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South Coast Threatened Birds News

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

MT MANYPEAKS FIRES—IMPACTS ON THREATENED BIRDS

Late in December 2004 a series of lightning storms brushed the south coast. On the 31st of December a local fisherman telephoned CALM with a report of smoke on the southern slopes of Manypeaks. Lightning had ignited an area between Peak and Folly gullies, in the impenetrable wind pruned thickets abutting the coast.

This wildfire was to develop into a major challenge for fire fighters, and have significant negative impacts on populations of Noisy Scrub-

birds and Western Whip-birds.

Following the initial report of fire, resources were immediately mobilised to try and minimise the area burnt, but due to the inaccessibility and extreme flammability of the vegetation on the southern slopes this was never going to be a simple task.

Because of the known high conservation values, suppression of the wildfire was given a very high priority. Over 160 personnel, including CALM staff from throughout the south-west

land division, were involved with the suppression activities. Four water bombers, accompanied by two spotter planes and one helicopter were used to try and minimise the area burnt. Unfortunately the high fuel loads made this very difficult, and after the efforts of the first few days it became a priority to ensure that the area burnt was contained within secure boundaries. The fire was under control by the 10th of January, but pockets of vegetation associated with peat were still smouldering at the beginning of February.

Continued page 13

Inside this issue:

<i>The Mystery of the Jar-nadup Bristlebird</i>	2
<i>Darling Range Noisy Scrub-bird Re-introduction</i>	3
<i>Noisy Scrub-bird Song studies</i>	4
<i>Finding the Cryptic Western Ground Parrot</i>	5
<i>Ten year follow up to Western Bristlebird's response to fire in FRNP</i>	8
<i>Landscape Expeditions come to the South Coast</i>	9
<i>A volunteer's story</i>	11
<i>And lots more stories inside!</i>	



South Coast Threatened Birds Recovery Team members Brenda Newbey, Anne Bondin, Ron Wooller and John Blyth visit the southern slopes of Mt Manypeaks in early January. Photo: Alan Danks

From Page 1

The significance of the area impacted by this wildfire for populations of Noisy Scrub-bird was well known. In 2001 55% of the total population of the vulnerable Noisy Scrub-bird was located in the 4500 ha comprising Mt Manypeaks and the gullies and flats directly to the north. Other special values of this area include the presence of populations of the Western Whipbird (Western Heath subspecies), Western Ringtail Possum, Quokka, rare flora and relictual invertebrates. A small number of Western Bristlebirds were known from the periphery of the area.

This area is not trafficable, and was last burnt in 1979. Due to increasing awareness of the inherent risks present in this large area of equal post-fire age and high conservation values, a strategy was developed to create a mosaic of fuel ages over a period of time. A range of people contributed to this strategy, including the South Coast Threatened Birds Recovery Team and various fire management specialists. In 2004 the South Coast Threatened Birds Recovery Team endorsed a prescription burn that was to be carried out as part of a fire management strategy for the Manypeaks ridge in Winter 2005, but unfortunately the recent fire pre-empted this burn and we are now left with a blank slate on which to develop a new strategy for fire protection in this area.

In terms of impact on the

Noisy Scrub-bird the recent wildfire was substantial. The loss of 4500 ha of approximately 13 000 ha of optimal habitat, in addition to approximately 4000 ha of habitat that has been impacted by wildfires since 2001 means that there are only around 4500 ha of optimal scrub-bird habitat in the Albany area. This highlights the difficulties of management - despite the best efforts and intentions it can be extremely difficult to control wildfire in the highly flammable heaths of the south coast.

The recent wildfire also highlights the importance, and historical successes, of the scrub-bird translocation program. Mt Manypeaks was the site chosen for the first translocation of Noisy Scrub-birds in 1983 with input and technical support from people like Don Merton, from New Zealand's Department of Conservation, assisting with the development of techniques specific to scrub-birds. The founder population of scrub-birds on Manypeaks was 31 birds (18 males and 13 females), released in 1983 and 1985. The growth in this area to a population index of 427 singing males in 2001 was quite remarkable. Indications from 2004 surveys of an area of approximately 800 ha on the eastern end of Mt Manypeaks (that was to be burnt in the prescription burn mentioned above) were that the growth of the scrub-bird population was continuing to increase. However, the recent wildfire has re-

duced scrub-bird numbers to roughly what they were ten years ago.

The Albany Management Zone (AMZ) was also surveyed for the Western Whipbird (Western Heath ssp) in 2001 by Sarah Comer and Shapelle McNee. The area burnt in the wildfire contained habitat of approximately one quarter of the total AMZ population of whipbirds. In conjunction with wildfires in 2003 the habitat of approximately one third of the western heath subspecies of whipbird has been affected.

Monitoring populations of scrub-birds, whipbirds and bristlebirds in 2005 will give us a good picture of the current population status of all of these species in the Albany Management Zone. In the future, it will allow us to study response to wildfire in these species in a way that hasn't previously been possible. We are also hoping to establish base-line post-fire monitoring of both vegetation and invertebrate food supplies in this area. Results of these studies will be used to underpin future management, hopefully allowing us to avoid similar drastic population declines in the future.

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