



Welcome to the Friends of the Western Ground Parrot Newsletter

No. 81

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



## Close call for the Western Ground Parrots



*Western Ground Parrot with transmitter (photo credit: A. Danks)*

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### **Parks and Wildlife Update - South West Fauna Recovery Project (SWFRP)**

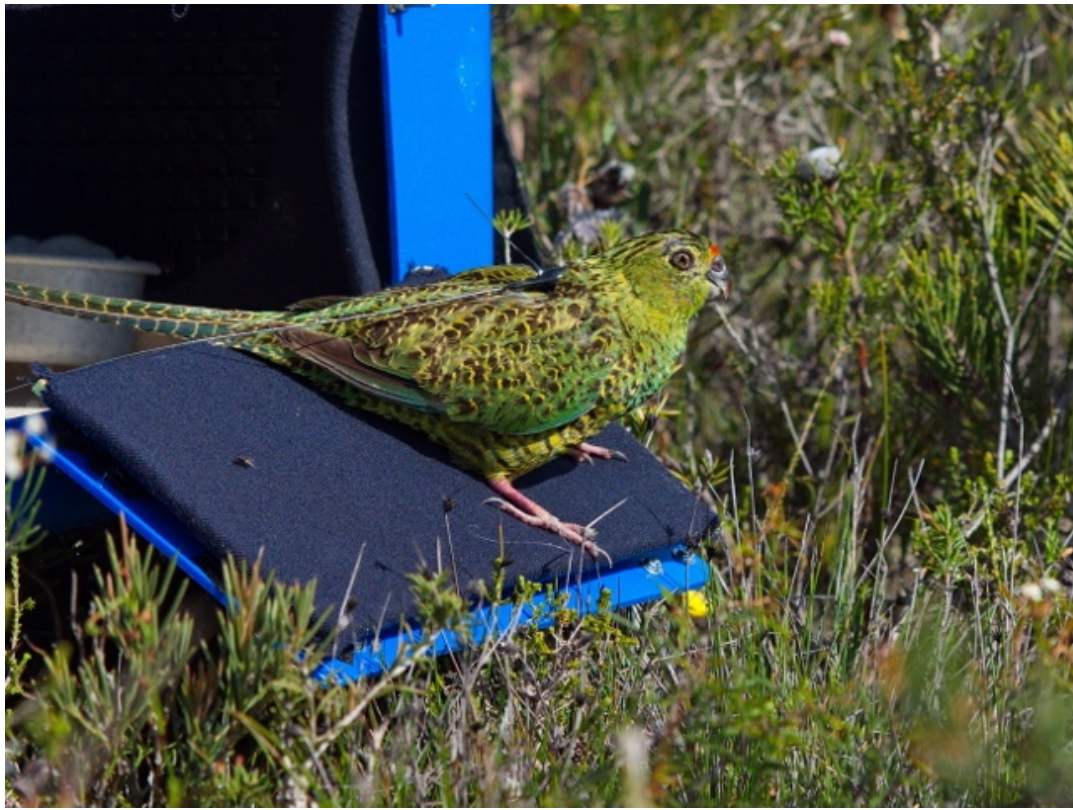
by

*Allan Burbidge, Sarah Comer, Deon Utber, Jeff Pinder, Abby Thomas and Abby Berryman*

In spring 2018 the DBCA team embarked on an important field trip to undertake a number of key steps in implementing recovery actions for the western ground parrot. The primary purpose was to capture additional birds to add to the captive management program at Perth Zoo to improve the chances of the captive breeding trial. Perth Zoo staff joined Parks and Wildlife staff and volunteers to ensure that the team had the right mix of husbandry / veterinary experts and bird handlers.

The timing of the capture was purposely set to occur after breeding period to avoid impacting on nesting birds with juveniles, which proved to be a successful strategy. All the birds captured were progressing through their post-breeding moult. Five birds (three males and two females) were transported to Perth Zoo and are settling in well into their new environment.

During capture attempts, five adult birds were caught and released with radio-transmitters that were a combination of a small VHF transmitter and a 'store-on-board' GPS tag.



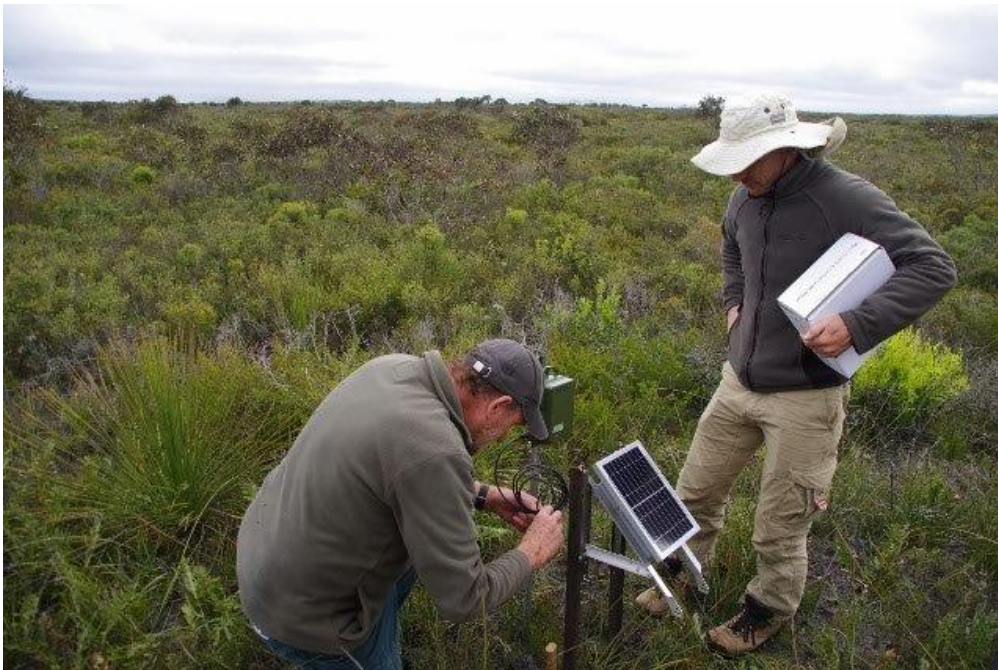
*(photo credit A. Danks)*

Released birds were tracked daily for up to three weeks after initial release, with follow-up tracking in December confirming that the transmitters were still in place and active. Re-capture of the birds to remove transmitters was planned for January 2019 but disruption was on its way.

On Sunday 13<sup>th</sup> January widespread thunderstorms moved through Cape Arid National Park and Nuytsland Nature Reserve resulting in dry lightning, which ignited a number of bushfires. Unfortunately, one of these fires burnt in western ground parrot habitat, one of the remaining core areas (equivalent to 10%) of known occupied habitat, that had remained unburnt from the devastating 2015 fire. The bushfire suppression effort was significant with the deployment of ground crews, air support (three water bombers, a spotter plane and a helicopter) to manage and contain the rapidly moving bushfire. The fire was contained to an area of 6,300 hectares through suppression efforts but also a prescribed burn conducted in 2017 was instrumental in halting the progress of the bushfire further east into a large area of unburnt habitat.

As Murphy's Law would have it, the bush fire occurred where we had recently fitted the five birds with transmitters. Post fire searches for these birds were successful in confirming that at least three of the five birds have survived the fire. Efforts to monitor and re-trap these birds to retrieve the transmitters with their GPS units are ongoing at the time of writing.

Other activities that occurred during the spring 2018 survey included monitoring of known ground parrot populations. Following the 2015 fires this is a priority for the recovery team and this year we deployed six new solar powered automated recording units (ARUs) across occupied habitat which will allow us to monitor these areas constantly.



*Volunteer John Tucker and Jeff Pinder (DBCA) with solar ARU (photo credit S Comer / DBCA)*

The value of a long-term monitoring has been demonstrated by analysis of volunteer Jim Creighton's two permanently deployed ARUs, which have been recording during peak calling times each day at two different sites in Cape Arid National Park since 2015. The graph below shows the mean monthly calling rate for the recordings that have been analysed (around 4 per month), and show how calling rates fluctuate during the year. The spikes are associated with either the presence of juvenile birds (December) or what we assume is pre-breeding activity (May). Jim's valuable contribution to understanding variability in calling rates throughout the year and over extended time periods has inspired the recovery team to extend the network of permanent monitoring sites.

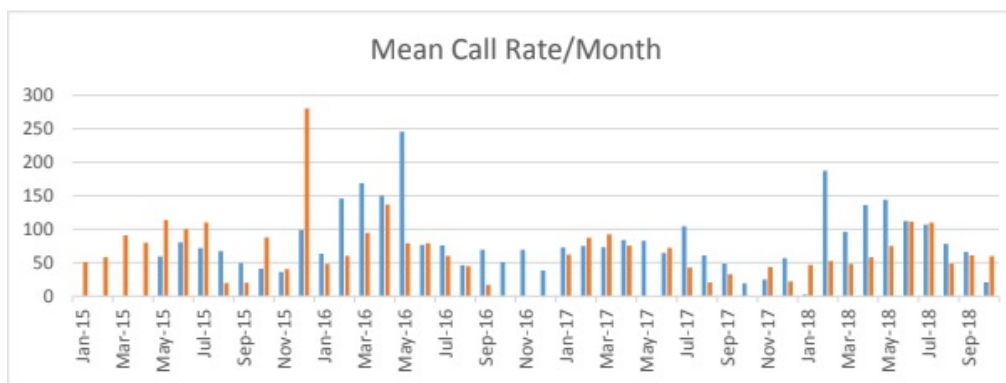


Figure 1: Mean calling rates per month from Jim Creighton's two solar powered ARUs (represented by the two colours). Spikes are associated with either the presence of juvenile birds (December) or what we assume is pre-breeding activity (May)

Also during the field work in Cape Arid National Park, DBCA staff and volunteers found a clump of Western Ground Parrot feathers on the ground. Further searching by volunteer John Tucker, with Abby Berryman and Chris Powell found that there were actually several piles of ground parrot feathers in a small area. They quickly worked out that the bird appeared to be a victim of predation and started searching for more evidence. They soon found some more feathers, and then a parrot nest nearby. The nest was well hidden and without the nearby piles of feathers it is highly unlikely that it would have been found.



*Chris Powell at nest site (photo credit A. Danks)*

This was both disappointing and exciting at the same time. This appears to be the first western ground parrot nest found since the early 1900s, when Whitlock found two nests, one with young and one with eggs, on the eastern side of Wilson's Inlet in 1912 and 1913. The sad thing was that the Cape Arid nest was empty, there was no sign of successful breeding, and the feathers were from an adult that was presumably attempting to breed.

Some of the feathers appeared to have saliva on them, so they were collected and sent to the DNA lab at the University of Western Australia. Unfortunately, the results were inconclusive. Some predators (raptors, goannas) don't leave saliva, so cannot be tested for. However, it appears that the bird may have been predated by one such predator (perhaps by a Brown Falcon, which had been seen hunting in the area), and then subsequently (from the DNA analysis) it seemed that a dog may have come along and investigated the remains.

So, we'll never know for sure what happened, but nevertheless the find was exciting. The predation of the assumed occupant of the nest also highlights the importance of the work being done controlling introduced predators.

The DBCA team are delighted to have received support for ongoing feral cat work in Cape Arid National Park in the first half of 2019. This work, funded through South Coast NRM's National Landcare Program 2 and DBCA's Western Shield, will complement the department's Western Shield aerial and ground baiting program and provide additional control of feral cats around Western Ground Parrot habitat after aerial baiting. In addition, the extra funding provided by Western Shield will see the array of solar ARUs extended in Cape Arid and Nuytsland Nature Reserve.



## Threatened Species Habitat Visit

During the South Coast Festival of Birds and Biodiversity there is a unique opportunity to learn more about threatened species in the Albany region and what is being done to protect them. The 5-hour field trip, hosted jointly with BirdLife Australia, takes place on Thursday, 14th March starting at 3pm and will visit the Oyster Harbour foreshore and Waychinicup National Park near Albany. Find out why shorebird numbers are declining, why Noisy Scrub-birds have a new island home, discover where the "bunyip bird" lives and listen to the "forgotten" Western Bristlebird. Regional ecologist Sarah Comer, who is the chair of the South Coast Threatened Birds Recovery Team, will also provide an update on the conservation work being carried out to save the Western Ground Parrot in the aftermath of the recent bushfires.

Costs: \$20 – all proceeds will go towards Western Ground Parrot conservation

Limited spaces. Booking essential. Please go to our [booking website hosted by Trybooking](#) for more details and to reserve your space.

Interested in other Bird Festival events? Please visit the [following website](#) to access the program.

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### Update from Perth Zoo February 2019

In November 2018 Parks and Wildlife with the support of Perth Zoo staff were successful in sourcing five new wild founder Western Ground Parrots from Cape Arid National Park. The logistics for undertaking this work was immense, and it's a credit to all involved that the five new birds were transitioned to the custom Western Ground Parrot aviaries at the Zoo without incident.

With the significant increase in knowledge we have gained over the past four and a half years of working with Western Ground Parrots, we have been able to provide the new birds with customised care from the point of capture, transport and settling into the aviaries. To further support the transition of the new birds, Perth Zoo has paid for weekly deliveries of specialist plant food to be delivered all the way from Albany, in collaboration with Parks and Wildlife. Intensive CCTV monitoring has been undertaken for the birds with the support of additional staff and volunteers and this has provided great insight into their settling and behaviour.

As summer draws to an end and we head into autumn we will be consolidating plans for the upcoming breeding season.



*Male Monak – from the Nyoongar language meaning sun; shine; heat.*



*Male Mingko – from the Nyoongar language meaning ‘brave’*



*Female Kangal (from the Nyoongar language meaning ‘sunrise’) having a bath.*



*Female Leuca (named after the plant genus 'Melaleuca')*



*Female Kopin (from the Nyoongar language meaning 'secret') having a drink*

Note from the editor: The Zoo did not provide any information about the well-being of the five birds taken from the wild. However, Environment Minister Dawson mentioned in his January media statement that the birds had settled into purpose-built aviaries exceptionally well.

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## CHIRPINGS FROM THE CHAIR

**Paul Wettin**

Greetings from your new chair. At the Friends AGM back in November, Anne stepped down as Chair after 2 very successful, busy and sometimes challenging years for the organisation. I was elected as your new chair and I hope to continue our great work. Anne has thankfully remained on the Committee (and doing our social media!!) with Treasurer Phil Bailey, and members Peter Stewart, Liz Tanner, Kate Simon-Ménasse and Deon Utber (our intrepid IT guru). We still lack a Vice Chair and Secretary so please consider nominating for these positions.

We continue to make significant donations to the Recovery Program, thanks to your membership, donations and merchandise sales. In 2018 we provided the following financial support:

- \$30,000 for the capture of birds to boost the captive population- see the Parks and Wildlife and Zoo reports.
- \$3000 from the BirdLife grant to support volunteers expenses for their participation in the field surveys, including the purchase of an ARU for a long term, dedicated volunteer.
- \$17,785 to Perth Zoo for equipment for the new aviary facilities.

Additional to the information below, I will fill you in on initiatives and priorities in upcoming newsletters and via our social media and for use of our funds in 2019.

With my apologies, this Newsletter has been delayed due to a number of events such as the Cape Arid National Park fire.

As indicated in the Parks and Wildlife (P&W) update, it has been a wild ride for the parrots over the past few months – so much has happened!! Placing transmitters on a few birds was a Eureka moment for starting to gain critical knowledge about their ecology and habitat use. And this has proven equally critical for the post fire monitoring efforts. We are all anxiously awaiting for the outcomes from this work.

The Cape Arid fire only highlighted the dire need to establish other wild population locations and that the Translocation Study for this to occur is critically needed – see below.

Needless to say, we offer our gratitude to the P&W staff for all their hard work over the past few months and particularly for their fire fighting efforts in Cape Arid. Also to the Zoo staff who have welcomed and taken care of the new arrivals.

We have been contacted by several other Not For Profit conservation-funding organisations offering their moral support and also potential financial support subject to their normal application processes– mostly for sums in the \$10,000's. We are working closely with the Recovery Team and P&W staff in pursuing these opportunities. The success with these applications will have a major bearing on the priorities for the use of the Western Ground Parrot Rescue Fund so watch this space.

### **Lobbying and advocacy:**

We have had several advocacy opportunities arise in recent weeks with federal and state politicians.

Anne and I met with Federal Environment Minister Melissa Price and Rick Wilson Member for O'Connor on 2<sup>nd</sup> February in Albany. Thanks to Rick and his office for organising this. The meeting with the Minister was convivial. We made the following key points:

- funding applications by P&W for some \$370,000 under the Federal Threatened Species Recovery Fund and subsequently the National Landcare Program V2 had been unsuccessful. These applications were for the Translocation Study to secure a second wild population.
- the critical need for the Translocation Study to be funded was highlighted by the current situation in Cape Arid given the dire circumstances and risks with the world's only remaining wild population. The Minister offered no

direct support. Rather, she advised funds may be available via the National Environmental Science Program's Threatened Species Hub. We are awaiting further information from the Minister's office on this.

- Disappointment that we had not received a reply to our letters to her or (then) Minister Frydenberg from April last year.
- We would like to know the Coalition's policy and funding commitment for Threatened Species protection and action prior to the election. She advised this was a work in progress.

**Note**– I will be requesting this information from the other major parties too so we can inform you.

State Environment Minister Dawson was also in Albany recently but his diary was already full when I contacted his office. I did meet with his Principal Policy Adviser, Brendan Dooley, and P&W staff where:

- the critical need for the Translocation study was repeated.
- a funding application to the WA State NRM program by the Friends for this study had been unsuccessful (Anne identified this application in her last Chirping).
- he identified another potential State funding source for this study subject to meeting the sources' requirements (eg funding application).
- the need for funds to employ the on-ground staff and the reluctance of granting bodies to fund staff was highlighted.
- to pass on to the Minister our appreciation of the government's commitment to Western Ground Parrot Conservation via the hard work and incredible diligence of P&W and Zoo staff and particularly with the recent fire fighting and monitoring efforts in Cape Arid National Park.

At the time of writing I am scheduled to meet with the Threatened Species Commissioner, Dr Sally Box, in Canberra on 27<sup>th</sup> February.

So again– watch this space and our Facebook and Twitter pages.

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