ISSUE N0.11 June 2007

# South Coast Threatened Birds News

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

## PORONGURUP NOISY SCRUB-BIRD TRANSLOCATION

It was with great excitement that the scrub-bird team and friends tackled the steep climb up Millinup Pass in June 2006. On our backs were the first of the eight male Noisy Scrub-birds released into the Porongurup National Park.

Making the decision to release birds in the Porongurup was not a simple task. Following the Manypeaks wildfire it became obvious that we would have to look for areas that could support small populations of scrub-birds near Albany. Not only did we look at vegetation suitability (including post-fire age), but leaf litter invertebrate food supplies were also sampled. The three Porongurup sites had good leaf litter invertebrate fauna, and abundance of the scrub-bird favourites were comparable to the levels on Mt Gardner. Comparing vegetation to areas we know scrub-birds use was a little more challenging as the sites we had selected were essentially karri forest, and it has been many years since scrub-birds have been recorded in this habitat type. Despite the obvious differences between the karri country and the gullies and thickets occupied by scrub-birds on the coast we felt confident that the Porongurup sites contained sufficient nesting material and the structure of the vegetation would provide good cover for the birds.

Having identified that the Mermaid-Waychinicup area near Cheynes Beach had a sufficiently healthy population of scrub-birds for us to remove a few, and also written a translocation proposal which was approved by referees and endorsed by our Directors, we were ready to start capture work.

A total of eight male Noisy Scrub-birds were sourced from the Mermaid sub-population and translocated to Porongurup National Park [PNP] between June and August 2006. The first four male scrub-birds were captured and transferred to the Two Peoples Bay aviaries and released in the Porongurup National Park at Millinup Pass and Spearwood Gully on 29th June 2006. A further four male scrub-birds were caught and transferred to the aviaries in late July. These birds were released on 3rd August 2006 at Millinup and Spearwood. Each bird was fitted with a radio transmitter, using a new harness system developed in 2005. Radio tracking and call monitoring of the released individuals was conducted post release. The terrain in the Porongurup proved challenging for staff tracking the birds, but the capable team managed to keep track of most of the birds. Those that we could find soon settled into areas fairly close to the release sites, and four weeks after release four birds could be heard calling on most days in the Park. This calling activity persisted, and by December we were still confident that at least three of the birds were doing well as they were still singing loudly!

*See page 12 for postscript*

Louise Hillman, from South Coast NRM Inc. releasing a scrub-bird (Photo: Andrew MacFarlane)

**Inside this issue:**

## *Health Screening of the Endangered Noisy Scrub-bird (Atrichornis clamosus):*
## *Dr David Edmonds*

During the 2006 translocation of the Noisy Scrub-bird from the Cheynes Beach population to the Porongorups, we undertook to assess the health status of the individual birds being moved. Blood and faecal samples were collected at the time of capture and faecal samples were collected at the end of the period in captivity. These were examined for evidence of disease and parasitism.

The blood samples were used to create blood smears, which in turn were examined for determination of white cell counts and for evidence of parasitism. There was a high degree of cell damage during the smearing process which made the white cell count difficult to determine. This damage was in part due to the innate fragility of avian cells and the technique used, which means that an alternate method of preparation of blood smears is required. There was no evidence of blood parasitism seen on any of the smears. Previous studies in Australia have determined a blood parasite prevalence of 11%, suggesting that these birds have not been exposed to these parasites. It is therefore possible that if birds are moved to an area where blood parasites are endemic, they would be highly susceptible to parasitism.

The faecal samples showed some interesting changes. The bacteria isolated from the samples collected at the beginning of the procedure were compared to samples at the end. During their period in captivity, the birds demonstrated a change in the type and amount of bacteria in their faeces. Immediately prior to release, the birds were excreting more pathogenic bacteria and in higher numbers compared to the start of the captive period. It is likely that these changes are due to the stress of capture and captivity as well as changes in diet. The excretion of pathogenic bacteria by the birds is an occupational safety and health issue for the bird handlers, which needs serious consideration.

Faecal samples were also examined for evidence of parasites, but none were found. This may be due to a low prevalence of parasites or due to existing parasites producing low numbers of eggs (which would be difficult to find during faecal examination).

After the translocation process, as part of a routine nest survey, a dead scrub-bird chick was found. A post mortem examination was performed. Due to decay in the carcass, the cause of death was indeterminate, but it most likely died from exposure. One unusual finding was that the beak was rubbery, suggestive of poor calcification of the bony skeleton. Calcification disorders have been recorded in wild birds due to inadequate calcium in the diet. Whilst one sample alone is not enough to diagnose calcium deficiency in a wild population, the issue warrants further investigation.

Overall the results suggested that the birds involved in the translocation were healthy, showing little evidence of disease and were good candidates for release.

## *Recently published papers*

The following two papers focussed on the Western Ground Parrot have recently been published:

Burbudge, A.H., Rolfe, J., McNee, S., Newbey, B & Williams, M. (2007). Monitoring population change in the cryptic and threatened Western Ground Parrot in relation to fire. Emu **107**: 79-88.

Gibson, L.A., Barrett, B., & Burbidge, A.H. (in press). Dealing with uncertain absences in habitat modelling: a case study of a rare ground-dwelling parrot. Volunteers helped gather much of the occurrence data for this paper.

Burbidge *et al*. discuss ground parrot monitoring and the decline in birds at Short Road in the Fitzgerald River National Park.

Gibson *et al*. detail the development of a predictive distribution model for ground parrots.

Allan Burbidge is happy to provide copies of either paper to anyone who is interested. Allan's email is Allan.Burbidge@dec.wa.gov.au

## *The Western Ground Parrot Recovery Project ~ Revealing the secret life of a cryptic bird: Mike Barth*

From July to November 2006 a small team of biologists made Fitzgerald River National Park their home away from home. In the process of monitoring breeding Western Ground Parrots (*Pezoporus wallicus flaviventris*) with the goal of finding a nest and increasing the knowledge of their breeding biology, the team uncovered new information on the life history of this enigmatic and critically endangered south coast parrot. Through daily listening sessions morning and evening, they were able to learn a wealth of information on the movements, home range size, breeding behaviour, vocalizations and food preferences of these elusive birds.

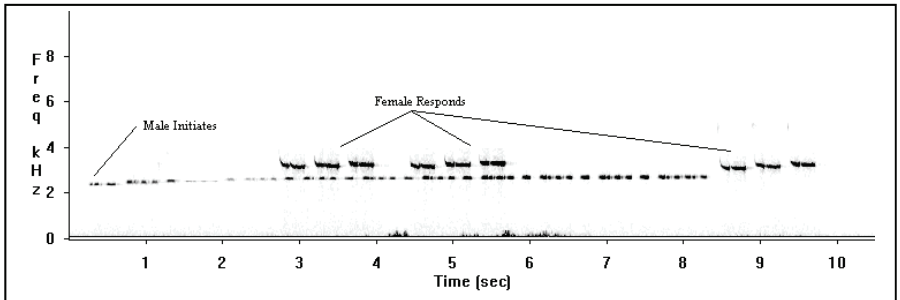
Very little is known about the breeding biology of the Western Ground Parrot and the last recorded nest was in 1913 by F. Whitlock near Denmark (The Emu, Vol. XIII, 1914). Based on studies of nesting Eastern Ground Parrots (*Pezoporus wallicus wallicus*), it is suspected the female is responsible for incubation and the male feeds her during the 21 days to hatching. Through close observations, it was discovered that the male feeds the female every evening at a meeting area well away from the nest. Over time, it also became apparent that the females had a distinct call which was not used by the males (See Figure 1) and was often part of a duet between the pair. The birds called to each other, they met up, the female used a begging "scree" call to elicit the beak to beak food exchanges and when it was over she disappeared silently off to the nest under the cover of darkness. The male then made his way to one of a few favourite nearby roost sites. The exchange generally took 5 to 10 minutes.

This strategy of feeding the female away from the nest made it extremely difficult for the biologists (and predators?) to locate the nest and so difficult in fact, that no nests were found last year. Despite this, a male bird of one pair eventually became somewhat desensitized to the researchers presence and allowed them to observe (and photograph) him in some of his daily routines. These observations have given new insight into basic behaviours and food preferences. It seems that the puzzle of the Western Ground Parrot is slowly being pieced together, but there is still much to be learned. Perhaps the 2007 breeding season will reveal yet more secrets.....

For information or if you'd like to assist, please contact:

Mike Barth – Project Leader
ph. (08) 9842 4519,
mobile (04) 2984 2451
or e-mail:
michael.barth@dec.wa.gov.au

**Male Western Ground Parrot (extracted from video by Brent Barrett)**




Spectrogram of Western Ground Parrot Duet

**A male Western Ground Parrot (bird on left) feeds his mate. (extracted from video by Brent Barrett)**

# *Search for the Western Ground Parrot north of Perth: Brenda Newbey*

Why?

The range of the Western Ground Parrot used to include Perth and extended as far north as Dongara and inland to Wongan Hills. The population had greatly diminished by 1900 with the birds being long gone from Perth and only occasional sightings in the extensive heathlands in the area including Jurien, Badgingarra, and Watheroo.

In 1984 Birds Australia ran a project to determine the extent of the Western Ground Parrot (WGP) population. The past and known range covered a huge area from Israelite Bay in the south east to Augusta in the south west, and then in the north as outlined above. Time and money constraints meant that some areas were surveyed more thoroughly than others and although the habitat appeared promising, only a token survey was undertaken between Cervantes and Badgingarra. Subsequently there have been no surveys in the northern sandplain and the question remained unanswered as to whether ground parrots are indeed extinct there.

How?

As a result of an interesting but unconfirmed sighting in 2001, at the Hill River mouth, a few attempts have been made to secure funding for a more detailed search in that general area but without success. At last, in 2006, an anonymous donor to Birds Australia WA elected to support a survey.

The 2007 survey

The survey has now begun. Birds Australia WA has received excellent support for the project from the Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC) in Jurien Bay.

An eye-catching leaflet was prepared for community information and was widely distributed. The leaflet was based on the south coast ground parrot information brochure but was adapted for the Jurien area.

In March a reconnoitering survey was carried out. DEC Jurien supplied the services of Renee Hartley, fauna conservation officer, who has had some ground parrot experience on the south coast and a vehicle, and Shapelle McNee, long-experienced in ground parrot survey, put in three days as a volunteer. In April the listening survey was done. Renee was again very much involved and several of her DEC colleagues volunteered. Additional volunteers included local Jurien residents and people from Geraldton, Perth, Toodyay, Albany and Hopetoun. We were able to survey 118 sites. Only six of these were repeats so with listening points being at least 400 metres apart, a lot of ground was covered. Listening conditions were good to excellent except for the last survey session which was cancelled due to poor weather. The survey result was negative. Though a couple of interesting sounds were heard, a follow-up yielded nothing.

It had been extraordinarily dry in the Jurien area last year, and dry conditions still prevailed in April 2007. Some vegetation of suitable age appeared too dry to warrant inclusion in the survey as it appeared to be in a dormant state and had produced little that could be eaten by a ground parrot. Overall, birds were not calling well. As a result of the negative outcome in April and the dry autumn conditions it was decided to try a second survey in August when it should have rained and birds should be calling more vigorously in response to the approach of spring .

Reasons for hope

There is a lot of conserved bushland in the Jurien/Badgingarra/ Cervantes area. Within these conservation lands, low heath is common. Some of the reserves are baited for foxes.

There has been a series of sightings of one and two birds bordering a farm in the area, but ending after a fire in 2003 when one bird was seen. There has been no search for this cryptic species in nearly all of the area covered.

But it may be too late. Well-known Badgingarra naturalist Don Williams has not come across ground parrots despite spending much of his time in the bush. Fire has ravaged much of the bushland, with fires being vast and frequent and almost certainly resulting in a depletion of plant species. Foxes and cats are prevalent. Kangaroos and their ticks are too, and perhaps the trampling of vegetation by kangaroos in some places and infestation with ticks have both added to pressure on ground parrots. The current drought conditions would have compounded problems for all wild life including our target species.

It would be a very interesting development for the Western Ground Parrot recovery program to locate a population, however small, of WGPs in the north. If you are unable to volunteer for the survey in August, then wish us that element of luck that is needed to enhance our expertise.

Brenda Newbey, Project co-ordinator, for Birds Australia WA, of the search for Western Ground Parrots in the northern sandplain. May 2007.

# *Noisy Scrub-bird nest searching on Mt Gardner: Sarah Comer*

One of the factors that could be affecting the scrub-bird population on Mt Gardner is lack of recruitment as a result of decreased nesting activity. With this in mind we conducted an intensive nest searching session on Mt Gardner in August, 2006. Traditional nesting areas were searched, and experienced nest searchers attempted to replicate previous nest searching efforts on Mt Gardner.

Over the two week period a total of 49 nests were found on Mt Gardner, and of these 14 were new (2006) nests, and another two recorded as possible new nests for 2006. Of the 14 definite new nests, six contained eggs and four had chicks present when found. Three of the chicks were banded, two females and a male.

The number of nests found in 2006 was comparable with similar nest searching efforts in 1990, 1991 and 1992, when between 9 and 12 active nests (and several more possible new nests) were found each year. The fact that the numbers are comparable allays the concerns that nesting efforts on Mt Gardner may have declined over the years. Some effort still needs to be given to determining nesting success in this subpopulation, and due to time constraints in 2006 it was not possible to track all active nests through to establish if chicks had successfully fledged.

The nest containing the fourth chick found in 2006 was revisited six days after it was found, and the chick was deceased. A post mortem examination of this bird did not establish cause of death; however the condition of the nestling carcass and date it was found confirmed the death was not related to the nest searching effort. It was more probable that the chick died of exposure having been abandoned by the parent. One interesting finding from the autopsy and examination of this chick conducted by Dr. David Edmonds (Denmark Veterinary Clinic) was the soft rubbery beak. This is very unusual for any bird this well developed. David suggested that a nutritional secondary hyperparathyroidism, or calcium deficiency, could be responsible for this, and that this is an area that may need to be investigated in the future if we find further evidence of this problem in scrub-bird populations.

**Right: The deceased female chick found in Gardner Gully, with softness of beak being shown (photo: Dr David Edmonds)**

**Below: Ian Wheeler (DEC Warren Region) & Lawrence Cuthbert were welcome additions to the nest searching team in 2006 (Photo: Sarah Comer)**

*VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES IN 2007 & 2008*

**Western Ground Parrot surveys**
Fitzgerald River National Park, Cape Arid National Park
Stirling Range National Park & Waychinicup
Contact Mike Barth on 0429842451 or (08) 90713733, email: mike.barth@dec.wa.gov.au

**Noisy Scrub-bird, Western Whipbird and Western Bristlebird surveys, Translocation and nest-searching**
in Albany and the Darling Range
May to November
Contact Cam Tiller or Sarah Comer on (08) 98424500
email: cameron.tiller@dec.wa.gov.au

# *Noisy Scrub-bird monitoring in the Albany Management Zone*

For the second consecutive year, a Noisy Scrub-bird census of the entire Albany Management Zone was completed. Although the population index in 2006 was slightly higher than that recorded during the 2005 census, numbers are still considerably lower than those prior to the 2004-05 Manypeaks wildfire (the population index is recorded as the number of male scrub-birds producing territorial song in a given sub-population). So how did the separate sub-populations fare in 2006?

**Mt Gardner**

Despite some recent concerns about a declining population index over the past few years, the 2006 census recorded a slight increase over the number of territorial males recorded during 2005. The annual census of this sub-population will continue to monitor changes to the number of territories defended by territorial males.

**Mt Manypeaks**

The Noisy Scrub-bird population of the Mt Manypeaks sub-area experienced a 78% increase in the number of territorial singing males between 2005 and 2006 (from 32 to 61). Much of this increase can be attributed to the number of scrub-birds that were recorded in areas that were burnt during the 2004-05 wildfire (a total of 23 birds). This was an unexpected discovery as it is generally considered that scrub-bird habitat requires vegetation of at least 7-10 years of age. It seems as though the wet winter of 2005, immediately after the wildfire, has promoted the rapid recovery of some of this habitat although it remains to be seen whether it is sufficient for males to persist, and for nest-building and breeding to occur.

**Bald Island**

The Bald Island population has seen a phenomenal level of growth since the population was established with translocations of scrub-birds in 1993 and 1995. See page 7 for Josie's update on the 2006 surveys of the Island!

**Mermaid**

Despite being used as the source population for the Porongurup translocation, the Mermaid sub-population still experienced a slight increase in the population index. The eight male scrub-birds taken from this sub-area for the translocation were quickly replaced by other males in their territories suggesting a very healthy population of subordinate males waiting for a chance to establish a territory.

**Waychinicup**

The Waychinicup sub-population index showed a 45% decline since the 2005 census. This decline may have been due to movement of territorial males from Waychinicup into the parts of the Manypeaks sub-area which are becoming suitable habitat post-fire, but this is pure speculation and is a good reason to make sure this area and Manypeaks are resurveyed in 2007!

**Angove-Normans**

Since 2005, the Angove-Normans scrub-bird sub-population experienced an increase of 8% in the population index. It is hoped that the scrub-bird habitat that was lost from the Angove-Normans and Lakes sub-areas due to wildfires in 2001 and 2003 may reach a post-fire age suitable for scrub-birds within the next few years, and recovery of the population in these areas may begin to occur.

Other areas surveyed included Mt Taylor and Mt Martin, but no scrub-birds were heard here in 2006.

Cameron Tiller

# 2006 Bald Island Scrub-bird survey: Josie Dean

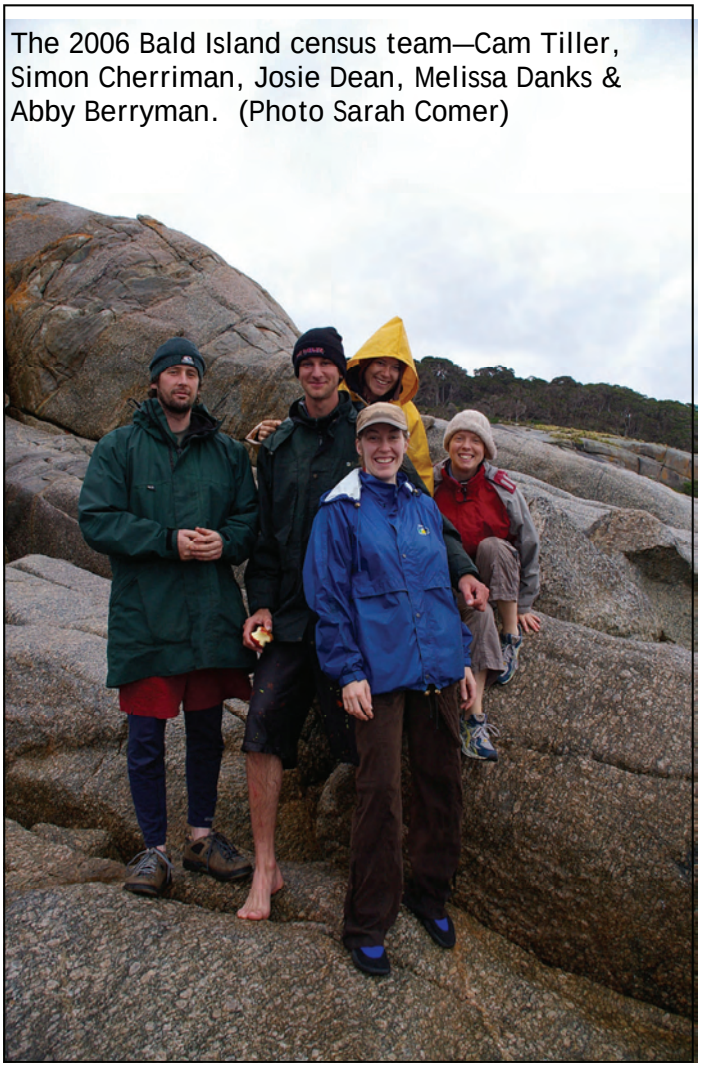
In 2006 the annual Bald Island trip was completed in the first week of September. A small army of staff stormed ashore on 1 September to assess the current population of Noisy Scrub birds. With a total of six people- Sarah Comer, Melissa Danks, Josie Dean, Cameron Tiller, Abby Berryman and Simon Cherriman - the scrub bird team was able to cover a large portion of the island thoroughly.

Using so many people meant the island was surveyed in a short space of time by three groups working in pairs. The added foot power increased both the accuracy of findings – birds' locations could be cross referenced between teams working in the same area – and scientific output – with more people, a greater area was covered and assisted the increase in audio recordings from many new birds, (information sought by PhD student Abby Berryman).

During the 4 day assignment a total of 77 male birds were recorded - an increase from the previous year. The Bald Island Noisy Scrub-bird population has increased continually at a rate of around 10% in the years since their initial translocation to the island. This pattern shows no signs or indication of halting or tapering off.

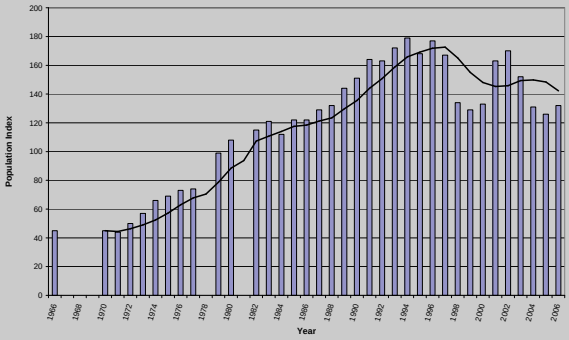
Of all the scrub bird populations monitored it appears to be experiencing the greatest growth.

To add excitement to the trip the team was forced to evacuate more hastily than planned to avoid incoming bad weather. All equipment and bags (including wet tents) were left ashore for what ended up being an additional fortnight. This necessitated yet another trip to the island, to retrieve them when conditions were suitable.

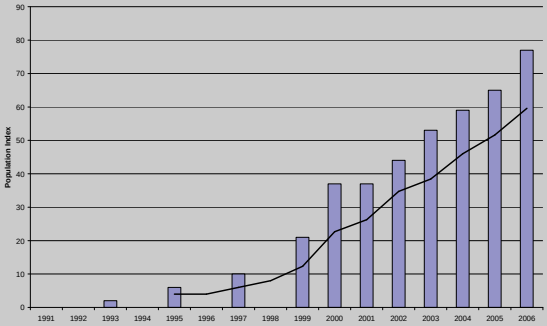


The 2006 Bald Island census team—Cam Tiller, Simon Cherriman, Josie Dean, Melissa Danks & Abby Berryman. (Photo Sarah Comer)

Mt Gardner (A) and Bald Island (B) scrub-bird sub-population indices (number of Singing Males) with population trend lines (5-year moving average)




A: Mt Gardner




B: Bald Island

# *Western Bristlebird surveys and translocation*

**SURVEYS IN THE ALBANY AREA**

In 2001 a survey of Western Bristlebirds in the Two Peoples Bay—Manypeaks area was completed, and an estimated 500 pairs found and mapped. This equated to approximately 80% of the total Western Bristlebird population, with around 120 pairs distributed patchily throughout the Fitzgerald River National Park.

Following the Manypeaks wildfire in December 2004—January 2005 and our successful application for additional post-fire monitoring funds (Project Phoenix) we were able to resurvey bristlebirds in the same area in both 2005 and 2006. The total number of pairs found in 2005 and 2006 was significantly lower than totals from 2001 (approximately 40% of the 2001 figure).

Results of these surveys were not surprising, as the Manypeaks fire and several other significant fires between 2000 and 2004 dramatically reduced the amount of available habitat for bristlebirds. Over the next few years it is possible that we will see bristlebirds occupy areas where they weren't found in 2001 as seral stages (ie. changing community composition) of the post-fire vegetation become suitable. One area that we suspect bristlebirds may return to is the lower ridge of Mt Manypeaks. Bristlebirds were recorded several years after the 1979 wildfire on Manypeaks, but quickly disappeared from this area as the hakea thickets developed.

The wildfires in both the Albany area and Fitzgerald River highlight the importance of establishing further populations to decrease the risk of loss due to wildfires (a strategy that has been extremely successful with scrub-birds).

**TRANSLOCATION**

In 1999 and 2000 a trial translocation saw fifteen bristlebirds released in Nuyts Wilderness, near Walpole. Despite an extensive wildfire at the release site in March 2001 at least seven of these birds were still present in spring 2001, and at least one survived to spring 2004. This persistence gave the recovery team some confidence that habitat in the Walpole area is likely to be suitable for bristlebirds, and that it is worth considering another translocation to the Walpole area.

Monitoring of bristlebird numbers in the Albany area has already provided good information on the suitability of a source population. There are sufficient numbers of bristlebirds (more than 70 pairs known) in both the Mermaid-Waychinicup area and on Mt Gardner. It is proposed to source birds from both areas for the translocation to Woolbales, which has the advantage of maximising genetic diversity of the translocated population.

A translocation proposal has been written, and plans are being made to commence the capture of birds in Spring 2007, for a summer release into the Woolbales site. DEC Walpole staff have been assisting with a fire management program to ensure there is a mosaic of long unburnt habitat amongst younger vegetation, which should enable birds to find refuge in case of a wildfire. An update on the progress of this translocation will be a highlight of the next SCTB News!

A wildfire from a series of lighting strikes that ran through the Short Road ground parrot habitat (in the Fitzgerald River National Park) on the 17th of November 2006. Every effort was made to keep this blaze from impinging on the 40+year old habitat occupied by ground parrots, but these were not successful. Luckily the fire was contained to the western side of Short Rd, and a ground parrot was seen crossing the track by Mike Barth and Dave Chemello. Post-fire surveys of this area will be conducted in 2007, and reported on in the next newsletter.

The ever-present threat of a wildfire starting on Mt Gardner became reality on the 14th of February 2006, when a lightning strike resulted in widlfire on the north of the headland near Little Beach. Prompt action by local fire fighting staff and DEC water bombers, which are now based at Albany during the fire season, contained this fire to less than a hectare. The result would have been disastrous if the fire had spread. Home to extremely important populations of scrub-birds, bristlebirds, whipbirds, and the only wild population of Gilbert's Potoroo, we were delighted with the outcome.

# *Wildfires and other memorable moments of 2006*


November 2006 saw yet another Landscope trip to Cape Arid National Park. This time the focus for our survey efforts was in the north of the Park, from Mt Ragged to Pine Hill where we set up camp. There was the opportunity for some members of the group (above left) to assist with a survey of some potential ground parrot habitat that had been identified near Mt Ragged. No birds were heard but it was a good chance to initiate some newcomers, and reacquaint some old, to the delights of ground parrot survey work. Felicity Druce (above right), from Victoria, was one of our new listeners.

The second release of Noisy Scrub-birds on Millinup Pass—despite the early start and steep climb (above) a 'healthy' crowd were keen to be there. From left to right front: Mark True (Ranger Two Peoples Bay), Melissa Danks, Fred Bondin, Anne Bondin, Josie Dean, Abby Berryman, Cam Tiller, Wendy Cooke (South Coast NRM Inc.), Franni Cunninghame, Louise Hillman (South Coast NRM), Mike Barth, Sarah Comer. Back: Simon Cherriman, Andrew MacFarlane (South Coast NRM ), Brent Barrett.

# *PROGRESS ON SOUTH COAST THREATENED BIRDS RECOVERY PLAN*

This is probably the most ambitious species recovery plan ever attempted by Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC) staff. It involves four threatened taxa (Western Ground Parrot, Noisy Scrubbird, Western Bristlebird and western heath subspecies of the Western Whipbird), one near-threatened taxon (western mallee subspecies of the Western Whipbird) and one presumed extinct taxon (western subspecies of the Rufous Bristlebird).

The plan is broken into two major sections, one on species specific actions and the other outlining area-specific actions. The latter covers 7 broad management zones in 6 different DEC Districts supporting one or more of the target species. While other somewhat similar plans are now in preparation elsewhere in Australia, this is the most complex of them and examples of this approach were not available when drafting of this plan began.

The recovery plan is being funded by the Commonwealth Department of Environment and Water Resources and being written by DEC's South Coast Region, under the supervision of the South Coast Threatened Birds Recovery Team. It has proved to be a challenging task! It was begun early in 2004 and is now very close to completion in early 2007.

Sandra Gilfillan, with constant input from Sarah Comer and Alan Danks, performed the Herculean task of extracting the necessary scientific and management information from a vast mass of publications, grey literature and the personal knowledge of many people, and of writing the first draft of over 200 pages. This was all done in under nine months before Sandra moved to other tasks. Other South Coast staff and Recovery Team members were more or less committed to other tasks on a full time basis, and in late 2005 I was appointed as a part time, absentee editor to finish the plan in consultation with the Recovery Team.

Although complicated by changing details, including major wildfires and changed status of target species, and the number of busy people from whom details were needed, completion of the plan to the satisfaction of the Recovery Team is likely to occur at an all day meeting in July 2007. It then has to be approved by DEC's Corporate Executive before submission to the Commonwealth for adoption under the Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999.

The final recovery plan will provide an invaluable source of information about the six species, and threats to them, and details are already being sought for updating the Commonwealth database on threatened species. Perhaps more importantly, the area management section will be invaluable to DEC District staff who have the responsibility for implementing the plan in the field. This section clarifies where new actions for each species fit within existing management plans and activities. The eventual implementation of the new plan should ensure that the five extant target taxa (and many other species living in the same areas) continue to improve in conservation status.

John Blyth

Members of the South Coast Threatened Birds Recovery Team had significant input into the preparation of the Recovery Pan

# *Noisy Scrub-bird Vocalisations by Abby Berryman*

2006 was a big year – I finally got the chance to study what happens to Noisy Scrub-bird songs when they are translocated to a new site and it allowed me to test my sexy song theory. The idea was that if scrub-birds do gain some benefit from copying the songs of their sexy neighbours, then when a group of birds who share no songs are released at a new site they should alter their songs so that they share with their new neighbours.

A lot of time and effort went into catching the scrub-birds – and attempting to catch quite a few more! Some birds were just too smart for us and would circle round and round, never going into the net. Others were so indignant that another "scrub-bird" (playback of their own songs!) was singing in their territory that they were captured in a matter of minutes when they rushed in to kick out the intruder. All in all, many hours were spent sitting very quiet and still in cramped hides trying to outsmart the birds.

All up we caught 8 male scrub-birds and took them to the Porongurup National Park. 5 birds were released at Millinup Pass and 3 at Spearwood Gully. Although we fitted them all with radio-transmitters, we didn't have a lot of luck with radio-tracking.

The transmitters had been made with the wrong antenna and they got tangled easily, either snapping the antenna or pulling the transmitter off the bird.

Luckily, when each bird began to sing, their songs could be used to identify them, even though they had changed since they were recorded pre-capture. At Spearwood Gully I recorded a bird singing about three weeks after release – it turned out to be Pele. Just 5 days later I recorded a bird singing in the same spot – imagine my surprise when it turned out to be Harry!

Harry and Pele continued to play tricks – a week later it was Harry again singing in that spot with Pele nowhere to be heard. Just 2 days later Pele had reclaimed the gully. Without recording their songs, we would have assumed it was the same bird the entire time, not two birds with a time-share on prime real estate!

A further twist to the tale was added when we happened to meet the other radio-tracking team on the road out from Spearwood Gully. We were happily chatting away when what did we hear but a scrub-bird song – coming from a creekline on a farm about 1.2km away from the release site!
After much disbelief and asking ourselves whether we had really heard what we thought we did, he obliged us with another song. I managed to get a recording from him and it turned out to be Harry – obviously sick of having to share his space with Pele!

When their songs were compared it was found that 3 of each of their 5 song types were nearly identical, but both birds had obligingly kept their characteristic endings so that I could still tell who was who.

Presumably their songs would have continued to become more similar until they matched exactly but Harry has not been heard since August. Also, even if he had continued to sing from that location there is no guarantee that he could still hear Pele singing over a kilometre away. At no time could we hear the other scrub-bird from either site, but scrub-bird songs are capable of carrying for that distance and scrub-bird hearing may be much better than ours.

At Millinup Pass the process of song convergence has been more complete. It was seen in 2 pairs of birds – Togo and Mendez; and Niko and Zizou. Togo and Mendez were both part of the first release and about 2 months later 2 of their song types were identical. Niko and Zizou were part of the second release at Millinup Pass, and after about 2 months 3 of their song types were very similar. Of particular interest is that Niko appeared to have copied Zizou's songs.

So, it appears that Niko probably copied Zizou's songs, Pele most likely copied Harry, and Mendez and Togo altered their songs so that they shared. This seems consistent with my theory that scrub-birds prefer to share songs and will change their songs to do so.

# *Darling Range Update: Sarah Comer & Dick Rule*

Two surveys were conducted in the Darling Range following the January wildfire that we reported on in Issue 10. The May survey recorded two males, one at each of Sixty-one Form and West Samson, whilst the fourth trip in late September only recorded a single male at Sixty-one Form. Although efforts to capture the male at Sixty-one Form during the final trip (late-September) were unsuccessful, the bird was sighted clearly several times during capture attempts by two of the capture team and was unbanded. This indicates that this bird was almost certainly a new individual and provides the first evidence that breeding has occurred in the Darling Range. However, given the large effort that has gone into this translocation since before the first release of birds in 1997, and the lack of other calling males in the area, the confirmation of breeding does not suggest that the translocation will result in a breeding sub-population, merely that breeding is possible.

In 2007 we will be considering the future of this translocation and investigating possible causes for the lack of success of establishment of birds.

DEC staff in Wellington and Dwellingup Districts have continued to manage habitat in this area with fire management, fox baiting and feral pig control being conducted in all release areas. Several individuals have also assisted with surveys. An impressive contingent from the Mandurah bird group has also assisted with surveys—and Dick Rule has given an update on this work below.

Frank Pridham & Dick Rule from the Mandurah Bird Observers group joined Dick Shore, Melissa Danks, Abby Berryman, Chris Powell, Simon Cherriman, Josie Dean and Sarah Comer during the 2006 May surveys.

In March and April in 2006 some members of the Mandurah Bird Observers Group headed into the Darling Range east and south east of Waroona to listen for Noisy Scrub Birds. We were all beginners but had listened to a call tape prepared for us by Sarah Comer before leaving Waroona. We were lucky to hear the NSB twice on the first visit so were keen on the second but had no luck. We were blessed with glorious weather and the forest was beautiful.

We are looking forward to one or more trips in 2007.

If you are interested in joining Dick and the Mandurah Bird group please contact Dick Rule

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# *The Jarnadup bristlebird eggs – who dunnit? Allan Burbidge*

In the H.L. White collection in the Museum of Victoria, there is a collection of two bristlebird eggs from Jarnadup, near Manjimup, Western Australia, collected by James Stephens in 1919. It was thought, with some controversy, that the eggs were from a Western Bristlebird.

More recently, measurements of many bristlebird eggs and consideration of the description of the nest (see *South Coast Threatened Birds Newsletter* No 9, page 2, 2005) showed that the eggs were definitely Rufous Bristlebird eggs. This lead to the conclusion that this clutch represented the only known collection of eggs of the now extinct western subspecies of the Rufous Bristlebird.

However, re-examination of the eggs by Nick Kolichis, who has extensive and detailed knowledge of the eggs of Australian birds, and further consideration of the case, has revealed that this conclusion may have been premature.
In colour, pattern and shape the eggs are very similar to collections from Victorian Rufous Bristlebirds, and almost identical to a 1921 collection by H.A. Purcell from near Anglesea. Interestingly, the eggs in the Anglesea clutch are also small for Rufous Bristlebirds, and almost identical to the Jarnadup eggs.

The Jarnadup clutch apparently was collected by James Stephens, but only one other known collection of eggs has been attributed to him. He was, therefore, probably inexperienced at collecting and preparing eggs for museum collections. An inexperienced collector would use two holes to blow the egg – one at each end.
However, the Jarnadup eggs were blown using only a single hole in each egg, indicating this was done by an experienced and competent collector. In addition, the set marks and holes match closely those of the Purcell collection from Anglesea.
Taken together, these facts suggest that the Jarnadup eggs may have been collected by an experienced collector in the Anglesea area of Victoria, and it is even possible that they were laid by the same female as laid Purcell's 1921 collection.

Recent re-examination of the collecting slips by Rory O'Brien at the Museum of Victoria has also shown that there is some minor confusion in the labels of the bristlebird eggs.

It is therefore possible that (i) there was a mistake made during the original documentation of the collection, (ii) a mistake was made during transcription of data, (iii) an unknown party intentionally falsified the collection data in order to attract a greater reward for a rare collection or (iv) the original collection was actually from Jarnadup in Western Australia but someone exchanged the eggs for the more commonly collected Victorian Rufous Bristlebird eggs. Given the confusion on the data labels, it is likely that an honest mistake has been made.

Nevertheless, given the extreme rarity of collections of clutches of the Western Bristlebird, and the intense and competitive interest in egg collecting a century ago, it is also possible that dishonesty may have come to play. It seems likely that the Jarnadup clutch is an example of a mistake, honest or otherwise.

We will probably never know the full story in relation to the Jarnadup eggs, but the story highlights the importance of careful observation, recording and communication of data, particularly in relation to threatened species, where the opportunity to collect data is often limited.


The Jarnadup bristlebird eggs. Photo courtesy Museum of Victoria.

# *Where are they now?*

In the last eighteen months there have been a number of changes to the faces working on the threatened bird projects and in the parks and nature reserves.
Neil Scott's departure from Two Peoples Bay late in 2005 slipped through the list of changes in the last newsletter. It was with great sadness that we said goodbye to Neil—his support for our programs and commitment to the upkeep of the fabulous research quarters at Two Peoples Bay was appreciated enormously. We were very pleased when Mark True took up the reins at Two Peoples Bay in 2006, and is assisted by Brendan Jelley.

The post-fire Project Phoenix money has enabled us to employ a seasonal ranger at Waychinicup during the busy summer months and over the last couple of years this position has been filled by Sara Hands and David Chemello.

Still in the Parks we have seen Mark Moore take up the senior ranger position in the Fitzgerald River National Park, and Allan Rose's recent departure from Cape Arid to Geike Gorge National Park. Allan will be greatly missed, his commitment to supporting the ground parrot work and Landscope trips in Cape Arid National Park was a great help to Mike and his team.

From Albany Neal Henshaw departed to work on the mines. Melissa Danks has also left to complete her PhD in Armadale, NSW. Both Neal and Melissa are greatly missed. Simon Cherriman and Sharon Fergusson joined the team for a short period in 2006, but both have moved on to warmer places.

On a brighter note we have some great new faces: Cam Tiller has taken up the position as Conservation Officer working on the Noisy Scrub-bird Program and assisting with the coordination of the other South Coast NRM threatened species projects (of which the Western Ground Parrot Recovery is one), and more recently Wes Manson has joined the threatened bird team as the Project Phoenix Technical Officer. Cam and Wes are getting their teeth into the 2007 scrub-bird program as I write, ably assisted by Josie Dean who is into her third season in Albany.

## *Porongurup postscript.*

The excitement that followed the 2006 release and subsequent persistence of singing males was somewhat numbed when a wildfire ripped through the Porongurup NP in February this year. Despite the best efforts of all involved all of the release areas and occupied habitat was burnt. As yet we have been unable to survey the entire Park, but some good news was found in the form of two singing males that escaped the fire—one on the north of the Park and one on private property to the south. A more detailed update will be included in the next newsletter.


***ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS***

**This newsletter was prepared jointly by the Department of Environment and Conservation and volunteers. We would also like to thank Environment Australia and South Coast Natural Resource Management Inc. for their financial support for some of these projects. BHP Billiton have kindly provided funds to support work on the genetics of the two WA subspecies of Western Whipbird.**

**In addition we would like to acknowledge the phenomenal support of volunteers on the recovery programs for the south coast threatened birds. In 2006 over 1000 hours of volunteer time was spent assisting with surveys for Western Ground Parrots, surveying and translocating Noisy Scrub-birds, and surveying Western Whipbirds and Western Bristlebirds in the aftermath of the Manypeaks wildfire.**


***Any contributions about threatened birds on the south coast are welcome.***

*If you wish to receive this newsletter electronically please let us know!*


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