

FRIENDS OF THE WESTERN GROUND PARROT

A community group dedicated to the recovery of an unusual WA bird which could soon become extinct.



Newsupdate no. 36 April 2009

This is a bumper issue as there is much to report.

Notice of Meeting

Friends of the Western Ground Parrot needs to change. Until now there has been no formal structure, no meetings, no autonomous bank account, as we focussed on spreading awareness of the WGP. However as the WGP continues to decline and extinction is a very real possibility, we realize that we can be more effective as an incorporated group.

Consequently our first meeting to elect office bearers and start on our new path has been arranged. It will be on Wednesday 20 May, in Albany at the Guide Hall. Starting time will be 4pm. Come half an hour earlier in time for a cuppa and the opportunity to maybe choose a shirt.

Abby Berryman, leader of the WGP Recovery Team, will give a short presentation.

The Guide Hall is at 19 Parker Street, Albany.

Genetics breakthrough

By Allan Burbidge

In the last Western Ground Parrot Newsupdate, it was mentioned that preliminary genetic work suggested that Western Ground Parrots may be quite distinct genetically from Ground Parrots in Tasmania and down the east coast. This work has been steadily progressing, with an important development in the last few weeks.

One specimen that was always of interest was a bird collected at the Reedbeds, near Adelaide, in the early days of European settlement. The species became locally extinct long ago in the Adelaide region, but this population was the one geographically closest to the ones in Western Australia. They were, therefore, the ones that might be expected to be similar genetically to the Western Australian birds. However, because the specimen was so old, it was proving very difficult to extract DNA from it.

After a bit of frustration, the team running the genetics program decided to recruit the assistance of Dr

Jeremy Austin, of the Australian Centre for Ancient DNA, at the University of Adelaide. Jeremy is an expert at extracting DNA from difficult sources, and rose to the challenge –he was able to extract DNA from this important specimen, and has confirmed that the test sequence matches closely the sequences from Victoria and Tasmania.

We now know that all the eastern birds, from SE Queensland to Victoria and Tasmania, are very similar to each other genetically, demonstrating that there is no basis for recognising the Tasmanian birds as a separate subspecies, as has sometimes been done. The Western Australian birds tested from the Fitzgerald area and Cape Arid National Park are also very similar to each other, but differ significantly from all the eastern birds. The result from the Reedbeds specimen was important because it demonstrated clearly that there is no gradual change from east to west – all Ground Parrot DNA tested falls clearly into either the eastern group or the western group. This confirms that the two sets of birds have been clearly separate for a very long time, and have diverged in isolation. The extent of that difference is very similar to

the genetic difference between Buff-rumped and Western Thornbills, which everyone agrees are clearly differentiated species.

Whether the eastern and western Ground Parrots are confirmed as separate species awaits confirmation by acceptance in the scientific literature. However, what

is certain is that the eastern and western birds are separate evolutionary lineages that have been diverging over a very long time. This adds even more urgency to efforts to conserve the Western Ground Parrot, as it is one of the most endangered parrots in the world.

Funding

As mentioned in the February newsupdate (No. 35), the company Exetel has offered to provide financial assistance to the WGP Recovery Project. Specifically, Exetel is supporting the Automated Recording Unit Project that is to run for four months, starting mid-March. . Birds Australia has agreed to work with Exetel as administrator of the fund. Both Birds Australia National Office and Birds Australia WA will be involved.

The remarkable fact is that our Friends group was contacted by one of the directors of Exetel offering assistance after he had read an article by Anne Bondin about the perilous plight of the WGP

Australia would be a better place if there were more companies with Exetel' s philosophy. Below, in italics, is a quote from one of their websites.



Why Is A Commercial Technology Supplier Doing This?

Exetel delivers technology derived services to end users as its method of existing as a commercial entity. There is little doubt that the human race has become the dominant species on this planet because of its abilities to use technology to overcome all ' natural' barriers and checks and balances to its continued expansion in both numbers and its expansion to every part of the planet' s land mass. In doing this we, as a species, have consigned to extinction more species of flora and fauna in our pursuit of our own existence and expansion than all other species that have ever existed, or currently exist, on this planet put together.

Exetel' s directors believe that one of the privileges of operating a commercial enterprise in Australia is to make our country a better place to live for all inhabitants. We do this by trying to provide technology services at lower prices than any other commercial entity that operates in our fields and marketplaces to Australia' s human inhabitants. Now that Exetel is making some regular, but as yet not very large, profits we believe it is our obligation to allocate a portion of those profits to providing ' services' to those species who cānhabit this country whose existence is being threatened by our species' existence in Australia and our use of technology.

Find out more about what Exetel is doing from these links.

http://www.exetel.com.au/fauna_feat/

http://www.exetel.com.au/enviro_feat.php

Shortfall

Funding shortfall is an issue of major concern this year as the Commonwealth funding that has supported the Recovery Project since the appointment of the first Project Officer in late 2003, has now dried up. Meanwhile the next phases of the project to be introduced soon, will be more expensive. These are captive management/breeding and cat control.

Birds Australia WA will be seeking some funding from the upcoming DEC Environment Community Grants. Much more assistance will be needed. At the time of writing this newsletter there is no assurance that the technical officer's position (Jeff's) will be funded beyond the end of June. Much effort by members of the South Coast Threatened Birds Recovery Team is going into trying to remedy this situation as if the WGP is to be saved from extinction, more staff will be needed rather than less. Ideas to overcome the problem are welcome.

My first experience of a Western Ground Parrot field trip

Pierre Rouxel

I recall the departure day. It was Tuesday the third of March and the weather was rainy. I woke up early to be sure not to miss the departure. I feared something would happen and prevent me from going camping! That nearly happened. Just before the start of the journey towards Esperance one of the tyres of the trailer was completely flat! Quite spectacular but fixed easily! Fortunately...

I was in a deep state of excitement. You know, this feeling when you realize you are going to do something new, something you were waiting for since a long time with restlessness. During the journey to Nuytsland Nature Reserve, to share this excitement with some people I just met was magic, as this motivation had the power to create connection between people. Among our team of eight persons, five of us were totally unknown to me and to meet all these people was an experience really rewarding!

Anyway, still driving, another unexpected event happened. The wheels detached from the trailer because of the road which was very hilly and uneven. It was a big moment of panic as we were in the middle of nowhere, "lost" in the bush. Then we had to fix it by our own and find a closer place for camping: Poison Creek, pretty famous for its fairly large population of WGP.

First Evening, First Listen and First Western Ground Parrot calls! At last! Here I was in the bush, armed with my torch and a GPS, ready to listen. This First Listen was completely amazing, awesome, marvelous, superb, wonderful, magnificent (I really need all my vocabulary!). Imagine, in the middle of the bush and wilderness contemplating a beautiful sunset, just underneath a cloudless sky with an impressive quantity of stars (and some shooting stars too). The light decreased more and more. Just a little light and very pleasant breeze caressed first my face and then all my body. And listening... Everything was quiet around me. And then... the calls of one of the most endangered birds of Australia!! Again and again!

This moment was really Magic!

Shortly after this wonderful experience (too shortly), something really unpleasant happened. The most frustrating thing for me, a Frenchman, not yet so comfortable with English, is to understand what is going on. I thought it was a joke when someone in the camp told me we are coming back to Esperance and it was the end of the trip. Hard to believe just after only two days, especially just after this first hopeful listening session and without any trouble. But there was real trouble: the suspension of one of our cars was broken... Now I felt like a baby when someone take back his rattle

Fortunately all was arranged. While we were at Esperance, preparing to go back to Albany and ordering some bus tickets for some people, we at last found a solution: Borrow a new car from Esperance's DEC. All of us were so happy!

So at last, we went to our first planned camping spot: Point Malcolm, which is near to a lovely and pleasant white sandy beach. Unfortunately, no WGPs were heard. But it was a really nice place, good for swimming, bush walking and bird watching. It was pretty unexpected to continue this trip after all these problems we had had.

It was such a rewarding experience from so many points of view.

(Pierre is a young Frenchman taking a gap year and spending some months assisting as a volunteer with the WGP Recovery Project.)

From Abby about the Point Malcolm trip and more

A huge thank you to our volunteers for their patience and understanding, and especially Jamie for his ingenuity for fixing a trailer with nothing more than a bolt and a tent peg. Thanks also to the staff at DEC Esperance for all their help in organising repairs, lending us a replacement car and doing everything possible to help make this survey happen.



The Point Malcolm crew...

Rear (left to right): Liam, Heather, Niki, Jamie and Pierre; Front: Abby, Kate, Jeff.

Volunteer opportunities

We have had a fantastic response from volunteers this year and all our trips are currently full until the end of June. If you would like to register your interest for any future volunteer work or if you would like more information on the WGP project please contact:

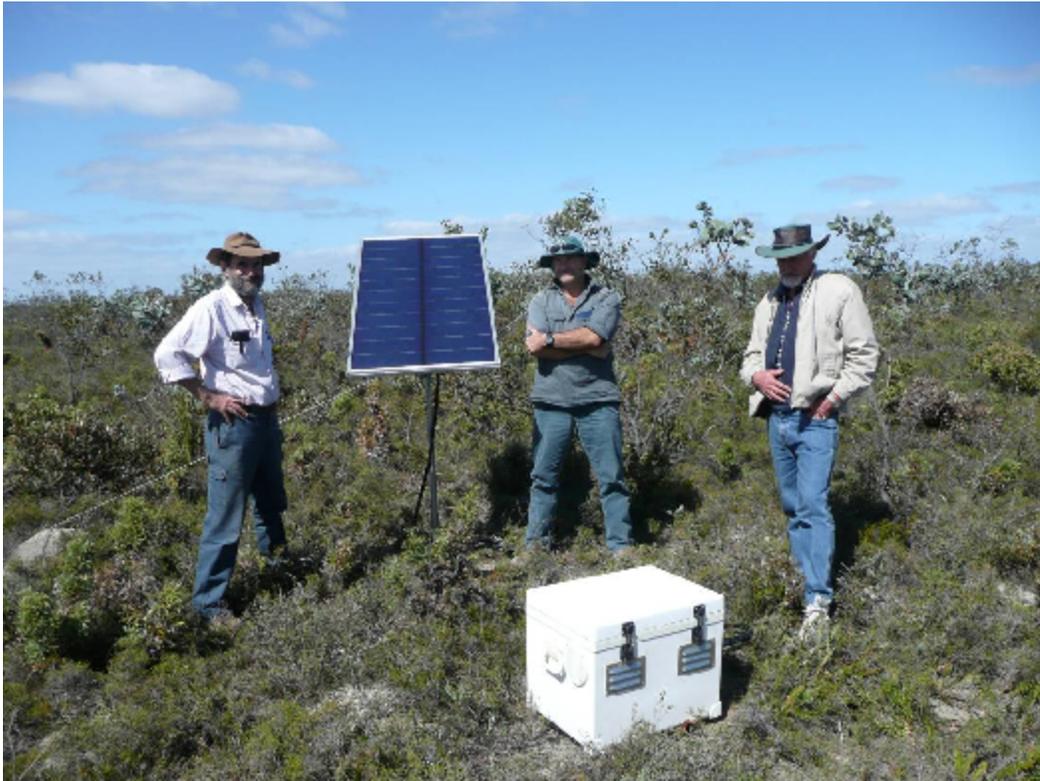
Abby Berryman – mob: 0429 842 451 ph: (08) 9842 4519
or email: abby.berryman@dec.wa.gov.au



Department of
Environment and Conservation
Our environment, our future



The DEC's Western Ground Parrot Recovery Project is funded through the South Coast Natural Resource Management Inc., the regional group for NRM on the South Coast of Western Australia. Funding provided by the Australian and Western Australian Governments through the joint National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality



Allan Burbidge, Chris Powell and Neil Boucher with one of the Automated Recording Units in March. (Photo Abby Berryman)



Pierre, Chris, Jeff and Clare during the wet Wilderness trip.

After our less than smooth passage through Nuytsland on our last trip, Abby and I were hoping for an easier ride in the Wilderness area of Fitzgerald River NP. Not so. First up we were delayed 24 hours; stopped in our tracks by the non-arrival of a critical piece of documentation which was needed to give the team approval for vehicle access into this special part of the park.

When we arrived we numbered 5; Abby, myself, Pierre, Chris Powell (our new sound recording teckie – welcome aboard Chris!) and a volunteer from Perth Zoo; Claire Bartron. However already 2009 is proving rather more challenging than the whole of the 2008 season, both logistically (flat tyres, broken suspension, tent poles vapourising!) and with our hopes and prayers for the Ground Parrot.

So halfway through the trip Abby was to retire hurt. I won't go into details about her ailment, but in one sense, she must have 'felt something in her water' ! I say this because when she departed prematurely, she left in glorious warmth and sunshine (and on the back of a great presentation to the 'Friends of the Fitzgerald' at their AGM) leaving behind less than friendly weather for the rest of us to 'enjoy' !

In fact the remainder of the team were 'trapped' in the park as rain then persisted for the next four and a half days. With large puddles starting to form on the tracks we had to abandon our vehicle and move around on foot. It was fortunate then that the listening spots were all within walking distance. However listening conditions were, for the most part, poor at best! While Abby was with us (aka when the weather was good!) we had managed to target the spots where we had heard (and seen!) WGP's last year so at least we had giving ourselves the best opportunity this time around. However we did not hear a single bird.

In the Wilderness the WGP population was only small to start with, maybe 2-4 birds. So in line with other population setbacks in the Fitz our hopes for a positive result were not high. The situation for this park regarding WGP's is so dire now that they may have disappeared completely..

So our time was fairly miserable all up. Wet shoes, wet spare shoes, wet clothes and localized flooding of our tents. We even lost our inspiring views as the weather closed in on Thumb Peak. Credit to the newcomers however they remained upbeat right up to the last. Pierre was even seen running around in his bathers in the cold pouring rain (we'll put that down as a French 'thing' !).

Oh and I forgot to mention we had one day where the temperature was somewhere approaching 40 degrees! So here's hoping that our next trip another sortie into FRNP (Drummond population) will at least confirm that WGP's do still exist the park, if only just.

New Shirts

The new shirts are now available.

There was a semi-democratic vote offered to a few Friends. Thirty-three voted. The idea was to select a preferred text for the shirt. The winning text was Save our Western Ground Parrot. The two that tied for second were Too precious to lose and One step from extinction. These three texts appear on the shirt as well as one of Brent Barrett's excellent photos.

There are 100 of the new shirts. If you want one set aside for you or posted let Brenda know. The shirts are all \$29 and postage for one shirt is an extra \$6. All are 100% cotton.

Men: S,M,L in black, olive and chestnut, XL black and chestnut. Short sleeve, round neck, semi-fitted style

Children and adults: 8 to 16 in black and navy, round neck, long sleeves.



Women: 10 to 16 in black, dark green and chocolate, 18 in black and chocolate. Round neck, short sleeves semi-fitted; 10 to 16 in navy V-neck (print on back), v. short sleeves semi-fitted; 10 to 14 in black round neck long sleeves semi-fitted.

Video on YouTube

Brent Barrett has produced a short WGP video that is well worth a look.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wwvxgdw1iYc>

Archive

All the Friends of the Western Ground Parrot newsupdates from June 2005 onwards have been placed in a blog for easy reference. The address is <http://wgpnewsletters.blogspot.com/>



Web pages

Birds Australia has a web page for the Western Ground Parrot. Go to <http://birdsaustralia.com.au/the-organisation/western-australia> and then access Projects, and Western Ground Parrot.

There is another web page maintained by the Albany Bird Group:

[www.albanygateway.com.au/Topic/Environment/Albany Bird Watching Group/Endangered Birds/](http://www.albanygateway.com.au/Topic/Environment/Albany_Bird_Watching_Group/Endangered_Birds/)

The next issue of the Friends of the Western Ground Parrot newsupdate is due in June 2009. **Feedback is welcome.**

Contacts

Anne Bondin. Phone (08) 9844 1793; E-mail: wgparrot@exetel.com.au

Brenda Newbey. Phone (08) 9337 5673; E-mail: wgparrot@exetel.com.au

Address: Albany Environment Centre PO Box 1780, Albany WA 6330 (Don't use this address for shirt queries.)