

Cocky Notes

Issue 23: Winter 2016

THE GREATEST GREAT COCKY COUNT YET!

The 2016 Great Cocky Count, held on Sunday 3rd April, was a great success as always. Workshops were held at 15 locations between Albany and Perth with an attendance of around 400 people. This year more focus was given to regional areas with five workshops in regional centres to encourage more data of the lesser-studied Baudin's and Forest Red-tailed Black-Cockatoos (FRTs).

On the big day the sun was shining, and social media was abuzz with expectation. Over 700 registered volunteers and their helpers were allocated to 426 sites. In the end 398 sites were surveyed, a big increase on the previous high of 293. 150 sites were occupied (80 white tails only, 46 FRTs only, 24 with both) and 248 were unoccupied. 43 new sites were confirmed this year with roosting birds. This reflects the inclusion of newly-reported roost sites in regional and metropolitan areas by local residents (35 new sites), and the integration of information on radio-tracked birds. Sam Rycken, from the Black-Cockatoo Conservation Project at Murdoch University (see page 2), has been monitoring movements of BCs with radio transmitters and he passed on details of where the birds roosted. This information gave us 22 new sites, of which 8 were occupied on the count night. Ongoing tracking work will continue to provide us with more sites for future counts.

A grand total of 16,755 white-tailed BCs were counted in 2016. There were 10,919 on the coastal plain, 2,496 in the hills and 3,340 in the regions. These numbers are markedly up compared to previous years (totals average 8,700 between 2010 and 2015) except for the regional count which was slightly down. The count was boosted this year with an incredible 4,987 Carnaby's count at a roost in the pine plantation east of Yanchep (see separate article). We believe that this demonstrates the



Enthusiastic Great Cocky Counters: Leah Knapp, Jo Garvey, Francis Smit, Adam Peck, Cockatoo Bill, and Simon Cherriman. Photo: Landcare SJ

importance of the remaining pine plantations as a food and roosting resource. As more clearing and bush fires reduce the habitat available to birds the value of what is left increases. Unfortunately this area is amongst that targeted for clearing under the state government's draft Green Growth Plan and the fight is on to save Carnaby's from a 'decade of famine' (see separate article).

A total of 2,004 red-tails were counted this year, a big jump from 896 in 2014 and 451 in 2015, thanks to more regional counts and the bird's increasing use of the coastal plain. Thanks again to the wonderful efforts of our GCC volunteers and supporters, we couldn't do it without you!

The official report is still being put together, and will be released later in the year. We always welcome reports of new black-cockatoo roost sites to include in next year's count. Details can be sent to adam.peck@birdlife.org.au, or call (08) 9287 2251.

Adam Peck,
Carnaby's Black-Cockatoo Project Coordinator

RESEARCH OVERVIEW: THE BLACK-COCKATOO CONSERVATION PROJECT AT MURDOCH UNIVERSITY

Since 2015, Murdoch University has been using innovative tracking technology to identify movement patterns, habitat use, and threatening processes of all three southwest black-cockatoo species, the first large-scale movement ecology study of its kind. Led by Associate Professor Kris Warren and Dr Jill Shephard from Murdoch University's School of Veterinary and Life Sciences, the group collaborates with Newmont Boddington Gold, South32, Department of Parks and Wildlife (DPaW), Perth Zoo, The University of Amsterdam, WWF and Kaarakin Black Cockatoo Conservation Centre, as well as BirdLife Australia.



A tagged male Carnaby's Black-Cockatoo, part of the flock at Myrup, Esperance. Photo: Sam Rycken

The group fits wild black-cockatoos with both satellite and GPS tracking devices while the birds are in the care of industry partners DPaW, Perth Zoo and Kaarakin Black Cockatoo Conservation Centre, which rehabilitate and release over 200 injured wild black-cockatoos annually. Following their release into wild flocks, PhD students Sam Rycken and Karen Riley track the birds to obtain behavioural, movement and ecological data at both fine- and landscape-level scales.

This information will feed directly into the Recovery Plans for these birds - the documents that outline the strategies for black-cockatoo conservation. Prior to this project there were major information gaps, information that required large-scale tracking of wild flocks. The Murdoch University research team has

spent the past several years trialling and developing the technologies and approaches to enable such large-scale tracking to occur. This present project builds on the development of transmitter attachment protocols by this research team to enable cockatoo flocks to be tracked for the first time across large temporal and spatial scales.

Excitingly, the research team is now collecting a large suite of hitherto unknown ecological information on these three threatened species, including landscape- and fine-scale flock movements and habitat use; health and demographic data; and identification of critical breeding, foraging and roosting habitats and sites. Together this information will allow DPaW and other organisations to make informed decisions for the management, recovery and long-term sustainability of these three iconic and charismatic species.

This information is already being put to use - as mentioned on the cover story - identifying previously unknown roost sites to be monitored in the Great Cocky Count. In the future, we can learn whether urban landscapes are changing the ways Red-tails behave. Tracking of Baudin's flocks can identify critical habitat in this poorly-understood species, as well as pinpoint locations where illegal shooting is still occurring. Tracking of Carnaby's flocks allows protection of birds in both breeding and non-breeding habitat.

To find out more about the project, visit Murdoch.edu.au/ConservationMedicine.

Associate Professor Kris Warren

Did you know?

Around 90% of the black-cockatoos admitted to wildlife hospitals have been injured in vehicle collisions. While acrobatic in the air, cockatoos are clumsy on the ground. While they often gather on roadsides, they struggle to avoid hazards during take-off.

If you know of local black spots, encourage your local council to install warning signs for motorists, and slow down whenever you see birds on or near the ground. If you see roadside grain spillage attracting cockatoos, notify the haulage company directly, asking them to ensure loads are securely covered.



ARTIFICIAL HOLLOW

In June 2016 Rick Dawson of DPaW led a group made up of Palm Beach WA Rotary Club volunteers and Adam Peck from BirdLife to install artificial nest hollows in Carnaby's breeding habitat in the Lake King area. The gun installation team took 20 minutes per install with the aid of a cherry picker and pulley system (each hollow is 1.2m high, 40cm wide and weighs up to 25 kilos). They installed 61 'Cockatubes' in Salmon Gum woodland at three properties: 30 at the Kennedy's property near Lake Magenta; 10 just down the road at the Delandgraft's property and 21 at the Price's property east of Lake King (the most easterly known Carnaby's breeding site on private property).

These land owners have all signed Voluntary Management Agreements with BirdLife, a 'handshake' agreement in which they commit to protecting Black-Cockatoo habitat in return for financial assistance to do fencing, revegetation and artificial hollow installation (funded by Perth NRM). Hollows are always installed in known breeding areas since the Cockatoos will normally only use them in these areas. Research has shown that artificial hollows are used preferentially to natural hollows and are more likely to produce fledglings than natural ones. It is thought that this is due to artificial hollows being larger (in depth and diameter) and less prone to damage (eg holes forming on the sides or the bottom collapsing). The larger dimensions also allow two chicks to be raised, which is quite rare in natural hollows. The hollows will be surveyed annually in order to assess their success.

Adam Peck



Ross Adam, Steve Clarkson, Lynne Kennedy, Rick Dawson, Peter Kennedy, Des Mant, Adam Peck and Alan Guthrie in the sunny (but cold!) Lake Magenta area. Photo: Rick Dawson.

HAD A CHANGE OF ROOST?

If your home or email address changes, or if you don't want to receive Cocky Notes in the future, please let us know at wa@birdlife.org.au.

A WINDOW INTO THE PAST

Fifty years ago, flocks of several thousand Carnaby's weren't unusual sights – they were described as 'blackening the sky' as they passed overhead. Today we consider a flock of a hundred birds to be significant. However Great Cocky Count volunteers Laura Parker and John Clarke had a window into the past in this year's GCC – recording a staggering 4897 Carnaby's roosting at a single site in the Pinjar pine plantation. From start to finish it took over two hours for the flock to fly past their observation point.



John Clarke in the BirdLife Office, with his record count sheet, and Laura Parker at the mega roost in Pinjar. Photos: Adam Peck



A small part of the mega-roost flock – like a murmuration of starlings, only bigger and louder. Photo: Tegan Douglas

Likely displaced from another roost site due to fire, this highlights the crucial importance of the pines as an emergency resource – allowing birds to survive when fire and drought claims other feeding and roost sites. Video of part of the flock crossing Indian Ocean Dve in Yanchep can be seen at: <https://twitter.com/blackcockatoos/status/717954903864250371>

Tegan Douglas

CARNABY'S AND THE GREEN GROWTH PLAN

Many will be aware that late last year the WA state government released its draft 'Green Growth Plan' - a strategy to map how Perth would grow as it approaches a population of 3.5 million people. In theory a strategic approach to urban development is a good thing - infrastructure can be planned for and placed where needed, e.g. public transport hubs convenient to growing urban areas. Forward planning is crucial in identifying critical habitat for threatened species (such as Carnaby's) to allow upfront protection, before they are smothered and fragmented by urban sprawl.



Female Carnaby's Black-Cockatoo, at home in the suburbs.
Photo: Georgina Steytler

BirdLife WA was optimistic the draft would contain some firm commitments to secure the future of Perth's Carnaby's and our other urban-dwelling native birds. But that was hardly the case. Instead the Plan proposed an increase in clearing of key Carnaby's habitat, despite evidence that areas such as the Gnangara pines are critical to the survival of the Perth population. Proposed actions to minimise these effects were poorly planned, tokenistic, and vague. Proposals for replanting small area of pines were timed so poorly it would be years between when the last pine was cleared in Gnangara and when these 'replacement' pines would start producing food for Carnaby's - a decade of famine for a threatened species.

The end result of the Green Growth Plan would see a 50% reduction in the Perth and Peel Carnaby's population. This is not acceptable, and is both negligently inconsistent with the conservation actions outlined in the Carnaby's Recovery Plan, and negates the years of hard work being done by communities throughout the southwest.



Residents from throughout Perth flock to save Carnaby's.
Photo: Tegan Douglas

Community support for Carnaby's

In addition to writing our own detailed submission to the government outlining recommended amendments to the Plan, we asked the community to get involved. Residents from throughout the Perth and Peel area flocked to an emergency town hall meeting, to strategise how grass-roots and global community action can be used to raise awareness and save a species. The positive attitudes and community spirit that were shown on this evening demonstrated that Perth people are determined to stand up for this charismatic West Australian.

The way forward

Although the deadline for submissions to the draft plan has passed, BirdLife WA continues to work with both state and federal governments to ensure that the future of Perth is indeed green (and black and white). There are still opportunities to participate. One of the vital ways is by keeping Carnaby's (and bird conservation) a discussion topic with communities and elected officials. Visit www.birdsyoulove.org for more details. We thank all those people who made submissions about the draft plan, who attended the town hall meeting, and who continue to be community advocates for Carnaby's.

Tegan Douglas & Adam Peck

KEEP UP WITH THE FLOCK!

The Southwest Black-Cockatoo Recovery Program is on social media! Keep up to date with all the latest happenings:



Southwest Black-Cockatoo Recovery Program



@blackcockatoos

BREEDING SEASON APPROACHES

Spring approaches. Breeding pairs of Carnaby's start leaving their summer coastal hangouts, heading inland towards their eucalypt woodland breeding grounds. The weather warms. Baudin's depart their wintering feeding areas in the Perth hills and return to the southern forests. Even the more sedentary Forest Red-tailed Black-Cockatoo, which can breed year round, takes advantage of favourable conditions, and has a peak of breeding activity in spring.

Why is this important?

Cockatoos nest in tree hollows, but hollows suitable for cockatoos take well over 100 years to form. This makes hollow-bearing trees one of the most valuable parts of the cockatoo landscape. Pairs will return to these same areas year after year. Knowing where nests are allows us to work with land owners to better protect them, to bolster good breeding areas by installing artificial hollows, as well as ensure there are suitable nearby food resources to allow cockatoos to raise healthy chicks.

How do I know if black-cockatoos are breeding?

Black-cockatoos mate for life and strengthen bonds with their partner year-round – pairs often preen each other, display and call. So, how can you pick breeding behaviour from general black-cockatoo canoodling?



Male Baudin's fanning his tail and displaying to his mate.
Photo: Sue Chick

For all three black-cockatoo species, it is the female that sits on the eggs. This means during the breeding season lone males and flocks of mostly male cockatoos are more likely to be seen, as they are out searching for food coming back to the hollow regularly to feed the female, and later the chick. While pairs (particularly red-tails) will *investigate*

hollows year-round, in the breeding season males can be seen returning to nest hollows and feeding the female as she emerges from the hollow.



A female Carnaby's emerging from a hollow. The fresh nibble marks around the hollow entrance are another sign that cockatoos are using the hollow for breeding. Photo: Keith Lightbody

How can I help?

Keep your eyes peeled over the coming months. If you spot flocks of mostly male birds foraging, or lone male birds at rest or on the move, there are likely black-cockatoos breeding nearby (Info on black-cockatoo identification is available at <http://www.birdlife.org.au/projects/southwest-black-cockatoo-recovery/identify-your-black-cockatoo>). If you spy pairs of cockatoos repeatedly entering and exiting hollows, particularly in the afternoons, or spot males feeding females close to likely nest trees, please let us know. Record as many details (location – GPS if possible, date and time, tree species, cockatoo species, photo). Together with partners at DPaW and the WA Museum, we work to track breeding success of our black-cockatoos, to better understand and conserve them.

Tegan Douglas
Cockies in Crisis Project Coordinator

OPERATION RAINBOW ROOST

Although beautiful to look at, Rainbow Lorikeets are a menace – introduced to southwest WA, they compete with native birds for food, roost sites and nest hollows. Operation Rainbow Roost is a new project to record and track lorikeets, particularly at roost sites. You can help by reporting observations of lorikeets to <http://birdlife.org.au/projects/operation-rainbow-roost>

COCKATOOS IN THE GOLDFIELDS

Earlier this year an unusual observation was reported - a pair of Carnaby's Black-Cockatoos in Kalgoorlie! With photographic evidence there was no denying they were indeed Carnaby's - even though they were over 200km outside their known distribution. Birds never read the field guides, but 'out-of-range' sightings are always of interest. If you spot Carnaby's in the Kalgoorlie area, or see black-cockatoos somewhere else unusual, please let us know! Photos encouraged.

THE COCKY CONSERVATION TEAM

Tegan Douglas, Cockies in Crisis - Forest Black-Cockatoo Project Coordinator

Tegan is based in the Perth office working on the Cockies in Crisis project. This project includes all three threatened black cockatoos within the southwest Forest area, but particularly Baudin's Black-Cockatoo and the Forest Red-tailed Black-Cockatoo. Contact Tegan if you know where these species feed, roost for the night, drink or nest, at tegan.douglas@birdlife.org.au or (08) 9287 2716.

Adam Peck, Carnaby's Black-Cockatoo Project Coordinator

The newest member of the BirdLife flock has been busy coordinating the 2016 Great Cocky Count and will soon be embarking on breeding season surveys. If you would like to volunteer to assist with these projects or if you know where Carnaby's Black-Cockatoos feed, drink, nest or roost for the night please contact carnabys@birdlife.org.au or (08) 9287 2251.

Helen Bryant, WA Program Manager

Helen is the Perth-based manager for BirdLife Australia's WA funded projects, including the cockatoo program. Contact Helen for questions about the program, at helen.bryant@birdlife.org.au or (08) 9287 2204.

STAY TUNED FOR THE NEW DATA PORTAL

In the next few months the new BirdLife data portal will be coming online. All those existing supporters who record and contribute their bird sightings will soon be able to do so directly into the online data portal and accompanying phone app, and keep track of their own sightings and survey work.

This will be an important tool for BirdLife, as many of our conservation projects depend upon citizen science - a network of keen-eyed observers just like you recording and reporting bird observations throughout the country. The web portal, and particularly the app, will make it easier to contribute, letting you record and submit observations as you see them, submitting vital information to ongoing projects such as the Southwest Black-Cockatoo Recovery Program. Once the portal is live we will be running a number of workshops for those interested. In the meantime keep those record forms coming in, and we always welcome new eagle-eyed cocky watchers! Observation forms are available for download at:

<http://www.birdlife.org.au/projects/southwest-black-cockatoo-recovery/publications-and-forms>

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