

Woodlands on the Wing

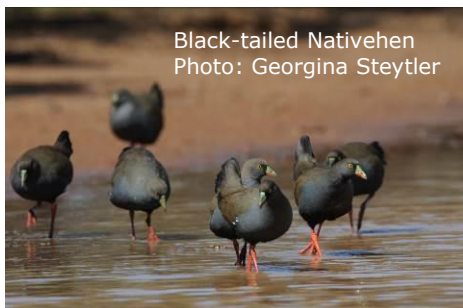
Issue 7 Summer 2014

The Great Western Woodlands is the world's largest remaining temperate woodland. BirdLife Australia is partnering with The Nature Conservancy to establish a long-term monitoring project in the woodlands to assess species distribution, population status, movements and ecology of bird species in the region, to better inform conservation and management of this significant region. This project has been made possible through the generous support of the David Thomas Challenge and individual supporters from BirdLife Australia.

Heavy Rains During Summer

From all accounts, nature turned on a truly amazing spectacle over most of the northern half of the Great Western Woodlands, with heavy rains on 23 and 24 January. Fraser Range Station had 127mm and Kalgoorlie 137mm. This amount of rain in such a short period is an uncommon event in the Great Western Woodlands, not having occurred since January 1967 and before then, in February 1943.

The birds are now most likely taking advantage of these heavy rains that even the high summer temperatures cannot evaporate away. Rowles Lagoon (near Credo Station) was filled with 4m of water, and Banded Stilts are breeding on Lake Ballard, north of Kalgoorlie.



Black-tailed Nativehen
Photo: Georgina Steytler

Come Rain or Shine

Trip Report by Terry Powell

My brother-in-law Simon and I set out on 22 January 2014 to meet Scott Corbett and his wife from Kalgoorlie for a trip through the Dundas Nature Reserve, east of Norseman, along the Old Telegraph Line from Norseman to Balladonia. Unfortunately, during the time we had allocated, most of the Goldfields were washed out from north of Kalgoorlie down to the Nullarbor by a huge rain-bearing depression before Simon and I got to Norseman.

On the way, Simon and I camped at The Breakaways, east of Hyden, where it drizzled the whole time (after 37°C at Hyden). We then camped at McDermid Rock (in drizzle) where we initially had to wade through water to get to the rock from the parking area. However, the sun came out for a few hours on the second day, hence some bird sightings.

On the third day we continued on to Norseman in the hope that the depression might have by passed the area we were interested in. However, the road was starting to break up near Norseman because of water on the road and we eventually found a Road-Closed sign road on the edge of the Norseman town site.

It transpired that Scott wasn't able to get out of Kalgoorlie because of road closures and because the area we were to look at was inundated with heavy rain. For Simon and I to return to Perth meant either going south through Esperance or chancing it along the Lake King Road. We chose the latter option and worked our way from the Norseman-Esperance Road through about 20 kilometres of deep, water-filled potholes. Eventually the road became its usual dry, stony, pot-holed self and we moved on to Peak Charles National Park for the night.



Peak Charles. Photo: Terry Powell

While we were at Peak Charles, GWW Project Officer, Shapelle, texted us some sites to check out at Peak Charles and Frank Hann National Park on the way home.

The weather at Peak Charles was cool with a cloud cover flowing from the big depression to the east. A feature of this area was small flocks of **Rainbow Bee-eaters**, recorded at one site and then seen and heard to the south-east of Peak Charles as we drove. **Black-faced** and **Dusky Woodswallows** captured our attention at a site further south. As well, we saw our first **Shy Heathwren**.

While surveying six sites in the eastern section of Frank Hann National Park, the weather was hot and steamy with thundery showers all around the horizon. **White-winged Trillers** featured here, with 21 passing over one site in two groups. As well, we were startled by a **Brown Falcon** flying straight at us from 50 metres away, low over our heads and then into scrub about 40 metres away. Its target appeared to be a **Common Bronzewing** which bolted in the opposite direction without being caught.

Our time being limited, we returned home via Lake King, but we look forward to our next sortie into the GWW.



Helena and Aurora Range in the Great Western Woodlands. Photo: Shapelle McNee

Helena and Aurora Range

One of the projects nine survey areas

Helena and Aurora Range (also known as Bungalbin by the Kalamai Kapurn Nation people) is one of the Banded Ironstone Formation (BIF) ranges in the Great Western Woodlands. This is a spectacular range, described as making a great 'companion' when camping near its base.

Helena and Aurora Range is the largest BIF range in the Great Western Woodlands, particularly in height (704m above sea level at highest point, at least 200m above the woodlands on the flat plains below) and also in length. The larger the BIF range the greater its local impact, such as attracting clouds, providing high water and soil runoff as well as habitat for birds not found elsewhere in the Great Western Woodlands.

The sheer size of Helena and Aurora Range is reflected in the tall White Gums (*Eucalyptus capillosa*) it supports, not seen on other BIF ranges. There are also extensive areas of Sandplain Mallee (*Eucalyptus ebbanoensis*) with the dull blue-green leaves and glossy ebony coloured fruits as well as the Rough-fruited Mallee (*Eucalyptus corrugata*) with the glossy green leaves and corrugated buds and fruits.

Standing on top of the range one gets awesome views and a feeling of being up there with the birds as Peregrine Falcons and Little Woodswallows (attracted to the BIF outcropping to breed) fly not far above eye height or sometimes even below. The BIF rocks and outcropping are also the home of the two rare plants endemic to this range (*Tetradlea aphylla* subsp. *aphylla* and *Leucopogon spectabilis*).

The large dryandra tree, *Dryandra arborea* (or *Banksia arborea*), provides an important source of nectar for the honeyeaters, and parrots like to feed on their fruits. When the *Dryandra arborea* and eucalypts are in flower the range resounds with the calls of honeyeaters. At other times of year their absence is noticeable with hardly a bird heard. Although there are resident birds during the hot summer months, such as the Singing Honeyeater, they can be very quiet.

The Helena and Aurora Range bird survey sites start north of Koolyanobbing (~60 km north of Southern Cross) and continue north to Helena and Aurora Range and Pittosporum Rocks, then head south past Hunt Range, Yendilberin Hills, Mt Finnerty and end near Jaurdi just north of the Trans-Australian Railway.

Amongst the Birds at Helena and Aurora Range

by Scott Corbett

My wife Laura and I embarked on a camping excursion to the Helena and Aurora Range in April 2013. En route to the range we detoured to an old disused prospector's hut near the Aurora Minesite. We stopped here as there was a geocache to find. As geocaching is not one of my passions in life, I opted for a spot of birding while Laura endeavoured to find the small, well-hidden cache. The time was just after midday and the birds were not especially active. Initially, a small number of **Rufous Treecreepers** seemed to be the only birds active at this spot. That was until the presence of a group of **Brown-headed Honeyeaters** was betrayed by their distinctive sharp, scratchy calls. The birds had been foraging unobtrusively in the canopy of a large Salmon Gum before vocalising. Their calls not only attracted my attention but also that of the more aggressive, larger **Yellow-plumed Honeyeaters**, which proceeded to launch multiple aerial attacks on the Brown-headed Honeyeaters.

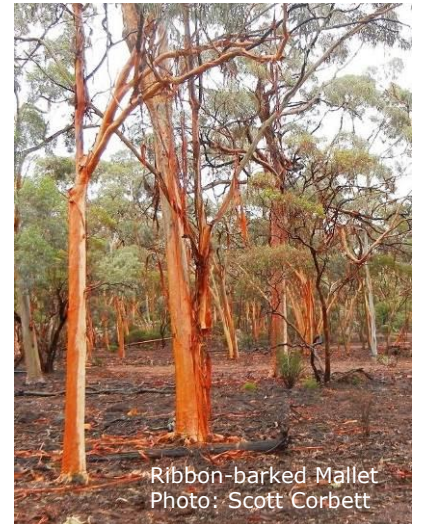
Our campsite was located approximately 300m west of the turnoff to the undesignated Range Lookout amid a grove of Ribbon-barked Mallet. The spot evokes a sense of tranquillity and remoteness. Being well screened from the main track by *Acacia* and *Eremophila* shrubs, a sense of privacy is also achieved.

Sitting around camp we were welcomed by the L.B.B. (little brown bird) brigade consisting of

Weebills and **Striated Pardalotes** in the eucalypt canopy, while closer to the ground in the shrubs we were treated to quite an elaborate vocal display from a **Redthroat** who was in the company of **Chestnut-rumped Thornbills**. Other noteworthy species recorded included **Crested Bellbird** and **Major Mitchell's Cockatoo**.

The next morning I woke early to the sound of the dawn chorus featuring **Gilbert's Whistler**. It seemed to be calling very close to camp so I slithered as quietly as possible out of the swag, grabbed my binoculars and attempted to locate it. Predictably, as soon as I had readied myself, the bird stopped calling! After several minutes of standing still and without hearing the Whistler I conceded defeat and decided to return to the comfort of my swag. As I turned for camp, an oddly shaped branch within a shrub nearby me made me pause and take a peek through the binoculars. Unbelievably, there sat a male Gilbert's Whistler! Shortly after this detection, the Whistler started to call again and went through his full repertoire.

Later, after breakfast, a group of **Chestnut Quail-thrushes** casually wandered through our camp fossicking for food items on the ground. Because we were sitting quietly in our



Ribbon-barked Mallet
Photo: Scott Corbett

camp chairs, the birds seemed unconcerned by our presence. The female quail-thrush appeared rather inquisitive. We managed to snap a few photos, which was a great result.

The view from the lookout on the Helena and Aurora Range is most certainly worth the drive up there (high clearance four-wheel-drives recommended). We were hoping to catch a glimpse of a **Peregrine Falcon**, which has been observed here previously. Unfortunately, on this day this particular raptor remained elusive. We were, however, lucky enough to see **Little Woodswallows**, another species characteristic of rocky ranges and escarpments. The drive back down the range yielded the intricately marked **Painted Button-quail**.



Chestnut Quail-thrush
Photo: Scott Corbett

In the period leading up to nightfall, the bush around our campsite was alive with the sound of calling birds. **Torresian Crows** punctuated the evening chorus with their snore-like wailing calls. **Yellow-plumed, Brown-headed** and **White-eared Honeyeaters** were busy in the canopy and provided Laura with an opportunity to refine her birding skills from the comfort of her camp chair. While watching the honeyeaters, we heard the distinctive chuckling call of a **Crested Shrike-tit**. We later tracked down the individual and were able to observe it for several minutes. If not for the distinctive chuckles, this small member of the Whistler family would be very easy to overlook. The western subspecies of the Crested Shrike-tit is considered Near Threatened, so, understandably we were extremely satisfied with this sighting.

The early evening also served up a spectacular thunderstorm. Copious amounts of forked lightning were a feature of the storm. Fortunately, most of the rain appeared to miss our campsite. Laura's prowess with the camera came to the fore during the storm as she was able to obtain some remarkable photos of the lightning show.

The rain also appeared to stir up the nocturnal reptilian fauna. In less than one hour's worth of head-torching, Laura was able to find numerous **Reticulated Velvet Geckoes** clinging to the trunks of the trees around our campsite. This arboreal species has a preference for smooth-barked eucalypts. The odd **Wheatbelt Stone Gecko** was also seen scurrying across the ground near our campsite.



Photo : Scott Corbett

To any nature lovers thinking of visiting the Helena and Aurora Range, or those reading about it here for the first time, take a couple of days and head out there. I highly doubt that you will be disappointed with what you'll find out there.

Frequency of Visits to Survey Areas

There have been a total of six surveys to the Great Western Woodlands for the GWW project during 2012-2013. These include two autumn surveys, one winter survey, two spring surveys and one summer survey.

There are potentially nine survey areas to survey each season - no small feat by any means as this would involve at least 36 people (four people and two vehicles per survey area). A total of 32 people volunteered in autumn 2013, when eight of the nine areas were visited.

Not surprisingly, autumn and spring are the favoured times to visit the Great Western Woodlands as these times provide the best weather conditions and are also the times when birds are likely to be most active and vocal.

Four of the nine designated areas have been visited five times from autumn 2012 to spring 2013 (see map on next page). These were Helena and Aurora Range, Transline, Dundas Nature Reserve and Frank Hann/Peak Charles National Parks. Credo Station and Fraser Range Station have been visited four times and Karroun Hill three times. There are two areas that have been visited only once or twice, Jilbadji and Cave Hill. Neither of them has been surveyed in spring.

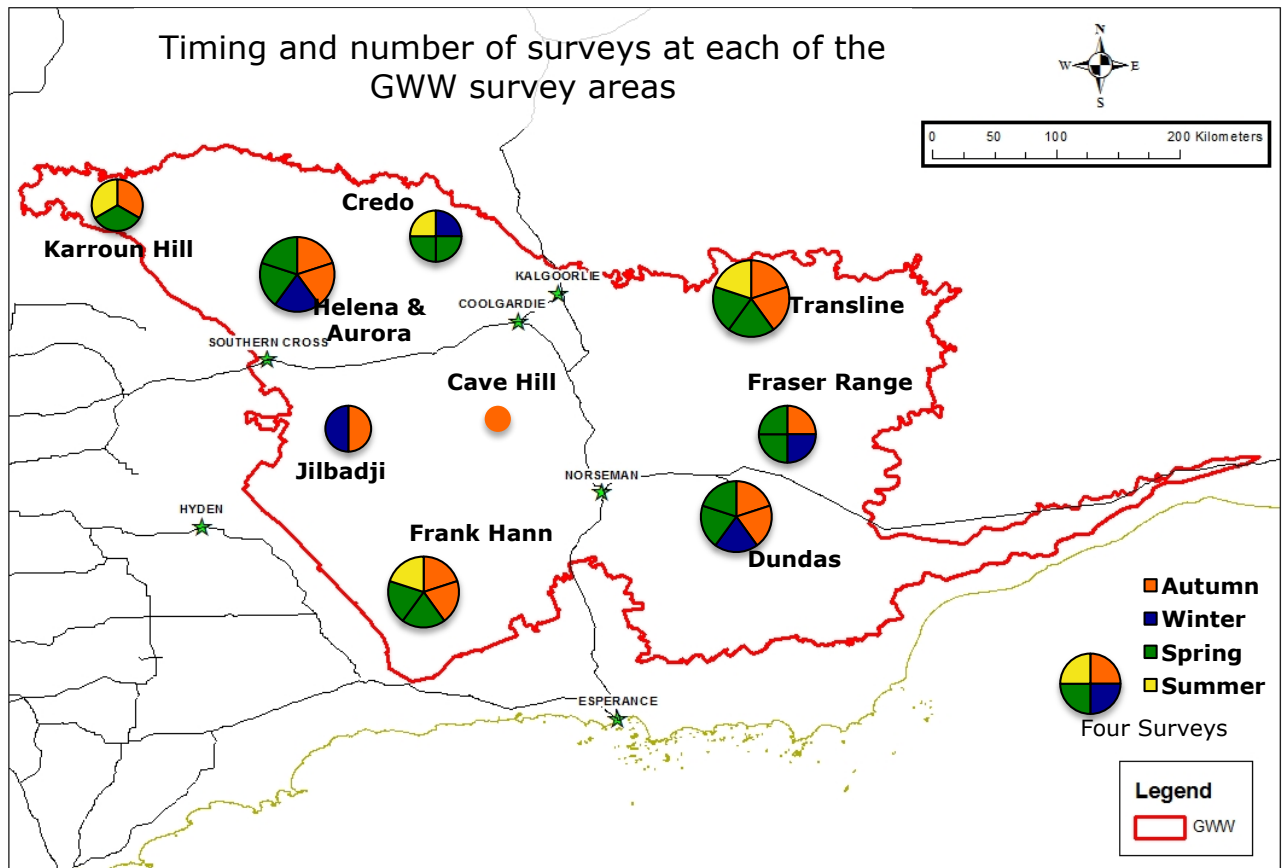
Jilbadji and Cave Hill are great areas to visit. Jilbadji has been reported as having good firm sandy tracks, and great camping spots among predominantly mallee and shrubland. When visited in winter 2013 there were many plants of all varieties in flower. The Cave Hill area is well recommended and described as providing good campsites and an enjoyable experience. Access is via the Hyden-Norseman Road and survey sites include McDermid Rock, Victoria Rock and Cave Hill, all of which have toilet facilities. Without neglecting other areas, it would be great to increase the survey effort to these two areas, especially this autumn and spring.



Jilbadji Nature Reserve
Photo: Barbara Manson

Despite the heat, four areas have been visited in summer (Karroun Hill, Credo Station, Transline and Frank Hann/Peak Charles). Surprisingly, it was heavy rains though that meant that the planned survey to Dundas in January 2014 could not occur, as tracks were impassable.

A major part of the data analysis for the GWW project is the repeat surveys of the fixed 2-ha sites. This means that each 2-ha site needs to have been surveyed more than once to be included in this part of the analysis. Due to the impressive



effort of volunteers, 73% of survey sites (144 sites) have been visited at least twice so far.

Repeat surveys at 2-ha sites are used to show any trends in populations, i.e. if the species is increasing, decreasing or stable, and to determine the habitat preferences of each species. One-off 2-ha sites, area searches and incidental sightings are also useful, as they provide essential data on bird species distribution, particularly for those species which are rare or are uncommonly recorded in a 2-ha search (e.g. Emu, Malleefowl, Western Rosella).

Looking ahead, we have three surveys planned for 2014 (in autumn, winter and spring). See the end of this newsletter for survey dates if you'd like to be involved.



Crimson Chat. Photo: Georgine Steytler

Would you be interested in being on the GWW committee?

The Great Western Woodlands is increasingly subject to pressures from mining, tourism, fires and introduced species. It is vital that we protect this internationally significant area and to do that we need to monitor the bird species that naturally occur there.

The GWW Bird Project aims to continue on until 2021 so that at least 10 years of bird data can be collected on how birds use the Great Western Woodlands and if their populations are stable or in decline.

A GWW Committee is being sought to oversee and coordinate the bird surveys conducted by volunteers, ensuring that they occur each year and that the data is collected in a standardised way to enable statistical analysis.

The GWW Committee will operate under the banner of BirdLife WA for the GWW project.

If you are interested in being on the GWW Committee, please contact Project Officer Shapelle McNee via email, gww@birdlife.org.au or mobile 0439 668 693.

Species in Focus

MAJOR MITCHELL'S COCKATOO



Major Mitchell's Cockatoo
Photo: Scott Corbett

The Major Mitchell's Cockatoo (~35-40 cm long) inhabits the more arid areas of Australia. They have a showy crest that, when raised, exposes stunning red with a yellow-orange band. The head and throat is salmon pink colour, which usually extends down the chest and belly. The underside of the wings is also salmon pink-pale orange, although the primary and secondary feathers are white.



Photo: Chris Tzaros

The cockatoo was named after Major Sir Thomas Livingston Mitchell (1792-1855), a Scotsman and highly respected surveyor and explorer in south-eastern Australia, who conducted three expeditions into the interior and wrote admiringly of encounters with this bird. Its scientific name *Lophochroa leadbeateri* commemorates the British naturalist Benjamin Leadbeater.

The Major Mitchell's Cockatoo's distribution covers most of inland Australia, reaching to the coast at two places: along the Nullarbor Plain in both Western and South Australia including Eyre Bird Observatory, and between Geraldton and Kalbarri in Western Australia.

The distribution appears more or less continuous based on BirdLife Australia's Atlas records, however, there may be concentrations within this broad distribution. Such an example would be in eastern Australia.

Major Mitchell's Cockatoos occur in groups, often up to hundreds of birds (and occasionally in pairs). They usually feed from the ground. They primarily eat seeds, but will also feed on grain, fruits, tubers and insects larvae. Where water is permanent, Major Mitchell's tend to be sedentary, but where food and water are limited (and seasonal) then they are nomadic, so that their abundance in areas can change.

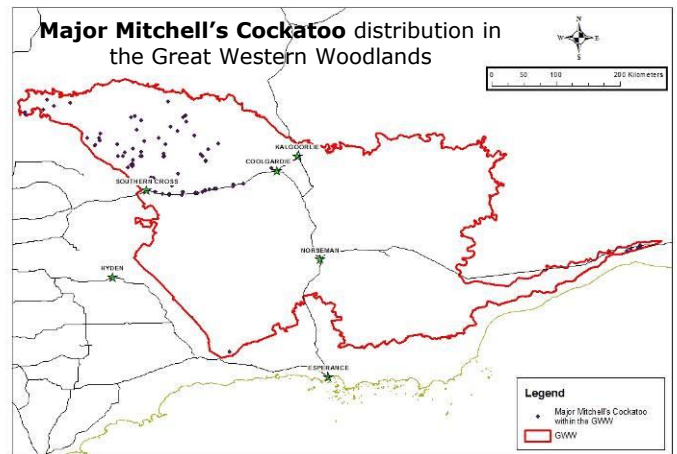
Major Mitchell's Cockatoos are long-lived birds (~40 years in the wild), monogamous and nest in tree hollows during spring laying two or three white eggs. The sexes can differ in their eye colour, the mature females usually having red eyes and the males brown or black eyes.

Threats to this species are the loss and fragmentation of habitat, including the loss of nest trees. The causes and extent of these losses differ throughout its distribution as does its status. The status of the Major Mitchell's Cockatoo's is Specially Protected in Western Australia. The main threats are the loss of the large old trees they nest in, poaching (illegal nest-robbing and trapping), clearing and heavy grazing (affecting food sources). In eastern Australia, the Major Mitchell's Cockatoo is listed as Threatened in Victoria (due to significant declining populations) and Vulnerable in New South Wales. Nationally, the Major Mitchell's Cockatoo is listed as Near Threatened.



Photo: Chris Tzaros

Within the Great Western Woodlands the Major Mitchell's Cockatoo's distribution is largely restricted to the north-western area, although it also occurs around Cocklebidy and the Eyre Bird Observatory (at the eastern tip of the GWW).



Checking out the birds at Jilbadji.
Photo: Barbara Manson

New to the Nest

INTRODUCING THE GREAT WESTERN WOODLANDS PROJECT OFFICER: SHAPELLE MCNEE

Shapelle has always had a love for birds in the wild. She first became a member of BirdLife Australia in ~1980 during her university days.

One of her first jobs was assisting Roger Jaensch with the Waterbird Project and later conducting the Western Whipbird and Western Bristlebird Survey (both Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union projects). Rare birds and pollination of rare plants by birds continued to be her main focus of work and studies until 2003.

Shapelle has welcomed returning to working with birds in 2014 as Project Officer of the GWW Project. This was following an amazing nine years of surveying and monitoring rare plants on banded ironstone ranges in the northern part of the Great Western Woodlands (for an environmental consultancy). For Shapelle this is a very inspiring part of WA.



Photo: Sarah Vann-Sander

What's On?

UPCOMING SURVEYS AND EVENTS

VOLUNTEER THANK YOU & GET TOGETHER

21 March 2014

Everyone associated with the GWW Project is invited to a *Thank you & get together* to be held on Friday 21 March. A time for celebration and thanks following two years of data collection by volunteer birders. We will get a glimpse of the results from the bird surveys in the GWW with a presentation by Liz Fox. There will also be refreshments, good cheer, much sharing of experiences and fun.

Venue is the WA Ecology Centre, 167 Perry Lakes Drive. From 5:30 to 7pm. Please RSVP to Shapelle by 19 March.

GWW AUTUMN (EASTER) SURVEY

18-24 April 2014

The coming autumn surveys could be an interesting time of year to see what the birds are up to in the Great Western Woodlands following the heavy rains over much of the GWW in late January.

The autumn surveys are planned for mid-late April, coinciding with the Easter long weekend. However, some surveys are already planned for earlier in April, and other surveys could be planned for after Easter if this suits better.

GWW WINTER SURVEY

12-18 July 2014

Winter can be a great time to get out of Perth and visit the Great Western Woodlands. With June - often the coldest month of the year - behind us, the vegetation will have turned vibrant and green by July from the autumn and winter rains. If your preferred area is Frank Hann/Peak Charles, Karroun Hill, Transline or Cave Hill, these areas have yet to be surveyed in winter for the GWW project.

FUTURE SURVEY DATES

If you would like to take part in a future trip to the GWW, the survey dates to the end of 2014 are shown below. Please remember that all dates are flexible and surveys at any time of year are appreciated. If you are keen to become involved either as a group leader or a participant, please contact Shapelle to lock in your preferences and to receive copies of the relevant information.

Autumn 2014: 18-24 April

Winter 2014: 12-18 July

Spring 2014: 27 September-3 October



Rufous Treecreeper

Photo: Chris Tzaros

For more information about the project please contact:

Shapelle McNea

Great Western Woodlands Project Officer

E gww@birdlife.org.au

M 0439 668 693

Liz Fox

Great Western Woodlands Project Coordinator

E liz.fox@birdlife.org.au

T (08) 9287 2716

www.birdlife.org.au/projects/great-western-woodlands

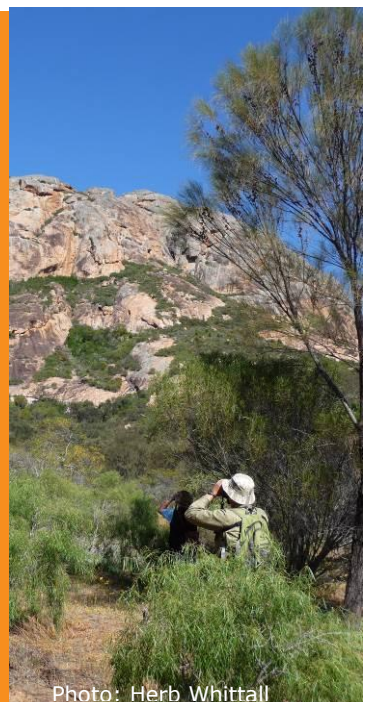


Photo: Herb Whittall