

Woodlands on the Wing

Issue 2 Summer 2012

The Great Western Woodlands is the world's largest remaining temperate woodland. BirdLife Australia is partnering with The Nature Conservancy to establish a long-term monitoring project in the woodlands to assess species distribution, population status, movements and ecology of bird species in the region, to better inform conservation and management of this significant region. This project has been made possible through the generous support of the David Thomas Challenge and individual BirdLife Australia supporters.

Getting into the Swing of Spring

The Great Western Woodlands project completed its second series of seasonal surveys last October. These Spring surveys went off without a hitch, with 23 participants from Perth, south-west WA and Victoria visiting 8 areas spread right across the region. By all accounts a great time was had by all (see page 3 for one of the trip reports), with some very interesting sightings plus good views of all the woodland regulars.

Huge thanks must go to the survey group leaders (Ken & Vivien Harris, Andrew & Jill Hobbs, Clive & Wendy Napier, Chris & Dianne Reidy) who organised each day's activities and discovered the existence, and non-existence, of various tracks through the area. Also to all the participants who provided extra sets of eyes and ears, along with their enthusiasm.

A total of over 200 2ha surveys were conducted, plus numerous area searches and incidental records, providing essential data for the GWW project. These data will be used to determine species distributions across the region as well as the population status of a variety of resident and migrant species. One survey group visited an area to the north of



Photo: Dianne Reidy



Photo: Barrie Smith

Fraser Range Station (east of Norseman) for which there were no previous bird surveys within 50km in any direction. These surveys provided us with invaluable data on species distributions in the area that could not otherwise have been obtained. As a result of this and other surveys, several range extensions were recorded, including Malleefowl, Gilbert's Whistler and Ground Cuckoo-shrike.

Numerous records were made of the typical woodland species, including Yellow-plumed Honeyeater, Purple-crowned Lorikeet, Chestnut Quail-thrush, Gilbert's Whistler, Blue-breasted Fairy-wren and Shy Heathwren. These species have all declined in the wheatbelt so it is reassuring to still find them in good numbers in the GWW.

The most unusual reports during the Spring surveys were the 5 separate sightings of Scarlet-chested Parrots. This rarely seen species occurs in the deserts of central Australia and is the only non-threatened species to be listed in the top ten of 'Australia's Most Wanted' birds (in the June issue of Australian BirdLife magazine). The prize for best photo of the trip definitely goes to Barrie Smith for his picture of three male parrots at a waterhole!

We are currently in need of volunteers for the summer and autumn surveys which are being held over New Years (Dec 29 – Jan 2) and Easter (Mar 29 – Apr 2). Please contact project coordinator Liz Fox if you'd like to be involved and see the GWW for yourself.

BirdLife Australia gratefully acknowledges and thanks the DEC for providing the opportunity to deliver the spring GWW survey, along with numerous community engagement activities, through an Environmental Community Grant.

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A Canadian in the Woodlands

To assist with some recent spring surveys to compare the bird fauna of the relatively intact GWW and areas within Gondwana Link (an area running from the SW GWW to the coast around Margaret River), I enlisted the help of volunteer Russell Cannings. Russell is a twitcher, on holiday from Canada. He currently holds the record for the most bird species seen in British Columbia in one year and has just written a book on where to see birds in BC.

Russell arrived in Perth and then just 3 days later we were off to the GWW – first to visit Kalgoorlie and Esperance for some community engagement, and then to the Peak Charles area to conduct bird surveys.

Russell maintains a bird watching blog where he can record the species he sees and the adventures he has. An excerpt from his entry for the GWW:



Photo: Liz Fox

Oct 12th

As we drove east out of the greater Perth area, heading for the mining boom-city of Kalgoorlie, the first trip bird was a lovely Nankeen Kestrel. A bird I should have had by now, and of course once I had one, they became one of the most common birds along the highway.

Liz spotted a whitish parrot well up the highway and speculated that it might be a Corella. But as we drew nearer we both realized what it really was—“Major Mitchell’s!!!!” we both shouted. This charismatic cockatoo is probably one of Australia’s most recognizable birds yet few Australians (let alone tourists) see them since they stick to the arid interior and never stray to the coasts. This had been one of my biggest targets for my Aussie trip but I hadn’t expected to get it this week since we were a fair bit south of their usual range. Oh well... I’ll take it!

Oct 13th

First bird of the morning was a calling Spotted Nightjar around 4am. As the sun broke over the scenic open-pit mine on the eastern horizon, I took a stroll through the arid woodlands near our camp hoping for some more lifers. Yep, got some! A flock of 15 Purple-crowned Lorikeets rocketed past overhead then a pair of Brown-headed Honeyeaters popped in for a quick view. A family of Blue-breasted Fairy-wrens were my first of many on the trip, then I finally got a decent photo of this common parrot—the (Western) Australian Ringneck—after some careful stalking.

Oct 14th

After testing out a few dead-end tracks we finally found our way into a slightly remote and very cool little camping spot known as “The Cups”—named for the natural water-pools found in this clearing, surrounded by thick Mallee scrub. This water-source proved to be an effective attractant to local birds, so we sat down nearby to watch the show prior to setting up our tents. Brown-headed and Purple-gaped Honeyeaters seemed the most common, but I also scored my first Red-capped Robin (a brilliant male) and Tawny-crowned Honeyeater of the trip.

Later in the evening, three Bronzewing came in to drink and they turned out to be male and female Common Bronzewing with a lone Brush Bronzewing. I went for a short walk as daylight faded, and managed my lifer Western Yellow Robin, then much later while watering a tree in the wee hours I heard the whiney calls of an Australian Owlet-Nightjar.

Oct 15th

Today was our first full-on day of point count surveys in the bush, and Peak Charles National Park is roughly where we were. The actual ‘Peak Charles’ from which the park gets its name, is an ancient outcropping of granite about 650m tall, which in this country is massive. We could easily see Charlie for about 100 km in any direction.

We hadn’t even made it to the park boundary however, when one of the most exciting birds an Aussie can hope to whiff decided to put in a brief but hugely appreciated appearance. We were driving along a well maintained gravel road (quite a luxury in this corner of the state), when a *Neophema* parrot ripped across about ten meters in front of us. The combination of bright yellow underparts, blue face, lime-green back and tail, and electric-blue outer flight feathers pointed to one bird. “Scarlet-chested Parrot!?!?!?” Liz exclaimed, as we screeched to a halt. I thought it might have gone down into some thick Mallee scrub so we searched the area but couldn’t re-find it. Although I was vaguely aware that this is very much on the “Wanted List” when it comes to Australian avifauna, it wasn’t until I cracked some field guides and chatted with Nigel, that we were extremely fortunate even to get this brief glimpse.

The Scarlet-chested was great, but then again everything is great for me at the moment. It wasn’t too long before my first Southern Scrub-Robin hopped into view; then I was chasing a couple singing (Western) Rufous Fieldwrens around over morning tea.

To learn more about Russell’s adventures in the GWW visit <http://www.russellcannings.blogspot.com.au/2012/10/the-great-western-woodland-adventure.html>

Species in Focus

WESTERN ROSELLA



Photo: Ben Pearce

Although you may be familiar with the endemic Western Rosella in the south-west of Western Australia, in the Great Western Woodlands you will find quite a different looking creature – the eastern subspecies of the Western Rosella. The eastern subspecies lacks the green back and tail of the more familiar south-western birds, and has a much paler yellow cheek patch. The two subspecies merge in the west of the wheatbelt, where intermediate forms can be found.

Western Rosellas have decreased in the wheatbelt due to habitat clearance and in particular the loss of trees with the hollows they require for nesting in. The habitat in the GWW provides a haven for the species, although even here frequent fires can cause the loss of trees that are old enough to form hollows.

The eastern subspecies was previously listed on the threatened species list, however it has recently been removed due to the assumed stability of the population in the GWW. However, we still need to know much more about this species.

The subspecies occurs mainly in eucalypt and casuarina woodlands, particularly wandoo, flooded gum and salmon gum. They feed on seeds, flowers and fruit.

The eastern subspecies of the Western Rosella occurs throughout the south-west quarter of the GWW, occurring as far east as Fraser Range Station (75km east of Norseman).



Photo: Dianne Reidy

Straight Down the Line

A SPRING SURVEY ALONG THE TRANSLINE

Running parallel to the Transcontinental Railway Line is the Transline Road. This straight, red road takes you through the north-eastern section of the Great Western Woodlands of Western Australia.

Just east of Boulder the road sign proclaims no fuel, no water and under that they should also say no people, no houses, no shops, just the woodlands full of birds, animals and flora.

Six of us swelled the sparse population to conduct one of the GWW surveys during October 2012.

Conducting 20 minute surveys over two hectares was new to 4 of us so our leaders did well to cope with novices but it was agreed that six pairs of eyes can find birds better than two pairs even if four can't identify them.

Coolgardie Black Butt, Sienna Bush, yellow through to dark red Hop Bushes, Mistletoe covered in red flowers and Quandongs with ripe, red fruit were all for the taking. This meant our most common species recorded were seven varieties of honeyeater.

Other highlights included Chestnut Quail-thrush busy in the leaf litter of large eucalypts and Mr and Mrs Mistletoebird breakfasting on berries.

A Malleefowl obligingly strolled across the road for two spotters and it and Crimson and Orange Chats were all further east and north than previously seen in the GWW.

Three Scarlet-chested Parrots foraged innocently while we ogled and the camera clicked away. The eleven Wedge-tailed Eagles lifting off a road kill was an inspiring sight.

Visiting a white clay dam, a station soak and the Cardunia Government Dam certainly gave a good indication as who is flying by and two new water birds were recorded, a Common Greenshank and a Red Necked Stint.

Of 130 previously recorded species for the area we found 73 at the GPS sites and the camps we made. I think we would need longer to record all the varieties given that 25 of the species are water birds.

We also spotted several train species. A rare night variety sped through the dark with its carriage lights shining and there was a species that tooted if you sat near the line at dusk with a glass in hand.

As a raw beginner I have made notes to myself;

- Learn more bird calls.
- Stay close to the experienced watchers so they identify what you are seeing.
- Start a life list of birds.
- Do another survey.

Written by Jan Waterman on behalf of Di and Chris Reidy (the wise ones), Barrie Smith (photographer), Judy Cullam-Smith (botanical guru) and Ron Waterman (GPS man)

What's On?

UPCOMING SURVEYS AND EVENTS

GWW STARLIGHT & CHAMPAGNE SUMMER SURVEY

December 29th 2012 – January 2nd 2013

What better way to see in the New Year than with some starlight and champagne in the Great Western Woodlands? The summer survey will be held over New Year's Eve, from Dec 29 – Jan 2.

Surveys will be conducted in small groups spread right across the region. Survey areas include Helena & Aurora Range, Peak Charles NP, the trans line east of Kalgoorlie, Dundas NR, Cave Hill, Mt Monger, Credo Station, Jilbadji NR, and Fraser Range station. Sites vary in accommodation options and accessibility. 4WD required in most areas and volunteers will need to be self-sufficient.

Please contact Project Coordinator Liz Fox if you are interested in being involved.

GWW EASTER SURVEY

March 29 – April 2 2013

Even if you can't make it at New Years, join us for the Easter survey, held over the Easter long weekend.

Office Help Needed

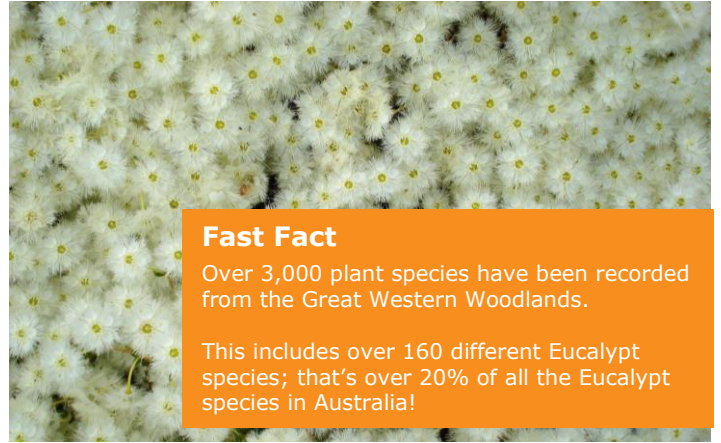
The Great Western Woodlands project is now in full swing and is in need of support from a group of dedicated volunteers to help in the smooth running of the project.

Assistance is required in two main areas: communications and volunteer coordination. Communications will include assisting in putting together the quarterly newsletter, flyers, project updates and organising the development of a bird guide for the region. Volunteer coordination will include recruiting and keeping in contact with volunteers, maintaining the volunteer database, and sending out survey information to participants.

Support for all activities will be provided by the project coordinator. Basic experience with Microsoft Word and Excel would be useful and you could work either from home or the BirdLife office. Please contact Project Coordinator Liz Fox for more information.



Photo: Liz Fox



Fast Fact

Over 3,000 plant species have been recorded from the Great Western Woodlands.

This includes over 160 different Eucalypt species; that's over 20% of all the Eucalypt species in Australia!

GWW Starling Watch

Starlings are listed as one of the world's worst invasive alien species and are an extreme threat to Western Australian agriculture, environment and community. They have the potential to establish wild populations in Western Australia's primary production regions. This major bird pest negatively impacts native ecosystems by plundering native bird nests, spreading diseases, competing with native and domesticated species for food, and gorging on cultivated grain and horticulture crops (particularly grapes and olives).



Photo: Robyn Pickering

It is possible that Starlings may be recorded in the southern parts of the GWW, which are not too far from areas of WA with previous infestations. Starlings are not established in WA and with public vigilance and co-operation we can keep them at bay. If you see a Starling anywhere in WA please record the details of location, number seen, and try to take a photograph. These details should then be provided to Debbie Sullivan, Conservation Officer for the Starling Project, on 0427 987 085 or deb.sullivan@birdlife.org.au



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Photo: Martin Gole