

9. Malleefowl conservation action in Victoria 2011–14

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Abstract

In Victoria Malleefowl almost exclusively live in large public national parks and reserves and are managed by Parks Victoria and the Department of Environment and Primary Industries through policy development and on ground actions including fire regimes and predator/competitor control.

Since 2000 the Victorian Malleefowl Recovery Group (VMRG) manage and carry out all monitoring of Malleefowl at 41 sites across all areas in Victoria where Malleefowl exist and, since 2004, have also researched or established the majority of these sites. Community groups and individuals have been actively involved in these searches. There remain a few unrepresented areas in the monitoring program especially in the Little Desert and the Western Big Desert, but the VMRG have added some additional sites to the monitoring area in this period.

The Wedderburn Conservation Management Network has organised extensive rehabilitation programs to protect Malleefowl in Victoria's most isolated remnant in the Wychitella NCR.

The VMRG organise annual training of monitors to carry out the monitoring and re-searching activities. The group has supported the PhD Genetics Research Project through participation in field activities. The VMRG has supported the ARC Adaptive Management Research project through the National Database and recent forums. Several additional research projects using the National Database have been commenced.

Planning and cooperative activities between Parks Victoria and local government shires has resulted in an expansion of the educational role of the VMRG through installing many large interpretive signs in key locations in northwest Victoria. School education kits are still being distributed.

Actions to protect Malleefowl habitat from inappropriate development have been pursued.

There are challenges for this forum and for Victoria to devise ways to maintain volunteer effort, address inappropriate fire regimes, to refine and improve the National Monitoring Manual, and to effectively use the National Malleefowl Monitoring Database.

Report

Malleefowl conservation in Victoria is undertaken by Parks Victoria, The Department of Environment and Primary Industries (DEPI) and two volunteer organisations, The Victorian Malleefowl Recovery Group and the Wedderburn Conservation Management Network.

Each group has specific roles, with Parks Victoria and DEPI working at a management level. Parks Victoria continues to support Malleefowl through on-ground weed, competitor and predator control and are actively involved in research projects through fox scat analysis, the Adaptive Management Project at the University of Melbourne and the Malleefowl Management Committee, which administers the Iluka Malleefowl Offset Fund.

Parks Victoria has funded the volunteer work of the VMRG on an annual basis. DEPI is less involved with Malleefowl as most Malleefowl in Victoria inhabit public lands managed by Parks Victoria. DEPI has a major role in fire management and fire research through the Hawkeye project.

The VMRG has a major role in monitoring the breeding success rate of Malleefowl through annual visitation to more than 1,200 mounds in 41 monitoring sites across the Malleefowl range in Victoria. VMRG membership is in excess of 100 volunteers and approximately eighty collect data in the field. The group also maintains more than thirty remote sensor cameras in two monitoring sites and also conducts systematic site searches of old and new sites on a periodic basis.

Data collection and analysis are proceeding along the usual lines, but three significant events have been noted in the years since the Renmark Forum.

2011 was a remarkably wet summer with some record rainfall events. It was difficult to gain access to some of our monitoring sites in January and February. Malleefowl did not seem to mind as there was an above average number of active mounds recorded (158). What was significant was the breeding numbers the following year in 2012 with a close to 20% increase in active mounds (218). Nothing like this number has ever been recorded to date.

The second remarkable event was the multiple sightings of Malleefowl on a ten kilometre stretch of road close to the isolated town of Patchewollock in spring and summer of 2012. It appears that cartage of canola along this road resulted in continual spillage and the word got around the Malleefowl community that free feed was available. It was not uncommon to see between 50 and 80 Malleefowl on the road verges in early morning and late evening for a period of three months. The Patchewollock pub ran a Malleefowl sighting competition and the pub blackboard highest count was eighty-eight.

The third event does not have a happy outcome. In the middle of January 2014 the Victorian mallee experienced catastrophic wildfires in Wyperfeld NP and surrounds. One of the reserves of more than 9,000 hectares, known as Bronzewing, was totally destroyed. This reserve was one of the best breeding areas for Malleefowl in Victoria. The monitoring site in this area consistently recorded 15 or more breeding pairs annually and 30 in the exceptional year of 2012. Up to 100 Malleefowl were counted fleeing the fire in one corner of the reserve. The fate of these birds is unknown, and it may be twenty or more years before Malleefowl breed in this reserve again.

In Victoria since 1996 volunteers have been collecting data from the same sites and the same mounds. All this data is now entered on to the National Malleefowl Monitoring Database. The database now contains twenty years of consistently high standard scientifically valid data and volunteers have collected it all. I stress this because I want to highlight the value of the work of VMRG members and the significant contribution they have made to recent scientific studies. All of the data is now able to be used for valid scientific research.

Victorian data stretches over a long period of time, covering different climatic conditions of drought, significantly different rainfall events, fires and heatwaves. There are no gaps in the data as VMRG monitors have visited more than 99% of mounds every year during the Malleefowl breeding period.

The most obvious use of the data is to record the annual breeding density of Malleefowl, and the data is used to produce an annual report based on the data. The reports are on the VMRG website. The long term data, particularly the location of active mounds in the Wandown and Menzies sites, has been used extensively in the genetics PhD studies undertaken by Taneal Cope and will be reported on in this forum. The complete dataset has been invaluable in the development of the ARC funded Adaptive Management in Arid and Semi-Arid Ecosystems research project.

Since 1996, volunteer monitors have collected fox scats at all mounds, and Parks Victoria has had these scats analysed to determine fox diet. The results indicate that Malleefowl are only a very small component of fox prey with small mammals predominant. Recently the fox scat analysis has been part of a major study in fox and wild dog prey undertaken by DEPI.

Another recent study using VMRG data is exploring vegetation types around active and non-active mounds in an attempt to determine how vegetation may impact on breeding success.

I guess some of us might wonder from time to time why we are visiting the same mounds year after year, and the significant research projects I have referred to provide the answer.

Since the Renmark Forum there have been a number of successes for the VMRG and a number of challenges.

Successes since the Remark Forum

Monitors continue to collect valid data from every mound visited, totalling 1,200 mounds at a 99% visiting rate.

The VMRG has established a Malleefowl kids group, who meet at the training weekend every year for loads of fun educational activities. The VMRG continues to work with schools and other youth groups who have been involved in searches and monitoring.

The VMRG has expanded its monitoring sites in the Little Desert and surrounds, and has increased the sites from two to six.

The group has continued to conduct track searches for Malleefowl prints and have driven more than 650 kilometres of tracks in the Northern Big Desert in 2012 in association with the Victorian Mobile Landcare Group.

Many projects have arisen through the use of Iluka mining Malleefowl offset funds, another item on the 2014 forum agenda. The most significant projects have been the installation of ten large interpretive signs in key locations in the Mallee Region and another six planned for the Wimmera Region. The fund has been used to produce a new information brochure. The fund has also enabled the purchase of several remote sensor cameras and their use will be outlined later in the forum.

Challenges

There are a number of recent government policies that will need to be addressed in the next three years. It is becoming increasingly difficult to attract government funding for a volunteer group such as the VMRG to continue its work and other funding avenues will need to be found.

The VMRG needs to liaise closely with Parks Victoria during the monitoring period. There is considerable restructuring within Parks Victoria, and the outcomes of the restructuring are not clear yet, but the VMRG may need to find ways to fit into the new structure to maintain the level of support currently provided by Parks Victoria.

Fire is a huge issue for Malleefowl, and on two levels, the VMRG needs to voice our concerns. The frequency and intensity of bushfires is increasing but there is no credible government policy to address climate change at a national level. The Victorian Government response to major bushfires arising out of the 2009 Royal Commission was to set up a regime of 5% targeted burns on public land in Victoria. To achieve this target large sections of prime Malleefowl habitat is subject to a burning regime that over time will destroy all long unburnt habitat bringing Malleefowl to the brink of extinction. We sometimes feel that we are a voice crying out in the wilderness, but it is important not to become disillusioned that our voices appear not to be heard.

The VMRG is committed to continuing our emphasis on annual data collection and supporting the conservation initiatives arising out of the National Malleefowl Recovery Plan. We appreciate the opportunity to outline what is happening in Victoria, and look forward to the discussions arising throughout this forum that may help us resolve some of the challenges we need to address.