

WELCOME TO THE WILDSIDE

Monday, April 16, 2007

Greetings from the Editor

G'day all, especially all you folks involved in the Nanangroe and South West Slopes Restoration Studies, and thanks again for your continued support. I hope you enjoy our first edition of "Welcome to the Wildside". This newsletter aims to keep you informed of our wildlife research activities in the South West Slopes and to keep you up to date with what wildlife is up to in your neck of the woods.

It has been a busy 12 months for David Lindenmayer's research team at the Australian National University. In addition to our normal field work, we have undertaken a major communication and extension program.

Research on both the Nanangroe and South West Slopes Restoration Studies are set to continue with funding for at least another 3 years. Both projects continue to unearth interesting and unique results.

Rebecca Montague-Drake who was formerly working for our team in Canberra has moved to join Damian Michael and myself. She is now based permanently in South West Slopes in the increasingly sunny town of Gundagai. Rebecca will be helping with both of the major studies and will also be conducting her own research into some declining woodland birds.

Mason Crane

Spreading the Word

Over last year our research team has undertaken a major communication and extension program, which aims to promote awareness of the region's wildlife and woodlands, and informed by the findings of our studies, demonstrate the ways we can conserve them. Over the last 12 months we have delivered over 50 presentations to various groups and the book *Woodlands: A Disappearing Landscape* continues to sell well with proceeds going back into our research. Other initiatives include:

Wildlife on Farms DVD

We have produced a FREE DVD called *Wildlife Friendly & Productive Farms*. It features most of the research team and some of the landowners involved in our studies (NOTE: due to a tight budget we couldn't afford a makeup van!). The DVD outlines some of the things you need to consider to have a wildlife friendly farm.

Gundagai Office

Now we have two researchers based in Gundagai, we have setup an office/wildlife information centre in the



old Crackers Pizza shop opposite the Post Office. It is open most week days (except when we are out in the field). We will soon have a stack of brochures and other educational material- so drop by for a cup of tea, a chat, or a general sticky' next time you are in town.

The "Woodlands: It's Your Country" Exhibition



This interpretive exhibition, featuring the photos of Esther Beaton, aims to educate people about the importance and beauty of woodlands. It has now visited 15 libraries in NSW and Victoria from Wangaratta to Singleton. In between 'excursions' (we are next off to Tamworth), the exhibition is housed in the Gundagai office.

A Year in a Woodlands Calendar

Our 2007 Calendar *A Year in a Woodland* was a great success. We printed 2500 and have only a handful left. A 2008 calendar is currently being developed.

Last November's bird surveys for the South West Slopes Study

In Spring 2006, the ANU team, together with a very dedicated and talented bunch from the Canberra Ornithologists Group headed to the South West Slopes for the biannual Restoration Study bird surveys. While some enjoyed the luxurious comfort of Araluen House, Gundagai Historic Cottages (nothing like a free plug hey Mason!), and Tabletop Mountain Retreat, others opted for the basic comforts of tent life (a comfort which included the joys of practising ornithology at 2 AM thanks to a rather vocal Blackbird- and then again at 4:30 AM to start the real thing!).

Over the course of approximately 10 days, the team counted 31,570 individual birds from 132 species across 184 native vegetation planting and remnant vegetation sites. A huge effort! New species for the study included two declining woodland birds (the Chestnut-rumped Thornbill and the Painted Button-quail), one species more typically associated with western zones (the Striped Honeyeater), and several more species including the King Parrot, Pelican, Rufous Fantail, Yellow-tufted Honeyeater, Crescent Honeyeater, Diamond Dove, Eastern Spinebill and Eurasian Coot.

A general consensus amongst the bird-watchers was that the abundance of small, insectivorous birds was down on previous years. Whether this is a significant pattern, together with a host of other questions, will keep our statisticians well and truly busy as they tease

apart and rigorously explore this large volume of data. Another interesting finding of the survey was that Superb Parrots (**see picture**) were much less concentrated in the grain-growing areas (probably due to the smaller number of crops being grown) and instead spread more widely across the landscape, particularly where there was Yellow Box.



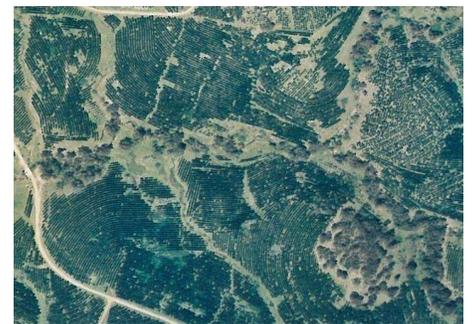
What are the mammals up to after 10 years of pines at Nanangroe?

Birds were not the only thing being surveyed on this camp. To assist Mason with his Masters study on Squirrel Gliders, two nights 'stag-watching' were also conducted. Stag-watching is undertaken by observing a hollow-bearing tree at dusk. As the animals emerge from their dens, they are clearly visible and identifiable as they are silhouetted against the dying light of day. By simultaneously watching many trees across a local area, a fairly accurate census of the local population can be undertaken. The first night was undertaken at Mates Gully Travelling Stock Reserve, where we were rewarded with sightings of around 25 emergent Squirrel Gliders, as well as Common Brush-tail Possums, Feather-tail Gliders, Yellow-footed Antechinus, Common Ring-tail Possums and even an elusive Blind Snake. The second night was conducted at Carabobala Lane, where the majority of Squirrel Gliders were no doubt enjoying the comfort of their hollows while those silly humans sat in the sleeting rain beneath their trees! One person was however lucky enough to see 3 emerge from one tree, which no doubt warmed the cockles of their heart- even if not their frozen fingers!

All in all an enjoyable and rewarding camp was had by all. Our sincere thanks again go to the Canberra Ornithologists Group as well as to all those people who assisted with the stagwatching.

Rebecca Montigue-Drake

For those not familiar with the Nanangroe study, Nanangroe was a large grazing property in the Adjungbilly/Jugiong area, purchased by NSW State Forests over 10 years ago to establish a Radiata Pine Plantation. Since then our research team at the ANU have been monitoring wildlife in the patches of woodlands in Nanangroe and surrounding grazing properties.



Our statistician, Ross Cunningham, has been busy examining the data and has found some interesting results.

Ross found that Eastern Grey Kangaroos, Swamp Wallabies, Rabbits and Wombats have all dramatically increased in the plantation and subsequently on the surrounding properties, which would be no surprise to many landowners. More interestingly the Common Brushtail Possums have done the same. While pine trees provide no food for Brushtail Possums, they do feed on fungi which increases under pine plantations. Pine also may provide greater protection from foxes as the numerous tree trunks provide the possums with plenty of opportunities to

scamper up. This would be particularly important for young animals that are moving around looking to establish their own territory.

Sugar Gliders (**see picture**) have also increased in the woodland remnants in the plantation but have decreased on surrounding properties. However, due to low detections of this species we cannot be highly confident of this result. The observed trend may be due to an increase in wattles due to reduced grazing pressure in the plantation.



The Common Ringtail Possums have significantly decreased in numbers in the plantation and on neighboring properties. We believe this may be due to greater numbers of Barking Owls in the area- a natural predator of Ringtails.

Many more results will be emerging from this study in the not too distant future: stay tuned!

Mason Crane

Critter Files: Diamond Firetail *Stagonopleura guttata*



Diamond Firetails are usually seen hopping about the ground searching for grass seeds, which form the principal component of their diet.

Because grass seeds contain very little water, Diamond Firetails must drink regularly and are thus usually seen near water. They are very social birds, often moving about in feeding flocks. Should individuals be separated from the flock, they will make plaintive cries until answered by their compatriots. The male Diamond Firetail has a spectacular courtship display, which includes the use of props (a long grass stem) and a song-and-dance routine.

While the Diamond Firetail is listed as a Threatened Species in NSW, it is still found on many farms in the South West Slopes. The critical requirements are nesting and feeding sites. This species likes to nest in mistletoe, briars and other dense shrubs. They need a diverse range of forbs and grasses, particularly native ones, for year-round seeds.

What Can I Do?

- Allow grasses to run to seed either in paddocks or in areas that are set aside such as fenced-off remnants, plantings and roadsides.
- Plant trees and shrubs. Diamond Firetails often nest and feed in plantings, particularly large, block-shaped plantings (over a couple of hectares).
- Protect existing nesting sites. These include existing trees with mistletoe and shrubs.
- Protect existing native grasslands: intact and modified.
- If you don't have a cat, bird baths are a great way to bring firetails into your garden.
- Provide artificial nesting sites (e.g. old fence netting rolls that grass has grown through).

About the Traps

Over the last month avian migrants have been doing their thing. Rainbow Bee-eaters have left for the warmer temperatures of northern Australia and beyond. Dusky Woodswallows are starting flock back north as well. Swift Parrots have arrived to the mainland from Tasmania to feed on the Iron Bark and White Box. Flame Robins

should turn up any day now as they are moving out of the highlands.

I have received news on some interesting sightings for the South West Slopes: a Koala near Culcairn; Glossy Black Cockatoos near Nangus and Regent Honeyeaters (**see picture**) near Gundagai. All these species are very rare in this area. Let us know if you see anything exciting 'about the traps'.



Hazards of doing bird survey in the Central Highlands of Victoria

As Chris (Rubber Snake) MacGregor found out, wet mossy logs and Hiluxes don't work well together, particularly on the steep slopes of Mount Donna Buang deep in Victoria's Water Catchment areas.

Chris and vehicle were both OK. The Hilux was pulled out by a Bulldozer that luckily was working in the area, clearing tracks of the many fallen tree after a severe windstorm.

Oh well, I guess after more than 10 years working with the team, he is allowed to have one 'slip' up!





Suzie Bond



Staff Profiles

The idea of having a staff profile is so you can get to know some of the many people who are part of David Lindenmayer's research team.

Rebecca Montague-Drake



Rebecca joined David's research team nearly 2 years ago. She was initially based in Canberra but has swapped the concrete confines of the city for the country life again. Rebecca has worked in ecology for around 10 years and has done many exciting and varied things in that time, from chasing animals in the Outback for her PhD, through to chasing tourists around national parks, such as Kosciuszko, and even some work on nature documentaries with the BBC. Rebecca is now located at the Gundagai office where she is conducting detailed studies on declining woodland birds, such as the Diamond Firetail, as well as helping the team with the bigger projects.

Suzi lives in Canberra. During her childhood she spent a lot of time on a farm near Albury and consequently became very interested in woodland birds. Suzi is now doing a PhD looking at how birds use revegetation and woodland remnants on some of the farms associated with the Restoration Study. She aims to do two field seasons for her PhD. She has just finished her first field season, which was focused on how successful breeding birds were in revegetation and remnant patches. Although data analysis is yet to be undertaken, she recorded over 60 species of birds in at least one stage of breeding. Declining species were also detected attempting to breed in the revegetation and remnants which was very exciting given the drought conditions prior to, and during, the breeding season. Not to be outdone, however were the brown snakes, with Suzi assuring us that the frequency and proximity of sightings also provoked much excitement!

Have you seen a Carpet Python lately?



Carpet Pythons, if about, are rarely seen. They have excellent camouflage and are mostly nocturnal. Much of the day is spent in burrows, rock crevices and hollow logs and trees. This little fella (see picture) was found in a shed near Nangus.

Carpet Pythons or Carpet Snakes eat rodents, nestling birds, rabbits and possums. Their main threats are foxes, clearing of habitats, such as logs and large trees, and loss of prey.

We are hoping to begin a study on this species and would appreciate it if you have seen one in recent times to please let us know.

Further information

For any further information or general inquiries, please phone us, drop us an email or call in and see us.

Gundagai Wildlife Information Centre

Phone 02 69 444 586

Mason Crane

Ph. 0427770594

masoncrane@yahoo.com

Rebecca Montague-Drake

Ph. 042777602

becmd@westnet.com.au

Damian Michael

Ph. 042770595

damianmichael@optusnet.com.au

Thanks to:



Natural Heritage Trust
Helping Communities Help Australia
An Australian Government Initiative



Australian Government
Land & Water Australia