

Lowan Behold

Volume 1 Issue 1

August 1998

WELCOME

Welcome to the first edition of Lowan Behold the Journal of the Ouyen Malleefowlers. This title was the most popular in a survey of the inaugural members of the group. The word Lowan is a Victorian derivation of the Aboriginal name for Malleefowl.

The journal will be an important communication link between members of the group and articles are required for future editions.

Group Now Has Fifty Members

The Ouyen Malleefowlers group now has over 50 members and memberships are continuing to be received.

At the inaugural meeting a list of 'potentials' was compiled. Application forms were distributed to them and many have been returned from across the north-west and interstate. The interest has been phenomenal and as it is only a few months since the first steps

were taken the future looks good.

Members of the group can be involved in a wide variety of projects and exercises if they wish. With this journal keeping everyone in contact members can participate at a level that suits each of them.



Every member is encouraged to spread the word about the group to those that may be interested. They are also encouraged to submit letters or relevant material that may be interesting to their fellow Malleefowlers. A good example is the column 'My First Malleefowl' where a member's first sighting may be documented and included in the journal. Many people remember a great deal about their first

Malleefowl sighting. The species large size and excellent camouflage often arouse comment.

Field work and information sessions will be advertised in the journal and Paul Burton is requesting that those interested in a specific project RSVP before the date provided. As some projects require a minimum number of participants this will be essential.

If anyone needs membership forms or more information Paul Burton can be contacted on the address at the top of the masthead. Any new members are welcome to join the group as there are many interesting things to achieve in the near future.

Malleefowl Watch

Included with the first edition of the journal is a copy of the Malleefowl Watch data form. The forms explain themselves and members are asked to fill them in when they see a Malleefowl. The more isolated and remote the sighting the better. Happy bird watching

MY FIRST MALLEEFOWL

Ever since I was young I have enjoyed going out into the isolated areas of Australia. Most of the time I had to settle for family outings and fishing trips. But the best times were when I could be alone in the bush. At a barbecue I could often stroll away for small walks. There was always something to explore and observe.

As soon as I was sixteen I sat for my motor vehicle licence. I then had the freedom of being able to escape to isolation

alone. Armed with a beat up .22 rifle I enjoyed shooting rabbits and foxes as I walked through the bush

One day I was out shooting on a friends farm about 30 kilometres south of Waikerie in the Riverland of South Australia. I spotted a pair of Malleefowl slowly walking and feeding only 20 metres away. I easily remember the beauty of these birds and how stately and gracefully they moved. They blended in so well.

After this sighting I discovered that the landholders knew of an active nest in some mallee forest. On several occasions I had the privilege of visiting the nest but I never saw the birds again. This area of mallee has now been grazed and it appears that the Malleefowl no longer live there. Little did I know that I would one day study and research this species and that it would fill an important role in my life.

Paul Burton,
Ecologist, Ouyen, Vic.

MALLEEFOWLERS DIARY

Date	Activity	RSVP
Sept 11, 1998 11.30 am	Victorian Malleefowl Group Meeting Wonga Campground, Wyperfeld National Pk	Not required
Sept 13, 1998	Moonah Grid Search , Wyperfeld National Pk	07/09/98
Sept 20, 1998	Garston Station Survey , New South Wales	13/09/98
Oct 11, 1998	Field Project to be announced	04/10/98

Upcoming Malleefowl Activities

On Friday September 11 at 11.30 am. the Victorian Malleefowl Group will be meeting at the Wonga campground, in the south of Wyperfeld National Park.

Everyone is welcome to attend as a wide range of issues are always covered at these meetings. A field exercise at the Lowan Malleefowl grid will be undertaken in the afternoon. For more information contact Paul Burton.

Several field projects have been organised for those members who want to become more involved in Malleefowl research.

They are included in the above table. The first field exercise is proposed for September 13 and will be at the Moonah Malleefowl grid in northern Wyperfeld National Park. The group should congregate at the Casuarina Campground south east of Pine Plains at 9am. It is very important for those who definitely want to be involved to send an RSVP.

The Moonah exercise will commence with an instruction and demonstration session before lunch and an opportunity to put new skills into action

afterwards. We will be performing important data collection yet the work is fun and all member's knowledge of Malleefowl will be enhanced considerably.

The Garston Station survey will be in conjunction with the Bird Observers Club in Mildura. It is certainly out of most peoples way but some may want to attend.

For all RSVP's please send them to Paul Burton via PO Box 158, Ouyen 3490 or leave a message on his answering machine at (03) 50921327.

MALLEEFOWLER PROFILE

The majority of research on Malleefowl has been conducted within the last ten years. Prior to this little work had been done on the species. One person who contributed towards this early work was Mr Angus Torpey of Turriff, Victoria.

In the early 1960's Angus started his observations of Malleefowl at what is now called the Wathe Flora and Fauna Reserve. With initial help from his wife Hazel and other family members he started observing the birds, their nest locations and the predators that preyed upon them. They searched large sections of the reserve for nests and marked them with hand made pegs and stakes. Some of these markers are still to be found.

Earlier as a child Angus can easily remember going into the scrub looking for birds eggs and animals. Armed with an acute knowledge of the area and a .22 rifle he hunted for food during the depression years. Malleefowl and bronzewing pigeons were relatively easy to harvest and the family depended on this food source. Those were the days when wildlife was more plentiful and shooting such animals did not attract large fines as it does now.

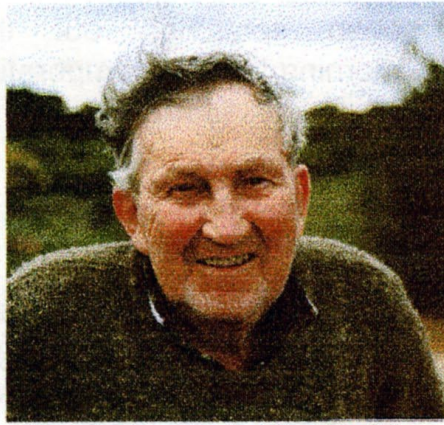


Photo: Paul Burton

Mr Angus Torpey (above)

Angus grew to love the Malleefowl with a passion. He has spent thousands of hours during his life simply watching their habits and ways.

"They are mallee farmers in a way. Every bird is different and depends on their environment. They are steady, slow and often just look at you," he says with a sparkle in his eyes.

This is a man that knows this species well. His early work is one of the few sources of accurate data that ecologists can use to determine if population levels have changed over the years. With a research grid named the 'Torpey Grid' many of the nests that were found in the 1960's by him are still assessed annually. To be able to compare back so far is critical for their ongoing management and it is heartening to find that Malleefowl numbers are quite stable in the same area.

Lowan Behold

Angus has experience in breeding programmes having incubated many eggs officially for the then Fisheries and Wildlife Department. These birds were released back into the mallee forests. He has also captured many Malleefowl and attached marker rings for identification purposes. He was able to determine from year to year which nests different pairs of birds worked and whether pairs split or took up new mates on the death of a partner.

Angus also developed an acute knowledge of the fox. At nesting mounds he often saw them. He is the only person to have seen a fox remove an egg from a nest in its jaws. This is remarkable as Malleefowl eggs are large and brittle. Evidence of this occurring is now recognised.

And then there are the stories. Like the couple who camped out near a Malleefowl nest to observe the birds. They rushed back to Angus at dawn terrified by the sounds of "wild bulls down there". It turned out it was a male Malleefowl calling out its resonating early morning booming from a roosting tree near their tent!

"There's some people like that," says Angus laughing. You can imagine their faces can't you.

Is that nest active? What to look for.

by Paul Burton

A critical part of Malleefowl research is being able to determine whether a nesting mound is active or inactive. Many nests people have told me are active are actually quite old and inactive.

So what is an active nest? Strictly speaking an active nest is one in which breeding is taking place. This means that eggs are being incubated inside it. These nests are found between October and March.

Most nests are easy to see and spot because over the years Malleefowl have scratched material in and around an excavated conical hole in the ground. Active nests can often be confused with inactive nests because conditions at each site vary.



Nest 1. Photo: Heidi Fielke

Author at active nest, Calperum Station, Renmark, January 1998.

The above photo was taken during a summer afternoon and shows a large active nest. The mixed soil and leaf litter is piled high to protect and maintain the optimum temperature for the eggs within. The nest may have

been scratched out that morning to allow temperature control or another egg to be laid.

An active nest often exhibits most of the following signs:

(a) lots of very fresh Malleefowl prints and signs including scats and scratchings on and around the nest. The surface of the nest is loose and not crusty. A walkway of many prints often joins the nest and a close resting place for the male during his regular visits to and from the nest,

(b) bird(s) on or next to the nest, and/or

(c) obvious litter collection areas around the nest where the leaves, branches and other materials had been raked up and deposited into the crater earlier in the year.

Obviously each nest has a combination of signs and not all active nests are the same shape as the one pictured. Often active nests are encountered that have been excavated out by the male bird to allow for temperature regulation and egg laying. They can be shaped like a crater but will still exhibit fresh signs of activity as detailed above.

Other nests such as Nest 2 in the photo below show signs of activity. This nest is undergoing preparation and the litter being collected and raked into a deep excavated hole can be seen to the right

Lowan Behold



Nest 2. Photo: Paul Burton

Nest being prepared, Sunset Country, Victoria, May 1998.

of the picture. The signs present may include fresh and old prints, rake marks and scats. These nests are often found between April and October and may indeed progress to become 'active' later in the year. However if suitable conditions for breeding do not eventuate they may be deserted and remain as a hole in the ground filled with nesting material. This litter bleaches over time and this provides clues about its age. Some nests of this form remain similar for many years.



Nest 3. Photo: Paul Burton

Inactive nest, Hincks CP, Eyre Peninsula, SA, July 1998.

Most nests look like a crater in the ground and are similar to Nest 3 above. They can be larger or smaller but if found in summer are inactive and do not exhibit the classic signs of activity. Many of them do have Malleefowl prints on them but these tend

5

Lowan Behold

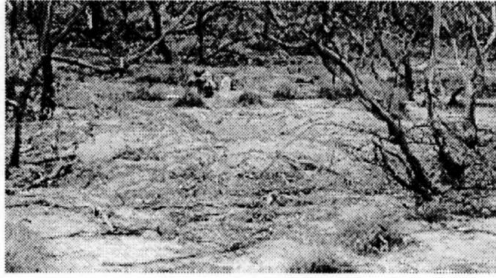
to be few and are left from wandering birds. Their surface is often crusty and hard obviously not being broken by recent activity. They may have been active at some time in the past and thus can exhibit a variety of features.

Crater shaped nests can also be practice nests which have never been used and are simply holes dug in the ground by Malleefowl. If they are freshly found they often exhibit prints and scratchings but have never had eggs laid in them. The practice nest pictured below was freshly made and showed many recent prints. Signs to look for are the freshly exposed roots that criss-cross the crater and the irregular shape of the excavation.



Nest 4 Photo:Paul Burton
Practice nest, Hincks CP, Eyre Peninsula, SA, July 1998.

If found during April to October they may become active as new nests have to originate at some point in time. If found between October to March they are inactive.



Nest 5 Photo:Paul Burton
Previously active nest, Hattah-Kulkyne NP, Vic., May 1998.

Sometimes nests can be difficult to interpret and only experienced researchers can tell their whole story. The nest pictured above was active during the 1997/98 season but showed few signs of preparation for the coming season when photographed in May of this year. It may now be similar to Nest 2 above and in stages of preparation or it could be deserted this season and look more like Nest 3.

Therefore depending on the time of year and the signs that are present, nests may be at a variety of stages of development. Even researchers have to study a small percentage of nests very carefully to determine if they have been active or were deserted at a critical time of the year.

So the next time you are visiting a nest make it a priority to carefully 'read' it. Often with careful study details can emerge that were previously unnoticed and the nest may tell its own unique story.