



THE

MALLEE FOWL

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WESTERN AUSTRALIA

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THREATENED SPECIES
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AUSTRALIA

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Welcome to the first edition of 'The Mallee Fowl', a newsletter working towards the national conservation of Malleefowl. 'The Mallee Fowl' is a national biannual publication which includes state updates, handy hints, diary dates and community stories from across Australia.

At the National Malleefowl Forum in Adelaide in 1995 recommendations made included:

1. Establish and promote survey and research programs to produce better information on the distribution and biology of Malleefowl.
2. Monitor breeding population densities to determine more accurate information on population trends.
3. Continue to improve habitat, competitor and predator management to protect and enhance Malleefowl populations.
4. Enhance communication within and between Malleefowl interest groups and increase the knowledge and understanding of Malleefowl conservation in the wider community.



The participants felt that a national malleefowl newsletter would enhance greater communication between interested community groups, individuals and government bodies.

The first edition has been sent to 500 people across WA, SA, NSW and Vic. This publication will assist

those involved to share experiences, techniques, skills and ideas about malleefowl conservation. Special thanks must go to our contributors, including Joe Benshemesh who contributed the handy hints of this edition, all our state reporters and Chris Bryant who drew the Malleefowl feather designs from feathers used for genetic analysis at the SA Museum. See our next edition for some results on this exciting research.

We look forward to your contributions of articles, state reports, anecdotes and any other ideas you would like to share. The next edition, due out in early December, will concentrate on your community stories. And you can enter our **Malleefowl Competitions**. If you have a suggestion for a suitable name for the newsletter or any photos or drawings of birds, their mounds, survey work, etc. you could win a

Malleefowl T-shirt! Simply send your suggestions and graphics to the Threatened Species Network in South Australia before Friday, November 1, 1996. All entries will have the chance to be published in future editions.

In each edition of 'The Mallee Fowl' we would

like to bring you handy hints from across Australia aimed at conserving malleefowl. If you have any hints that could be shared with others and would make their job easier please send them.

If you know of someone who would like to receive 'The Mallee Fowl' please let us know. For further information contact the South Australian Threatened Species Network, Vicki-Jo Russell on (08) 8223 5155.

By HINE BRYANT, Threatened Species Network (SA)

HANDY HINTS

- A "hip-chain" or "belt-chain" is a device that allows one person to measure and install a malleefowl monitoring grid. The device uses a spool of cotton thread that passes over a counter to measure distance with an accuracy of about, and is available by mail order from Prospectors supplies, Sydney (02 838 7699).
- **Roadside reflectors** make excellent gridline markers being conspicuous and UV resistant. Coordinates (gridline, distance from baseline) can be permanently written on them with a soldering iron.
- **Marking grids** in the conventional Cartesian format (X running to the right, and Y running up the page) makes it easier to calculate the coordinates of nests, plot them, and the fastest way from nest to nest. Marking the X axis in kilometres, and the Y axis in metres reduces the chances of mixing these up.

SOUTH AUSTRALIAN UPDATE...

A South Australian Malleefowl steering group has now been established to coordinate malleefowl monitoring, research and community education in this State.

Last year systematic malleefowl surveys were carried out at existing grids. **It appears that Malleefowl populations in these surveyed areas are relatively stable with a possible increase in activity in fox baited areas.** These surveys not only provide valuable information on Malleefowl habits and assist in population monitoring but also act as a catalyst for community involvement in Mallee conservation. Surveys have been aided by numerous individuals and community groups who continue to provide invaluable voluntary support.

These groups include: Cooltong/Pooginook grid (Riverland Parks Friends group); Ferries McDonald grid (Ferries McDonald and Monarto friends group, Murray Bridge High School, ATCV); Mt Scott grid (Butchers Gap friends group); Calperum, Chowilla grids (Renmark Lions Club); Danggali grid (Retired Apex members); Bakara / Short grids (4WD Adventurers Club) and Martins grid (Landcare group)

Survey grids have been established in the Cleve Hills (Gales property) and improved in Innes National Park (assisted by the Innes friends group and Pt Pearce aboriginal community). These and existing grids will be surveyed later this year. Anyone interested in being involved can call their local coordinator (see diary dates) or contact Stuart Pillman on 08 8204 8875.

Apart from providing general information on local Malleefowl populations, grids have also been installed for particular research purposes. For instance, Calperum and Chowilla grids (Bookmark Biosphere Reserve) will help assess the impacts of sheep grazing on malleefowl whilst grids at Bakara Conservation Park and nearby on Henry Short's property will assist in measuring malleefowl recovery and the effectiveness of the long standing community-coordinated fox control program.

Recently data loggers were used at Cooltong to obtain profiles of nest opening behaviour and it is hoped that this information will assist in the mapping of active mounds using air-borne infra red sensors.

Malleefowl located in Mulga woodland in the Anangu-Pitjantjatjara lands (north west SA) have continued to be monitored with the assistance and support of the local communities and although at this stage numbers appear low there are indications that breeding is occurring. Consideration is being given to installing additional grids in the western Murray Mallee, far west coast and the central region (Murray Bridge) in 1997.

By **STUART PILLMAN**, DENR (SA)

VICTORIAN UPDATE...

During the 1995/6 breeding season we monitored about 600 nests in 18 grids in NW Victoria and permanently marked these grids with roadside reflectors. We found that Malleefowl breeding densities had increased from the drought last year, but were generally still about 10 to 15% below those recorded before the drought. We also found a positive correlation between the abundance of fallen lerp (the carbohydrate tests of *Glycaspis psyllids*) at sites and how well Malleefowl populations had recovered from the drought. The Victorian government understands the importance of the monitoring and we expect the program to continue next year.

A database has been developed to store monitoring data, facilitate monitoring and provide immediate access to this important data. Each nest is described in about 50 fields detailing its location and features. A prototype is currently in use, and features automatic summary reports and plotting and will be reported on in the next edition of 'The Mallee Fowl'.

Soon we will be producing a monitoring manual for use in the field. While it will be designed primarily for use in Victoria, we will consult representatives from other states to arrive at a standard set of definitions and procedures for monitoring Malleefowl. **This will mean data collected across Australia will be comparable, and others can use the manual and database to facilitate their monitoring efforts.**

We are currently reviewing the monitoring data collected in Victoria. While worrying declines are evident over the past few years at some sites, possibly related to the 1994/5 drought, long-term trends at two sites suggest similar densities exist now as 25 years ago when breeding densities were first measured.

An intensive monitoring program has been started to gauge the indirect effect of the Rabbit Calici-virus Disease (RCD) on Malleefowl. We expect that rabbit populations will collapse due to RCD, resulting in lots of hungry foxes and increased predation on Malleefowl adults, chicks and eggs. To measure the effects on Malleefowl, we have established some new grids near agricultural land where foxes are common but not rabbits. At some sites fox numbers will also be reduced by intensive baiting. We will monitor all nests within these sites three or four times a year, and also measure breeding success at working nests.

By **JOE BENSHEMESH**, Victoria

WEST AUSTRALIAN UPDATE...

The Malleefowl Preservation Group Inc. (MPG) continues to be very active around Ongerup in maintaining and expanding public interest in Malleefowl conservation. Over 30 schools have been visited and given talks on Malleefowl conservation and landcare in the Wheatbelt. Other initiatives by the MPG include 'The Marvellous Malleefowl', a brochure written by the MPG and published by the Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM). This provides an attractive introduction to Malleefowl conservation.

MPG, with \$31 000 from the Gordon Reid Foundation, has just fenced 21 km of vegetated corridors, linking known Malleefowl populations across ten farms. Fox baiting by local farmers, and by CALM on neighbouring reserves, continues in the Ongerup area. MPG has gained a State Government grant for a school kit on Malleefowl and work will begin shortly.

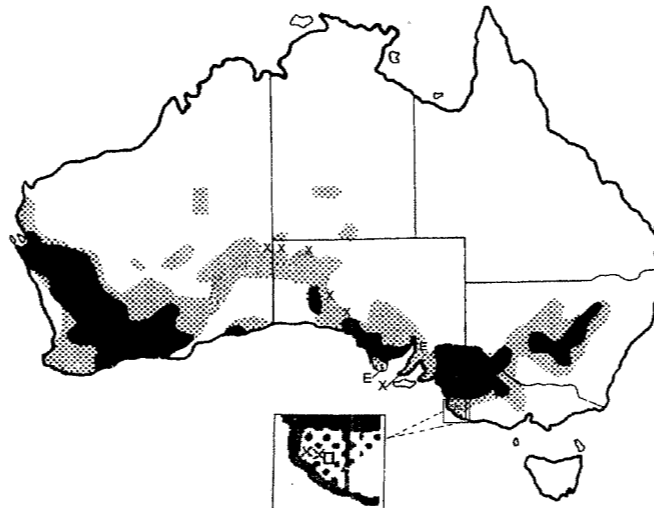
A *Kitless Kat Clinic*, approved by the Western Australian Veterinarians Board, was funded by donations and assisted by many volunteers, to provide a day of free sterilisation for cats in the Ongerup district. The response was overwhelming with 74 candidate cats, not all of which could be treated in the time available.

A newer Malleefowl Preservation Group based at Wubin/Dalwallinu in the north-eastern wheatbelt is coordinating a fox baiting project in late August 1996. The project involves 100 farmers baiting over 350,000 continuous hectares, at their own cost. This is part of the Western Shield project, a CALM initiative

that has expanded to become the world's largest campaign against introduced predators. For more information contact Caris Bailey, Project Officer at CALM (09) 442 0300 and see the diary dates for fox baiting times.

The Wubin/Dalwallinu group hosted members from the Royal Australasian Ornithological Union (RAOU) earlier in August in a concerted attempt to find as many active Malleefowl mounds as possible.

CALM is coordinating the Statewide collection of Malleefowl material including feathers and dead specimens, for genetic analysis by the South Australian Museum. CALM is also conducting another baiting program on over five million hectares of land under the Western Shield project. As a part of this, Project Eden, at Shark Bay, will, in cooperation with the local community, re-establish Malleefowl populations on Point Peron, which is predator free.



Distribution of the malleefowl: past and present (■ = present distribution; ▨ = prior distribution, Source: Priddel 1989)
X = Post 1984 sightings E = Recent local extinctions □ = Probable local extinction

The WA Malleefowl Recovery Group has a new convenor, the Threatened Species Network's WA Coordinator, Denise True. Thanks from the Group to the previous WA Coordinator, Jean-Paul Orsini, who has been deeply involved in Malleefowl conservation in WA for many years. **The Group is now concentrating on assisting local communities to establish malleefowl preservation groups in at least five widely spaced parts of the Wheatbelt.** Many other valuable projects by member groups are continuing.

By **JOHN BLYTH**, WA CALM

NEW SOUTH WALES UPDATE...

The New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) has been researching aspects of malleefowl ecology throughout the western region of the state. One crucial study has been determining the role of the fox in the decline of malleefowl numbers.

We have released malleefowl fitted with miniature radio transmitters into Yathong Nature Reserve, in central NSW about 160 km south of Cobar. Many of these birds were killed by foxes within weeks of release: few survived longer than a month. We expected that foxes were a major reason for the decline in malleefowl numbers but were surprised at how devastating fox predation was. **In NSW the fox is preventing most malleefowl young from reaching maturity.**

We baited a large section of the reserve monthly, poisoning about 500 foxes in five months, but large numbers of foxes were still in the mallee. We commenced regular baiting of the whole reserve (over 100,000 ha) but only found this to increase the life spans of the released birds to months instead of days. **Foxes flowed into the reserve almost as fast as we were killing them.** To extend the baited area in 1992 the local NPWS office approached the reserve's neighbours about partaking in a broad-scale and regular baiting program to benefit wildlife on the reserve and livestock on the properties. That baiting programme has gone from strength to strength. In four baiting operations since October 1995 16,000 baits were issued to properties adjoining Yathong Nature Reserve (monthly baiting still takes place within the reserve). **Now released birds survive for much longer; and some have paired with wild malleefowl.**

Since the NPWS and adjoining landholders are hammering foxes so hard in the district, swinging the tide in the favour of this unique Australian bird, we feel more at ease about releasing captive-bred malleefowl into the reserve. Although the security of malleefowl in this state is still much in the dark we can now see light at the end of the tunnel.

By **ROBERT WHEELER**, NSW (NPWS)

DIARY DATES

WESTERN AUSTRALIA

The Malleefowl Preservation Group Inc. holds its meetings the last Wednesday of each month in the Ongerup Roadhouse (7:30pm in winter and 8pm in summer), for further information and event details contact the group on (098) 28 2007.

- 29-30 August **Grid work** - Ongerup district. Volunteers needed.
- 31 August **Social Day** - Fitzgerald River National Park Association (bushwalk, picnic, barbecue). All welcome.
- 14-18 October **Grid work** - Ongerup district (beautiful wildflower season!). Volunteers needed.
- 23-24 October **Fox Baiting** - Ongerup district (beautiful wildflower season!). Volunteers needed.
- 3-4 November **Population Survey** - Nugadong Reserve, Dalwallinu (half an hour's drive from farm accommodation). Compass and whistle required. Contact: Rod Smith (02) 397 5319 or (02) 293 2777

NEW SOUTH WALES

- 20-22 September **Population Survey** - Tarawi (80 km north of Renmark, adjacent to Gandara Conservation Park). Volunteers welcome. Contact: Ray Dayman (050) 231 278
- 23-25 August **Population Survey** - Tarawi (80 km north of Renmark, adjacent to Gandara Conservation Park). Volunteers welcome. Contact: Ray Dayman (050) 231 278
- Late November **Population Survey** - West Wyalong (date to be finalised). Contact: Robert Wheeler (02) 95 856 553

SOUTH AUSTRALIA

- 12-13 October **Population Survey** - Innes CP
Contact: Bruce Bone (088) 854 4040
- 12-13 October **Population Survey** - Calperum/Chowilla district. Contact: Andy McQuie (086) 883 111
- 26-27 October **Population Survey** - Bakara district.
Contact: Stephanie Williams (085) 952 176 or Heidi Fielke (085) 763 345
- 26-27 October **Population Survey** - Cooltong district. Contact: Joe Stelmann (085) 952 179
- End October **Population Survey** - Martin's property. Contact: Di Green (08) or Jo Tilley (086) 883 111
- End October **Population Survey** - Danggali district. Contact: Joe Stelmann (085) 952 179
- Early November **Population Survey** - Cleve district.
Contact: Di Green or Jo Tilley (086) 883 111
- 2-3 November **Population Survey** - Henry Shorts HA. Contact: Stephanie Williams (085) 952 176 or Heidi Fielke (085) 763 345
- End November **Population Survey** - Ferries McDonald CP. Contact Robin Storr or Stuart Pillman (08) 204 8888

VICTORIA

- Oct - December **Population surveys** - throughout Victoria. Contact Joe Benshemesh (03) 9450 8600

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