

Nullarbor Quail-thrush

Cinlosoma alisteri



The Nullarbor Quail-thrush is restricted to the Nullarbor Plain in South Australia and Western Australia. Remoteness of the Nullarbor Plain and shyness of the species meant that the Nullarbor Quail-thrush was unknown until 1910, and there have been relatively few observations since then. These factors, and concern that the species may be declining, led to the recent study by Lynn Pedler and myself. The study was supported by funds from World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), the SA Wildlife Conservation Fund and CALM. The aim of our study was to clarify the status of the bird and identify the major management issues.

The Nullarbor Quail-thrush feeds and nests on the ground. The bird is about 18 cm long (bill tip to tail tip) and well camouflaged, with the upper surface being a rich reddish-cinnamon that blends in with the soil and lichen colours. The male has a black band across the chest. The bird is shy and difficult to see, and usually hides under or behind bushes when people are around. They have even been reported as hiding down rabbit burrows! Quail-thrush rarely fly, but occasionally they are seen flying up from the roadside when flushed by a moving vehicle. On such occasions they usually fly less than 50 metres low over the bluebushes before settling back on the ground. When flying away, the reasonably long tail with a pale tip is usually fairly obvious.

We were able to find previous records of Nullarbor Quail-thrush from only 79 sites across the Nullarbor Plain. During our field work in 1991 and 1992, 88 Nullarbor Quail-thrush were recorded at 55 sites. Some of these sites were made known to us by people on the Nullarbor, including Dougal McQuie and Peter and Barbara Brown. A further 65 sites were searched unsuccessfully. We concluded that the Nullarbor Quail-thrush still occurs throughout the area from which historical records are known, with the possible exception of the extreme western end of its range. The Nullarbor Quail-thrush was first found at Waddalynia, near Rawlinna homestead, and it is worth noting that it appears to be more common here, on one of the older pastoral properties on the Nullarbor, than in some other locations.

Looking at the Nullarbor as a whole, it is difficult to make firm conclusions concerning its status because the bird is so hard to find, but overall it appears to be rare, and probably declining.

We found that preferred habitat is in healthy stands of bluebush (*Maireana sedifolia*) at a density greater than about 100 plants per hectare, and with little or no Ward's weed (*Carrichtera annua*). The future of the Nullarbor Quail-thrush is therefore tied to the future of healthy stands of bluebush.

The area, and in some cases density, of bluebush stands on the Nullarbor Plain appears to have declined, apparently through fires and possibly grazing, especially by the introduced rabbit. The key to maintaining these stands in the long term is through co-operative efforts to assist the work already being done by local pastoralists.

An important step is to extend the commendable efforts of the local LCDC in rabbit control, to provide broad-scale control of the rabbit population right across the Nullarbor. Further control of predators by local pastoralists, CALM and the APB to more effectively control foxes and cats is also needed because removal of rabbits would mean that small native animals (especially ground-dwelling ones like the Nullarbor Quail-thrush) would be next on the menu for these predators. In order to manage bluebush, prevention of large wildfires is also important, and in this area, Australian National Railways needs to be involved.

Conservation of the Nullarbor Quail-thrush, the only bird species that is restricted to the Nullarbor, cannot be achieved by government agencies on their own. Co-operative efforts, building on and encouraging the work of local pastoralists, and involving the Department of Agriculture, the APB, CALM and the Australian National Railways, should ensure that the Nullarbor Plain remains a secure home for the Nullarbor Quail-thrush and other native animals, as well as remaining a secure and reliable area for pastoral activities. In other areas, local groups of concerned people, especially land managers, are making increasingly important contributions to conservation. An excellent example is the Malleefowl Conservation Group, based at Gnowangerup. This group of people is carrying out on-farm conservation measures and important basic research on the Malleefowl, with the help of State and Commonwealth funding. If Nullarbor residents could "adopt" the Nullarbor Quail-thrush in a similar way, its future will be much more secure.

[Ed: It is very encouraging to see conservationists promoting the good work of members of the pastoral industry and wishing to work collaboratively.]
