variations in plumage, however these variations are now thought to be clinal.

Based on current data, the Gilbert's Whistler occurs throughout much of the GWW. It is not known whether its absence from the north-east, south-east and north-west areas of the region is due to the lack of surveys in this area, or whether conditions are not favourable for its survival. More surveys in these areas are required to help answer this question.

What's On?

UPCOMING SURVEYS AND EVENTS

GWW SPRING SURVEY

October 2nd – 7th 2012

The next survey in the GWW will occur from 2nd – 7th October, although survey dates and length are flexible. Being the middle of spring, the GWW should be alive to the sound of calling birds and it will be a great time to see the woodlands in all their glory. If the Eucalypts are in flower, this will bring in large numbers of Purple-crowned Lorikeets and numerous honeyeaters such as Yellow-plumed, Purple-gaped, Brown-headed, and White-eared.

Surveys will be conducted in small groups spread right across the region in areas such as McDermid Rock, Credo Station, Frank Hann National Park and the Helena-Aurora Ranges. 4WD required in most areas and volunteers will need to be self-sufficient. Please contact Project Coordinator Liz Fox if you are interested in being either a group leader or participant.

KALGOORLIE BIRD SURVEY

October 13th 2012, 8am

Kalgoorlie locals and visitors are invited to attend a demonstration of bird survey methods and assist with bird surveys in Karlkurla Park, Paddington Drive, Kalgoorlie. This annual survey will help us to determine what species are using the park and the impact of the revegetation efforts. This event is being held with the assistance of the Kalgoorlie-Boulder Urban Landcare Group.

GWW STARLIGHT & CHAMPAGNE SUMMER SURVEY

December 29th 2012 – January 2nd 2013

If you are unable to make the spring survey, then why not see in the New Year in the Woodlands? The summer survey will be held over New Year's Eve and what better way to start the year than with some starlight and champagne? For more information contact Project Coordinator Liz Fox.



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Photo: Martin Gole

