

Saving Western Australia's Rarest Bird



Welcome to the Friends of the Western Ground Parrot Newsletter

No. 76

Get up-to-date information about the latest efforts to save this critically endangered parrot unique to Western Australia

Spring – Fingers Crossed



Western Ground Parrots at Perth Zoo: Joy and Fifi (photo: Perth Zoo)

Update from Parks and Wildlife Service - Spring 2017

by Sarah Comer

Firstly, we need to let you know that we have change our name. The former Department of Parks and Wildlife is now known as the Parks and Wildlife Service of the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions. This has occurred as part of the Labor Government's Machinery of Government policy which has seen us merge with the Rottneest Island Authority, Botanic Gardens and Parks Authority and the Zoological Parks Authority. In short, we are the DBCA.

The first half of 2017 was busy for the DBCA team, and despite the heavy rains that restricted access to both Cape Arid and the Fitzgerald River National Parks some significant work has been completed.

Autumn is always a busy time for the ground parrot project staff with both the standard population monitoring of the few remaining areas where ground parrots remain in the wild, and feral cat control programmed between March and June. *Eradicat*® baiting was carried out across the Cape Arid & Nuytsland areas in autumn, and the project team followed this up with targeted trapping and removal of six large feral cats. Commonwealth funds provided by the Threatened Species Commissioner have allowed for this feral cat control to continue. The funding also supported work in the Fitzgerald River National Park and Stirling Range National Park, which continued to investigate the optimal timing for delivery of cat baits in south coast ecosystems.

Deployment of ARUs was completed by staff and volunteers in April and these results have now confirmed that birds are still present in the Pasley and Poison Creek areas. Call rates were slightly lower in the Pasley area than in 2016, but given the size of the unburnt patch it is really encouraging that the call rates are still comparable with those at Poison Creek. Poison Creek call rates were very high in 2016, some five years after the majority of this site was burnt in a bushfire. It is possible that the increase recorded here is a reflection of the recovery of vegetation in the 2011 burn, combined with immigration from surrounding burnt country.



Sunrise over Cape Arid (Photo: Abby Thomas)

The South Coast Threatened Birds Recovery team were very keen to see some proactive fire management following the 2015 fires, and in discussing this with DBCA fire staff realised that one of the weak points for protecting the small pockets of unburnt vegetation lay to the east in Nuytsland Nature Reserve, where there were large areas of unburnt vegetation, and prevailing winds have historically carried fire from this direction. The prescription for carrying out this burn was prepared by Esperance staff and ideal conditions for carrying it out were a key to implementing. Steve Butler and Rob Blok carried out the burn and provided some good images of the fire spread.



Prescribed burn undertaken in unburnt vegetation to the east of 2015 bushfires (Photo: Rob Blok)

The DBCA project team has been trialling the software Kaleidoscope, which was kindly supported by the Friends and a donation from Rotary Club of Albany Port WA. This software provides staff with the tools to perform a basic cluster analysis on the files collected by the ARUs to determine if ground parrots are present or absent in the recordings. Files can be processed without any cleaning, and reference files aren't needed. The software clusters similar recordings together, and so project staff still need to determine which clusters contain WGP calls. This method of scanning needs more work to be confident it is an effect alternative to the current scanning method, which uses human scanners as the most efficient way to analyse data. In the longer term we are hoping that we can do more with the cluster analysis to improve efficiency of ARU data analysis and are really grateful for the support of the Friends and Rotary for helping with this software purchase.



Cape Arid Magic (photo Abby Thomas)

We've been unsuccessful in our bids for ongoing funding, which aimed to continue the momentum in on ground WGP parrot conservation that the bigger project team has been able to deliver over the past 14 years. DBCA will continue to be proactive with fire management, and the delivery of feral cat and fox baiting around ground parrot habitat through the Western Shield Program will continue. The project team has delivered some amazing outcomes for ground parrot conservation over the past 14 years, and their loss leaves a big hole in our capacity to complete more targeted on-ground actions. There will be a tag along trip to Cape Arid in October to collect ARUs and complete some ground parrot survey work in conjunction with the Western Shield fauna monitoring. Participants will need to be completely self-sufficient, and have their own transport. Basic shared camp facilities will be provided, and participants will need to be in Esperance for a briefing prior to this trip. If interested and able to help please contact Sarah sarah.comer@dbca.wa.gov.au



Long-time volunteer Jim Creighton assisting Jeff Pinder with Western Shield Trapping (Photo:Saul Cowen)

UPDATE FROM PERTH ZOO

by Arthur Ferguson

Since our previous update in June, there have been considerable developments between male Joy and female Fifi. Joy has displayed his devotion to Fifi, visiting her often to offer and provide mate feeding which then progressed to the first mating being observed on the 9th August.



Joy mating with Fifi

Soon after the first mating, female Fifi started to show interest going in and out of one of the large tussocks and it soon became apparent that Fifi had selected this area to make her nest. We were very fortunate with the nest site chosen as it enabled us to position our small discreet CCTV spy camera and mobile microphone near the nest so we could monitor and observe the behaviours that unfolded. The spy camera has captured never before seen footage of a female Western Ground Parrot constructing her nest and associated nesting behaviours.



Fifi on nest 23rd August 2017



Male Joy leaving nest after feeding Female Fifi 25th August 2017

Due to Fifi's chequered history with her previous breeding attempts (being egg bound in 2013 and unanswered questions with her nesting attempt in 2016), there was great uncertainty as to whether she would be capable of producing viable eggs, incubating them successfully and rearing chicks. As a result, the decision was made by the Western Ground Parrot Captive sub-group to retrieve any eggs laid in the nest for artificial incubation. The process was to involve substituting Fifi's eggs with 'dummy' eggs as each egg was laid, to encourage Fifi and Joy to continue to focus their breeding efforts at the nest site. As part of this strategy we also prepared one of the dummy egg by incorporating a tiny temperature data logger to record temperatures from within the nest to better understand the female's incubation efforts. This was considered the best approach to increase the odds for successfully hatching eggs, if they were viable, and to provide fundamental knowledge of Western Ground Parrot incubation behaviour. Further to this it would also provide the opportunity for us to encourage Joy and Fifi to lay a second clutch of eggs in the season, to increase the overall odds of producing chicks.

Just prior to the start of the breeding season, Perth Zoo invested in a second Grumbach® incubator in preparation for the possibility of eggs being laid and the incubator arrived just in the nick of time.



On the 27th August Fifi was observed displaying never before seen behaviour in the nest and she looked to be fussing with her head deep down in the nest for extended periods of time. Upon close review of the recorded CCTV footage, a very brief glimpse was recorded of something white in the nest.



Glimpse of Fifi moving her first egg in the nest 27th August

On the afternoon of the 27th of August the first nest inspection was undertaken and we were elated to discover that Fifi had laid her first egg. The egg was small and looked similar to the egg she had passed when she was egg bound in 2013, however we were pleased that she was able to pass the egg without complication and this provided hope that she would continue to lay further eggs. The precious egg was removed from the nest and transferred to Perth Zoo's Western Ground Parrot egg incubation facility. We have been in regular contact with Daryl Eason (the Technical Advisor for the Kakapo recovery program with the Department of Conservation in New Zealand) for advice and support with developing our egg incubation management procedures to give the eggs the very best chance for success. Daryl has exceptional knowledge and experience with egg incubation and we are very grateful for his support.

Fifi's first egg wasn't off to a good start and was losing weight much faster than was normal and unfortunately it failed to show any signs of development. Fifi laid a further three eggs (on the 29th, 31st of August and 2nd/3rd of September without complication which was a great result. These three eggs looked better than her first egg and five days after egg #2 was set for incubation, it displayed its first clear signs of fertility and development. This provided optimism for the team, confirming for the first time that Fifi is capable of producing fertile eggs. On day seven of egg #2 incubation the vascular development was noticed to have deteriorated and our optimism quickly turned to disappointment. Although this was not the result we wanted, we recognised that this is part of the reality of dealing with eggs from such a rare and poorly studied species. There are many possible reasons as to why egg #2 failed, including that it was in the first trimester of incubation (when the greatest loss of embryo death occur from genetic reasons), age and overall health of the female (Fifi is 7 years old), possible inbreeding issues which can lead to increased numbers of early embryo death and sperm abnormalities (due to the small population size of the Western Ground Parrots). The more we continue to learn about Western Ground Parrot reproduction and egg incubation the greater our capacity will be to refine and further improve our incubation systems for this unique species. We are yet to confirm if egg #3 and #4 are fertile, however we will be able to verify this in the coming days. Our understanding of Western Ground Parrot reproduction and management has grown considerably in recent times and we are better positioned than ever, to achieve a positive breeding result.



Fifi egg #1 laid 27th August



Fifi egg #2 laid 29th August



Fifi egg #3 laid 31st August



Fifi egg #4 laid 2nd/3rd September



Fifi's nest showing egg #3 (right) with 2 substitute dummy eggs 31st August



Fifi's well-constructed nest showing 3 substitute dummy eggs 2nd September.



Fifi on nest containing 4 substitute dummy eggs (including the concealed data logger).

Secrets at Sunrise

By Jennene Riggs

Secrets at Sunrise came about because of a love of our natural world and a desire to inspire others to care about the dire situation many of our native species are now in. In 2013, I heard about the Western Ground Parrot for the first time and how staff from the Parks and Wildlife Service of the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions were working out at Cape Arid National Park to try and recover this critically endangered bird.

I went out and did some filming of the team listening for the birds and met a few volunteers recruited by the Friends of the Western Ground Parrot. I saw first-hand how well everyone worked together and the incredible amount of effort involved working with this cryptic species in such a remote and harsh environment. I knew then that this was a fascinating story that needed to be told.

Its been an extremely arduous journey and taken a lot longer than I thought it would, but there have been lots of wonderful experiences along the way and I'm really proud of the finished film and how well it is being received.

I know it will go a long way to helping raise awareness and keeping the Western Ground Parrot in people's minds. Communication is power, and I hope the film inspires many who see it to become involved in conservation for the health of the planet.



Secrets at Sunrise was well received at the Revelations International Film Festival

I'm extremely proud the film was officially selected for the Revelation Perth International Film Festival in July and how well attended many of the screenings of *Secrets* have been throughout regional WA. We have more screenings coming up and I'm about to head east for the Sydney premiere and several special Q&A sessions in regional NSW which will open up a whole new audience for the film and create an awareness of the Western Ground Parrots plight further afield. If you have family or friends over there that would like to see the film, they can check out www.secretsat sunrise.com for more details and ticket links. Stay tuned to that website or 'Like' the Secrets at Sunrise Facebook page to be informed about screenings in other states as details become available.

I'd like to thank all of you who have donated or supported the film in any way. Without the successful crowd funding campaign early on, that many of you contributed to, it may not have eventuated at all. Of course, I'm very grateful for the support of the Friends of the Western Ground Parrot and I know they're happy with this very useful educational tool that's also a genuine way for them to raise funds for the recovery program.

The story is wrapped up for *Secrets at Sunrise*, but for the recovery program there is still a long way to go!! I urge all of you to continue supporting this dedicated non-profit group and their work with this beautiful bird. If it is to survive the next decade it's going to need all the help it can get.

Upcoming screening dates for *Secrets at Sunrise*

Ravensthorpe Wildflower Show – Hopetoun, WA 22nd September 2017
NSW premiere – Chauvel Cinema, Paddington, NSW: 3rd October 2017
Huski Pics Screening – Huskisson, NSW: 5th October 2017
Mount Vic Flicks Screening - Mount Victoria, NSW: 10th October 2017
Australasian Bird Fair and Wildlife Expo – Sydney, NSW: 3rd November 2017

Go to <http://www.secretsatsunrise.com/> to find out how to get your tickets.

Chirpings from the Deputy Chair Paul Wettin



Greetings to you all and I trust you've successfully negotiated our winter period. Been a bit wet the last few months on the South Coast of WA. Our chair, Anne, had the sense of departing on her annual migration with her husband for some 3 months to northerly climes chasing her beloved puffins. Undoubtedly, she can provide some stories in the next Newsletter.

So it's my turn to provide you with an up-date of WGP events over the past few months which has been a very busy period - so sorry for the length of this Chirp (more like a long dawn chorus like the one my wife and I recently experienced at Monkey Mia where the Little Crows decided to have a territorial dispute at the caravan park which ran for about an hour starting at 5AM).

Our State Natural Resources Management Grant of \$149,000 was successfully completed, and all bills paid prior to 30 June. We had a very small expenditure over-run which the Friends met. I provided a final report and acquittal to State NRM in early August. This outcome for the grant would not have been achieved without the great commitment by Jennene Riggs and her several sub-consultants. As usual there was a need with a fairly complex project to shift funds around amongst activities on a few occasions, but all this was achieved with minimal disruption and within the overall budget. Our Treasurer, Phil Bailey, was extremely efficient and diligent in keeping constant track of expenditure and remaining funds throughout the project, much to the delight and relief of Jennene and myself.

I hope all of you have had, or will have, an opportunity to see *Secrets at Sunrise*. It is a marvellous documentary and has received universal praise at all screenings. Since the last Newsletter and the premiere events in late May, it was shown at a packed house screening at Perth Zoo on 16th July. A Q&A was held at the end of this screening with Jennene being present as well as key "actors", Sarah Comer, Arthur Ferguson and Alan Burbidge. It was a delight to have the inspiration for the establishment of the Friends, Brenda Newbey in attendance. All net proceeds from this screening were dedicated to our fund raising for the Captive Breeding Program at the Zoo and thanks to Jennene for generously donating her share of these proceeds. Net revenue from screenings are normally shared on a 50:50 basis with Jennene, which in a small way is contributing to defraying her major in-kind contribution to the documentary (in the order of \$150,000+).

Just prior to the Zoo screening, *Secrets* was shown three times at the Perth Revelation Film Festival, with Jennene in attendance with several of our members assisting her- thanks to you all!! Entries at other film festivals in Australia and overseas have not been successful to-date but the documentary made the short list at Byron Bay Festival (it's a highly competitive market place).

Since the Zoo screening, other screenings have been held recently at Margaret River and in Geraldton at the end of Threatened Species Conference. Many more are scheduled or in planning - see the FWGP and *Secrets* at Sunrise webpages for the current listing. Jennene has organised screenings in NSW as part of her holiday over there!!! We are getting other inquiries, encouragingly from the eastern States and hopefully these will eventuate and we will be able to increase the awareness of a larger audience (and politicians) of the circumstances for WGP's, the incredible work done by Parks and Wildlife, Perth Zoo and volunteers.

Unfortunately, efforts to get a national or international broadcaster or a film distributor interested in and committed to *Secrets*, have not been successful to-date. This has placed a major impost on Jennene and Committee members for organising individual events. As *Secrets* is our primary vehicle for fund raising and increasing awareness and our "audience", it is important we continue with this workload. Anything you can do to assist in this area would be greatly appreciated.

Events at the Zoo are very encouraging, both with the breeding (fingers and toes crossed) and the success with receiving the Threatened Species Recovery funding (TSRF) for the new aviaries from the Australian Government. Therefore, our fund raising priority for the capture of more birds is now even more important and given the very, very shallow gene pool the Zoo is working with!! Unfortunately, a TSRF application submitted by Parks and Wildlife for further WGP work was not successful in the \$3 million announced last week (see <http://www.nrm.gov.au/national/threatened-species-recovery-fund>).

Now for the further bad news.....If you've seen *Secrets*, or been volunteer on a field survey, you would have experienced the incredible, and incredibly varied work (ie not just for WGP's) done by Parks and Wildlife staff. Four of these staff who are central to the overall program and who appear in *Secrets* are no longer funded for this work when the grant for this work ceased at 30th June. Without these staff critical monitoring, data analysis and the development of improved management activities will virtually grind to a halt. One of these staff has moved on to another position and other movements are to be expected. As Anne outlined in the last Newsletter, the Committee has been actively lobbying the State and Australian Governments for funding to continue employment of these staff. We have received two responses from Minister Dawson saying the "ball" was in the court of his new Department, (ie no additional funding commitment).

Worse still, Minister Frydenberg has not responded to our letter of 8th April on this issue, or a reminder email sent in late July. Only my personal view, but this cavalier attitude with a community-based group of highly committed volunteers is extremely regrettable and demotivating and particularly given the Threatened Species Strategy (<http://www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/publications/strategy-home>) states "The Australian Government has established a new national approach to threatened species, and this Strategy is a plan for how we will prioritise effort and work in partnership with the community and state and territory governments over the next five years." Do we really need to keep reminding governments that we are tirelessly working for the survival of the last 150 or so individuals left on this Earth?

Rick Wilson (Member for O'Connor) has been in contact with us and has provided support for funding actions for WGP's. We are looking forward to meeting with Mr Wilson in the near future.

And finally, please remember to pay your membership fees for the 2017-18 period if you haven't already done so as they are now due. The Friends of the Western Ground Parrot is a strong group which is demonstrated through its membership base.

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