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Newsletter August 2006

Coming VMRG events

September 2	- Committee
October 14,15	**- Training weekend,AGM**
October to January	- Nest monitoring
February, 2007	- Committee
February 2007	- Newsletter
March 2007	- Reporting back meeting

Present Committee

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Malleefowl and waste at Nowingi

Adapted from the Sunraysia Daily July 5 report

"Clearing of land remains the greatest threat to the endangered Malleefowl. Construction of the proposed toxic waste dump at Nowingi would result in the clearing of about 10 hectares of vegetation with high significance".

Dr Joe Benshemesh of the Victorian Malleefowl Recovery Group said it was important to keep the Nowingi site to stop a continuing decline in habitat of the bird. The facility represents a permanent change to the landscape for thousands of years, and the numbers of birds in this area have fallen by about half over the past decade.

Group secretary Ann Stokie said it was a war of attrition being waged. Large scale clearing had fragmented the remaining areas of Mallee where populations remained but now the chief threat is incremental clearing. "If this proceeds then it says that this is okay, the precedent has been set. If it is okay for the government to clear large areas of land then it is okay for anybody."

Dr Benshemesh said a line had to be drawn in the sand by the lead agency for protection of the environment, and that was the government. "In fact I find it depressing that so many millions of dollars have been spent so far on this proposal when it should never have started. We have to protect all the area of high conservation areas that we have left, full stop. Personally I find the notion of trucking waste five hundred kilometres to dump it into native vegetation quite appalling." The integrity of the whole region would be compromised by the government itself, Dr Benshemesh said. "It undermines the whole public perception of what national parks are about."

Dr Benshemesh said the impact on a wide-ranging bird like Malleefowl, would be far wider than the footprint of the facility. "We must consider that this thing is going to outlast the pyramids, this is forever, it can never be rehabilitated."

You probably know that the results of this hearing have been delayed to late November. A huge thank you to all those who gave so much time and effort in preparing and presenting to the hearing. Gil

Malleefowl habitat at the Nowingi site

If you want to nominate for the committee or executive, forms are available now from our Secretary, by post or online

What would you like in the Newsletter?
What have you done?
Tell Gil and send pictures to
giliz@netconnect.com.au

Team Outpatients and VMRG at Torpeys

Searching the Torpey site

Adapted from the Hopetoun Courier, May 18 2006

On April 29 and 30 members of the Murray to Moyne cycling team (Team Outpatients), researched 02 Torpey grid for existing and unmarked Malleefowl mounds, with the assistance of some members of the Victorian Malleefowl Recovery Group Inc. This site is about 4 square kilometres.

We all gathered along a baseline at 20 metre intervals ready for a straight walk through bush using GPS, looking for unmarked and staked mounds as we went. The walking was not so easy in places with a combination of undergrowth and steep sandhills to climb. On the first full round trip we swept about 360 x 1800 metres.

After lunch it was easier for some and of course others needed a rest, but all in all it was a very successful day and to finish it off we all returned to the campsite for a barbecue tea and friendly chat together.

Next morning we started in fog, and had a great walk. The search in the afternoon was highly successful as two unmarked mounds were found. These will be added to the site and monitored this season.

By searching this site the Team Outpatients bike riders raised money for the Rural Northwest Health Hopetoun Campus. The money was provided by the Dara Foundation for searching Malleefowl grids, making this a win-win-win situation.

The dates for the training weekend this year are Saturday 14th and Sunday 15th October

The Wilderness Society/Dara Foundation WildCountry Small Grant (2005) to VMRG.

Adapted from Ann's report to DARA Foundation

Funds were granted to research a number of Malleefowl grids during 2005/06, and to involve the broader community in Malleefowl conservation by supporting them in undertaking grid re-searching.

The project achieved the researching of six grids during its year of operation. These grids were located in the three Victorian Mallee National Parks – Wyperfeld, Murray Sunset, and Hattah Kulkyne, and two adjacent Flora & Fauna Reserves of Wathe and Wandown.

Groups have included Bendigo TAFE CaLM students, RMIT CaLM students,MidMurray Field Naturalists and Sunraysia Bird Observers, as well as VMRG members.

The project involved approximately 90 people from various groups and localities, and covered 21 days. Collectively the groups traversed 2,500 hectares, re-located approximately 85% of known mounds (210 of 240 mounds) and located a further 25 previously unknown mounds.

It is interesting to calculate the individual volunteer hours involved in this project. With the 90 people involved, this covered 359 individual days, working approximately 7 hours a day, a staggering 2,513 hours was required to complete the task. To put this in monetary terms, say at $15 per hour, $75,390 of in-kind hours has been contributed to the project.

Menzies site re-search team

Our President from Hopetoun (not Rainbow)

Multi-Regional Malleefowl Project

Adapted from Joe's Report to the Steering Committee

The multi regional 'National Malleefowl Monitoring, Population Assessment and Conservation Action Project' is a two year NHT funded project that implements key components of the National Malleefowl Recovery Plan. The general objects of the project are:

- Collate existing Malleefowl monitoring data for analysis
- Interpret breeding density trends in the light of management practices and environmental variables
- Develop a consistent national monitoring system and a national database, and foster on-going and self-sufficient monitoring that facilitates government, private and community monitoring programs
- Develop the monitoring program in the future so that management actions that are most beneficial to Malleefowl conservation can be identified and demonstrated, and integrate this knowledge into outcomes for conservation on private and public land across Australia
- Involve all stakeholders in this project and provide advice to regional NRM bodies on how best to promote Malleefowl conservation within their region

The first phase of the project aims to tackle the first two points above. Although a lot of data has been collected and collated, there is still information held by individuals and agencies which could help.

'Gap analysis' is a method which examines the gap between the data we have available for the review and analysis of Malleefowl monitoring data, and the data we expected or would reasonably have liked to have for these analyses. While some gaps identified may be remedied if a reliable source of data can be found, other gaps may be by nature unfillable because data was not collected.

Data collated include 'nests used for breeding, nest description, study sites used, monitoring sites locations, years of data, no. of nests checked per site, regularity of re-searching, abundance of foxes et al, fox control, herbivore control, habitat fragmentation, climate, fire history, food pulses, and environmental attributes of sites.

Gaps in data in some places can be overcome by comparing with good data from other places. We have a lot of consistent data about sites and nests now from Victoria, especially over the last 10 years (of drought!), but there are gaps in information about past management, especially fox control and herbivore control (goats and sheep). We are also lacking information on fire history, climate, and soil and habitat classes, but this information should soon be available.

The focus of the first analyses will be on how the original data protocols have performed, and this will provide a firm basis from which to design future Malleefowl monitoring programs.

Joe Benshemesh explaining the use of Cybertracker and GPS for monitoring– or think of your own title!

Malleefowl monitoring 05-06

Adapted from Joe's report to VRMG April 2006

The VMRG visited 997 Malleefowl nests during the 2005/6 breeding season, of which a pleasing 123 were active. This is the most ever recorded in Victoria!

This great result was in part due to increased breeding at sites compared to the last few years, but also because we have also monitored more nests at more sites than ever before. For example, in the past few years we have added several sites to the system, and in 2005 we added 40 nests to established sites: 28 nests due to the re-searches by Greencorp, plus another 18 nests that were found during the course of routine monitoring. Only two of the 28 newly described nests were active when the sites were monitored.

The trends in breeding numbers are showing some positive signs, although there are certainly a number of sites at which Malleefowl are still losing ground. At the 22 sites that we have been monitoring for at least ten years, we recorded 93 active nests and this is the best result we have had since 1996. The trends in the different geographic regions over the last decade or so show that there has been an improvement in breeding numbers in all regions compared with last year.

This trend was most marked and welcome in the North-west (Hattah and Sunset) where breeding numbers were higher than they have been for the past eight years, although still only two-thirds the number recorded in 1996/7. In the Eastern Big Desert (Wyperfeld, Bronzewing and Wathe) breeding numbers were still below those prior to the 2002 drought; some sites appear to be doing very well (03,04) whereas others show less than half the breeding numbers that they usually show (02,20,23). In the northeast (Annuello, Wandown, Menzies and O'Brees), the unusually high breeding numbers at Wandown and Menzies has continued now for three seasons and represent a full recovery at these site from the decline that was evident in the mid-late 1990s (breeding densities are now better than those recorded in the early 1990s).

Longer term trends are also positive. Seven of our sites (in the Eastern Big Desert and North East) have been monitored for at least 18 years and show that while breeding numbers are still less than the usual breeding numbers in the early 1990s, 2005 was the best breeding season since 1998.

The monitoring system is working well and the data are of a very high standard again.

The main monitoring issues to focus on now are that we should:

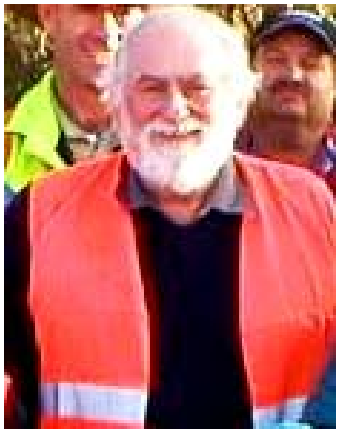
- Continue the high standard of data collection
- Support the multi-regional Malleefowl project
- Refine the monitoring program and develop field techniques to describe and track changes in the habitats that support Malleefowl.

Our data on Malleefowl is excellent, but its power to explain trends in the birds populations is limited by our knowledge of our seasonal knowledge of their food resources, predator numbers, and other factors. With suitably fast and easy techniques, we could monitor these resources and greatly increase the value of the data we already collect. The multiregional project provides us with the opportunity to at least begin this process.

The multi-regional Malleefowl project will lay the foundation that enables us to develop a more dynamic form of monitoring that integrates management and research. This is a critical point in the evolution of the monitoring program, and that if we set things up carefully now, we will learn a tremendous amount about Malleefowl conservation requirements over the next decade.

The effort made by people in collecting the high quality data is greatly appreciated, together with the tremendous effort by the Stokies in keeping the program running, performing the duties of the cybertracker 'hub', doing preliminary checks, supplying summaries, and conducting questionnaires which provide the sort of feedback needed to improve the technology.

Secretary - Ann Stokie



Equipment - Peter Stokie