

4(3)

July 2000  
Vol. 4, Number 3DEPARTMENT OF  
CONSERVATION AND  
LAND MANAGEMENT

# Western Wildlife

NEWSLETTER OF THE LAND FOR WILDLIFE SCHEME  
REGISTERED BY AUSTRALIA POST PRINT POST: 606811/00007

## THE NOISY SCRUB-BIRD IN THE DARLING RANGE

by Alan Danks

**T**HE NOISY SCRUB-BIRD is one of the most intriguing birds you are likely to come across in Western Australia. It isn't large or spectacular and it doesn't dominate the skies in large raucous flocks. But this small, semi-flightless inhabitant of dense scrub draws attention with its loud song and tantalises with its easy command of a tangled and impenetrable habitat. Those with the patience to wait quietly may be rewarded with a few glimpses of a bright-eyed, cocky bird dressed in subtle colours but with a voice that makes your ears ring. After a Cheshire Cat history of discovery, disappearance and rediscovery, the successful management of this threatened species in recent decades has ensured that the bird is well established in coastal areas east of Albany. One of Western Australia's conservation icons, the Noisy Scrub-bird has recently been reintroduced to its old haunts in the Darling Range.

John Gilbert discovered the Noisy Scrub-bird in November 1842 while exploring and collecting in Western Australia for John Gould. With the botanist James Drummond he travelled from Perth to Augusta along the coastal plain. From Pinjarra they made a detour to explore Mt William in the Darling Range. They made their way from the Murray River rapids up into the hills, crossing several westward flowing streams before reaching their goal.



This was Gilbert's second trip to WA and he was reasonably familiar with the bird life of the colony. But at the Murray he was tantalised by a bird whose resonant song told him it was something new. Gilbert wrote to Gould in England: "... its loud but pleasing note fairly made my ears ring, and yet I could not see the creature". At the first stream past the Murray (now known as Drakesbrook) after "waiting around in the rain for days" he at last got a glimpse of it and was able to shoot one. Gilbert sent several specimens to Gould who officially described the new species. Gould was also intrigued by the bird and wrote: "Few of the novelties received from Australia are more interesting than (this) species". He also predicted gloomily that it was "destined to rarely meet the gaze of civilised man".

Gilbert considered scrub-birds were locally common but after his report, no other naturalist reported them in the Darling Range. But

Gould's publication and interest aroused curiosity and ornithologists were keen to find out more about the life history and breeding biology of the Noisy Scrub-bird. They were intrigued by its anatomical peculiarities - it has no wishbone for instance - and puzzled about its relationships to other birds. The bird's elusive habits and impenetrable habitat however, made it extremely difficult to study in the wild or even to obtain specimens. Frustratingly, as scientific curiosity about the scrub-bird grew stronger in Australia and Europe, the scrub-bird was dwindling as its habitat was ravaged by wildfire and clearing for agriculture. By the end of the nineteenth century the Noisy Scrub-bird was referred to as "rara avis", by the 1920s it was widely considered to be extinct. In 1948, a memorial to the "sweet-voiced bird of the bush" was placed at Drakesbrook, near the site of John Gilbert's discovery.

Fortunately however, the Noisy Scrub-bird was not actually extinct. One tiny population remained, hidden in the deep gullies of the Mt Gardner peninsula at Two Peoples Bay. Here, less than 50 individuals clung precariously to existence and, in 1961, after more than 70 years without an official record, the Noisy Scrub-bird made a dramatic reappearance. This "rediscovery" brought international conservation attention to Albany and Two Peoples Bay in the early 1960s. The Noisy Scrub-bird was literally on the brink,

continued on page 3

however, and strong measures were needed if it were to be saved from extinction.

## Conservation

The first priority was to protect the bird's habitat. This was begun by the creation of Two Peoples Bay Nature Reserve. On-site management made it possible to exclude fire within the reserve and this seems to have been particularly important. Scrub-bird numbers began to increase from 1972. Such a small population however, is at risk from many factors – fire, habitat disturbance, predation. The solution is to build the numbers quickly and spread the population out in the landscape. But the bird needed access to more habitat if the population was to grow enough to provide security from wildfires in the longer term. For a bird with very limited powers of dispersal, this meant that new populations would have to be created by translocation from the rediscovered population. Fortunately, by the early 1980s scrub-bird numbers had grown enough to allow some removals and a translocation program began to be developed.

Once the essential methods of capture, transport and monitoring were developed, the birds were taken to new homes in a number of places along the south coast between 1983 and 1995. Populations developed successfully in the area east of Albany but, interestingly, not to the west where there were several failures. Overall however, the program was successful and resulted in a five-fold increase in numbers in the Albany area.

By 1995, however, scrub-birds in the Albany area were already occupying most of the suitable habitat. Numbers would continue to rise as these populations developed, but it was clear that there were no other areas suitable for establishing large populations. There was a need to look further afield. To the east and north, lower rainfall meant little suitable habitat. To the west of Albany, the unsuccessful attempts at settling Noisy scrub-birds and the lack of any historic evidence that they had occurred there, indicated little likelihood of success in that direction.