

Lowan Behold!

Newsletter of

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Coming VMRG 2014 events

- National Malleefowl Forum Dubbo, Sep 12-15
- Training w/e Wyperfeld NP, October 11-12
- AGM at Wyperfeld weekend, October 11
- Monitoring October – January
- Summer newsletter

See www.malleefowlvictoria.org.au
or contact our Secretary Ross Macfarlane (see above)



Watching you watching me!

Canadians at a Malleefowl Mound

by **Paul Prevett and Candy McManiman**, Ontario, Canada

For Candy and I a love of wild things goes way back. I was involved in research and conservation studies of geese, polar bears and other arctic wildlife in northern Canada for many years while Candy taught school in a remote sub-arctic community, in the process also becoming a wildlife artist. Now retired we happily travel to far off places to experience as many of the globe's wonderful and still intact biomes or ecosystems as possible, and see their representative plants

and animals – such as a Jaguar and Hyacinth Macaw in Brazil; penguins and albatrosses on Antarctic islands; a Tiger in India; or Mountain Gorilla and the strange Shoebill in Uganda to mention a few. But up till now we hadn't been "down under".

To visit Australia of course is a complete no-brainer. It is chock full of quirky, charismatic species that people with our interests dream of seeing one day. Although possibly a bit of a yawn to some Aussies we very much wanted to see some of your terrific cockatoos and parrots. And a female kangaroo carrying her joey. Without doubt the iconic Koala and Platypus. Could we still see a wild Tasmanian Devil? Even the enigmatic little Plains Wanderer (which we now know is an offbeat shorebird or wader, not a quail or buttonquail). And we did see these, all of them. Yet there was one other bird high on our list.

I think it was around 1970, when I was a young biology student, that I saw an early film (I think by a man named Frith) about a strange bird in Australia called Malleefowl that appeared to me like a pheasant or large grouse. Amazingly it laid its eggs in a huge pile of sand, leaves and woody debris it had kicked together. Then kept fussing with it for days on end until the young hatched by themselves and climbed up through the sand, at which point the adults completely ignored them and the young birds wandered off alone! The narrator explained that the seemingly aimless scratching and kicking was in fact intricate innate behavior to regulate temperature around the eggs so as to enable them to develop properly, and ultimately hatch. Obviously all this was extremely fascinating and I thought to myself that if circumstances ever permitted I had to see this bird someday.

That day came nearly 45 years later, but not before I had contacted Ross Macfarlane to ask for help about where we might have our best chance to see a Malleefowl. Instead he emailed me back that Ron Wiseman, a member of VMRG, had already agreed to try to show us a bird! So it was that on the evening of Dec. 11 we met Ron at his home in Hopetoun to plan the next day. Before we left I could not resist asking what he reckoned our chances to be. "Good" he said "If there's a bird at the mound". I wasn't at all sure how to take this.

It's not long after 09:00 and we are bouncing along a sandy track in the Wathe Reserve in Ron's vintage 4WD RangeRover (well over 450,000 km on it!), stunning Regent Parrots perched in the scrub alongside us, when he stops, switches off the motor and climbs out. Has the long anticipated moment arrived? Maybe not, because Ron keeps peering into the Mallee. Then my heart skips a beat as he turns back to us, a big grin on his face and motions us to get out. It is pure magic, and just like the film! A fabulous male is walking casually around the mound, at intervals kicking a bit of sand about. "He's just working it for a little while in the morning" Ron says. Candy fires off multiple bursts from her camera; I just gawk at the bird. Before too long it wanders off

into the scrubby Mallee vegetation. Short, but very sweet! And now as I write this back home the thrill courses through me again like we are still there, and the driving snow slashing past our windows outside doesn't seem so bad.

Candy and I want to thank Ross very much for setting it up for us. And Ron for his cheerful, good natured company and knowledgeable commentary, on Malleefowl and the Mallee in general. To all members of the VMRG our sincere congratulations on a great conservation program.



Candy, Paul and Ron

Changes At The Top

by **Ralph Patford**

At the Reporting Back Meeting, President Peter Stokie indicated that there is a very real possibility that he will not re-nominate for that position at the next AGM. Secretary Ross Macfarlane indicated that he will not be re-nominating. And, of course, due to the passing of Peter Sandell, our Vice-president, that position will also need to be filled. Treasurer Ralph Patford, will, in all likelihood, re-nominate (however, that should not inhibit anyone from nominating for that position).

So some serious thought needs to be given to the filling of those positions and to Committee positions (there are currently six). It behoves all members to think about whom they want in these positions, as a good executive and committee is essential for the continual well-being of the club. In its relatively short life, the VMRG has been blessed with quality and passionate leadership and there are many, many members with the skills necessary to follow on with that tradition.

More information follows from President, Peter Stokie.

Important letter to VMRG Members from VMRG President – re VMRG Committee by Peter Stokie

Condensed by the Editor from Peter's letter to members

The VMRG Committee Meetings on June 21 and August 3, 2014 discussed many issues dealing with the past successes and achievements of VMRG and the steps we may need to take to continue these successes and achievements into the future. The Committee has identified that the organisation has a few challenges to be addressed to ensure that there is good succession planning for future committees, that we maintain high level planning and the need to secure ongoing funding to support our volunteer activities

The VMRG has achieved outstanding progress since it was first formed around 1999/2000 - more than 90 members and growth, a long-term monitoring program of a threatened

species, a best-practice volunteer training program, 40+ monitoring sites, accurate annual monitoring in all sites every year, consistently high data collection, effective distribution of equipment, highly effective safety system, consistent grant funding by Parks Victoria, and a greatly valued volunteer organisation.

The VMRG has outstanding success with monitoring and recruitment. VMRG has - highly trained volunteers, high degree of enthusiasm, monitors who return to same site every year, great friendship, and highest quality scientific data collected by volunteers.

VMRG achieved this through - a strong belief that VMRG members are essential volunteer researchers, quality committee and outstanding leadership, outstanding training, modern up to date equipment, and a high level of support from Parks Victoria.

So What Is This Introduction All About?

The current President (Peter Stokie) does not intend to nominate for the position next year. He will nominate for the general committee, and has expressed interest in continuing to distribute monitoring equipment and data download

The current Secretary (Ross Macfarlane) does not intend to nominate for secretary next year. He is considering the Committee and continuing the role of Safety Officer

Peter Sandell was Vice-President and this position is vacant. Ralph Patford intends to re-nominate for Treasurer.

The VMRG Committee is concerned that three of the four executive positions will be vacant for 2015 and will need to be filled at the 2014 AGM. We are not concerned that the positions will not be filled as we are certain that there are skilled and enthusiastic members who will consider nominating for the vacant executive positions.

The committee considers that renewal and new leadership is great for every organisation. It is important that those members who might be interested in nominating for the executive, consider the roles now, and nominate in time.

The Roles of President, Secretary and Vice President are well documented on the VMRG Website and in the 2013 version of the Constitution. The Role statements and Constitution are on our website

www.malleefowlvictoria.org.au in [About VMRG - Policies](#).

In summary the main role of the President is to - chair meetings, be spokesperson, represent VMRG on the Malleefowl Management Committee for the Iluka offset fund (4 meetings/yr in Mildura for 2015,16,17).

Another two roles ideally for the President (but could be another member) are - VMRG representative on National Malleefowl Recovery Team, and VMRG representative on the Adaptive Management team on the ARC funded project with Uni of Melbourne and Parks Victoria.

In summary the main role of the secretary is well described on the website, but essentially - involves meeting agendas, recording details of decisions and actions, grant applications, communication with members, Government, DEPI, PV and media, and meeting requirements of 2012 Incorporations Act for Department of Consumer Affairs.

Other issues such as ongoing finances and future directions of the VMRG will be put together in the next month or so for input from VMRG members

If you would like further information or want to discuss matters raised in the document, please contact Peter Stokie (03 5755 1969 or 0409 356 426) or Ross Macfarlane (0417 370 371)

In mid-September the VMRG Secretary will be distributing the notice for the AGM to be held on Sunday 12 October at Wyperfeld NP and nominations for Committee and Executive positions will be distributed at the same time.



Malleefowl Interpretive Signs Extension

by **Ralph Patford**

Following the successful design, construction and installation of ten identical Malleefowl interpretive signs in the Mallee, the VMRG committee has backed a plan to apply for funding from the Iluka offset funds to provide for six more signs, to be placed in the Wimmera.

Whilst there has not been any qualitative assessment of the effectiveness of the existing signs, anecdotal evidence suggests that they have been well received, strengthening the argument for signs to be placed in the southern part of Victorian Malleefowl territory.

Prior to an application being made it was thought useful to have a look at the ten signs already up in order to assess how they were weathering and to see if they had been damaged or vandalised in any way. So, accompanied by Wendy and Gwyn and Ron Wiseman, I did a 'drive by' of nine of the signs. The tenth, at Rainbow, will be inspected by Ron in the next week or so. It is very pleasing to note that none of the signs showed any sign of deterioration or damage. This was particularly satisfying with respect to the three signs placed in National Parks, where their remoteness possibly makes them more vulnerable to vandalism.

So, armed with that knowledge, I am confident that the cost of the additional six signs can be justified. The next question to be answered is "where do we place them?"

A number of positions are already on the 'possible' list but anyone with a suggestion or comment to make can forward them to me. Currently, the committee is considering Broken Bucket on the Nhill-Murrayville Road, the Little Desert at either Kiata Campground or Boundary Bend Campground or both, Horsham, Natimuk, Tooan State Forest, and Nhill.

The funding application will be presented in May and, if successful, will lead to the installation of the signs by the end of June.

Website Update

by **Ralph Patford**

The upgrading of the website ground almost to a halt in recent months but is now in full swing again and not far from completion. For the viewer, the only negative has been the lack of up-dating of the events calendar, but for me, as web manager, it has been much more frustrating.

Our website was hosted by Vicnet, an arm of the State Library. They, in their wisdom, decided, late last year, to close down Vicnet. Consequently, VMRG had to look for another hosting service and the VMRG Committee eventually endorsed Webcentral. Webcentral is known to the VMRG as they are the hosts of the National Malleefowl Database, which most monitors access without too much difficulty, through the

VMRG website. Their fees are cheaper than many of their competitors and, indeed, cheaper than Vicnet.

However, the actual changeover process was drawn out over several months and required hours on the phone while various protocols were established and implemented. Hopefully, all the details have been seen to.

Two additional features of the re-vamped website will be the Membership Database and a Membership 'blog'. The database will allow new members to join the VMRG on-line and existing members to renew on-line, with payments being made, typically, by bank-to-bank transfer. The Membership database will only be visible to a small number of people authorised by the committee and they will need both a login name and a password. The administrator of the database will be the only person able to make changes. Initially, access to the database will be restricted to the administrator, President and Secretary. Our previous experience with Webcentral gives us confidence that the integrity of the database will meet VMRG requirements.

The membership blog will provide a forum for members on issues related to the operation of the VMRG. It should be operational soon.

The two email facilities already built into the website, information and secretary, can be used to send in queries and comments.

One of the comments that came out of the Reporting Back Meeting suggested that it would be good to be able to share interesting photos collected during monitoring but not directly related to core monitoring. One idea is to create a page on the website which features such images. It shouldn't be too hard to do. More about this later as it gets off the ground.

If anyone has an interesting photo from last year's monitoring season (or any other season, for that matter), and they would like to add it to a page on the website, email it to me, together with an explanatory note., at r_patford@hotmail.com

The Malleefowl Nest

by **Kate Pedititis**

Dry. Crackling, papery, desiccatingly dry.
Twisted coal black twigs and branches
Offering sparse sage shade
Mottled on ochre, red, grey ground.
Spinifex needle stacks shot blue
Housing the unprotected.

And then, breathtaking,
The huge smooth, curved sand walls
Enfolding a nursery.
Testimony to month on month's
Unrelenting scratching and scraping,
Choosing and checking,
Discarding and adding,
Perfecting, exacting,
Centering the place
For the newborn's entry.

I'm a new Malleefowl nest monitor this year and have just returned from a few days up in the Murray Sunset NP. I found the whole experience amazing and quite humbling and wrote a little poem about it. An impression really. The leader of our little group suggested I send it to you for the newsletter. *Kate*

See www.malleefowlvictoria.org.au
for lots of Malleefowl photos and life-cycle information,
VMRG details and past Newsletters.
For enquiries contact our Secretary at
secretary@malleefowlvictoria.org.au

Reporting Back Meeting

by **Gil Hopkins** from notes made by **Sue Hayman-Fox**

The meeting was held at Tooleybuc Sporting & Recreation Club on Saturday April 5, 2014. About 40 people attended.

Neil Macfarlane of Mid Muray Field Naturalists Inc (MMFN) welcomed VMRG members to the meeting. He said that MMFN was formed 1967 with group of mostly landholders interested in conservation and the bush. With funding from the MA Ingram Trust about 3000ac of virgin bush was bought to become Wandown Reserve in the late 1960's - to become the first Mf grid search in the world!

Technical report on 2013 monitoring by Joe Benshemesh

76 individuals equalling 126 bodies monitored, 1200 mounds visited. MobileMappers very accurate especially for GPS records. 5 year mounds – encouraged people to go to these. Increase in number of fox scats noted

What worked, what didn't by Peter Stokie

Photos from Mobile Mapper now automatically going straight into database. Feedback to volunteer now being done by email. Printed sheets went well. Mobile Mapper GPS seemed to work quicker. Please use Etrex as well if new mound found.

Motion capture camera project by Joe Benshemesh

Iluka funds 16 cameras in Wandown, 8 in Menzies to show what is happening in the Mallee – what animals, what food, etc. Cameras not at mounds but a systematic scattering at random, often on trees with open area in front. Over 90K photos so far. Processing went really well – maybe 1000 photos in 40-50 minutes with no training. Solar panels going well. Volunteers for this project did really well with their processing and just about all would do it again.

Wathe FFR motion capture camera by Ron Wiseman

2 cameras at the same mound – 1 high, 1 low. Photos of echidnas, choughs, pigeons, lizards, and fox digging out a chick and egg within hours. On windy days the bird puts larger sticks on mound. Three year camera records have found actions on the same day one year apart! No live chicks seen.

Fire Management and Fire Impacts by Phil Murdoch

An horrendous summer, with 60 fires for the season burning 100,000ha!! Temperature 46c, 80-90 fire index, hot winds. Lightning strikes at Wirrengren, then Albacutya, then Rocket Lake. Bronzewing struck on the second day. Six water bombers by the second day and started getting help in from other areas. It was evident that 6-7 fires were arrested because of prior burning. Ferocity of fire at times shows that burns and tracks can be of no protection at these times.

Need for community input to what happens in the future, especially with climate change. Local farmers suggesting to break big blocks into 5Kha lots and chain and roll these. Advisory Committee to be formed, watch papers as we need a variety of people.

Header fires - up to the farmer as to what risk they will take depending on more expensive machinery. Less fallow than in past, wall to wall crops now – more to burn. But farmers don't set out to ruin their machines and burn their crops!

Landscapes for Wildlife Project by Ian Sluiter & Geoffrey Allen

The goal is to investigate 38 small patches of Mallee in the landscape and what use they might be for Malleefowl, in line with National Action Plan, using Iluka funds. Geoff showed findings of the corridors and remnants study – can these smaller remnants be connected to these small core areas? Can we identify 'potential landscape links'? The top 12 sites are about to be ground-truthed.

This report will now go to the project Management Committee to see if one/more sites might be pursued further, and funding for future action pursued.

Geoffrey, Peter, Joe and Peter Robinson to discuss 'where to next'.

New VMRG Malleefowl brochure

Original brochure has been updated by Ralph.

Monitoring Lowan site, 2013 by Felix



Peter and Felix monitoring

I enjoyed this year's Malleefowl monitoring as much as our previous years, it was fantastic. I slept in my swag outside on the tray of the ute and enjoyed the stars.

The first mound we visited on Friday afternoon was active; however this ended up being the only active mound in our search of the Lowan 20 area. Every morning we awoke at about 6am, had our hot drinks and were out searching before 8am. I thought the pines were much thicker than last year. We sighted a few foxes around the campsite and driving back to the campground on Saturday we sighted a large male wild goat. After Rob left on Sunday morning it was Peter's and my job to work the MobileMapper. We also did the measuring and some of the GPS tracking. It was starting to get hot when we left on Sunday, and we also owed Gary and Peter a milkshake from Hopetoun over a bet on whether mound 37 was going to be active. Next year I hope we see more active mounds and less fox poo,

Our own Malleefowl

Part 1

by **David McLaren** (photographer) and **Pam Lloyd** (in photo)



We found this Malleefowl mound on our block at Nurcoung!

Our own Malleefowl

Part 2

By Neth and Trev Hinton



Malleefowl on our property.

We have only been members for three or four months and live on 1700 acres in the Hattah area. The property is subject to a conservation covenant and therefore provides a haven for several endangered species. It has a mix of loamy sands, Mallee and Woorinen Mallee and includes some areas which have previously been cropped and are now in the process of regenerating. We see Malleefowl frequently on the edges of these areas. Malleefowl have also been seen in the open areas. We are aware of three active and one inactive nests on the property, however it seems likely there are others which we have not found yet.



Training session



Monitoring Joe's way

Pictures from 2013 training weekend



First get-together



Line-up for camp-oven tea