

Woodlands on the Wing

Issue 6 Spring 2013

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 supporters from BirdLife Australia.

Birds in the Wildflowers

All who took part in the spring bird surveys in the Great Western Woodlands will agree that it was a magical time to be out there. At several points you would have thought we were all conducting flora surveys rather than looking for birds, as attention and cameras were drawn to the masses of flowers carpeting the ground, including verticordias, grevilleas, melaleucas, eremophilas, and everlastings.

Volunteers came from all over the south-west of WA to take part in the surveys this season, and Jane Colbert even flew over from Victoria for a chance to visit the GWW!

Large numbers of the resident species were recorded breeding and were seen sitting on nests or feeding fledglings. Several nesting Tawny Frogmouths were seen in Dundas Nature Reserve, while Tawny-crowned Honeyeater, Spotted Pardalote, Western Rosella, Western Yellow-Robin, White-fronted Honeyeater and Chestnut Quail-thrush were just some of the other species recorded breeding throughout the region. Breeding in the eastern subspecies of the Western Rosella is particularly encouraging as the species is still thought to be declining in numbers in the eastern wheatbelt.

Only a few unusual records were made, with the highlight being a Scarlet-chested Parrot seen north of Helena & Aurora Range by Ron and Jan Waterman, Judi Cullam and Barrie Smith – their second sighting of this elusive species in the GWW!

Being spring, several of the migrant species had returned and were present in good numbers, including White-winged Trillers, Rainbow Bee-eaters, and five species of cuckoos.

If you missed out on the spring surveys then I urge you to get out there next year and see the beauty of this majestic part of WA. Refer to the end of this newsletter for upcoming survey dates.



Fan-tailed Cuckoo
Photo: Barry Heinrich

The Dawn Chorus

Trip Report by Mary Whittall

Barry Heinrich led Brad & Jill Kneebone, Graeme & Aina Hargans and Herbie & Mary Whittall for six days through Frank Hann NP and onto Peak Charles. Early morning birding soon became natural, even to those professing to be late-morning risers. That heavenly dawn chorus was enough of a drawcard.

With perfect spring weather and a carpet of rain-nourished kwongan bush, we were overawed by the variety of flowering and nectar-producing species. Truly, it resembled a calendar cover of the best digitally-enhanced photographs and proof that the Kings Park wildflower mass display really is a replication of nature.

The campsite at Lillian Stokes Rock offered great choice with generous welcome shade. We each assumed our different responsibilities, be it note-taker, photographer, birdsong hearer (for the high-whistled challenged). Barry added a special dimension with his high-quality scope, offering special treats, when the birds obliged and posed for us. One such delight was a near-fledged Brown Falcon chick sitting in the nest, being aggressively attacked by a Willie Wagtail. Studying the beautiful markings of the Tawny-crowned Honeyeater (the dominant honeyeater for a while) was another delight. After a commotion which drew attention to a nesting Grey Shrike-thrush, the close-up study for new birders Graeme and Aina will no doubt be the experience that got them hooked. More than one sighting of the "wanted" species - Western Yellow Robin, Southern Scrub-robin and the Rufous Fieldwren - were other "zing" moments.

Of course, even the experts get their thrills. Barry found it difficult to contain his excitement having watched at leisure two Shy Heathwrens scampering around the tea-tree scrub and then posing in the sunlight on a bare branch. When we recounted this to the other group, saying he'd practically danced an Irish jig on the spot in excitement, Brad quipped "What, the bird or Barry?"

As we approached Peak Charles, the kwongan landscape gave way to attractive Salmon Gum woodlands. The group was constantly struck by the contrasting vegetation at the different sites. The bird activity and the resulting species counts really related to the surrounding vegetation and what was flowering. The trip was a stunning revelation to the team of this stunning section of the Great Western Woodlands.



Some of the Frank Hann/ Peak Charles team among the wildflowers
Photo: Mary Whittall

What's It All For?

Since the project started, volunteers have conducted approximately 1,700 surveys. That is a 30% increase on all the surveys previously conducted in the Great Western Woodlands since 1901 – and all in just 2 years!

All this information is being used to create, for the first time, a reliable baseline dataset for this internationally significant region. This information will be used to help manage and conserve the birds living there in a number of ways.

Mapping Species Distribution

Due to the lack of knowledge on the birds in this region there is still some basic knowledge that we do not know, for example the exact distribution of each species. Only by visiting all parts of the GWW can we find out where species occur and do not occur. Some of the survey sites set up for this project are located in areas where there were no previous bird records for at least 50km in any direction! Therefore all bird sightings are helping to fill in gaps in our knowledge.

Habitat Preferences

Once we know exactly where each species is living, we can compare this against various vegetation and disturbance factors to identify why they are living there – does a species only occur in long unburnt Salmon Gum woodland or is it more widespread, occurring in all woodland types, or even occurring in mallee or shrubland habitats as well? This is why we are asking volunteers to take photos at each site – that way we can identify the vegetation type and what it is that makes each species want to live there. By knowing what constitutes good habitat for a species we can then better manage it.

Impacts of Disturbance

Fire is one of the major disturbances present in the GWW and the data collected as part of this project will assist us in identifying how birds are impacted by fire. By surveying in areas of different fire age we can find out what post-fire vegetation age different species prefer and this can then be used for effective fire management across the region. We will also look at the impact of other disturbances such as grazing, distance to major roads or towns, etc. This means that some of the current survey sites are in recently burnt or degraded areas. These sites may have few species now, but come back in 10 years and you'll really see the difference! These highly altered landscapes often also house different species to the

surrounding bushland – it is where you are most likely to see Richard's Pipit, Rufous Songlark, and the button-quails. Over the coming years it is likely that some of the survey sites will be burnt as a result of wildfire. This will provide us with great information on the species present both before and after fire, and it will allow us to measure how long it takes for the bird population to return to its pre-fire condition.

Species Population Declines

Survey data collected from the same sites, recorded over periods of a decade or more are required to identify a species' status and determine if their population is stable, increasing or decreasing. This is the reason for the specific sites that we are asking volunteers to survey each season. A decrease in the number or distribution of a particular species is a warning sign that something is impacting that species and making the landscape no longer able to support it. This can be due to factors such as the removal or fragmentation of habitat, degradation as a result of weeds or dust from adjacent roads, or an increase in the number of introduced predators or competitors. If a decrease in population is observed, it is time to start thinking about why it is happening and putting conservation measures in place to stop the decline, as well as preventing it from occurring at other locations.

Identify Priority Areas

The survey data will be used to identify priority areas that can either be set aside for purely conservation purposes, or areas that require conservation works to maintain their bird populations. These areas can be identified by mapping the distributions of threatened species or species that are known to decline rapidly as a result of disturbance, as well as identifying potential hotspots or refuge areas for birds that play a crucial role in maintaining bird populations during drought or other difficult periods.

Linking in with Gondwana Link

A number of organisations such as The Nature Conservancy, Gondwana Link and Bush Heritage are working hard on the Gondwana Link project – linking the Great Western Woodlands to the south-west coast through remnant and revegetated patches of bushland. Knowing what birds are present in the south-west area of the GWW, around the Frank Hann/Peak Charles National Parks, will assist in revegetation efforts in the adjacent Gondwana Link area by providing information on what the bird fauna of an almost pristine environment looks like.

These are just some of the ways in which the data you are gathering will help us to protect the Great Western Woodlands, now and into the future.



Tawny Frogmouth on nest
Photo: Joe Porter

Species in Focus

SOUTHERN SCRUB-ROBIN



Photo: Chris Tzaros

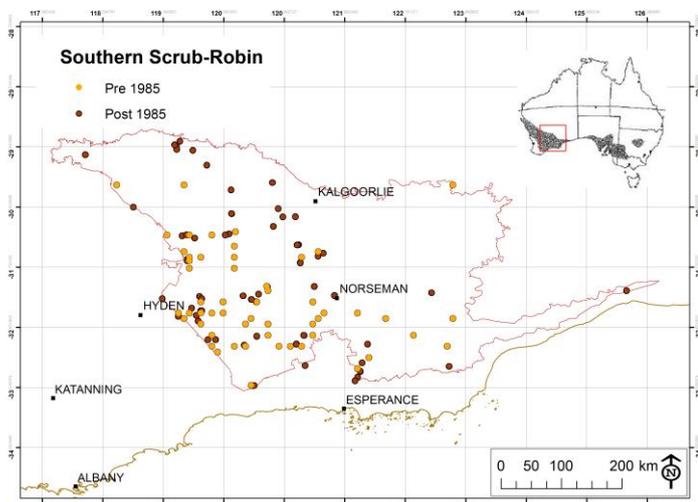
The Southern Scrub-robin (19-22cm) is a ground-dwelling, thrush-like bird that inhabits thickets and low shrubs, such as mallee, acacia, mulga and Cypress Pine, as well as sandplain vegetation and uncleared verges in farmland. Its head is most distinctive, marked with a pale rear eye-ring and a vertical black eye mark around the large dark eye. Sexes are alike, though the female is smaller. The only other species that it could be confused with, the Chestnut Quail-thrush, is larger, has a different posture (mainly due to much shorter legs) and very different plumage and head patterns. The Southern Scrub-robin's distribution stretches across from south-western NSW, southern South Australia, and, in Western Australia, the south coast north to Shark Bay.

They can vary from uncommon to common, tending to be patchily distributed through their range. Currently the species is declining due to clearing, and has become locally extinct in some remnant patches.

The Southern Scrub-robin is primarily an insectivore, eating ants, beetles, caterpillars, termites and plant bugs, as well as spiders, seeds and berries. Usually encountered singly or in pairs, it is unobtrusive and shy, but can often be detected by its loud call, often given from an elevated perch.

Breeding is from September to January. The nest is cup-shaped and composed of strips of bark, outwardly protected by a rim of criss-crossed twigs and lined with grass and a few rootlets. It is usually built in a slight depression scraped in the ground among the scrub, or sometimes placed on top of a dense low shrub. They usually lay only one egg.

The map below shows where Southern Scrub-robins have been seen to date within the GWW project area.



Millennium Kids in the GWW

Millennium Kids is a non-profit organisation run by young people who are committed to improving the environment through constructive action. 'Project Explore' is an initiative run in collaboration with BHP Billiton Nickel West to enable students to get into some citizen science in the GWW. The following is an excerpt from a report outlining their latest jaunt to the Woodlands.

The MK Project Explore team spent Science Week in the Great Western Woodland with 80 young people from schools in the Goldfields exploring what it means to live in the largest intact temperate Mediterranean woodland left in the world.

Kids' inquiry questions formed the development of a series of workshops that took young people from East Kalgoorlie, Boulder, South Kalgoorlie, O'Connor, Norseman Primary School, John Paul College and Kambalda West District High Schools into various parts of the woodland alongside scientists, indigenous elders and their children. Kids asked: What is that scat? Is that bug native? Why is this exploration hole open? Is that plant edible? Why are these indigenous sites vandalised and what birds live in this part of the woodland?

The activities were designed to get kids thinking about the 16 million hectare woodland and how they could help scientists and stakeholders work together to collect information about the area and discover ways to protect the woodland for future generations.

At two site visits the team discovered evidence of the endangered Malleefowl. "It was so exciting", said one student from O'Connor Primary School. "We were on the bus and then a Malleefowl came right across the road in front of us." Scientists and kids were quick to get their cameras out to get photographic evidence of the sighting. While the kids readied themselves for lunch the local indigenous representative with the team, Betty Logan, quietly disappeared in search of tracks and possibly a nest. The smile on her face when she returned said it all – an active nest and a fresh scat! The team worked to bag the scat which will be sent to Murdoch University for DNA testing. They also noted the time, the date, the weather conditions, GPS location and a description of the vegetation where the animal was seen. All the information was recorded and given to Great Western Woodland stakeholders BirdLife Australia and Department for Parks and Wildlife.

Liz Fox, Great Western Woodland Project Coordinator, BirdLife Australia, was thrilled to receive news of the sightings as was Nigel Wessels, Regional Leader, Park and Visitor Services, Goldfields Region, Department for Parks and Wildlife.

"This information is important for us to monitor and protect the active nests," said Nigel. "We are really pleased Millennium Kids, through Project Explore, can help us take care of the area. The Woodland covers a vast area and this citizen science initiative is a great way to have the kids in the community helping us out," he said.



Hard at work entering the day's data
Photo: Mary Whittall

What's On?

UPCOMING SURVEYS AND EVENTS

GWW SUMMER SURVEYS

January 2014

Due to the high temperatures and potential for high fire risk days, we are not setting a survey date for the upcoming summer surveys in the GWW. People can choose when they want to head out based on the weather forecast. We would prefer surveys to be conducted in January, but any time between December and February is okay.

These summer surveys provide extremely useful information on what the birds are doing during these difficult periods of low food and water availability, but it can be challenging to find volunteers willing to take part in these surveys. If you are interested in being involved, please contact Liz for further details.

GWW AUTUMN SURVEYS

18–24 April 2014

If you don't deal well with the heat of summer why not lock in some dates for our Easter surveys. In autumn there are cooler temperatures and the birds are out in force. If you are interested in being involved, don't hesitate to contact us.



Checking out the birds at Credo Station
Photo: Greg Taylor

FUTURE SURVEY DATES

If you would like to organise a future trip to the GWW, all survey dates to the end of 2014 are shown below. Please remember that all dates are flexible and surveys at any time of year are appreciated. If you are keen to become involved either as a group leader or a participant, please contact Liz to lock in your preferences, and to receive copies of the relevant information.

Summer 2013-14: January

Autumn 2014: 18–24 April

Winter 2014: 12–18 July

Spring 2014: 27 September–3 October



Tawny-crowned Honeyeater
Photo: Barry Heinrich

For more information about the project please contact:

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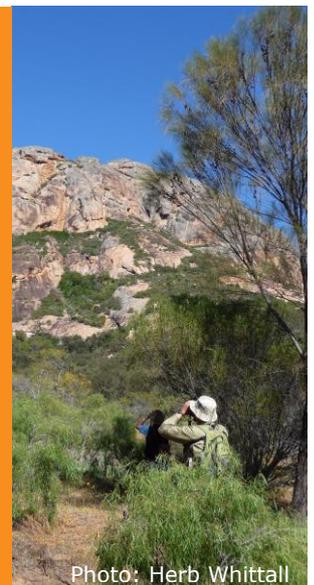


Photo: Herb Whittall