

South Coast Threatened Birds News

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

Western Bristlebird translocation to Walpole

If anyone ever tells you that bristlebirds are easy to catch, don't believe them! The grand plan to capture up to 10 bristlebirds for translocation to Walpole in September and October 2007 came a little unstuck when the bristlebirds refused to cooperate.

Unexpectedly, the bristlebirds weren't very responsive to playback so after several capture attempts in which the bristlebirds pretty much ignored us, we decided to delay captures for another few weeks. Once we launched back into capture attempts we continued to have little success until, just when we were contemplating giving up, we managed to capture Bravo on the

20th October. Bravo was an A-calling bird - the assumption is that A-calling bristlebirds are male and B-calling birds are female. Bristlebirds seem to hang around in pairs and the A-calls that are presumably given by the male are often answered with a B-call. However, no one had told Bravo this and at times in the aviary he repeatedly sang A-calls followed by B-calls!

Bravo's capture was followed by a string of bad luck - just when the bristlebirds were responding well to playback we had four that managed to escape the net. Eventually we managed to catch Delta on 7th November. Delta was a B-calling bird and was captured on the same netline as Bravo. She may have been his mate, although by the time we captured her, Bravo had been replaced by another A-calling bird. On the last day of capture attempts (9th November) we caught Whiskey, another A-calling bird.

So off to Walpole with just three birds - a smaller number than we had planned but a huge amount of effort went into catching them. They were released near Mandalay Beach on the 13th November. All three were fitted with transmitters and for the first week they were radio-tracked intensively. Whiskey was released on his own and Delta and Bravo were released together a few hundred metres away. It was thought that because Delta and Bravo were captured from the



same territory that they might stay together. However, this proved not to be the case. While Delta stayed very close to the release site for the first few days, Bravo took off and went exploring. Whiskey also spent a few days moving around and exploring before returning to within a few hundred metres of his release site.

Five days after release, Delta finally began to move. She could hear Whiskey singing and gradually began to make her way towards him. By the end of the day she was within 100m of Whiskey and began to reply to his A-calls with B-calls. Since they paired up, Delta and Whiskey have continued to stay close together and are often heard duetting. Bravo however has been much less vocal. He sang for the first couple of weeks but then went quiet.

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Plucky Pioneers — Scrub-birds translocated to Gull Rock

Gull Rock is a historical scrub-bird translocation site, with birds released in this area in between 1990 and 1992 following the 'appearance' of a singing male in the area in 1988. This male had dispersed under his own steam from Two Peoples Bay Nature Reserve. The population grew to 12 singing males in 1994 before declining after a wildfire in 1995.

In the latest Noisy Scrub bird (NSB) translocation, five males were released at Mt Taylor (Gull Rock National Park), in what is typically Albany's wettest month - July. Though it made for some very miserable days for those involved in tracking them after their release, it was perfect weather for our plucky pioneer NSB's. The birds' confidence in the new home was indicated by a number of them singing within hours of their release, and the establishment of territories close to their release sites.

The 2007 troupe of pioneers were named for the human pioneers instrumental in recording the original information about the Noisy Scrub-bird: Gilbert, Gould, Webb, Campbell and Masters.

The July 19 (2007) release was assisted and attended by over 30 people including representatives from the Gull Rock National Park Working Group; Mt Martin Reserve Community Group; South Coast NRM Inc; South Coast Threatened Birds Recovery Team; the Hon Peter Watson (MLA); members of the local community (including Gull Rock and Mt Martin working groups, Albany Bird Group, the South Coast Threatened Birds Recovery Team; DEC staff and WIN television. A bus was hired for the occasion to enable more people to participate and witness the release. However, on what turned out to be a cool and blustery day, the *pièce de résistance* was definitely the

mobile coffee van and delicious morning tea for all involved!

All birds had radio transmitters attached prior to their release in order to identify each individual's movements and location once placed in the new environment. Intensive radio tracking and song monitoring continued daily for three weeks following the release. This work was greatly assisted by the problem free performance of the transmitters and the fact that many birds could be located from or close to existing tracks.

The transmitters were attached using a specifically designed harness system which pulls free of the bird if entangled or falls off in time (ideally after the battery is too weak to provide a detectable signal). During the initial monitoring period at Gull Rock, 3 of the 5 transmitters were recovered. These were all located within 750metres of the birds' release sites which may indicate the birds readily established new territories in their new home.

With no radio signal to identify individual birds, their singing now remains the only method of locating them. DEC staff will continue to visit Gull Rock National Park in the coming year (2008). Provided these birds are heard singing after 12 months in their new home - the capture of female scrub-birds will take place in winter 2008. These females will also be released in Gull Rock NP in the hope of establishing a new breeding colony.

Josie Dean



Local MLA Peter Watson and Mt Martin Botanical Park working group member Hazel Mitchell releasing a scrub-bird—the very sharp-eyed observer will be able to see the blur in the photo! Photo: Allan Burbidge

Community celebrate at Gull Rock National Park Release

The release day, 19th of July, dawned with grey skies and a threat of showers. By 10am, a number of people invited to witness the release of the Noisy Scrub-birds gathered at the bottom of the 4WD track within the newly created Gull Rock National Park. Glancing skywards, we all prayed silently for the weather to hold. Nobody was keen to walk through wet vegetation.

Soon, a small bus driven by David Chemello, pulled up to transport the group which had now swelled to more than twenty people including members of the Gull Rock & Mt Martin Community Working Groups, the South Coast NRM, the South Coast Threatened Bird Recovery Team, DEC volunteers and Peter Watson, Albany's representative in the WA parliament. Even the local TV station had sent someone to film the event for the evening newscast.

Some of the local community groups had initially held reservations about the translocation of a threatened species into Gull Rock National Park. However, their representatives now appeared thrilled about having Noisy Scrub-birds in their "own backyard".

We were all pleasantly surprised to see a mobile coffee van parked on top of the hill. More importantly, there were also five boxes with very precious cargo – the Noisy Scrub-birds. It was obvious that we were not going to enjoy our coffee anytime soon.

After a brief welcome by Sarah Comer, we split up into three groups and started to walk to the release sites. Those of us who looked as if we might survive a longer walk, were assigned the

most distant sites. The first group which included some very excited youngsters soon stopped to release their two birds whilst the rest of us continued on. Before long we had covered a couple of kilometres. Where were our release sites? Surely we were not going to walk all the way to Nanarup?

However, soon after Cam Tiller indicated the spot where the first bird would be released. Our bird wouldn't be disappointed, the location had million dollar ocean views. DEC volunteers, Mike and Shane Hall were on hand to open the cage door.

This was the moment we had all been waiting for. Cameras ready, we all stood there holding our

bell to his new home.

This time it was local MLA Peter Watson's turn to perform the honours. Together with Hazel Mitchell (Mt Martin Community Working Group), he released the last Noisy Scrub-bird.

When we started to walk back we suddenly remembered the coffee van. Hopefully, it hadn't left. We were all looking forward to a nice, hot cup of coffee when all of a sudden our thoughts were interrupted by a rather distinct and unmistakable sound - a Noisy Scrub-bird was calling!

Minutes later we caught up with Wes Manson, who confirmed that Gilbert had started to call

within 30 minutes after his release. Obviously the bird was very happy with his new home. A good omen!

And when we finally made it back up the hill, a cup of hot coffee was waiting for us.

ANNE BONDIN

Eds Note

Janet McArtney (kneeling front left) is a member of the Gull Rock Community Working Group, and a presentation of this

translocation was given to the group prior to the release. It was great to have some members present at the release, and Janet suggested involving the local community in 'naming' the females that we hope to release in 2008. So if the males have persisted Janet and the local community will assist with identifying local identities (female) after which the birds can be named.



Members of the Gull Rock community, Coast NRM Inc, and the local media join the team for the scrub-bird release in Gull Rock National Park.

Photo: Allan Burbidge

breath. The cage was opened and within seconds Masters made his dash for freedom, disappearing into the dense scrub. The trackers sprang into action to radio track the bird's movements whilst the rest of us moved on to release the last bird.

For a brief second we panicked. Where was the last bird? Then we saw the cage sitting by the side of the track where we had left it a few minutes earlier. We walked on to the next gully to translocate Camp-

Search for Western Ground Parrots in the northern sandplain

Last year the first serious search for ground parrots north of Perth was undertaken.

The modest project was initiated by Birds Australia WA and was funded by a gift from an anonymous donor. It was strongly supported by the Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC) which doubled what could be accomplished.

A large area of suitable habitat was located within range of the project base, Jurien Bay. Some of it had been too recently burnt to warrant a survey in 2007.

A brochure was prepared showing roughly where there had been historical records as well as how to identify a Western Ground Parrot (WGP).

With the help of volunteers, including several from DEC, a total of 241 listening surveys was conducted, mostly in April and August, surveying approxi-

mately 10700 ha., about 1000 ha. more than once.

No WGP's were found. However, several records of possible sightings over the past sixteen years came to light. Some of our search areas yielded no evidence of WGP's. These included Coomallo Nature Reserve and Mount Lesueur National Park. There was a different story in Badgingarra National Park where two forms of evidence pointed to the presence of WGP's at least until 2003 when the park was extensively burnt. These were possible sightings over a few years by a neighbouring farmer, and the very ground parrot like calls of Tawny-crowned Honeyeaters within that park. Additionally, three of the five unresolved records from our surveys were in Badgingarra National Park. The other two were in unvested Crown Land near Lake Logue Nature Reserve, another area where there had been possible sightings over some years until 2001.

A small number of the surveys and most of the records of possible sightings were beyond the original study area and any future work should cover a wider area. One interesting account over some years to 2005, was from north east of Yuna which is east of Northampton.

Renee Hartley (fauna conservation officer, DEC, Jurien), and Brenda Newbey prepared a report on the project. We recommended that further work on WGP's in the northern sandplain be undertaken and that it be soon.

A copy of the report (on disk) can be obtained from Renee (renee.hartley@dec.wa.gov.au), or from Brenda (wgparrot@westnet.com.au). The report is well illustrated including a number of maps and photos. It also includes eight accounts of the possible sightings of northern WGP's between 1992 and 2006.

Brenda Newbey Project co-ordinator for Birds Australia WA.

Western Ground Parrot surveys in 2008

Last year's ground parrot surveys showed up a worrying trend in the Fitzgerald River National Park. Numbers were well down from previous years, with perhaps a total of about 20 birds heard. As for Cape Arid, only the Poison Creek area was surveyed with perhaps 30-40 birds heard.

The Pasley Track area has not been surveyed since 2005.

Over the next few months the priority is to survey both the Cape Arid and Fitzgerald populations to determine just how many birds remain. Volunteers are needed to help us survey for Western Ground Parrots. Trip dates are:

**1-10 April - CANP Pasley/
Telegraph
22 April - 1 May - FRNP**

**Wilderness Gate
13-22 May - CANP Poison
Creek
4-13 June - FRNP Short Road/
Hamersley Drive**

For more information or if you would like to assist, please contact Abby Berryman
Ph: (08) 9842 4519
Mob: 0429 842 451
Email:
abby.berryman@dec.wa.gov.au

Western Ground Parrot Recovery 2007-The Year in Review

2007 was another busy year for the WGPRP. A number of parks and new areas were surveyed for new populations, as well as extensive surveys and census of known populations. Here's a breakdown of the year:

D'Entrecasteaux National Park

Two 10 day surveys were conducted to search for new populations following a number of reported sightings, and the presence of suitable habitat in the bird's historic range. No WGP's were found but the park is vast and largely unsurveyed.

Stirling Range National Park

A reported sighting in SRNP was followed up on this survey but no birds were detected. The habitat surveyed looks very promising and similar to that occupied in the Fitzgerald River NP, however the presence of dieback was disturbingly obvious and most of the park provides unsuitable habitat.

Short Rd FRNP

The historic population at Short Rd in FRNP was surveyed following the wildfire that burnt through half of the occupied area in Nov 06. Sadly WGP numbers were at a record low with only a few birds found.

Poison Creek CANP

The Poison Creek population in Cape Arid NP was surveyed with the aim of estimating the number of WGP's found in this area. The population seemed to be stable and was estimated at 20-40 individuals which is promising. This figure (although difficult to accurately estimate) gives us something to base future surveys on to determine population trends.

Hammersley Drive FRNP

Hammersley Drive used to harbor a large population as recently as the 90's. However no birds have been detected in this area for some time and unfortunately this survey did not change this. It appears in FRNP that once they have been displaced from an area by a disturbance, such as wildfire, no recolonisation of these areas is occurring once the vegetation becomes suitable again. This may be due to insufficient



The ground parrot survey team in the Fitzgerald Wilderness, (L-R) Back row Luke Barrett, Mike Barth, Louisa Bell, Dave Chemello, Cam Tiller, Karen Rusten, Janet Newell, Front Sarah Comer, Saul Cowen.

numbers of birds or poor dispersal techniques.

Waychinicup to Bremer

Mike and I surveyed the remaining remnant vegetation between WNP and Bremer Bay for suitable habitat and to explore the option that this vegetation could serve as a corridor for between WNP and FRNP. There is a surprising amount of coastal vegetation found along this stretch but since it is not vested as National Park there is no baiting or burning regime for this bush. Consequently the vegetation was very old with little food, and a high presence of cats and foxes evident by tracks in the sand.

Nest Searching FRNP

Again there was a concentrated effort to study the Wilderness Gate population and attempt to find the holy grail—a WGP nest. This was easily the quietest year of the four spent in this area, and the first that there has been no evidence of chicks. The population seems to have diminished in this area. It was also a later year with nesting behaviour at least a month behind last years. Sadly there was no sign of the movie star Charlie and his mate. Attempts were made to capture a breeding pair of birds for radio telemetry but this was unsuccessful. A WGP did hit the net one morning but was able to free itself before it

could be captured.

FRNP Wilderness

Despite ideal listening conditions and a good survey team, a trip to the Fitzgerald Wilderness in October 2007 only managed to locate a single ground parrot to the east of Thumb Peak. The team are keen to resurvey this area in Autumn 2008.

My Goodbye

2007 was also my last year on the WGP Project. The last 4 years have been an incredible chapter in my life and an amazing start to my future in conservation. For all the painful memories of early morning starts, freezing conditions, long walks through horrible vegetation, ticks and mozzies, all I have to do is remember the laughs, look back at some of the photos of the people I've met and the amazing places and critters I've seen and I'm left with a big smile and some incredible memories.

Thankyou to all the people who have assisted both me and the project over the years. I was made welcome from day one and everyone has always been willing to help in any way they can.

Good luck to Abby and Jeff on taking over the project.

DAVID CHEMELLO

Noisy Scrub-bird monitoring (Albany & Darling Range)

In 2007 The Noisy Scrub-bird survey program had its share of highlights and lowlights.

The year began with a couple of fires, the largest impact caused by the wildfire that scorched the entire Porongurup National Park in early February (reported in the last edition). The two scrub-birds that survived this fire were still calling throughout 2007. A second fire in the Mt Martin area did not impact any current scrub-bird habitat, but was still uncomfortably close to the Gull Rock translocation site.

Potential translocation sites in the tall karri forests of the Warren Region were investigated in 2007. Superficially this habitat type is similar to the Porongurup release sites, and a number of sites were identified which merit further investigation in 2008-2009.

ALBANY POPULATION CENSUS

The entire Albany Management Zone [AMZ] was not surveyed in 2007, but there were some interesting results in those sub-areas that were surveyed in full (refer to table).

The census of Mt Gardner revealed population numbers to be almost identical to those recorded in 2006.

The source population for translocations (Mermaid) is looking very healthy, with all territorial males removed for the last two years translocations being replaced by singing males.

The Noisy Scrub-bird population on Bald Island has seen an impressive level of growth in the 15 years since the first translocation. Population

growth has been consistent with annual increases of between ten and twenty percent since 2001. As mentioned in previous articles the size of the population has already far exceeded all expectations of the Island's carrying capacity (95 males heard producing territorial song in 2007), and scrub-birds are defending territories in habitat that previously would have been considered marginal.

The number of territorial males recorded on the southern slopes of Mt Manypeaks increased again this year (these birds were first heard in 2006) which is quite probably related to the decline in the number of singing males recorded for Waychinicup. The post-fire regrowth on the south side of the ridge is vigorous, and quite different to any other post-fire habitat seen elsewhere in the AMZ. In addition we now know that breeding has been attempted in this area, which is an extremely significant finding (see article page 7 for more information on the Manypeaks recovery).

Although surveys of the Angove-Normans sub-population did not manage to cover the entire sub-population area, the major areas were visited in 2007 and there is

still no sign of recolonisation of areas burn in the 2001 and 2003 wildfires.

Similarly areas previously containing populations of scrub-birds around Lake Gardner and Moates Lake are not being reoccupied.

Overall the AMZ population is only showing minimal signs of increasing following the wildfires of the past six years. Continuing to protect the key remaining sub-populations (Mt Gardner, Mermaid and Bald Island) will be a key task for the next few years. In addition we hope to continue to monitor the recolonisation of Mt Manypeaks!

DARLING RANGE CENSUS

The spring census of scrub-birds in the Darling Range failed to locate any birds in and around the release areas. However, there was a single bird heard at Sixty-one Form by Bruce Withnell earlier in the year.

Monitoring of the Darling Range release sites will be conducted again in 2008, and a review of the success of this translocation is currently being prepared.

Cam Tiller & Sarah Comer

Sub-population	Number of Singing Males		
	2001	2006	2007
Angove-Normans	79	40	Incomplete
Bald Island	37	77	95
Lakes	4	1	0
Mermaid	22	29	25
Mt Gardner	163	132	130
Mt Manypeaks	427	60	Incomplete
Waychinicup	37	29	11

NSB population indices in the Albany Management Zone
** denotes incomplete surveys of sub-populations during 2007.*

Mt Manypeaks recovery ...a very exciting find!!

In late September 2007 Sarah Comer, Cam Tiller, Josie Dean and myself hiked up Mt Manypeaks to conduct the annual NSB census. The path used in previous years had grown over and we often stumbled from its vague impression. Much of the habitat was dense, tall *Hakea elliptica*. It caught at our clothing and the thin trunks closed on our backpacks and slowed our progress. In other areas the sharp stumps of the Eucalypt regrowth left us scratched and blackened. But as with any mountain the view from the summit made it all worth while.

It is now three years after the December 2004 fire that tore through much of the long unburnt vegetation of Mt Manypeaks, including around 55% of all known habitat occupied by NSBs. This fire devastated researchers who presumed that any birds which survived the direct physical threat of fire would further suffer from the ongoing loss of habitat leaving them exposed to predators, loss of food resources and limited access to nesting materials. Other NSB populations which have experienced a widespread fire have been decimated and are yet to recover (eg. Angove-Norman and the Lakes). Based on the historic pattern of NSB recovery after fire it was presumed it would be around seven to ten years before the habitat would be suitable for scrub-birds.

Researchers were therefore delighted with 2006 and 2007 census data from Mt Manypeaks which demonstrated that NSB numbers are recovering more quickly than expected. Although Mt Manypeaks was only partially surveyed in 2007 the results suggest that the NSB recovery first observed in 2006 has been maintained with territorial male scrub birds heard calling from much of the ridgeline and surrounding gullies.

The reasons for the different response in the Manypeaks population are unclear. It may be partly explained by corridors to nearby habitat in Waychinicup providing access to a refuge and facilitating resettlement. This theory is supported by

the Waychinicup census data where the number of singing males increased in 2005 and has since declined. Recruitment on the Mt Manypeaks ridge is unlikely to be due to breeding in the post-fire regrowth, as the earliest this is likely to have occurred is 2006, meaning the soonest we could expect to hear the songs of any successful recruitment of new males would be 2008.

The high number of males on the Manypeaks ridge led to the decision to conduct nest searching in Atrichornis Gully on the steep southern slopes and we made our way slowly down to a creekline about a third of the way up from the coast. This was my first time nest searching and I was a bit unsure about what came next. My hands were bleeding from where I have inadvertently touched some sedges on the way down. Sarah waved vaguely up slope where the mountain looms above us. "Search every clump of sedge. If you miss a nest then you wont find another until you move into another females nesting territory." (based on the premise that the earliest nesting could have occurred in the post-fire regrowth would be 2006) looking again at my bleeding hands and for a brief moment wishing I was an accountant.

Despite my initial fears we were buoyed by some immediate success. A large softball sized nest hidden under the apron of a sedge only a few meters from the creek. although there is no conclusive proof that recruitment was successful at least here was evidence that nest building is possible within 3 year post fire habitat. Over the course of the day we found three more nests. Three of the tally of four were from 2006, and one from 2007. It was a jubilant but tired group who returned to the camp on the summit.

It is clear that the survival of the NSB depends upon the maintenance of habitat which can provide adequate food, nesting materials, and protection from predators. Knowing with more subtlety how NSB populations and their habitat respond to fire can assist in managing habitats and response to wildfires. Despite the difficulties with working in this inaccessible area it is planned to conduct more intensive studies in the Manypeaks and Waychinicup areas in 2008. This knowledge will help shape future management decisions in this and other NSB populations.

WES MANSON



Wes Manson, his 'gloved' assistant and a scrub-bird nest located in 3 year old regrowth on Mt Manypeaks.

Three and a half years away - what's new with the Western Ground Parrot? –a volunteer returns

Having completed my Zoology degree back in England last June and with job opportunities in critical species conservation few and far between, I made the decision (with permission from Sarah!) to return to Albany last October. My 2 months in Albany back in summer 2004 were easily the highlight of my 'gap' year between school and university and I was keen to add to my previous experiences. I was originally persuaded to make the journey in 2004 after a chance encounter with Brent Barrett in a rural pub in the South Island of New Zealand, where I had been working. Brent and I knew each other from time spent working with Kakapo and he informed me he was heading west for more parrot work. And the rest, as they (all too frequently) say, is history. Before returning to New Zealand for my flight home, I was fortunate enough to be involved in 3 Western Ground Parrot surveys including Cape Arid and the Wilderness Zone of the Fitzgerald River National Park. It seemed remarkable to me that on my return to WA, my first fieldtrip was the first venture into the Wilderness Zone for WGP surveying since I left in 2004! Sadly, although a successful trip for other reasons, a maximum of only two birds were recorded from our twice-daily listening surveys. However, from this survey trip and from my subsequent work with overhauling the WGP database this January, it has been inspiring to see the leaps and bounds the project has made during the time I have been away. I was always aware of the new ground that was being covered, particularly through the Friends of the WGP newsletter from Brenda Newbey as well as email contact with Dave Che-

mello. But it was only through talking to Mike Barth and Dave in person that I could see first hand what had been achieved.

Firstly, the knowledge of WGP vocalisations has advanced significantly. Through Brent, Mike and Dave's listening survey work (with input from others involved in the project) an impressive array of call types can now be discriminated. The use of increasingly advanced recording equipment and bioacoustic software have allowed the discovery of additional call types, particularly the 'drawn' or 'd' call. Through careful detective work, this call has been found to be diagnostic to females, allowing listeners to assign sexes to calling birds. Differences in calls have also emerged between populations, even within the same national park. The increased complexity of WGP vocalisations almost prompts me to say "In my day we only had three calls, and it was all the simpler for it...". Calling birds are the bread and butter of the research of this

cryptic and *usually* rarely observed species. I say usually, because the WGP has continued to surprise researchers over the last few years. I remember the elation of both Brent and Dave after they had just had their first pulse-racing encounter with a WGP. I also remember trying (and failing) to disguise my considerable envy. But now, largely thanks to the ridiculously obliging individual known as 'Charlie', the quantity of observation data has proliferated, as has the increased knowledge of the species in WA. Information on the feeding behaviour, breeding ecology and the social interactions of the bird has been obtained from field observations, photographs and video footage. The discovery that females leave their nests every evening for food exchange ritual with the male is just one example of the knowledge gained from these observations. These data are key in understanding WGP ecology, which in turn is vital for the recovery of the species.

Saul Cowen



Saul Cowen (right) with John Blyth and David Chemello at a recent Recovery team meeting in Walpole

VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES IN 2008 & 2009

Western Ground Parrot surveys are continuing throughout 2008 & 2009 to both Fitzgerald River National Park and Cape Arid National Park.

(see page 3 for dates)

Contact Abby Berryman on 0429 842 451, email: abby.berryman@dec.wa.gov.au

Noisy Scrub-bird, Western Whipbird and Western Bristlebird surveys, capture, translocation, and nest-searching in the Albany district and the Darling Range (May to November).

Contact Cam Tiller on 0427 440816 or (08) 9842 4500

email: cameron.tiller@dec.wa.gov.au

WESTERN BRISTLEBIRDS RECORDED ON THUMB PEAK

In October 2007 a group of researchers obtained a permit to conduct surveys of a number of threatened species in the Wilderness Zone of the Fitzgerald River National Park. The idea of this trip was to combine our resources to survey Western Ground Parrots, Western Bristlebirds, and Dibblers and conduct searches for threatened flora populations and short-range endemic invertebrates.

It was during a day searching for the latter on Thumb Peak, that we were surprised by the calls of bristlebirds from not one, or two but four separate home ranges. This is the first record of bristlebirds from this area—and the

birds are calling from ideal looking bristlebird habitat that was last burnt in a wildfire in 1998. Other bristlebird home ranges on Telegraph Track, Woolber-nup Hill and the Marshes Track—including all of those surveyed by Shapelle McNee and Brenda Newbey in 2000 were surveyed during this trip, and we were delighted to find a healthy population of at least 110 'a' calling birds within the 1998 fire scar. This is a significant increase on the number of birds recorded by Shapelle and Brenda in 2000, and a good indication that this population is recovering well after the wild-fire.

Sarah Comer

STAFF CHANGES

There were numerous staff changes on the South Coast Threatened Birds projects during 2007.

In the Darling Range Bruce Withnell has moved on to take up a position at Lorna Glen. Bruce has been one of the key supporters of the Darling Range translocation, and will be greatly missed by the south coast staff.

Dave Chemello again changed hats over the summer months to fill the seasonal ranger role (made possible with the Project Phoenix funding) at Waychincup National Park.

Saul Cowen, a previous volunteer on the ground parrot program, has joined us from the UK to lend a helping hand to all threatened birds projects. We hope that Saul will be staying on the south coast to complete his post-graduate studies.

Finally, at the end of the year, both Mike Barth and Dave Chemello departed from the Ground Parrot project with Abby Berryman temporarily taking up the reins as Project Officer until we can readvertise this position. Jeff Pinder is providing Abby with technical support for the coming season.



The FRNP Wilderness survey team on Thumb Peak, near where the first of the mountaintop Western Bristlebirds was heard in October 2007.

Photo: Sarah Barrett

To Suffer in Silence

"It is absolutely the most silent and unobtrusive bird I have yet encountered in Western Australia." Whitlock (1914).

"The call of the Ground Parrot... conveys a sense of sadness." Mattingley (1918).

"As far as could be ascertained, it uses its call as infrequently as possible." (Mattingley, 1918).

"I found it a very difficult bird to study, and the task of finding its nest and eggs trying in the extreme to one's patience." Whitlock 1914.

When I first learned I would be coming to Albany to work on the Western Ground Parrot four years ago, I began to do a little research on the bird to increase my knowledge of my future quarry. I found it difficult to obtain many references on this bird. I began to think my researching skills left a lot to be desired. The reality is that not much is known about this bird, which is uncommon these days for most animals.

There are short articles written on the WGP from the early 1900's but they only pop up sporadically and usually go something along the lines of "while walking through the heath I flushed a bird and had a fleeting glimpse of a green parrot which soon disappeared". This fleeting glimpse took 7 weeks in the field to happen to me, and even longer for others.

It wasn't until almost two years of full time research that I had my first good look at a WGP. I was amazed that something so bright and colourful had avoided my attention until then. Need-

less to say the image of seeing this WGP sing, the call that I had only heard until then (albeit hundreds of times) is something I won't forget in a hurry.

These birds have evolved to remain invisible, and they've had plenty of time to perfect the art. The cryptic markings on the feathers enables even the scantiest of vegetation to con-



Being in a positions to capture images such as the one above, of a Western Ground Parrot nicknamed 'Charlie' (photo taken by Brent Barrett) was a highlight of Dave's time on the project.

ceal their bright fluorescent green bodies, and allows them if seen to once again disappear.

While the WGP's amazing camouflage and cryptic nature are both fascinating and intriguing, it is at the same time frustrating. How can you help a bird you can't see, and is extremely hard to find?

Anything we can learn about this species is a godsend. Slowly we are piecing the pieces of the WGP puzzle together from scattered clues-feedsign, feathers, the occasional glimpse, but mostly from listening surveys. But is it coming together too slowly? WGP's are still sadly, and silently, declining.

Why is this the case? Their remaining habitat is now preserved in national parks, efforts are made to minimise large scale destructive fires, and foxes are controlled using 1080 baits. The two remaining parks are expansive and contain a lot of suitable habitat that is not occupied. Are there other pressures we can't see? How long has their decline gone unaware? Some articles from the mid 1900's mention their decline and disappearance from certain areas. It appears the have been silently declining since then.

Perhaps the saddest thing is that if ground parrots did vanish, how many people would actually know or care? They are after all nearly impossible to see, and not many people are in heath at sunrise or sunset to hear their call. But by the same token how many people get to watch a potoroo digging for truffles, or a numbat digging for termites? Does it have to be seen by people to make it worth saving?

Most people that drive past the FRNP or CANP don't stop in and of those that do not many actively search out the WGP. But to know that somewhere in these huge parks the secretive WGP is running around is what's important to most people.

We need to continue to try to improve the status of this beautiful species because to let it drop to the next status is to let it go extinct.

DAVE CHEMELLO

Western Ground Parrot Project welcomes new technical officer

Hello everyone. As David Chermello did such a great job as Technical Officer of the Western Ground Parrot Project I felt the need to announce myself to the world of Pezoporos enthusiasts and hence move out of his illustrious shadow. He certainly has big shoes to fill and anyone who knows me already will know I can only hope to fill them metaphorically. I would also like to thank Allan Burbidge and Sarah Comer for giving me the opportunity to work on such an exciting (read also as "extremely challenging") project.

I do feel I am ably qualified for the job as I am one of the lucky few who have actually seen a WGP. I just hope this is a good omen for the coming season. And even at this early stage I won't apologise for looking for omens. Omen searching maybe an unscientific approach but I'll take all the help I can get. (I know how these birds operate!).

My credentials for this position include completing a 4 year honours degree in Rural Resource Management at Plymouth University in England



(still not sure what a degree in rural resource management actually qualifies me to do). I then went on to work as a ranger on an island nature reserve; Flat Holm in the Bristol Channel. The island is only 500 metres in diameter with a population of three (good grounding for working in isolated areas such as ground parrot habitat). My main duties were conducting tours of the seabird colony, habitat management and goat herding.

I then moved away from nature conservation and into "the nest of vipers" that is education. I started

as an outdoor instructor teaching young people activities such as rock climbing and abseiling. After 3 years I went back to university (Southampton) and qualified as a high school teacher. I then took a job as an environmental tutor at a field study centre leading inner city kids on trips within the beautiful Dorset countryside. For many of these kids it was an experience of a lifetime. Some had never seen whole, live cows before, only parts of the animal such as a Big Mac or a Double Whopper.

Somewhere in the middle of this 7 year post I took a year's sabbatical and traveled Down Under among other places. I loved the friendly, laid back life and the taste of Timtams. When I returned to England my mum said that she could see me moving permanently to Australia one day.

Jeff Pinder

Eds note: Jeff's experiences as a volunteer on the ground parrot project led to him applying, successfully for the position of technical officer. We wish him good luck in the challenges of his new job!

EXPERIMENTAL CAT CONTROL—FRNP

The partnership with South Coast NRM Inc. has resulted in some of the more innovative ideas for threat abatement actually funded, and DEC were lucky enough to get funding to set up an experimental cat control project in key Western Ground Parrot breeding areas in the Fitzgerald River National Park.

One of the first tasks that needs to be completed prior to any actual cat baiting is identifying the risks to non-target (native)

fauna from consuming the baits. This is done by inserting a rhodamine dye marker into the bait, then taking whiskers from all animals captured in monitoring programs where the special (non-toxic) baits have been laid. The first stage of non-target baiting found that significant numbers of Bush Rats and Western Brushtail Possums consumed the baits, which had the dye marker injected. The second trial will be completed in autumn 2008, and in this trial the

dye will be contained in a capsule (similar to how we would then insert the poison).

Once this has been completed and we can satisfy requirement to minimise the impact of cat baiting on any native fauna we can hopefully continue with experimental baiting of cats around those very critical ground parrot breeding areas in the FRNP. A great step forward for ground parrot conservation!

Stay tuned for future updates...

Walpole Translocation Contd from Page 1

The last time we picked up a signal from Bravo's transmitter was a month after release - he had settled in an area about 2km away from the release site.

When we visited them on 31st January, Bravo was not heard but Whiskey and Delta were singing away happily together. Hopefully Whiskey and Delta will continue to sing and Bravo will be heard again as well.

This project could not have happened without the support of the Warren Region DEC, in particular, the staff who made the time to come over to Two Peoples Bay to assist with netline preparation and captures (Chery Ehlers, Carol Rodd, Jason Benson, Marnie Swinburn, Carol Ebbet, Jason Fletcher and Mark Barley). The effort that has also gone into fox baiting and cat trapping at the release site is also greatly appreciated. Thanks also to volunteers Saul Cowen and Carolin von Prondzinsky and other staff who helped out along the way.

ABBY BERRYMAN

Fitzgerald River National Park Wildfires

In last year's newsletter we had a postscript about the devastating wildfire which burnt through the scrub-bird translocation sites in the Porongurup National Park in February 2007 (see page 6.) January 2008 saw yet more wildfires threatening bird habitat, when a series of lightning storms moved through the Fitzgerald River National Park. The first smoke was reported on the 8th of January, and by the following day some six separate fires had been reported from the west to the east of the Park. While all of these presented challenges for managers, several were of great concern for populations of threatened species in the Park, especially Western Ground Parrots. While at least one fire appeared to self extinguish when it burnt into a low fuel zone, the largest was burning in a north-easterly direction towards Drummond Track and the core WGP breeding habitat that has been the subject of research in the past few years. Various strategies were put into place, including the establishment of an 'Environmental Team' (which amongst others included Dave Chemello, Sarah Comer and Alan Danks) within the fire management team, and upgrading of breaks that could be used to

contain the fire to the west of the Bell Track phytophthora infestation and Drummond Track WGP population. At the same time another wildfire on Mid Mt Barren was also creating concerns for the Wilderness Ground Parrot population, but this wildfire was contained to the cell it started in. The efforts and success of the fire fighting crews and incident management team in minimising the impact of these wildfires on the key remaining populations of the Western Ground Parrot were a great outcome.



The sign above is an example of the signs erected near sensitive areas during the wildfires—these were essential to ensure habitat disturbance was minimised and crews were aware of important areas for protection.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This newsletter was prepared jointly by the Department of Environment and Conservation and volunteers. We would also like to thank DEC, 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 2007 over 1500 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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