

## **Poster papers**



# Conservation through community passion: Observations of Malleefowl *Leipoa ocellata* in the Mallee Region

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The Mallee has a long legacy of skilled amateur naturalists who have contributed greatly to our understanding of the ecology of species in this region. Mr Harold Buckingham is one example of an amateur naturalist. He resided in Wagin in the 1920's but soon after resumed his farming career in southern Victoria. During his time in Wagin he developed an interest in the natural history of the Mallee and maintained his interest with periodic visits to the Mallee. He befriended Rudd Campbell (Ranger, Wyperfeld National Park) and Ben Eggleton (Ranger, Hattah - Lakes National Park). Harold retired to Ouyen in 1965 and pursued a seasonal study of Malleefowl in the Timberoo area. He collected a large number of photographs and published two papers discussing the heat generation and management in the mound of the Malleefowl and a qualitative description on the birth of Malleefowl. Therefore, importance of field observations made by individuals and community groups should not be underestimated because through their passion and commitment a greater understanding of species ecologically at an intimate level, in this case, the Malleefowl has been achieved.

# Survival on the land - the mallee, the malleefowl, the community

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Malleefowl conservation is about to get a big boost with the construction of Yongergnow Malleefowl Interpretive and Research Centre in Ongerup, Western Australia. Four years in the planning the centre is now taking shape with the completion of a visionary design which incorporates the shape of a malleefowl mound.

The development evolved from a mix of concern for the demise of the local shire emblem, the malleefowl, its disappearing habitat and a dwindling rural population. These elements were put together during community workshops and an innovative solution emerged in the form of a malleefowl interpretive and research centre.

The story of the mallee, the malleefowl and the local community will be told using displays, interactive and audio-visual media. Visitors will also experience the captive breeding program by viewing birds in a large aviary, chicks hatching in incubators and eventually being translocated to secure bushland areas in the region.

The aims of the centre are threefold:

- Support and contribute to the conservation of and research work for the malleefowl and its habitat
- Raise awareness of mallee habitat and ways of living sustainably within that environment
- Increase visitor numbers to the town and region and create employment opportunities for local people

Ongerup Community Development has received funding from local, state and federal governments and construction will begin early in 2004 with an opening in mid to late 2004.

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# **Aboriginal Legacies-Contributions Toward Community Awareness**

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Two very significant reminders of the malleefowl can be used effectively in drawing attention of the community to the plight of the malleefowl and the need for its conservation. Neilloan, the malleefowl Creator Being of the Boorong Clan in north-west Victoria provides a nightly reminder for the six months prior to the egg-laying season. Known to Western astronomers as Lyra, this ageless celestial image suggests the need to provide a continuing future for the malleefowl. Another reminder is close to the home of the two remaining breeding pairs in Central Victoria. At Kooyoorra State Park a probable malleefowl increase site lies as a silent reminder of a once thriving population of malleefowl in this part of Victoria. The recently established Wedderburn Conservation Management Network which includes Kooyoorra in its area of responsibility has chosen the malleefowl as a potent symbol to represent its aim of halting the decline of biodiversity and reversing this trend. Protection of the remnant malleefowl and enhancement of its habitat is a number one priority for this action-oriented community group.

## **“Kitless Kat Klinicks” A Community Response to Cat Predation**

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The delivery of two malleefowl chick specimens by pet cats to farm homesteads in Pingrup and Narembeen, Western Australia and community concerns for the number of feral cats in private bushland instigated a Malleefowl Preservation Group awareness campaign in 1999.

The “Kitless Kat Klinick” project was developed in consultation with the West Australian Veterinary Association and the Albany Veterinary Hospital mobile service as a free cat sterilisation clinic. In promoting a greater understanding of cat impacts on native fauna and supporting a “responsible” cat ownership philosophy, the project aims to increase community values of the region’s biodiversity.

Kitless Kat Klinicks are funded by the community, cat owner donations and heavily subsidised by veterinary practitioners.

As a “one off” service to the Ongerup, Gnowangerup and Gairdner communities and current interest from the towns of Ravensthorpe and Kojonup, the Malleefowl Preservation Group recognises the potential to expand this program to country regions in Western Australia.

## The Mulga to Mallee Link - a corridor vision

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The Foster Road survey site represents one of many isolated remnants scattered across the agricultural landscapes of Western Australia and is the starting point for the “Mulga to Mallee Link” wildlife corridor plan.

In response to community concerns for the cultural and heritage significance of the *Gnowangerup* Shire faunal emblem, the “gnow” (Noongar Aboriginal name), or malleefowl, a Community Action Plan was completed in 1994.

Concern for the isolation of the Foster Road site and personal observations (Dennings and Vaux) of malleefowl using an unfenced and degraded tree line lead to the development of a North Ongerup Malleefowl Corridor Plan. Given the size (138 ha) and breeding activity of five active malleefowl mounds in the Foster Road site, stage one involving 6 farmers and volunteers constructed 26 kms of corridor fencing in 1996. This year, a further 17 km incorporating local providence seed and germinated seedlings from the Foster Road site has extended the network to 63 kms. Within the corridor, a series of monitoring points have been established to record autumn and spring birds sightings (all species) and vegetation changes.

The existing Macro Corridor from the Fitzgerald River National Park and regional Landcare programs have provided the opportunity to develop the “Mulga to Mallee Link”, a visionary project of approximately 1,200 kms to the most northerly reach at Yeelirrie Station 500 kms north west of Kalgoorlie.

## **How fox scat collection can provide information on fox diet.**

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Members of the VMFRG have been collecting fox scats from Malleefowl nests in the course of their monitoring activities in the Victorian Mallee. Approximately 2500 scats have now been collected since 1996 – the year in which Rabbit Haemorrhagic Disease virus (RHDV) first arrived in this region. Parks Victoria have had the contents of these scats analysed in order to gain a better understanding of how fox diet might have changed in response to fluctuations in the abundance of prey items (particularly rabbits) and how diet might vary spatially. The collection of fox scats is a cost-effective means of surveying fox diet and perhaps abundance. Preliminary interpretation of the analysis of scat contents shows considerable spatial variation in fox diet. For instance, in areas of low rabbit abundance remote from farmland, reptiles appear to be a staple component of diet. For foxes resident close to farmland; house mice, carrion, and plant material are relatively important dietary items. The implications of this variability in fox diet for Malleefowl are still being investigated. In the meantime, it is recommended that the VMFRG continue to collect fox scats to assist with the development of a more comprehensive understanding of fox diet and the interactions with rabbits and other prey items, including Malleefowl.

## **Community searches for Malleefowl at Yeelirrie (WMC), central WA**

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The decline of Malleefowl has been especially severe in the arid zone, although information is scant and there have been few field studies of the species distribution, abundance, or habitat requirements in such remote areas. Yeelirrie Station is a pastoral leasehold owned by WMC Resources Ltd. and situated in an arid area at the northern edge of the recorded distribution of Malleefowl in central Western Australia. Malleefowl have occasionally been recorded on Yeelirrie Station over a period of many years, but there have been no detailed records of the birds' distribution on the property. In August 2000 and 2003, the Malleefowl Preservation Group (MPG) conducted a series of searches for signs of Malleefowl at Yeelirrie. Volunteers were trained to recognise the footprints and tracks of Malleefowl, and searched along predetermined routes for these and other signs of the birds and other animals. Volunteers searched over 500km of transect for footprints and found Malleefowl in several widely separate areas, and also a few active and inactive mounds. On Yeelirrie, Malleefowl appear to be patchily distributed in shrublands of mulga, bowgada and sugar brother on deep sand. We also gathered all previous sightings of Malleefowl on and in the vicinity of the property. While occasional sighting of Malleefowl were recorded outside Yeelirrie, the property is a stronghold for the species in the area and of great importance for conservation. That the species persists at Yeelirrie is probably due to a history of low stock rates, historically low fire frequency and predator control that has operated at the property since the 1970s. This work has provided data on the distribution and habitat preferences of Malleefowl, and laid a firm basis for monitoring the species' persistence at Yeelirrie.

# The Mapping of road verges in the Shire of Gnowangerup

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Gnowangerup Shire is in many ways typical of rural shires in Western Australia, with cereal crops, sheep and cattle being the prime agricultural pursuits. The local community however has developed a high level of stewardship towards its natural environment. This is illustrated by their involvement in events like the Ongerup Wildflower Display, which provides visitors with easy access to some of the diverse range (□ 2,000 sp.) of unique local flora and Malleefowl Preservation Group conservation projects.

An approach by Ongerup community groups to their Gnowangerup Shire and the Roadside Conservation Committee to survey roadsides of the shire for 'conservation value' was made in 1998. The completion of this survey was made possible through the coordination and management commitment of the Malleefowl Preservation Group (MPG). The purpose of the survey was to identify roadsides of high conservation values using a rapid survey method devised by the Roadside Conservation Committee. It is known that roadsides are important wildlife corridors that link the fragmented landscape and those values are now being supported by the Malleefowl Preservation Group's mapping of malleefowl sighting records in the area. Thus a survey for the conservation value of roadside vegetation would provide indicators to the presence or absence of wildlife corridors between remnants and ensure that these high quality verges were managed in a sustainable manner.

The RCC survey provides data that assists road managers and utility providers to maintain their assets whilst minimising risk to the native vegetation. This data also provides a basis for decision making in fire management, verge weed control, tourism, Landcare and conservation.

# Using Database and Mobile Computing Technologies for Recording Malleefowl Activities.

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Since December 1981, several pairs of malleefowl have been studied in a block of natural mallee habitat near Nhill in Victoria. Information from this activity was recorded on over 2,800 separate sheets thus making analysis and data sharing difficult. To preserve the information and facilitate analysis, a database was developed into which all the historical data was entered. This solution, although necessary for existing data, still requires field observations to be manually entered from data collection sheets – a time consuming and tedious operation. To overcome this problem a mobile computing solution using a Pocket PC is in the testing stage and will be used for direct entry of field observations in the near future. As well as eliminating the separate data entry step, the mobile solution allows direct entry of graphic information such as mound diagrams and other site characteristics that would normally require lengthy verbal descriptions. This presentation will describe the historical context of the data and illustrate both the database and mobile computing solutions.

## Trust for Nature (Victoria)

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Victoria's Trust for Nature is a non-profit organisation that has worked to protect remnant vegetation and habitat on private land for over thirty years. Created through an Act of Parliament, *the Victorian Conservation Trust Act 1972*, Trust for Nature operates in several ways:

- Purchasing freehold properties with outstanding conservation value for the benefit of all Victorians. The most recent purchase was Ned's Corner Station on the Murray River 90 kilometres west of Mildura; properties such as this are retained by Trust for Nature as showcases of conservation, education and research, with strong community involvement in their management. Trust for Nature currently owns over 50 properties across Victoria. Ned's Corner Station, at 29,000 hectares, is Trust for Nature's single largest property and is also the largest freehold property in Victoria;
- Conservation covenants; covenants are legal agreements negotiated with private landholders that remain on property titles in perpetuity regardless of change of ownership and supported by management plans and monitoring through a Stewardship Program; Over 500 covenants across Victoria now protect 25,000 hectares of habitat negotiated by an extension team of Regional Managers who work in the ten Catchment Management Authority regions of Victoria;
- Revolving Fund; this allows Trust for Nature to buy high conservation value properties, selling them on with conservation covenants to committed landholders.

The purchase of Ned's Corner Station has greatly increased Trust for Nature's overall focus on the Mallee region and the importance of protecting privately owned remnant vegetation for the benefit of species such as the Mallee Fowl. At present, two conservation covenants and one Trust for Nature property in the Mallee region protect known Mallee Fowl habitat. In 2004, Trust for Nature, in partnership with the Mallee Catchment Management Authority, the Department of Sustainability and Environment and Conservation Volunteers Australia, is piloting a new incentive program for Landcare Groups in the Mallee. The program will offer one-off management payments to landholders to encourage permanent protection and active management of remnant vegetation in the Mallee and at a landscape-scale.

# “Malleefowl Magic” An Education Program for Primary Schools

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“Children instinctively understand the value of the natural world but they need to learn about it in some detail if they are to know how to protect it. This book (package) does just that. It is both practical and imaginative and I believe it can be a major factor in ensuring the marvelous malleefowl gets the protection it so badly needs ” Sir David Attenborough CH.FRS –extract from *Malleefowl Magic*’s forward to primary school teachers.

Teacher’s responses to the Malleefowl Preservation Group Community Awareness and Education Program involving 60 West Australian Primary Schools 1995-1999 identified the need for an improved curriculum and outcome based program.

In gaining the support from children’s book author, Pauline Reilly and artist Will Rolland, “*Malleefowl Magic*” evolved in 2000 with funding support from the Lotteries Commission WA and WMC Resources Ltd (Goldfields program). Reilly’s book, “Malleefowl, The Incubator Bird” was chosen as the primary school focus to develop a teachers’ easy access manual and compact disk for junior, middle and upper primary Science, Society and Environment learning areas.

Advertised and promoted on the Malleefowl Preservation Group’s web site, the success and popularity of *Malleefowl Magic* has extended its education value and scope to Language Other Than English (LOTE) curriculums including Noongar Aboriginal education programs in Western Australia.

## **Landholder and community efforts to protect malleefowl populations in the northern wheatbelt of WA**

**Sally and Wally Cail**

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The North Central Malleefowl Preservation Group Inc was formed in 1994 and has since been involved in a number of malleefowl conservation projects. A total of 756 farmers have baited a 2,290,000 ha area using 37,699 1080 dried meat baits with an overall 73% of baits taken from 1995 – 2003 for the purposes of safeguarding malleefowl on their properties. In addition, jumpers, T-shirts and displays have been developed and distributed to raise awareness of malleefowl conservation issues and community efforts in protecting these intrinsic threatened species. In the next year, our group will be setting up grids and surveying for active malleefowl mounds to establish the distribution and abundance of malleefowl in our region. This poster illustrates our efforts over the last decade through the use of photographs, mapping and highlighting some of the major community efforts to protect malleefowl for future generations.