

Lowan Behold!

Newsletter of

Victorian Malleefowl Recovery Group Inc.
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August 2012

Coming VMRG 2012 events

- Training w/e Wyperfeld NP October 13-14
AGM at Wyperfeld weekend

- Monitoring October – January

See www.malleefowlvictoria.org.au

or contact our Secretary Ann Stokie

Money matters by Ralph Patford, Treasurer VMRG Membership

VMRG Membership Year is from **November 1 to October 31** the following year.

The Annual Training Weekend (2nd weekend Oct at Wyperfeld) provides an opportunity for new members to join or existing members to renew. At other times members download a membership form from the VMRG website, and forward the completed form with payment to VMRG Treasurer, 5 Selma St, Corio 3214 or forward the form to above address and direct credit (bank transfer) to VMRG Account at BSB 063528, A/C No. 1013 8852.

The Annual Fee is currently set at \$20 for individuals, \$30 for households, \$50 for organisations. Junior members can be attached to household memberships at no charge. Please note that members who have not renewed by January 1 will receive one reminder notice only.

If you are unable to download a copy of the membership form from the website, forward payment and basic details to me and I will forward a receipt, together with a membership form for completion and return. New members also receive a Membership Kit.

The preferred method for distribution of 'Lowan Behold' (VMRG Newsletter) is by email. In all likelihood a fee of approx \$10-\$15 will be charged for those wishing to receive a hardcopy in the mail – commencing after this year's AGM.

VMRG website www.malleefowlvictoria.org.au is full of information on the work of the VMRG. The Constitution, which includes the AIMS, can be accessed.

Catering Costs at the Training Weekend

The cost of catering at the Training Weekend has steadily risen over the past few years. In the past few years a charge of \$5 per head has applied. However, the actual cost of catering (Sat dinner, Sun lunch, and refreshments) is closer to \$25 per head. So, effectively, most of the membership fees were being spent immediately. At the same time our income from ParksVictoria has fallen a little. Consequently, the Committee has decided to set a catering charge of \$20 per head (free for children under 16) for this year.

There will be provision on the Training Weekend Registration Form for participants to indicate whether or not they wish to use the VMRG catering arrangements. The form will also include provision for direct payment for both membership and catering fees into the VMRG account.

Big Desert Track Search by Ralph Patford



Ken Harris, Les Solly and
Ron Wiseman



Tony (Dad), Adam & Riley Corke

Following on from the relatively successful search of the Little Desert tracks, the VMRG in partnership with the VMLCG (Victorian Mobile Landcare Group) set out to explore the Big Desert in much the same way.

However, due to a number of factors, modifications had to be made. It is over 8 times larger, has large areas devoid of vehicle tracks and is, in general, more demanding of vehicle and driver. Additionally, whereas the Little Desert can be defined by the National Park, the Big Desert is a conglomeration of National Park, Wilderness Area and State Forest which means it exists for a broader range of reasons. Nonetheless, after consulting with ParksVic staff and a couple of friendly and helpful locals (Jim Fischer from Yanakie North, Kelvin Heintze from Murrayville and Jocelyn and Robert Lindner from Tutye), Ron Wiseman and I decided to concentrate our initial search along the northern boundary, extending 30 or so kilometres southward.

So, on the weekend of June 30–July 1, 19 VMRG members and 21 VMLCG members descended upon Underbool on the Mallee Highway and conducted what turned out to be a fairly successful track search. Underbool is quite a small town but, nonetheless, we were made welcome. We made good use of the excellent general store and the friendly and warm local pub.

As we did in the Little Desert, we set off in single vehicle teams to search about 24km of track. This was done by driving 850m, walking 150m, driving 850m, etc. During the walking sections various GPS readings were taken and track signs of animals, particularly Malleefowl were photographed and recorded.

The results, although yet to be analysed in a scientific way, make for some interesting reading. The signs of Malleefowl in a couple of places were very encouraging – broadly speaking in the top centre and north west. Significant signs were seen, despite the effects of recent light rain on the tracks. A number of Malleefowl mounds were also seen. However, no Malleefowl were seen while the searching was going on but quite a few people reported seeing them beside the road between Walpeup and Patchewollock. The majority of teams also reported sightings of dog tracks.

In terms of whether or not we use the information to establish more grids, the VMRG Committee has decided to ask Joe Benshemesh to look at the general question of where gaps exist in the current monitoring. Hopefully, we will in the not too distant future and with substantial help from the locals, establish grids in the area and add them to the monitoring program.

Of course, all did not go smoothly. Two of the VMLCG had mechanical problems and did not make it and one of our members got a pretty nasty dose of gastro on the first night. Additionally, I was intrigued by the antics of one of our members who, when setting up his tent, discovered he had brought the poles from one tent and the covering for a much smaller one. Innovation is still alive. Well done, Bernie!

For the statistically minded we collectively travelled 45,000km, volunteered 1,100 hours of time, and searched 275km of track. Quite an effort!

Thanks to all the VMRG and VMLCG members who attended. Working with the VMLCG is not only good fun but is proving to be quite beneficial to both groups. Hopefully there will be more opportunities in the future. Particular thanks for the efforts of Ron Wiseman who did a great deal of the local work on the ground and came with me when we went off for a preliminary survey.

VMRG Interpretive Signage Project

by Ralph Patford

VMRG was successful in its application to the Malleefowl Management Committee (Iluka offset fund) for funding to erect Malleefowl interpretive signs within Victorian Malleefowl habitat. In fact we were funded \$26,000 (ex GST) and this should allow us to erect 10 signs. Preliminary permission has been obtained from ParksVictoria, Mildura Rural City Council, Swan Hill Rural City Council and Yarriambiack Shire Council to place signs in their jurisdictions.

Discussions have begun with ParksVictoria, possible designers and possible manufacturers. The plan indicated manufacture by the end of November and placement by the end of next May. Placement will be done by VMRG, so we will be looking for assistance early next year.

There is quite a bit of red tape to deal with but none of it seems particularly onerous.

Feedback from members is welcome, although if you wish to comment on the design you will need to be quick. Suggestions on where to place the signs can be sent to me (address page 1 column 1).

VMRG Committee August 2012 Report

by Peter Stokie, President

The most recent VMRG Committee Meeting was held on Saturday August 4 at the DPI/DSE offices in Horsham. The following matters were discussed/decided -

Malleefowl Monitoring Training Weekend

The training is October 13/14 at Wyperfeld National Park. Registration at 12-12:30pm on Saturday. In field activities – Saturday afternoon; Technical equipment (including Mobile Mappers) and Safety - Sunday Morning.

Catering –The committee set an optional charge of \$20 per person (excluding children under 16) to cover the Saturday evening meal and Sunday BBQ, and this information will be included on the registration form. A roster seeking help for general tasks associated with preparation of meals and washing dishes etc will be sent out with registration forms.

Annual General Meeting

The AGM will be held 9am Sunday October 14. A revised Constitution will be presented at the AGM for the consideration of members. Elections of the Executive and five committee members will be held. All positions on the Committee are elected annually. Current members can re-nominate for positions. The current secretary, Ann Stokie, indicated at the last AGM that she would not stand for the position in 2013. One of the current Committee members has decided not to re-nominate in 2013, so there will be at least one committee vacancy.

'Roles and Responsibilities of Committee Members' is on the VMRG website, so if anybody is considering joining the committee, this document is well worth reading prior to a nomination.

VMRG Website

The committee is seeking expressions of interest from members who might be interested in managing the website into the future. Initially those interested would assist Ralph Patford with the aim of eventually taking on full responsibility for the management of the site. VMRG has some funds to provide Website management training for those interested.

Membership Recruitment

The committee is currently developing strategies to recruit new members who are prepared to become involved in the annual monitoring activities, particularly from the Mallee region where most of the monitoring sites are situated. The committee will place notices with Birdlife Australia and the VNPA Friends Network and write to volunteer environment groups and the like to inform them of VMRG activities. The Committee seeks your help in this matter. If you know people who live in the Mallee Region who you think might be interested in becoming involved in Malleefowl monitoring, please talk to them or pass on their contact details to the committee

Interpretive Signage and revised Information Brochures

Through the Malleefowl Mitigation Offset Funds that Iluka was required to establish to enable the sand mining at Ouyen to proceed, the VMRG has successfully applied for funds to install 10 Interpretive signs (1m X 700cm) in various locations in National Parks and local communities. Ralph Patford is coordinating this project.

Do you have any pictures of unusual Malleefowl mounds? Or stories about Malleefowl? Or stories about 'Malleefowl people'? Send them to Gil at giliz@activ8.net.au

The same fund will be used to revise and update the VMRG membership brochure and Ann Stokie is coordinating this project.

Malleefowl Site Searches

The VMRG has not been able to secure recent grants for site searches. As no external money is currently available for searches, the committee is seeking ways to continue this valuable aspect of the monitoring program. The committee has established a special fund from within our own resources specifically for site searches and allocated an initial \$1,500 to \$1,800 for this purpose. The Committee developed a priority listing for search efforts:

- (i) four existing partially completed sites (Nurcoung, Broken Bucket, Broughtons and Tooan);
- (ii) existing 24 original sites to be searched once every ten years;
- (iii) new sites to fill representative gaps in the current location of sites based on scientific investigation provided by Dr Joe Benshemesh;
- (iv) new sites arising from local interest where known populations of Malleefowl exist (these sites may not be monitored every year, but visited on a less regular basis).

Limited evidence for the effectiveness of fox baiting for Malleefowl conservation

by Jessica Walsh



Photo by Dee Parkhurst

It makes ecological and economic sense to use the most effective management actions for conserving biodiversity. Yet, the effectiveness of conservation actions are rarely evaluated and these actions are often used despite limited evidence on the benefits they produce for biodiversity. Fox control is one such action that is implemented to protect Malleefowl.

So is fox baiting effective to increase Malleefowl population numbers? I conducted a study with Joe Benshemesh, Kerrie Wilson and Hugh Possingham at the University of Queensland asking this exact question. Surprisingly, we discovered limited quantitative evidence that fox baiting is beneficial for

conserving Malleefowl, despite it being the main management action implemented across Australia for this species.



We looked at the relationship between the intensity of fox baiting and both the number of active Malleefowl mounds and the population growth rates at monitoring sites across Australia. We used data collected through the national monitoring program since the late 1980s. According to our models, increased investment in fox control did not result in higher Malleefowl population growth, suggesting that baiting is generally not a cost-effective management strategy for the recovery of this species.

Even though the Malleefowl is one of the best-monitored threatened species in Australia, we are still uncertain how to cost-effectively manage this species. The adaptive management project is underway at the University of Melbourne, with plans to investigate the outcomes from alternative management actions (such as reduction of grazing pressure or fire management) to determine the approach that achieves the best return on investment for Malleefowl conservation.

This research is important, not just for Malleefowl, but at a much larger scale because it provides a powerful example of why management decisions should be based on evidence, rather than ecological intuition, and highlights the value of monitoring and evaluation of conservation management.

Exciting news: this paper has recently been published as a feature article in the scientific journal *Animal Conservation*, including this spectacular photo of a Malleefowl by Dee Parkhurst on the front cover. If you would like more information or a copy of the paper, please contact me (Jessica.walsh@uqconnect.edu.au).

Thank you to VMRG for supporting this project and for your hospitality and kindness at the 2009 Annual Training weekend and the site visit to Scotia Reserve in 2010. We also thank the many dedicated volunteers involved in the Malleefowl monitoring program who made this research possible, Joe Benshemesh and the National Malleefowl Recovery Team for providing the database for this study, and the



Volunteers at Scotia – photo J Walsh

Ecological Society of Australia and Wildlife Preservation Society of Australia for providing funding.

'Around the Mounds' the National Malleefowl Recovery Team Newsletter is available from the VMRG website along with the National database.

Nurcoung Neighbours
A Living Landscapes Project
supported by the Alcoa Partnership Program
by Jess Gardner



Living Landscapes is an approach to Landscape Scale Conservation and Restoration that recognises people as the key stewards of the land and their engagement and ownership of projects as critical to their success. Funded by the Alcoa Partnership Program, Greening Australia is working with the 'Nurcoung Neighbours' to foster community ownership of a developing habitat corridor between Mt Arapiles/Tooan State Park and the Little Desert National Park.

The Nurcoung area contains significant patches of remnant vegetation which exist on private land that is predominantly used for agricultural purposes. Many of the surrounding properties are also considered to be marginal farmland. Malleefowl are a nationally threatened species that have a significant population of breeding pairs within the Nurcoung Flora and Fauna Reserve. By returning connectivity to this landscape, it is hoped that Malleefowl and many other significant species will be able to move more freely throughout the landscape.



The 180ha property above was purchased by Greening Australia for high quality biodiverse restoration providing multiple environmental outcomes whilst also generating carbon credits through the market. Funding was obtained from the RE Ross trust and carbon credits are generated on behalf of Simply Energy and Cool Melbourne using species which enhance biodiversity.



Wimmera Conservation Volunteers supported by the Wimmera Catchment Management Authority checking out a Malleefowl mound in the Nurcoung Flora and Fauna Reserve

Volunteers have assisted in undertaking line searches throughout the reserves in the area. The searches allow the Victorian Malleefowl Recovery Group to monitor the overall population of Malleefowl and try to understand patterns in breeding, predation, population movement and size within the landscape.

VMRG 2012 Reporting Back Meeting

On March 17 VMRG Reported Back to members, volunteers and persons interested in the welfare of this nationally threatened species. The Alcoa Partnership Program allowed Greening Australia to host this event in Natimuk Town Hall.

An invitation was extended by Dr Rod Sutherland after the meeting to join him at his residence near the Tooan State Park for a cup of tea and a tour of the reserve. Doc, as he's known locally, has lived and worked in the area for 90 years and shared with everyone anecdotes and his knowledge of local history. A truly wonderful day was had by all who took up this invitation, who also had the chance to view Doc's watercolour paintings of local flora and fauna.

One of the wonderful outcomes of coordinating a rabbit control program is that people have to talk to each other and it provided opportunities for one-on-one conversations between different land managers. Personal invitations were able to be extended to landholders to attend the VMRG meeting. Five farmers from the Nurcoung area attended and were reassured of their privacy and confidentiality of information to participate in the Malleefowl monitoring program.

We now will be monitoring five previously unknown Malleefowl mounds that exist on private land in the Nurcoung district. These sites will exist on the VMRG national database but will have very restricted access to ensure privacy for these landholders. This is a great outcome for increasing our understanding of the threats and processes faced by the much loved Malleefowl in the Nurcoung and surrounding districts.

VMRG and site searching

In July 2011 Greening Australia assisted VMRG by recruiting volunteers and organising a Malleefowl mound search in the Little Desert National Park and the Nurcoung Flora and Fauna Reserve. Another line search with Conservation Volunteers International was conducted on September 23.

Collecting data on the current population of Malleefowl both north and south of the Nurcoung Link is critical to informing where restoration can most strategically benefit local fauna. Also Jess Gardner worked with local landholders to collect Malleefowl feathers from private land. The feathers were sent to Latrobe University for DNA analysis to provide critical information regarding how fragmentation of habitat is influencing Malleefowl populations.



Peter Stokie, President VMRG, demonstrating what to do if you come across a Malleefowl nest

Search efforts have discovered five previously unknown active mounds (presumably five more breeding pairs of Malleefowl) and volunteer recruitment efforts have



Local volunteers checking out an active Malleefowl mound in the Nurcoung Flora and Fauna Reserve

resulted in five new and young members of VMRG.



Reporting Back meeting at Natimuk, March

VMRG Committee member Bonnie Gelman and HRCC Mayor Mandi Stewart



Members and guests enjoy a meal

Big Desert Track search, June



Mary Erwin (VMRG), Julie Parke (Victorian Mobile Landcare Group) and Hilary Ackroyd Curtis (Deakin Uni student)

Myf and Neil Macfarlane and Richard Hughes



When is a mound not a Malleefowl mound? by Gil Hopkins

After monitoring for years I think I know enough to recognise a Malleefowl mound, but sometimes there are surprises. Is this photo of an old rubbish tip or actually a Malleefowl mound?

When Jess Gardner and I were 'monitoring' Toaan Reserve near Mt Arapiles for the first time for VMRG records, we went to all known mounds and fortunately found a couple of unknown new mounds.

This photo is of a known mound. It also had the right shape and was in a reasonable position for a mound, but obviously had been badly abused over time. We dug up some of the soil in the centre of the mound and found old plant litter, and some egg shell pieces, so it was an old mound. Further scouting around showed the area had been stripped for buckshot gravel and this mound was on the edge of the stripped area – convenient for rubbish from workers, probably many years ago, maybe the 1930s to 1950s.

Little Desert National Park & ParksVictoria, August by Gil Hopkins



Recently Secretary Ann and President Peter Stokie made a presentation to a group of volunteers meeting at the Little Desert Lodge to discuss the work and wishes of volunteer groups using the Parks and Reserves across the region. They discussed the important data collected by VMRG and the positive ripple effect of quality data and consistent volunteer effort on Park values and assets.

We also had the opportunity to discuss the precarious situation for the Little Desert Malleefowl population (especially given the Government 5% burning targets) and the importance of small Reserves like Nurcoun and Toaan.

There is the possibility of volunteer groups being better informed about each other following this meeting, and combining for greater effect on particular occasions or for specific issues.



But the mounds above were probably not Mf mounds – there was no litter remnant, nor egg-shell, but plenty of ants with echidna diggings. But we did record them! The photos on the left were taken in Hattah and were probably not Mf mounds, but old kangaroo scrapes in the shade of the trees, now fallen.



The Toaan and Nurcoun clayey buckshot gravel areas push up natural soil mounds with gilgais or 'crabholes'; later altered by human activity.

