

MEMBERS' PAGE

BUSH STONE-CURLEWS AND HOMESTEADS

Avril Baxter

BILL WARREN grew up with the eerie sound of bush stone-curlews calling at dusk from the sheds near his farmhouse. Fifty years later they are still there, usually just a pair although sometimes he might see four mature birds. However he has never seen stone-curlews in other bush remnants on the property.

Bill's property lies between the well-wooded and populated Highbury Townsite and an unbaited 928 ha Forestry Block. On clear nights he can hear the stone-curlews in both these areas.

Bush stone-curlews (sometimes known as stone plovers) are large ground nesting birds preferring open forests and woodlands with a low grassy or herbaceous understorey. They are active at night foraging for insects, seeds and small animals such as frogs. During the day they lie still as a stone (hence the name stone-curlew) camouflaged amongst fallen branches. They lay one to three eggs on the ground in open areas.

Our farming environment initially favoured the birds, but numbers crashed in the 1950s when rabbit populations were decimated by myxomatosis; this may have been due to foxes changing their food source.

Nationally, the bush stone-curlew is listed as "near-threatened", this is because whilst still relatively common in the tropical and sub-tropical north they have declined from the agricultural areas in the south. In Western Australia, bush stone-curlews are listed as a Priority 4 species, which means that they are not considered to be currently threatened, but could be if circumstances change. In NSW and Victoria they are considered threatened.

At Bill's place, the birds are quite tame. During the day they will sit

and watch the general farm activity and if it is raining shelter in the farm sheds. The farm dogs do not bother them. They nest near some of the old machinery and on one occasion when a bluegum was blown down, nested amongst the branches on the ground. When the female is sitting on the eggs, which is usually around harvesttime, Bill says, "Nothing will shift her".

Bill regularly sees them nesting although he has never seen any chicks. Eggs will be there one day and gone (shell and all) the next. However, some of the offspring are managing to survive, as although the birds are long-lived they do not live for more than 10-30 years and Bill has learnt to distinguish particular birds over the years.

There have been other reports from *Land for Wildlife* members about stone-curlews living around their sheds. How have these birds managed to survive so close to human habitation? How have they managed to survive fox and cat predation?

One clue to this may come from a *Land for Wildlife* member from Victoria who has his male dog urinate around stone-curlew sites on his property stating that it will deter foxes from hunting nearby, although they still move through the area (pers. comm. Brett Beecham). Maybe the presence of farm and town dogs is protecting the birds. Could this be a useful management technique?

Bush stone-curlews have been known to return to areas where extensive fox baiting takes place and increase in numbers in areas where there is fox proof fencing. Bill fox-baits twice per year.

If you have any interesting anecdotal evidence or management tips for bush stone-curlews on your property we'd love to hear from you.

You can contact *LFWO* Avril Baxter at CALM, Narrogin on ph: 9881 9218, fax: 9881 3297 or email: avrilb@calm.wa.gov.au.



A resident bush stone-curlew near Bill's shearing shed. (Photo: Avril Baxter)