

FAUNA

A RIDDLE IS NO JOKE

Brent Barrett

*What use is an animal that's beautiful to behold but never seen?
How do you save a species you can never find and one that, when saved, will seldom be seen by others?
What's in a voice when no one is listening?*

THE answer to these and many other questions must lie in our hearts rather than our heads. We are surrounded each day by reminders of nature but a few take this for granted. Birds invade our back yard and all we see is the damage they do, not the beauty and splendour of their presence. On these two counts the Western Ground Parrots will never be guilty. Rather the reverse is true. As described in a previous article in Western Wildlife this little unassuming parrot knows how to be good, keeps to itself, and sadly never asked for help when it needed it most. So while more and more people are becoming aware of this pearl-in-the-swamp, still very little is known about it.

This is a phantom bird which those in the know long to see and others, unaware of their rarity, believe they saw. A parrot so beautiful and striking in appearance, yet so reserved and cryptic, that few photos exist. But perhaps the most lasting feature of this lost tribe of avian friends is their haunting rhythmic voice. A voice that echoes through the heath as the sun is waking to embark on its harsh arc across the sky. A chant that emulates late into the night when the sun fades to a distant memory and all that remains is moonlight and stars. A voice which few humans are ever present to hear. Caught in translation, struggling to categorise what we find around us, humans describe these ghostly syllables as a mix between Morse code and a whistling kettle. To another ground parrot they are as different as the statements "what a beautiful day" and "do you want fries with that".

Like the retiring gardener you never had a conversation with, or the long-term neighbour you never met, these birds have been buzzing and calling in the background and we have never paused to listen. For eons these semi-flightless parrots have been walking in the wilderness far longer than written history exists. Despite our continued close presence we know almost nothing of them. So, like the gardener who invites you to speak at his retirement, we have no words to impart over the last remaining populations as they slide slowly towards extinction. Not one nest has been observed by humans since 1912. Despite 150 years of attention there is no known photograph of a Western Ground Parrot in the wild. No knowledge of breeding season, population size, food type or bird dispersal is recorded in satisfactory detail. It is as though this bird had never really existed. Until now!

Contrary to written history, the Western Ground Parrot has entered the hearts and minds of the most stoic of birders for generations. Shrouded in semi-silence it has waited in the wings for the day when we turned our attention to its plight and set a course to intervene with a slowly written history. One that would have the bird utter its last peep within 5 years should humans not intervene now. In our desire to categorise the globe around us we are now forced to label the Western Ground Parrot as Critically Endangered. Thus condemning it to eventual extinction based on all we know of dwindling populations.

How can humans answer such allegations? Here is one of the most unique parrots in Australia, a true gem of Western Australia. This, the largest and most diversely parroted continent of the world is now facing the loss of one of its less understood endemic birds. Finally we have an answer! Meek as the lone voice amongst the crowd, there is a steady rising of one unified voice. The Western Ground Parrot is becoming known by communities and professionals alike and as such appreciated and valued despite its attempts to remain incognito. For the past year a dedicated recovery project has been building a picture of occupancy and bird numbers, steadily filling the knowledge cup. This dedicated CALM team has been working alongside the recently resurrected Friends of the Western Ground Parrot group to raise awareness and understanding in the community. As a result interest is building, good reports of sightings are being lodged and people are promising to help.

Nest searching was recently undertaken with surprisingly positive results. While no nests were found, we now have the first ever photograph of a Western Ground Parrot in the wild, taken by the project leader Brent Barrett. A short film of a bird flying was also recorded. Timing of breeding is now better understood and with it the knowledge of when these birds need the greatest protection and where it needs to be focused. The entire 330,000 hectare Fitzgerald River National Park has been surveyed and mapped. Two new populations

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of Western Ground Parrots have already been found there. We are changing the course of history now. When the tide of time next recedes on its wax and wane of life there will be no Western Ground Parrot cast up on the shore of extinction. There is no more room on that beach.

Through these efforts and the planned continuation of this successful project it is hoped that more populations can be found or established and once more our neighbour, the elusive cryptic ground parrot, will be heard calling a start and end to each day. With communities and conservation experts working together the future of this unique bird can be secured. With the technology and awareness we now enjoy in the 21st century we humans can make a positive change. Above all, it is no longer palatable to be offered a spoon marked extinction while holding a bowl of vulnerable species in the soup kitchen of life.

If you consider that only a few people have heard this parrot calling freely in the wild and you then realise that you could become one of those people, then please get involved as a volunteer on the project. Alternatively join the Friends of the Western Ground Parrot group and learn all about the progress of this dynamic team. The next area of focus is Cape Arid National Park and operations will be based in Esperance. We can assist volunteers with transport and during the trip with food and equipment. For more details contact Brent Barrett 0429 842 451 or brentb@calm.wa.gov.au

Brent Barrett has worked on Southern Right Whales and the rare New Zealand parrot the Kakapo. He is currently Ground Parrot Project Officer at CALM, Albany.
