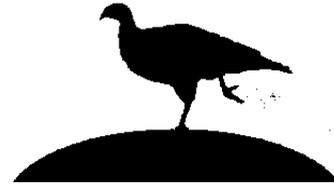


Victorian Malleefowl Recovery Group Inc.

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Newsletter April 2005



Coming VMRG events

August 13	- Committee
August/September	- Newsletter
October 8, 9	Training weekend, AGM
October to January	- Nest monitoring
February 2006	- Newsletter
March 2006	- Reporting back meeting

See www.malleefowlvictoria.org.au

2005 Committee

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Malleefowl monitoring in Victoria 2004/5

Extracted from a report to VMRG by Dr Joe Benshemesh

Breeding

Another great monitoring effort in 2004/5 and VMRG recorded 93 active nests out of a total of 960 nests visited. Several new sites were set up, including Nurcong (28), Wychitella (29), Hattah South (30), and Hattah Tracks (26) (a linear strip along tracks in Hattah-Kulkyne NP). A wonderful effort!

While 93 active nests sounds good, this masks a rather poor result in terms of the breeding density at most grids. There were 68 active nests in the 22 sites we have been monitoring for at least nine years, and this is the lowest result we have had with the exception of the 2002 drought when only 9

nests were active. The trends in the different geographic regions over the last decade or so show that this decline is most marked in the north-west (Sunset and Hattah areas) where there has been an on-going decline since 1996, and in the Eastern Big Desert (Wyperfeld, Bronzewing and Wathe) where numbers usually fluctuate between 40 and 50 active nests, but where there are currently only 31 active nests. These are very worrying trends. But there is good news too, with an increase in active nests in the northeast, particularly Wandown and Menzies.

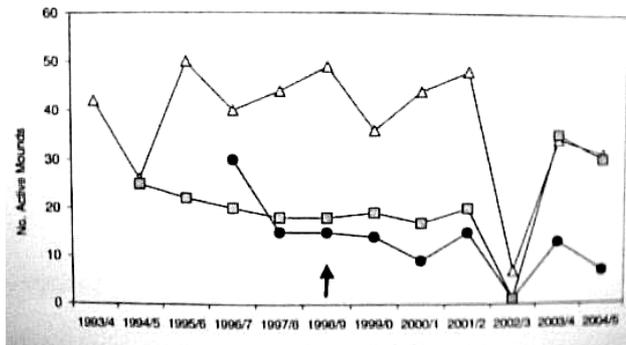
Even so, active numbers in the north-east are down on last year. In fact, breeding numbers in each of these three regions are below what they were last year. Longer-term trends also show this decline. Seven of our sites have been monitored for at least 17 years and even ignoring the drought years there is a distinct decline, with there currently being about 15% less breeding at these sites than a decade ago in the early 1990s.

It's hard to be sure why these declines have occurred, and why the north-east seems to have been spared. Rainfall has been poor for several years, but it is unclear whether this can explain all the patterns in breeding numbers. Other data collected in the course of monitoring may hold some clues (trends in fox signs and Malleefowl footprints, etc), and we need to know how much of the variation we are seeing, and the trends, can be explained by rainfall patterns.



Male malleefowl tending nest in Nurcong, 2005

The long period since sites were re-researched might explain some of the overall decline in the Eastern Big Desert. However, the declines in the north-west are of such a magnitude that there is no doubt that the declines are real.



Trends in active nests in the three areas from 1993

Fox scats

267 fox scats were collected in 2004/5 weighing a total of 3.61 kg. This is more than last year, even accounting for the new grids, but still less than in 2002/3 when 348 scats were collected weighing 4.8 kg! This suggests that there are fewer foxes around than 2-3 years ago (during the drought), and that numbers seem to be on the rise again.

Conclusion

The monitoring system is working well and the data is truly of a very high standard again. While we had a few more Cybertracker problems than last year, these should be easily rectified with some minor changes. The main monitoring issues to focus on now are:

- devising ways to get the sites re-researched, and to do this about every 5 years
- measuring the effects of management via the monitoring system

Foxes in Wathe Flora & Fauna Reserve



On a visit to Wathe (early September last year) we saw two foxes at midday. It is a definite sign that there are plenty of foxes about if they are seen during the day.

On another day, around the channel, there was a quick glance of another fox. Foxes hanging on fences are another indication that foxes are about. Stud-sheep farmers in our area are finding that having Alpacas in amongst their flock helps reduce lamb loss. It works, as it's very easy for stud lambs not to live.

Another recent event indicates an abundance of foxes. Our son-in-law and his neighbour decided to check out a fox burrow on their farm between Hopetoun and Rainbow – eight baby foxes and one vicious mother! The burrows are not easy to find, and it's a very dangerous job to dig them out.

On our most recent trip to Wathe, fox prints showed up well with fox pups in tow after a fine mist of rain. We followed the prints for a long way, and found fox prints on most of the tracks we were on.

We discussed what we saw with our local ParksVic lads, and they have baited and they reported back that some bait stations have been disturbed.

Gwyn Wiseman

More about foxes

Over the last few years the number of fox tracks and scats observed in northern Hattah National Park have decreased, where there is an ongoing fox baiting and track-monitoring program.

At Nurcong Reserve we found a large number of huge fox scats and most mounds had holes dug, with very strong fox smells. There's no baiting program there!

Gil Hopkins

Stakeholders - who are they?

At the National Forum in Mildura, and again at our meeting in Swan Hill, reference was made to 'stakeholders' in the malleefowl realm and the question was asked, "who are they?"

I would suggest stakeholders are any individual or any organisation having a line responsibility for decisions regarding malleefowl habitat and issues affecting the survival of the species, plus individuals or organisations having a commitment to the preservation of habitat and promotion of the wellbeing of the birds, including research scientists studying the bio-status of *Leipoa ocellata*.

To detail the stakeholders in these two broad categories produces a long list indeed as we now have a national perspective, but in general it looks like this:

1. **Responsible organisations** would include the Natural Environment Departments in each of the States and Territories; the Commonwealth Environment Australia (Endangered Species Unit); Catchment

Management Authorities and Shire Councils in regions which the birds are known to inhabit; landholders, and 'development lessees' (eg mining industry) in malleefowl country; Aboriginal communities in remote areas of the range.

2. **Voluntary organisations** would include natural history groups – Australian Trust for Conservation; Birds Australia; Threatened Species Network; community groups such as Malleefowl Preservation Group (WA); Mid Murray Field Naturalists; Victorian Malleefowl Recovery Group; Whimpey in the Wimmera. Scientists would include Western Plains Zoo and Adelaide Zoo (Monarto), plus individual research scientists at the universities.

The coordinating voice between the responsible organisations and the voluntary organisations is the Malleefowl National Recovery Team.

What do you think?

June Brown

VMRG Response to a Victorian 'Gap Analysis' of the National Recovery Plan for Malleefowl

Adapted from a report by Peter and Ann Stokie and Gil Hopkins

Following the National Forum, the VMRG committee have undertaken a survey and held a series of email discussions to determine what activities the VMRG could undertake (in addition to monitoring) to support the National Recovery Plan for malleefowl.

The focus of the survey and discussions was to develop a strategic plan for Malleefowl recovery in Victoria to address ways to reduce loss of Malleefowl numbers, and to maintain and increase numbers.

Following are a list of possible actions in order from highest to lowest rating. Ratings 1-6 were strongly supported, with middling support for ratings 7-9, and little support for ratings 10-12. Based on the survey responses, there is sufficient interest for the establishment of sub-committees for each of these 12 areas.

RATING 1 *Researching Grids*

VMRG and other groups such as GreenCorp to re-search all grids ASAP.

RATING 2 *Working with Agencies*

Establish who the appropriate agencies are, collate a register of contacts and their roles, and seek representation on committees such as biodiversity and threatened species

programs, fire planning and community education.

RATING 3 *Establish new grid locations*

Establish new grids particularly in the Big Desert, Little Desert and Wychitella with a timeline to achieve this.

RATING 4 *Collection of resources*

Analysis of existing VMRG data, together with GIS, habitat and fire history to assist with deciding upon the most strategic projects for group follow-up.

RATING 5 *Funding sources*

Investigate all funding sources to support short term and long-term project plans.

RATING 6 *National Recovery Team*

VMRG to be actively represented on NRT and participate fully in activities.

RATING 7 *Education*

Promote malleefowl awareness amongst schools, local adult groups and farming communities.

RATING 8 *Extend monitoring*

Extend data gathering to vegetation, rainfall, and fire history.

RATING 9. *Fund scholarships & research*

Strong support for action on this matter, but outside the scope or influence of our group.

RATING 10 *Land acquisition for conservation projects*

Strong support to reduce isolation of fragmented populations, extension of National Parks and covenants on private land, but again beyond our immediate scope or influence.

RATING 11. *Assist with Land Care projects*

Limited active support for involvement in Landcare activities.

RATING 12 *Breeding and release programs*

Very little support for the group to be actively involved in these activities.

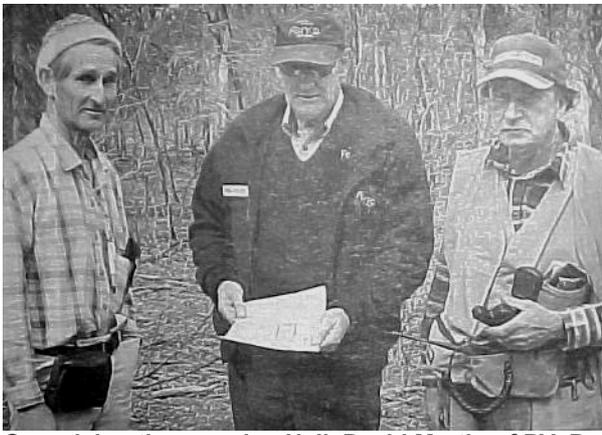
"The jokes on me!"

Ralph had the job of getting everybody to sign the PV insurance form at the training weekend. The last thing Peter said to the group on Sunday was, "Don't forget to sign the insurance form". As quick as a flash Ralph said "It's all under control Peter, you're the only one who hasn't signed!"

What have you done?

Tell Gil and send pictures on

giliz@netconnect.com.au



Organising the search – Neil, David Martin of PV, Peter Watts.
Photo courtesy of The Loddon Times.

Searching Wychitella

Adapted from The Loddon Times, Sept 2004

In September 2004 forty-five people line searched the Korong block of the Wychitella Conservation Zone for malleefowl mounds. No mounds were known in the block, so there was great excitement when three mounds were found, one recently active.

Searchers led by VMRG Neil Macfarlane and members, also included Friends of Kooyoora, and Wedderburn Conservation Network.

Foxes and rabbits

VMRG members Sue Hayman-Fox and Bernie Fox featured in an article in The Weekly Advertiser (Wimmera) in August 2004.

The article publicised their purchase and covenanting of 621 ha of land in the Teloepa Downs area, south of the Big Desert, and their participation in the Hindmarsh Plantout. 70 people helped plant trees during the weekend, to complement a direct seeding project, all helping to return the property to bush.

The article also highlighted their rabbit removal program, using fumigation of burrows, all mapped and recorded (you guessed it) using GPS. So malleefowl monitoring has lots of spinoffs we haven't thought of yet!

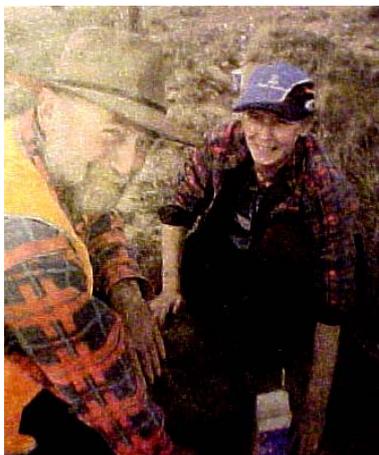


Photo courtesy of The Weekly Advertiser

Some ideas from the March General meeting and the April Committee meeting to be discussed at the Training Weekend

- use best quality batteries in Palm
- make Palm use more efficient and same sequence as paper record
- continue training with radios and satellite phones
- satellite phones be available for hire to members when not being used by VMRG
- make vegetation surveys easier and more objective
- consider alternatives for experienced people at Training Weekend
- assist GreenCorp with grid re-searching
- offer funds to local community groups to re-search grids (do you have a local group who needs funds?)
- consider 'job descriptions' for executive and committee and coopted members
- consider next Malleefowl Forum in 2006/7



Original Malleefowl paintings by Sue McInnes found in Victorian Gould League Book 5, 'Birds of the Dry Country'. These are the first bird books to show birds in their natural habitat. The original is much better than this poor digital image! These bird books are in the process of being republished.

If you want to nominate for the committee or executive, think about it now because forms have to be completed before the AGM. The position of President will be vacant!