

NEWS - FAUNA

MALLEEFOWL IN MERREDIN PEAK RESERVE

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Malleefowl (*Leipoa ocellata*) were reported to be widespread in the early days of colonisation by Europeans but are now threatened with extinction. The causes are probably habitat destruction or decline in habitat quality, and predation by introduced species such as cats and foxes. Whilst this decline has been noted it is important that it be researched and documented.

In the Shire of Merredin many sightings of malleefowl have been made on roads close to reserves and in one case in a backyard in town. These included some sightings in the Merredin Peak Reserve, which is an area of approximately 1800 hectares adjacent to the town and vested in the Shire of Merredin. The newly formed Merredin Malleefowl Group felt that it was important to survey the reserve because, being close to town, the effects of cats, dogs and humans on malleefowl populations was not known, so the Malleefowl Preservation Group (MPG) was approached to help carry out a baseline survey of malleefowl numbers and habitat.

Thirty local residents attended an induction evening. With the benefit of local knowledge from community members and malleefowl expertise from Susanne Dennings of the MPG, an area of approximately 370 hectares within the reserve was chosen as the area to be surveyed. The survey took place over one week in June 2006 and 21 people were involved during the week, 11 of whom were visitors from as far away as Denmark.

The Merredin Peak Reserve is composed of a number of vegetation associations ranging from dense thicket, mainly *Acacia* and *Allocasuarina* species, which is very difficult to traverse, to open salmon gum and inland wandoo woodlands.

The survey methodology was to form a team of volunteers along a base line and have a leader and a tail end person both with GPS systems. The leader then walked into the bush on an east-west line and was followed by the next team member after having walked 10 to 15 metres. The team members were spaced 10 metres apart. These small distances were necessary due to the dense bush, where it was difficult to see people at any greater distance, and to ensure that no malleefowl mounds were missed. The density of the bush required that the searchers wear long sleeved shirts, long trousers and eye protection.

If a mound was found, the line halted to record all relevant mound attributes such as position, recent activity, mound dimensions and shape, soil type, habitat, litter trails

scats, vegetation, tracks, presence of eggshells and any other relevant observations. Once the record was made the survey continued. During the survey, sightings of other birds and animals were also recorded. We were fortunate to have an expert on birds as a volunteer and 57 species of birds were noted during the week.



It was very successful! Thirty-one malleefowl mounds were recorded, eight of which showed signs of fresh malleefowl activity and 22 were determined to be old or very old. A follow up monitoring survey of all the active mounds was undertaken in October 2006 to determine if the level of activity had changed. This survey found that seven of the eight original mounds were still active, which was a very pleasing result.

Another monitoring survey was conducted in October 2007, coordinated by Carl Danzi from WWF-Australia who is the WA Malleefowl Network Facilitator. All 31 previously discovered mounds were monitored but none of the mounds were found to be active. This was very distressing – perhaps it is due to the current drought conditions?

All data collected during this survey was recorded on a number of palm computers. One of the participants was a ten-year-old girl who was given the job of recording with one of the computers. This greatly contributed to her interest in the survey and her determination to do the hard work of walking through the difficult terrain. There may be a lesson to be learned here!

The Merredin Malleefowl Group have now committed to maintain the monitoring of the mounds every year between October and December and to do a complete survey of the site every five years so that the Merredin community retains ownership of the results.

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