

# Lowan Behold!

Newsletter of  
Victorian Malleefowl Recovery Group Inc.

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Winter 2015

## Coming VMRG 2015 events

- Searching Nurcounng sites July, September
- Committee meeting July/August
- Training w/e Wyperfeld NP, October 10-11
- AGM at Wyperfeld weekend, October 10
- Monitoring October – January
- Summer newsletter

See [www.malleefowlvictoria.org.au](http://www.malleefowlvictoria.org.au)

or contact Robyn, our Secretary (see above)



Toonan State Park, 2014. Working Malleefowl mound discovered

## Malleefowl Mound Search in Toonan State Park August 2014 by Annette Robertson

After very poor weather on Friday the forecast for Saturday's line search was much more promising. It was certainly a frosty and cold morning but pleasing to see a good roll up with volunteers travelling from a wide area for the line search. After introductions, explanations of purpose and methods for the weekend searches, car-pooling arrangements sorted out, the search in Toonan State Park was under way by mid-morning. There were sufficient volunteers to form two teams able to conduct line searches simultaneously on the northern and southern side of the road. Overall it was a successful day with a new and quite active mound located, and three birds sighted.

On Sunday a smaller number of participants again formed two search teams. Half the group left at lunch time to attend the VMRG committee meeting. As we were leaving in the early afternoon a final farewell to the area was the sighting of another Malleefowl. This bird was crossing the track only a few hundred metres from the search area.

When you have memorable experiences like that it makes all the effort of line searches seem really worthwhile.



New Committee at Wyperfeld – trusting in nature!

## 2015 VMRG Committee (short biographies)

**President – Bernie Fox** (yes, he's already heard all the name jokes!)

Born at Shelley, son of railway man who had farmed at Tempy, next to Bronzewing. Lived at Red Cliffs for several years and moved to Melbourne's eastern suburbs. Education in Box Hill and at Monash and RMIT Universities.

Long-term career with a single employer, Social Security, performing many varied roles. As 'retirement' approached, started to work as a volunteer with the Community/ Environment/Conservation spheres.

Had always been aware of and appreciated the Malleefowl as one of the 'tough ones'! Admiration fostered through visiting the Mallee Parks and meeting locals from the adjacent communities. Naturally joined VMRG and much respected the ethos of the group and the massive achievements made by 'volunteers' who organised and managed themselves. This involvement was 'cemented' when we bought and subsequently moved to our own 'patch of Mallee'.





### Secretary – Robyn Rattray-Wood

I became interested in Malleefowl after visiting the Mid-Murray Field Nats' camp out at Wandown a few years back, where I was lucky enough to see a pair of Malleefowl working a mound, just a few metres away from the track we were on. Coming from Merton in the north-east of the state, how did I find out about Wandown you may ask?

Well Neil Macfarlane is a second-cousin in-law to me - hence the connection!!

I have had an interest in the natural environment since my student days and taught science in secondary schools for over 30 years. Currently, I am President of Merton Landcare and a committee member of the local Landcare network.



### Treasurer – Ralph Patford (by Gil)

Ralph has been Treasurer since VMRG Incorporation – over 10 years. As such, he also keeps the books for the National MRTeam and the "Iluka Offset Funds".

He also organised the Interpretive Signs and track searches in the Little Desert and Big Desert. He and Wendy

attend all the VMRG functions and many searches and events, and they also manage to travel widely across Australia.

### Committee members



### Anthony Chamings

I have been a VMRG member for the last 5 years, monitoring one of the two Wathe grids. It is an interesting patch of bush and I have been lucky enough to spot a Mallee Fowl in the feathers each time. I joined the committee last year to find out more about how the VMRG operates. For my day job I am a researcher and veterinarian at the

University of Melbourne. I investigate health issues in commercial, pet and wild birds with a particular focus on infectious diseases and how they spread in populations of birds and how they are diagnosed with pathology and diagnostic tests. I also teach veterinary students about avian medicine and I am completing my PhD on a virus causing kidney problems in commercial poultry. The VMRG's program is a lot of fun to be involved with, and an awesome excuse to get out of town and go bush with a great group of people.



### Greg Davis

Our involvement with the VMRG is a result of a friendship with other people who enjoy the natural environment. We have enjoyed the experience and like the idea of contributing to the science. I come from an engineering and management background and felt I could contribute these skills to the

committee.



### Iestyn Hosking

My partner Heather Phillips and I have 600 acres at Grass Flat and Clear Lake. My first involvement was helping set up the Lowan Grid in 1997 as an ATCV team leader, and now assisting with Malleefowl monitoring and grid searches over the last 8 years.

Recently completed a Masters in Forest Ecosystems Science specialising in Bushfire management

and planning. Working for Kowree Farm Tree group managing the Bank MECU Landbank program and have 20 years revegetation experience across SE Australia.



### Sue Hayman-Fox (by Gil)

Sue and Bernie have built underground at Mali Dunes near the Big Desert (see pg 3) and love to talk about their regenerating bush, including Malleefowl and mounds!

Sue is also involved in various community and environment committees in the Nhill area.



### John Olsen

My uninformed interest in birds generally was sharpened in 2007 when I heard Peter Stokie speak at a Birds Australia workshop about the VMRG and the research effort that they supported. Since then I have become a keen VMRG member and look forward to monitoring each year.



### Peter Stokie (by Gil)

You probably remember Peter as a mainstay of VMRG since it formed over 10 years ago, especially as Equipment and Monitoring Organiser, past-President, etc. Together with his wife Ann (who sadly died two years ago), he has put a lot into VMRG and national Malleefowl monitoring

and research including standardised monitoring protocols, regular re-search of sites, National Malleefowl Recovery Team, Iluka Offset funds, etc.



### Ron Wiseman

Gwyn and I first started doing Malleefowl monitoring in about 1997 with the help of Joe and Paul. In those times there was no GPS setting for the mounds that had to be visited, just a lot of walking with a compass along grid lines to help find the mounds. Our grid was 03 Wathe FFR and it was very daunting to march off in to the bush

and find those mounds that nearly always seemed to be hidden somewhere. We managed to find them all and we found it a big relief and the excitement when you came upon a mound that was being worked and an even bigger surprise when the Malleefowl was actually working the mound. We carried on until the GPS were introduced and found it much quicker by just going from mound to mound.

I have also been involved with the Mallee CMA Land and Water Advisory Committee for around 6 years, and have been Secretary of the Hopetoun and District Historical Society Inc. for a long time.

## More Malleefowl Interpretive Signs

by **Ralph Patford**



Following the successful installation of ten Malleefowl interpretive signs in the Mallee, the VMRG received funding from Iluka offset funds for six more signs, to be placed in the Wimmera. Three of these new signs have been erected by ParksVic, at Horseshoe Bend

and Kiata (Little Desert NP) and Duffholme near Nurcoung Flora Reserve. Other signs may be at Nhill, Kaniva, and Broken Bucket (Big Desert NP)

It is very pleasing to note that none of the previously erected signs have any deterioration or damage.



## Mali Dunes: where Malleefowl thrive

by Bill Hampel

As I greet Bernie Fox and Sue Hayman Fox, 40 km from the South Australian border, an impish cockatiel jumps from Bernie's shoulder to mine where its crest tickles my ear. Interesting!

I interviewed Bernie and Sue in 2013 for my book, *Against the Grain*. It's about farmers who respond constructively to the science of climate change (the couple's farming is harvesting and selling seeds of native plants). Although the 621 hectares of trees on their Mali Dunes property massively absorb CO<sub>2</sub>, their major goal is restoration – bringing back habitat in all its complexity. The cockatiel, one of over 20 such Mallee parrots, says something about their wholesale embrace of nature.

As apparently isolated as this couple are – the nearest settlement tiny Yanac lies 18 km away – they mention 13 government and non-government organisations whose expertise they have used. They have hosted dozens of volunteer tree planters from afar. Graciously, they reciprocate eager volunteer queries about habitat restoration and their totally sustainable living. It includes convectional heating and cooling, reliance on solar energy, composting toilet and trapping of rain water.

They respect scientific input from visitors, read extensively and sharpen their observations with the aid of 'Caught on Camera(s)' operated by a VNPA volunteer. Comparisons for fauna abundance are made with another camera located in the adjacent 243 ha park.

Keen to increase Malleefowl numbers, they source seeds from within a 40 km radius, including that of *Acacia calamifolia* (Wallowa) which Bernie found to be the bird's favourite. Not only has the notoriously timid and secretive bird been emboldened to come close to Bernie but now there are three active mounds. Judicious baiting for foxes has removed a major predator.

Motoring slowly around the property, I spot half-metre square board sitting in a still grassy patch to our right. Bernie replies with a laugh, 'It's 'Foxy's Fantastic Fauna Flipper'. Its easily removable lid covers a depression designed to attract reptiles. Earlier, we'd talked about the mesmerising Eastern Brown Snake they watch through their glass frontage, easing its way across their vision. 'Big snakes are hypnotic', Bernie says. 'You really have to consciously not reach out and pat them'. Their pleasures abound: discovering the rare Curl Snake and the diminutive pointy-nosed and furry Ningau; watching a Yellow-rumped Thornbill flitting past the windscreen; kangaroos bounding into the adjoining park – all these told me that respect for the Malleefowl extends to all creatures. Bernie and Sue's passion is infectious.

Living my first 16 years in a tiny Victorian Mallee town, I'd never seen a Malleefowl. Imagine my joy too when a Mallee Bustard – which I'd also never seen – paused by the boundary fence then regally secluded itself in roadside shrubbery. Links with such roadside vegetation and parks are so important as habitat corridors. Leaving, dark thoughts intervened: climate change! Rising temperatures! More voracious fires! Trees! Those precious Malleefowl! All the other creatures! We are all responsible for their preservation. (*Against the Grain* will be released in mid-2015 by Rosenberg)

## Excursion to Nanya by Ralph Patford

Recently, some members of VMRG, took up an invitation from the VMLCG (Victorian Mobile Landcare Group) and participated in some field work at Nanya. Nanya is a 30,000 hectare property owned by Federation University and is about 170km by road north-west of Mildura. VMLCG had been on the ground at Nanya once before, but it was the VMRG's first foray into the property. For those readers who participated in the activity at Scotia a few years ago, Nanya's western boundary is basically Scotia's eastern boundary.

VMLCG were there, to do some clean-up and maintenance work whilst the VMRG was there, to do some Malleefowl mound searching, but there was a bit of overlap. The activity commenced on the Saturday of the long weekend (June 7) and went through until the following weekend. However, with some of us leaving early and some others arriving later, the numbers were fluid.

For VMRG, our activities commenced on the Sunday, when we started a line search of a 1km by 2km grid. The search was completed on the Monday. For most of the time there were 10 of us walking the line (photo below) – Bob Clark, Salty Moore and his daughter's partner Ian, Keith and Ralph Patford, Graeme Tonkin (who did most of the organising), Greg Davis, John Olsen, Rod Cole and Rod's mate Roger Vinen. The latter two turned out to be pretty good 'birdos' which added something extra to the experience.



The line search discovered 3 mounds. All were inactive but showed signs of having been used in the not too distant past (photo next page). The walking was easy by our usual standards, although there was an abundance of *Trioda*, perhaps as much as 60% coverage.

By early Tuesday Graeme, Rod and Roger had been joined by Peter Stokie and Tim Simpson, the manager of the property; the others having departed. That small group spent the next two days driving through the property and walking to 39 sites that had been GPS'd as probable Malleefowl mounds. About 20 to 25 mounds were located, with many of the remaining waypoints right beside the tracks and probably the return points for those venturing further into the scrub. None of the mounds were active but some showed similar signs to those found in the grid.



Not only were there no active mounds located, there were no recent signs of Malleefowl at all – no tracks, no scats and no feathers. A group of artists who were in residence when we first arrived, did say they had seen a pair of Malleefowl close to the track leading into the homestead area.

Whilst our searches indicated that quite a few of the listed mounds, were, in fact, not mounds, five new mounds were added, two found by Bob Clark out in the scrub very early in the weekend, and three found by the line search. Peter Stokie informs me that all Nanya mound data has been uploaded to the National Malleefowl Database.

For VMRG, a pretty successful week of searching and mound monitoring, and VMLCG also seemed satisfied with what they achieved. VMRG may very well get involved with annual monitoring of the Nanya mounds, but time will tell.



At the meeting in Hopetoun

## Reporting-back meeting, Hopetoun

by Robyn Rattray-Wood, photos and modification by Gil Bernie Fox – thanked everyone for attending, in particular the guest speakers and those who organised the meeting. He acknowledged the funding from the FNP&W which supported last season's monitoring and said that VMRG's challenge now is to find a source of on-going funding for future monitoring. Bernie encouraged members to email their thoughts about what they think is important for the committee to focus on (use [secretary@malleefowlvictoria.org.au](mailto:secretary@malleefowlvictoria.org.au)).



### Joe Benshemesh – 2014 monitoring results

Joe noted that the monitoring was excellent and a robust and accurate collection of data. There were less active nests than bumper season 2 years ago, due to the dry season and the fires in Feb 2015. Maybe Malleefowl don't stress their bodies by breeding in dry conditions.

The coming season is the next 5-year period when all the optional mounds will need to be monitored.

Lerps – the literature indicates that the lerp psyllids benefit in drought years because as the trees become more stressed there is an increase in protein in their sap, which leads to an

increase in lerp numbers which is potentially good for Malleefowl. Abundant lerp numbers around the mounds are particularly good for Malleefowl chicks as it means they can eat lerps, getting good nourishment without having to be very exposed to predators. This year appears to be a good year of lerp outbreaks, so it could be a good year for Malleefowl.

It is probably unlikely that Malleefowl will adapt to climate change, as comparisons between Malleefowl in SA and Victoria where the climate is different, demonstrate that the birds follow the same routine at the same time of the year.

Fox Scats - scat numbers were down this year, which is good for Malleefowl. Members are encouraged to check the database for more detail.

Joe also asked for feedback from members regarding their ease in accessing the database.

It's important for monitors to record all participants in the field so it is reported to Government agencies, which allows them to see the contribution made by volunteers.

### Peter Stokie – What worked and what didn't

Postage and distribution of equipment worked well.

Access to database and downloading of forms and maps also worked well. Where mounds are close together it could be difficult to identify all mounds on the maps yet available.

Volunteer contributions are recorded for reporting to government departments and agencies, therefore it's important that **the number of extra people that help out** is also recorded.

The new GPS units may need practice.

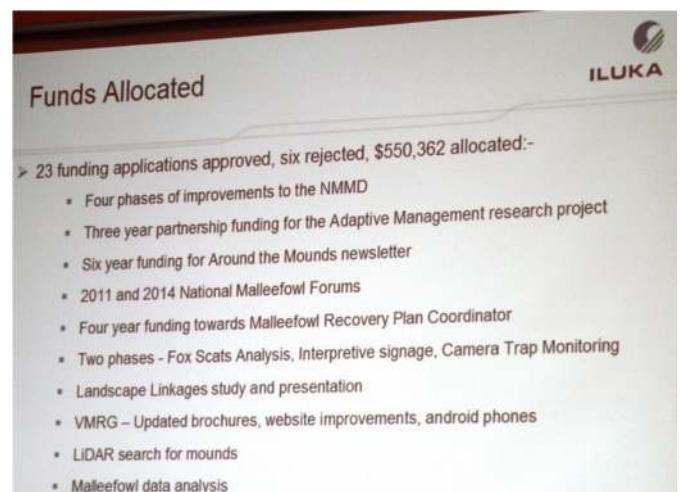
Joe B commented that Smart phones occasionally go haywire which is a problem in the field, and so back-up system is necessary when monitoring.

Smart phones for collecting data were excellent, easy to use, and easy to see the screen, photos were easier to take and reduced the time taken to monitor at the mounds.

Sometimes the photos captured weren't put into the Cybertracker program, but they were stored on the card in the phone and therefore retrievable. 'Apparently lost' data should be stored, even though not observed on the screen. So the message is - don't panic!

Transfer of all data from the devices into the database is much easier now, and it's then available for all to access.

5-year mounds can be just photographed annually if no change, or they can be fully recorded each 5 years – it's up to the monitor



Allocated Iluka Offset funds so far



### Stephanie Mitchell – Iluka Mining Off-set update

Stephanie, who is Chair of the Malleefowl Management Committee which distributes the funds, described the Off-set management process and reported that the process had

worked well. Reasons for this include: Iluka and VMRG worked collaboratively to develop the MOU; both parties had a shared vision of the best value for money; there were no administrative costs to Iluka as VMRG administered the funds; the Charter and Guidelines were developed by the committee; and there had been good continuity of committee members and staff on the committee.

The success is pleasing as it demonstrates a good model to DEWHA and DELWP, and this 'Environment Management committee' model is the only one of its kind that has been established among mining companies.



**Tim Burnard – National Malleefowl Recovery Coordinator**  
Tim gave an overview of new sites that were being included as part of the national recovery programme:

Expansion in NSW included sites at Nanya, Scotia and Tarrawee, with potential sites at West Wyalong, Dubbo and Mallee Cliffs.

WA's North – NCMPG held a field day that trained staff and will begin monitoring. Further training days will be held during the year.

SA – Eyre Peninsula data is to be inserted into the national database. There will be further monitoring training days, including at Murray Bridge.

Data collection will now be standardised across the country. A management structure will be put in place in each state that will coordinate each state's data. A crucial objective of the National Program is to ensure longevity of monitoring, so it's important that state coordinators are trained appropriately. Graeme Tonkin, from SA will be trained by Joe B to enter data and review it for accuracy to ensure it is robust.

Adaptive Management Project will select 20 sites where there are threats to Malleefowl and carry out experiments to identify main threats.

The first stage will investigate fox control. Monitoring will follow NMRG guidelines, and remote cameras will measure fox activity at 6 sites.

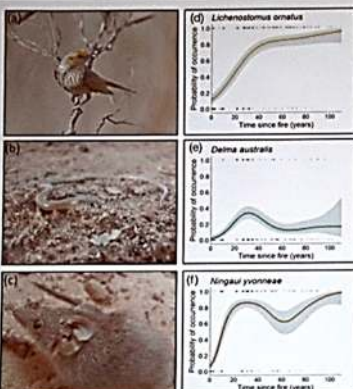


**Natasha Schedvin – DELWP Mallee Hawkeye Project**  
Natasha outlined the Mallee Hawkeye project, that La Trobe University was engaged to complete, which investigated the effect of fire on

threatened species habitat in the Mallee. The final report is on line at the La Trobe Uni web site.

Although there were a limited number of fauna species researched, the results above suggest that fires about 30 years apart may allow good fauna habitat. And it's close to the present age structure in the Mallee reserves as shown by the graphs.

### Fauna responses to fire history

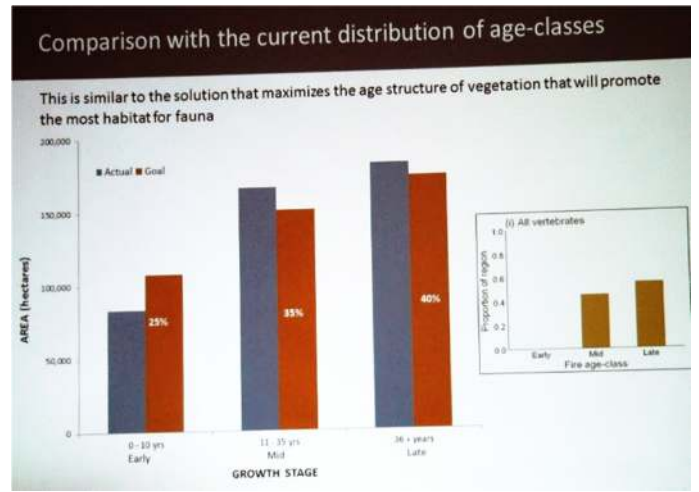


**BIRDS:**  
10 of 23 species showed a strong response to time since fire

**REPTILES:**  
11 of 25 species showed a strong response to time since fire

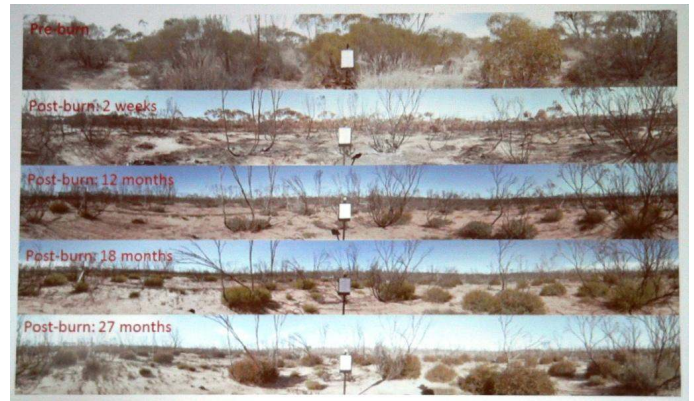
**MAMMALS:**  
1 of 3 species showed a strong response to time since fire

Kelly et al. (2015). Conservation Biology 29: 473



The report's findings were taken into account in the development of the Mallee Fire Management Plan, which is almost complete and due out early July.

A summary brochure was developed for the community and is also available on line.



### Joe Benshemesh – LiDAR, Remote Cameras, Scats

LiDAR - the mound-finding plane flights have been done and the data is being analysed.

Sensor Cameras – the findings from the trials in the season before last are available in last year's monitoring report. The cameras give good data on other fauna in Malleefowl habitat. The process and cameras are robust and effective in the field. 50 more cameras will be distributed around VMRG sites.

Wild Dog and Fox Scat Analysis is undertaken by La Trobe Uni. Data on fox scats in Victoria was substantially provided by VMRG.

### Sunday excursion to Paradise Flora and Fauna Reserve, led by Les Solly and Ron Wiseman



Setting up sensor cameras – Photos Robyn R-W  
Cameras were set up away from Malleefowl mounds as part of the research project to find other fauna that exist there.



Members also checked out some of the Malleefowl nests in the Reserve.



Malleefowl on nest at Australian Inland Botanic Gardens, Mildura area. Mound courtesy of CVA volunteers, photo and bird courtesy Alec Hawtin

**Domestic Cats = Feral Cats** by Alec Hawtin

I read a recent article about the damage done by feral cats and this brought back memories of a kitten that followed my parents home after catching a late bus from town one Saturday night and it settled in and adopted us.

Puss grew into a normal average-sized dark tabby cat and was an excellent mouser. She also used to sit up on her haunches and lap up milk squirted in her direction straight from our house cow while we were milking.

We kept about 2000 laying hens in 20 pens in a 50m shed. In each pen we had a self-feeder made from a 44 gallon drum sitting in a 20inch truck tyre cut to size and flat on the ground. Mice lived under these feeders and Puss would follow me into the pen and when I tipped the drum over she would dash under to catch any mice remaining there.

One particular time I saw her catch two in her mouth and one under each front paw, while looking to see which of the escaping mice to go for next, because she knew from experience that if she lifted a paw a mouse would be lost. When all the mice had vanished Puss calmly ate the four she caught then wanted to go to the next pen for more. This was a well-fed and cared for domestic cat!

On at least two occasions if she had a litter of kittens, Puss would hunt and kill then drag a fully-grown hare home to behind the garage. Here she would eat it at her leisure for extra nourishment for herself and her family of kittens.

This cat was an ordinary-sized domestic animal, not a large feral cat! What would a large feral cat be capable of? A fully grown hare is quite heavy. I have dressed a hare carcass and they are awkward to handle, so Puss did well.

Another example was when I was talking to a Mallee farmer from Murrayville area and his large ginger cat walked past us, he mentioned that he had seen it snatch a stubble quail out of the air while it was in full flight at least 1.5m off the ground, after being flushed from the Lucerne patch.

When travelling toward Broken Hill we saw a fox and large tabby cat having a stand-off at a kangaroo road kill, neither

**Training Weekend 2014, Wyperfeld NP.**

by Gil

Graeme Tonkin shows us how to use the 'smart phones' for recording monitoring data.

Certainly the screens were easier to read and the photos easier, but of course they weren't phones any more!



Three teams of people learnt different aspects about monitoring, maintaining contact using radios and satellite phones with 'safety contacts', and navigating with new Etrex GPS units or older MobileMappers.



There were quite a few new monitors and we also had Year 11 biology students with their teacher to complete a study of Malleefowl in its natural environment.

Paul Burton gave us the history of monitoring and the formation of VMRG from earlier volunteers, and Stuart Thorpe described their own covenanted property adjacent to the Little Desert NP, with likeminded neighbours, and with great improving habitat

**Things seen when monitoring!**

Robyn Rattray-Wood discovered this mound but decided not to record it for some unknown reason. Not even to check it every five years!

