



Newsletter No. 96 – Summer/Birak 2023

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The Friends acknowledge the traditional owners and custodians of Australia and their continuing connection to the land, waters and community, of the lands on which we live and work. We pay our respect to Elders past, present and emerging.

In this issue:

- Welcome back Sarah Comer!
- Status of the translocated and Cape Arid birds
- A bitter-sweet update for the birds at Perth Zoo
- Chair's Chirpings - our Annual General meeting and Federal Government funding issues

Wishing you and your loved ones a joyous holiday period!

Please donate

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Update on Kyloring Recovery, December 2023

Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions (DBCA)

South Coast Threatened Fauna Recovery Team, Parks and Wildlife Service, South Coast Region

Carly Watson, Abby Thomas, Abby Berryman, Allan Burbidge and Deon Utber



Cape Arid National Park November 2023, *Banksia speciosa* - (Source: DBCA - Abby Thomas)

When we last left you, the DBCA-led project team were busily waving radio-tracking antennas around in the new home of the five kyloring translocated in 2023. Towards the end of June, two birds still had VHF transmitters attached, and were successfully radio tracked for over 90 days post release, right up until their trackers timed out. The birds seemed to settle well into their new homes, not straying too far from the release site, similar to the birds released in 2022. We now leave them to forge connections amongst the more seasoned translocated birds and to eke out a new life for themselves in historically familiar habitat. We don't leave them unsupervised however, we continue to listen in on them, monitoring their calls through a network of autonomous recording units (ARUs) that remain in situ. In July and again in November – with the support of Southern Aboriginal Corporation rangers, these ARUs were serviced, which means 47 SD cards were retrieved and countless batteries were swapped. The data was then brought back to the office and hungrily analyzed for kyloring calls. We were rewarded with consistent calls on several of the units and with the sound of two birds calling together.

In May, we checked up on the source population of kyloring in Cape Arid NP. Six acoustic monitoring grids, consisting of 91 ARUs, were installed in February, across core occupied kyloring habitat to inform evaluation of the translocation decisions and monitor these core areas post capture. These units were collected, and the data analysed, revealing no significant decline within the Cape Arid National Park and Nuytsland Nature Reserve population. All in all, we are happy to report that to date the success criteria for all stages of the translocation have been met!

To ensure the continued success for both translocated and source populations, the team must invest considerable time in ensuring numbers of invasive predators in the landscape remain low. This work value-adds to DBCA's Western Shield program, which delivers aerial and ground baiting across the reserves. In November, with the help of DBCA Esperance and Pilbara region staff members and two volunteers, the team set off to CANP and Nuytsland Nature Reserve for a session of feral cat trapping. It had been a few months since we last laid eyes on Cape Arid and our spirits soared when we drove

along Fisheries Track and saw the flowering *Nuytsia floribunda* and weeping *Banksia speciosa* in all their glory. While the gorgeous Kwongan heathlands put on a spectacular display of wildflowers, the rains that had postponed our trip had filled the salt lakes, bringing an enormous flock of grey teals, a gaggle of Australian shelducks and a huge band of red-capped plovers to their shores (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Waterbirds on a Cape Arid salt lake (Source: DBCA - Abby Thomas)

But nothing could compete with the chance sighting of not 1 but 2 kyloring! A truly rare event even for the seasoned Parks and Wildlife staff!!

Despite one unfortunate night of toe-curling lightning and a deluge of rain, the trip was a success with 12 cats removed from the northern and southern ends of the kyloring home range. The solar ARU network grid that continues to be used to monitor the occupancy of the birds year-round across the two reserves was partially serviced, with wet tracks limiting our access in certain areas. Ideally, this 5km x 5km grid consisting of 33 ARUs and which covers around 60,000 ha of habitat would be serviced by helicopter, but this requires significant resources. We've serviced them on foot before and did so again this year with one particularly memorable ARU being a 14km round trip to get to (Figure 2)! We will take some time to recuperate from the trip, before undertaking analysis of the collected data over the summer.



Figure 2: Technical Officer extraordinaire Larisse Guislain heading off to service a solar ARU unit 3kms off track. (Source: DBCA - Abby Thomas)

Supported by BirdLife Australia and the Friends of the Western Ground Parrot, two Felixer grooming traps were installed this year to provide more support for the intensive invasive predator management program at the translocation site (Figure 3). Felixers were developed by ecologist John Read as another tool that can be used to support feral cat control. The device uses laser sensors to detect feral cats, which are then sprayed with a gel containing 1080 poison which the animal then grooms and ingests. To date, the Felixers have fired on two foxes but have yet to encounter a cat. But it's still early days for these units and we will continue to tweak our procedures as we learn more and their Artificial Intelligence/laser sensor capabilities grow.



Figure 3: An example of a Felixer unit in-situ (Source: DBCA - Carly Watson)

In other news, one of our beloved volunteers, Jim Creighton, was nominated for and received the DBCA Outstanding Service Award for his invaluable contribution to the Department on various projects across the State but most notably, his work on the South Coast to help save the kyloring. Jim was first registered as a volunteer in 2007, when he signed up with his daughter as a way for them both to spend more time in the bushland near their home. From that first trip he was hooked on this elusive threatened bird. Jim regularly dedicates his time to this project and is often out in Cape Arid listening for kyloring's call outside of coordinated volunteer trips. He pioneered, in his shed, the very first solar powered ARU and battery system to monitor kyloring activity all year round, changing the way we monitor these birds. Jim joined us on our most recent expedition out to Cape Arid, his dedication never more evident, than when he decided to stick around after his mattress and sleeping gear were soaked through with rain – despite living nearby with a cellar full of family produced wine. His enthusiasm and knowledge has inspired a lot of people that have worked and volunteered on the kyloring project over the years and there isn't one amongst our team who wouldn't consider him as a friend. In true Jim fashion, when told of his nomination he replied, "What did you go and do a thing like that for?" He is a very humble man.



Figure 4: DBCA Volunteer for Outstanding Service Award winner Jim Creighton and Conservation Employee from the Pilbara Region Lily Robertson servicing one of the solar ARUs in Cape Arid National Park. (Source: DBCA - Larrisse Guislain)

The team have been busy sharing the story of conservation efforts, with presentations at a number of conferences and workshops in the last six months. A presentation to the WA Biodiversity Conference was acknowledged for the contribution of new technologies used for the translocations. The story of the first wild to wild translocation was shared at the IUCN International Conservation Translocation Conference, and the telemetry methods used in translocation work shared at the Australasian Ornithological Conference.

DBCA's South Coast Threatened Fauna Recovery Team has evolved yet again. In September, BirdLife Australia's Susie Stockwell left the project. Susie and her partner Sam are forging an intrepid new career path for themselves in Australia's Top End. Susie's cheerful and sunny nature will be missed by the team, but her enthusiasm and knowledge of birds will no doubt lead her on many great new adventures. We wish her and Sam all the best. And we look forward to having a new BirdLife project officer working with us in the near future.

The team got an early Christmas present this year, when Sarah Comer announced her return to DBCA to reprise her role as Regional Ecologist. The team was (none too quietly) overjoyed to hear of her return and are looking forward to working with her on the exciting projects we hope the new year has in store.

As the year draws to a close, we would like to thank the Friends of the Western Ground Parrot for your ongoing support. This year and all our adventures would not be possible without it. On behalf of everyone in the DBCA project team we would like to wish all our Friends a Merry Christmas and a very happy new year!

Western Ground Parrot Update from Perth Zoo December 2023

It has been a tough season for the team at Perth Zoo with a rollercoaster of highs with eggs being laid, and the lowest of lows with birds being lost. New information has been learnt with the first ever semen samples collected and evaluated for this species.

All Photo credits - Perth Zoo



A World's First! Evaluating under the microscope a Western Ground Parrot semen sample collected from male Mingko.

In October, Perth Zoo hosted internationally renowned avian reproductive specialists Professor Dr. Michael Lierz and Dr. Dominik Fischer from Germany. Michael and Dominik have significant experience with applied assisted reproductive techniques with over 150 species of birds including providing support for the Spix's Macaw and Kakapo programs.

The work with the Western Ground Parrots involved semen collection from four males. This was successful in three males (Figure 5); however, semen was not able to be collected from Brutus (see further information below). Michael and Dominik were able to determine the method for collecting semen from this species and identify the most suitable diluent used to improve storage and sperm motility and viability. They will further analyse the semen samples collected to report on the quality and characteristics of the semen. This is the first time semen samples have been collected from Western Ground Parrots, providing new and valuable information that is hoped will support future reproductive efforts for this species.



Figure 5: Michael Lierz (left) and Dominik Fischer collecting semen samples

In July, during the breeding season, male Joy and female Leuca commenced copulation and a total of 110 successful copulations were recorded. In October the female was observed nest fussing and we suspected she may have a nest. With plans to check the nest and remove eggs for incubation this year, we kept a close eye on her. The team decided we should enter the aviary to check the nest for eggs, and a nest was discovered in the back northwest corner of the aviary well hidden under the tussocks (Figure 6). This nest contained one egg (Figure 7) but the egg was poorly calcified. We removed the egg from the nest and replaced it with a dummy egg and moved a camera closer to the nest to monitor behaviour. The egg was candled and then transferred to the incubator.



Figure 6: The nest with male Joy feeding female Leuca



Figure 7: Leuca and Joy's nest with first egg.

Further discussion was had with the Zoo team and Michael and Dominik. The team decided that we would undertake artificial insemination with the female with semen collected from two males. The insemination procedure went well, and the female was returned to the aviary within minutes. She was later observed to pass a soft shell egg which was not viable and removed from the aviary. She continued to tend to the nest and dummy egg after these events and the male continued to feed her on the nest.

We continued to keep a close eye on the female in case she experienced egg binding. We observed her weight to increase so we expect the third egg was on its way. The next day, review of overnight CCTV footage revealed that she had laid the third egg on the ground. We were pleased the female did not become egg bound. The egg was retrieved however the calcification of the egg was not normal, although it was a good size, and it was transferred into the incubator. That morning we went into the aviary to check on the female and she ran away under the vegetation. We watched the female on the cameras, and she was moving around at 12pm. We kept watching the CCTV footage to keep an eye on her and she had moved into the vegetation just after 1pm. By 3pm we had not seen the female emerge, so we decided we should enter the aviary to check on her. To our devastation the female was found deceased under the vegetation. Perth Zoo veterinarians have since conducted a full autopsy and samples have been submitted for laboratory analysis. The female appeared to have abnormal bone density suggesting calcium metabolism is still an issue (see Perth Zoo report in our Newsletter No. 93 – Winter/Makuru 2022). Preliminary findings indicate no evidence of infectious disease, and we are awaiting further testing and will be conducting micro-CT scanning of the skeleton to further investigate bone density. We are also awaiting some further analysis of egg shells.

Unfortunately, the two eggs (eggs 1 and 3) that were placed in the incubator did not show any signs of fertility, but it was later confirmed on laboratory testing that sperm successfully reached the third egg.

Following the loss of Leuca and in discussion with the team, the decision was made to move female Kopin in with male Joy in late October. The pair were observed allofeeding a short time later and

continued this behaviour through until the end of November, though they did not progress to copulation or nesting this season.

Prior to female Kopin being paired with male Joy, she was housed with males Mingko and Jinnung to provide mate choice. Providing female Kopin with the choice of two males did not result in increased reproductive behavioural progression. Mingko did show a significant increase in reproductive behavioural progression this season in the form of allofeeding behaviour towards objects and plants, display flights and increased calling, and he did approach the female.

Male Golambiddee was housed with female Kangal again this season. Golombiddee is a very outgoing and confident bird, and he showed a good level of behavioural progression. He progressed to allofeed female Kangal late August. The male was observed to allofeed the female at least 10 times this season, which is an increase on last season, however, the female was not observed to present to the male for copulation and no further progression eventuated.

As part of the assisted reproduction investigations by Michael and Dominik, male Brutus was found not to be producing semen, therefore, it was important to explore this further as his apparent lack of semen would need to be considered for future breeding scenarios. Perth Zoo veterinarians conducted x-ray and subsequent computed tomography (CT) scans to evaluate his health. The procedure went very well and the CT scans revealed that Brutus had small testes on both sides. Brutus has a history of unusual behaviour, so this information further adds to our understanding of this individual.

During the breeding season, old male Zephyr, who has been under close observation and quality of life monitoring for some time, caught his leg during a routine catch-up causing it to fracture. Veterinarians attempted to stabilise the fracture, however, unfortunately this was not sufficient, and it was evident a surgical fixation was needed. Vets were able to pin the fracture, but unfortunately, Zephyr did not recover and died overnight following the surgery. Zephyr was the oldest living ground parrot on record having transitioned into the program as a mature, over 2 year old bird in 2009, and therefore he was at least 16 years of age. His bones were poorly calcified so this may have been a contributing factor to the fracture. It's unclear if the poor calcification was due to his old age as seen in some other species, or other factors.

Combined with the loss of female Leuca, it's times like this when it would be easy to give up, but we can't give up, we must continue to keep working if we are to have any chance of saving these incredible birds from extinction.



Chirpings from the Chair *Paul Nettin*

Firstly, wishing you all a joyous Festive Season and start to 2024. Time marches on - I need to catch some more KGW's or similar to update the photo above...

Particularly, and on Members' behalf, I welcome Sarah Comer back to the Department and her role as Regional Ecologist. This is monumentally good news for ongoing progress with the Recovery Plan and Saving Kyloring!! Sarah also recently completed her studies, submitting her PhD thesis *The ecology of the feral cat (Felis catus) in coastal heaths of the south coast of Western Australia* and achieving her Doctorate at the University of Western Australia.

Congratulations Sarah!

Thank you to the Parks and Wildlife staff who have valiantly (in my view) kept the Recovery Plan work for the wild birds going over the past months. The Parks and Wildlife report outlines the work completed and also the status of both of the wild populations which is looking quite positive! Thanks also to the now resigned BirdLife project officer Susie Stockwell for her contributions to the team and I offer well wishes for her future.

The Zoo report is certainly bitter-sweet. The involvement in the captive program of Professor Lierz and Dr Fisher is a major boost, not only for their artificial insemination expertise but more so for their wider experience with similarly challenging captive breeding programs for extremely rare birds. I was pleased to be part of a presentation they gave recently about their time at the Zoo. It was most impressive, interesting and gave me new insights about artificial insemination projects and research. I am confident their expertise and involvement will be welcomed and contribute significantly to improvements with the program. I am sure you will hear more about this in coming months.

We are all distressed at the losses of Leuca and Zephyr and particularly so for the Zoo staff. Every bird is precious and Saving Kyloring from extinction is extremely challenging. There's still a long way to go.

Annual General Meeting and Membership

Our AGM was held on 16 November at the Parks and Wildlife office in Albany. The existing Committee members of Julie Lee (Treasurer and Facebook), and general members Peter Stewart, Liz Tanner and Chris Young and myself all renominated and were elected. I will be the Chair for another year. The Committee will continue to receive administrative support from non-Committee members for merchandising, membership, finance and publications (Newsletter and website) duties. It's a great Committee but we do not want to have any fewer Committee members.

Deon Utber gave an excellent presentation at the start of the meeting outlining more recent activities with the wild birds. Thanks to the general members who participated in the meeting including via Teams. I'm sure they would have learned a lot about *what's happening*.

Lobbying: Funding update

As I identified in the last Newsletter, much of the Australian Government funding for the Recovery Plan, primarily to support the translocations, ceased at the end of June. The opportunities for ongoing funding were rolled mostly into the next version of the Natural Heritage Trust/Landcare program which is the subject of a “re-start” process (the prior Landcare funding ceased at the end June 2023) and the establishment of Panels of Regional Delivery Partners and subsequent funding of agreed projects. This process commenced early in the 2023 year, which I made mention of in my last Chirpings. Most regrettably, this process is running many months late according to the timetable issued by the Commonwealth Environment Department. This situation has placed DBCA in a funding bind to keep Recovery Team staff (most of whom are temporary officers) employed, therefore leading to a request from them for financial support from the Friends for field work costs that would assist them to keep these staff on the job until the end of June 2024. The Friends have agreed to meet the field work costs of up to \$23,000 for the recent trip to Cape Arid (see Parks and Wildlife report).

I recently wrote to Environment Minister Tanya Plibersek expressing my dismay that this situation has arisen and asking her to expedite the NHT/Landcare process, pointing out the impact on the Recovery Plan and impost created for the Friends (and presumably other community based, volunteer nature conservation groups). Also, that this situation flies in the face of frequently stated Australian Government(s) objectives to work with and require the involvement of community groups such as the Friends to achieve the outcomes of the *Threatened Species Action Plan*. Surely this “partnership” does not involve community groups subsidising the Federal budget because of their inaction?

I also advised Minister Plibersek that the \$23,000 is a major part of our available funds and for which we have very limited capacity to replace into the future. This therefore reduces our capacity and ability to contribute to other priority activities for the Recovery Plan such as awareness raising with school students and feral animal control.

Only last week has the Regional Delivery Partner for the South Coast (South Coast Natural Resources Management) advised us that discussions will commence about projects including *a threatened species project to maintain or improve the trajectory of the critically endangered Western Ground Parrot...* I anticipate that these “discussions” will take a period of months and it is likely that any funding will not be available until the 2024/25 financial year.

I, and the Friends Committee, are equally concerned that the capacity of SCNRM is being severely impacted by the NHT/Landcare funding situation. As evidence, SCNRM are in the process of not re-employing several of their senior contract staff.

Aligned with this representation, I wrote to the Western Australian Environment Minister Reece Whitby seeking his support with raising the issue with Minister Plibersek. I had the opportunity to meet with Minister Whitby in late July at the invitation of the Member for Albany Rebecca Stephens. This meeting was primarily to provide the Minister and Ms Stephens with information about the recent translocation events for Kyloring, which was done by a DBCA representative. At the July meeting I expressed my concern to Minister Whitby about the impending issue with Australian Government funding for the Recovery Plan via the NHT/Landcare process. He made a commitment to speak to Minister Plibersek about it. I reminded Minister Whitby of this commitment in my letter and again asked him to contact Minister Plibersek.

At the time of this Newsletter distribution, I have yet to hear back from either Minister.

Communications and Awareness raising

Newsletter

Our Autumn (Bunuru–Djeran) 2023 Newsletter was released in June and thanks to Deon *et al.* at Parks and Wildlife and Arthur Ferguson at the Zoo for their reports. We have produced only 2 Newsletters in 2023 but are looking to a return to 3 or 4 editions to keep you all up to date.

Children's Book

The author, Rosemary Argue, has completed her story and has submitted it to many publishers, but without success. Nevertheless, nearly all rejections have complimented her on the quality of the story. There is still some hope, as some potential publishers have not replied as yet. Depending on the outcome of this process, the Friend's Committee will potentially be considering other options including financially supporting the publication. I (we) would welcome any advice of assistance members are able to provide.

Saving Kyloring Stories ([SAVING KYLORING STORIES](#))

This great project, organised and run by members Caralyn Lagrange and Anne Bondin, concluded in September. It resulted in winning entries for both the primary and secondary story telling competitions with the following outcomes:

Years 4-6

- Winner: Hazel Bee for "The Case of the Kyloring"
- Second prize: Shelby Burns for "Lightning Strikes a Bush"
- Third prize: Ama Domey for "The Traumatic Bushfire"

Years 7-9

- Winner: Lucy Phillips for "Call of the Kyloring" (Lucy's story was particularly meritorious and is available on the SKS website. NB this story is subject to copyright.)
- Second Prize: Evie Swann for "Saving the Species"
- Equal Third Prize: Grace Felton for "The Boy and the Bird" and Kate Mitchell for "Paint, Feather, Leaves and Resin"

Encouragement award

- Jada Elford for "The Kyloring"

I would like to especially thank Caralyn and Anne, Jenni Loveland, the judges led by Dianne Wolfer and the organisations who supported it, being:

- the Albany & Surrounds Feral Cat Working Group
- BirdLife Western Australia
- Oyster Harbour Catchment Group
- State Natural Resource Management Program
- the Jane Goodall Institute's Roots and Shoots program.

Income, Donations and Grants for the Recovery Plan

We received a wonderful \$14,695 donation from an auction run on our behalf by the WA Fur Out West community in August. Committee member Peter Stewart attended the auction event. We are truly grateful to Fur Out West and also the items donated to us and sold at the auction, including a wonderful painting by member Michelle Dujmovic (Figure 8) and a cartoon donated by Dean Alston (Figure 9) which appeared in *The West Australian* Newspaper. Both items were framed for us for free by Tony Banner.

We continue to receive regular donations from a number of members and also non-members. We are forever grateful to these donors.

Your annual membership subscriptions have contributed some \$1,200.



Figure 8: Kyloring painting similar to the one donated by Michelle Dujmovic. This painting is available for sale (Source – Michelle Dujmovic)



Figure 9: Cartoon by Dean Alston, *The West Australian Newspaper* (Source - Paul Wettin).

Since the last Newsletter, and as indicated above, we are in the process of finalising a donation of up to \$23,000 to DBCA for the recent Cape Arid monitoring project outlined in the Parks and Wildlife Report.

We also provided a \$4,850 contribution (50% of the total contribution) to BirdLife Australia for the lease of the 2 Felixer units in the translocation area mentioned in the Parks and Wildlife report, plus we provided funds for some of the prizes for the Saving Kyloring Stories project.