

South Coast Threatened Birds Newsletter

A newsletter about the conservation of threatened birds on the south coast of Western Australia

Bristlebird translocation update

In spring 1999, a small group of CALM staff and volunteers working in Nuyts Wilderness, Walpole-Nornalup NP, became the first people to hear Western Bristlebirds west of Albany since 1912! The last person was F. Lawson Whitlock, who heard them near his home just east of Denmark, almost 80 years ago. They disappeared from the area due to clearing for agriculture and too frequent fire.

The bristlebirds we heard in September 1999 were ones we had just translocated from Two Peoples Bay to Nuyts Wilderness. We were pleased to hear them calling because it suggested that they were finding the site to be suitable – we felt they wouldn't be

calling if they couldn't find sufficient food and shelter. During spring 2000, we were encouraged to hear at least four birds (three males and one female) of the original eight still present near the translocation site – this told us that they had survived at the site for a whole year. This was so encouraging that we put in a further seven birds to expand the local gene pool.

The aim of the bristlebird translocation project has been to re-introduce the bird to its former range, to minimise the possible effects of severe wildfires. Translocation has been possible only through the co-operative efforts of volunteers from Albany, Walpole and elsewhere, working alongside CALM scientific and regional staff.

(See the article by Carl Beck elsewhere in this issue for an insight into one way in which volunteers have been making a major contribution to this project).

Things were going really well until early March of this year. On the 7th of March, lightning started a fire near Circus Beach, east of the translocation site. This was not an immediate concern, because the winds were blowing from the SW, towards the inlet a short distance away. However, the forecast was for winds changing to the SE. This area is rather inaccessible – there are no roads near the translocation site. Firefighters and a bulldozer were brought in by barge, and the water bombers were also called in. However, the brisk winds in sometimes very old fuel loads were too much, and the fire headed west. The area containing most of the bristlebirds was burnt at night, at a time when it was not possible for the water bombers to be flying. The fire was finally stopped at the Nuyts walk trail.

At the time of writing, we are not sure how many bristlebirds are still present in the area. At least one bird was living beside the walk trail last spring, and he is probably still there somewhere. From our

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Allan Burbidge transporting one of the first bristlebirds to Nuyts in 1999

Bristlebird Translocation Update (contd.)

work in Fitzgerald River National Park, we believe that some birds can survive some fires, so it is possible that some survived in Nuyts Wilderness. However, because it was such a 'clean' burn, with little left untouched by fire, the outlook is not good.

When we first planned to translocate to Nuyts Wilderness, we realised that there was a risk that such a fire would occur, and the options and possibilities were discussed at some length. However, the habitat looked so good to us that we thought the risk worth taking. The fact that the birds were singing as strongly as they did, and survived as well as they did, suggested that we had chosen a suitable site. The area consisted of vegetation of different fire ages extending to more than 40 years unburnt. We had hoped that there would be no major fire for a few years at least, by which time the bristlebird would have had a chance to breed and disperse. However, things didn't turn out quite as we hoped.

The Nuyts fire does, however, highlight the potential value of translocations. A major reason for translocating bristlebirds is to "spread the eggs between more than one or two baskets" so as to minimise the potentially devastating effects of severe wildfire. If such a fire occurred at Two Peoples Bay, the result could be catastrophic. (In fact, the fire at Two Peoples Bay earlier this summer did burn some bristlebird habitat, but fortunately Mt Gardner escaped being burned). The aim of translocations is to minimise this kind of risk.

What happens next? Over the next few months, we will be monitoring the site in Nuyts to determine how many bristlebirds are still present. (If you can help with this, your assistance would be appreciated). We already know that there is at least one other

potential translocation site in the Walpole area, and this and other sites will be examined more closely. And you can be sure that there will be a detailed discussion on this question at the next meeting of the South Coast Threatened Birds Recovery Team!

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Thirty-seven Years Ago—A Very Special Day!!

The picture (right) is of special significance in that it was taken on the 5th of January 1964, on the day the first scrub-bird was captured at Two Peoples Bay. The individuals in the photo include some notable names, including Harley Webster, Dom Serventy and Robert Stranger. Also present on this day were Vin Serventy, Graeme Pizzey, Harry Shugg and Rica Ericson, who took the photo. Rica kindly provided us with a set of slides taken on this day. These slides are a fantastic record not only of such a momentous event in the history of the scrub-bird but also of the nature of the vegetation on Mt Gardner 35 years ago. Thanks Rica!



Harley Webster, Robert Stranger and Dom Serventy (Rto L) taking measurements of the first scrub-bird captured at Two Peoples Bay (Photo Rica Ericson)