

Western Ground Parrot Project – 2008 Review

2008 brought mixed results for the Western Ground Parrot Project. The first half of the year focused on visiting each of the known WGP populations to find out how many birds remain. In August and September we switched to concentrate on radio-tracking in an attempt to find out more about WGP breeding biology (see Jeff's story on page 7 for more on the radio-tracking).

Population monitoring results

WGP's are now only found in Cape Arid and Fitzgerald River National Parks. Our population monitoring in 2008 revealed that there are probably fewer than 140 individuals remaining. Particularly in the Fitz, things are looking very grim. Over the past few years numbers have declined dramatically and last year we estimated that there were fewer than 16 WGP's remaining at just two sites.

In addition to this, the birds at Short Rd seem to have vanished. A survey carried out here in June 2007 found that there were still 3 or 4 WGP's in the area but in June 2008 no WGP calls were heard at this site. Whether these birds have moved or something happened to them remains a mystery.

The reasons for the decline at the other two sites in the Fitz

aren't entirely clear as neither site has been affected by fire in recent years. The most likely culprit appears to be predation, particularly by feral cats. When a population reaches such low levels, even the loss of one or two birds will have a major impact.

At Cape Arid, the situation is looking more positive. The Poison Creek area was last surveyed in 2007 and the number of WGP's present was estimated to be between 20-40 individuals. Our 2008 survey revealed a similar number of birds. The Pasley/Telegraph population on the other hand had not been properly surveyed since 2005. While cautiously optimistic about the trip we had planned for April, we expected to find only 30-40 birds in the Pasley area. What we found exceeded all expectations. In just one evening, with 6 listeners spaced out over a 400m x 800m grid, we heard between 20 to 40 birds. Potentially, there may be 100 or more WGP's within the Pasley subpopulation.

Pasley fire

Unfortunately some of the area we had surveyed at Pasley was burnt in May by a prescribed burn that escaped due to an unexpected wind change. WGP's require areas of habitat that have not been burnt for many years and the best way of protecting



this habitat is to use fire to create strategic buffers. While there is always the chance of prescribed burns escaping, to not burn at all means that we could lose the entire Cape Arid population in a single wildfire.

While in Cape Arid for the Poison Creek survey in May we also visited Pasley to resurvey around the edges of the burnt area. Only a small proportion of the potential habitat was burnt and the fire was slow-moving, giving the WGP's a chance to escape it. Although very few ground parrot calls were heard, the survey was just a few days after the fire and the disturbance may have

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FRIENDS OF THE WESTERN GROUND PARROT ASSOCIATION

If you would like to join the Friends of the Western Ground Parrot Association and receive regular updates on activities associated with this beautiful, cryptic bird, please email:

wgparrot@exetel.com.au

Further information is available at their website:

www.western-ground-parrot.org.au

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caused the WGP's to temporarily stop calling. Alternatively, they may have moved well away from the burnt area into places as yet not surveyed.

A follow-up survey was conducted in July and the results were more encouraging. The number of calls heard along the edges of the burnt area had increased and we also heard good numbers of calls to the west and north, representing up to 30 individuals. However, these areas had not been surveyed since 2005 so it is impossible to know whether these birds were refugees from the fire or already resident in the area.

The area of potential habitat at Cape Arid is large and we have not had the time or the people to survey it thoroughly. It is possible that there are more WGP's there than we know about.

For now, Cape Arid seems to be the stronghold of the Western Ground Parrot, however one severe wildfire could potentially result in the loss of more than

80% of the population. It is hoped that over the next few years prescribed burns can be implemented to reduce the risk of wildfires burning large areas of WGP habitat at Cape Arid.

The year ahead

In 2009 we will again monitor each of the WGP populations to see how numbers are going. We will continue to work with fire management staff to plan effective fire management strategies to protect valuable WGP habitat. Trials of cat baits are planned for April - if successful and dependent on funding, landscape-scale cat baiting will be undertaken in the Fitz and Cape Arid.

A captive management trial is also proposed, dependent on funding. The WGP has never been kept in captivity so it is vital that we take a small number of birds into captivity soon to refine techniques for keeping them to give a full-scale captive breeding program the greatest chance of success when or if its needed.

Autonomous Recording Units (ARUs)

During 2009, we will be trialing the use of ARUs to determine their suitability to survey sites for the presence of Western Ground Parrots. These units will be able to be left in place for longer periods to provide long-term monitoring of WGP populations. This project has been made achievable due to generous support from Exetel Pty Ltd.

Volunteer opportunities

There is a field-trip planned for late-August 2009 to Cape Arid to survey for the Western Ground Parrot. However, surveys past this date have not been scheduled due to funding uncertainties.

Western Ground Parrots need help. Please throw your support behind them by joining the Friends of the Western Ground Parrot Association and add your support for this Critically Endangered species.

Abby Berryman

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. Exetel Pty Ltd has provided much-needed funds to trial autonomous recording units to assist with surveys of Western Ground Parrots during 2009.

In addition we would like to acknowledge the phenomenal support of volunteers on the recovery programs for the south coast threatened birds. In 2008 over 1500 hours of volunteer time was spent assisting with surveys for Western Ground Parrots, Nolsy Scrub-birds, 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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