

ECONOMIC ASPECTS OF BIODIVERSITY

BIRDS, TREES - AND FLY STRIKE

by Ann Smart

WHEN our property at Jerramungup was cleared, a lot of vegetation was left - around lakes, for example - and we have planted trees, so that now the property has 20 % tree and shrub vegetation. We also grow lucerne, which has performed excellently, lowering water tables and providing good feed.

One of the results of this policy is that there are always plenty of birds on the farm. Wherever the stock are, birds such as willie wagtails, flycatchers, mudlarks and others can often be seen moving around among them. We have occasional fly strike, nothing really serious, but noted that the next-door neighbours, with only 2 % remnant vegetation (and that all in one place, around a lake), always had it much worse. Robie suspected that it was because their sheep were a different bloodline. Then we bought the neighbouring property for our son.

With cash being tight at the time (when isn't it!) we didn't buy in new stock, but split the existing flock, half onto the 'new' property, half to remain on the 'old'. Those on the 'new' property were hit by severe fly strike - the bloodline theory was out. It has to be that on the 'new' property, there were no birds to keep the pest insects down.

Fly strike causes an economic loss to a sheep operation. Even if stock don't die, they lose condition. This affects wool quality and, if they are going to be sold, it also prolongs the period of time before they can go for sale. There is also the cost in time and materials to treat the condition. We had not realised it before, but by keeping the incidence of fly strike down to a low level, the birds on the 'old' farm were actually saving us quite a lot of money.

Another point - we decided to do some serious tree-planting on the 'new' block, and put in 15,000 seedlings. Beetles and grasshoppers ate the lot. We've never had that problem before, obviously the insects' predators are present on the 'old' block, but not on the 'new'. The lack of birds costing us money again!

These 'intangible' savings are not usually taken into account when assessing the 'value' of retaining

remnant vegetation and revegetation, since it is difficult to prove their existence. But we are very happy that wildlife shares our farm!

Ann and Robie Smart farm at 'Girraween', Jerramungup. They have a strong interest in growing perennials, especially lucerne, and are considering storing surplus runoff to begin irrigation.

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Blue-breasted Fairy wren with a blowfly. (photo: Babs and Bert Wells, CALM.)