

# Conservation of Malleefowl on Army Lands in South Australia

Lawrie Bruggemann

Property Manager of the Defence Centre Adelaide  
Responsible for for property matters for Defence throughout most of SA

In line with the long standing tradition in the Army of "volunteering" for additional duties, my section was "volunteered" for environmental duties approximately 5 years ago. Initially this was just for tree planting but now our role has extended to critically examining all Defence activities to minimise adverse environmental impacts.

This presentation is to brief you of the challenge that faces Defence in conserving malleefowl on Defence lands in South Australia and to outline our obligations under the Endangered Species Protection Act.

There are two Army areas in SA that have been put under scrutiny as to the existence of malleefowl. The first is Cultana which is between Whyalla and Port Augusta. Heresay from informed sources makes mention of the existence of old mounds in the area as well as a possible sighting of a bird from a distance. A search of the area was conducted in June with nothing discovered although I am told that the vegetation (*Eucalyptus socialis* dominant) and surroundings are ideal habitat. Work in this area has been placed on hold until further information becomes available and our priorities directed to Murray Bridge where the bird definitely exists.

The Murray Bridge Army Range is 100km. east of Adelaide and 7km. east of Murray Bridge. The range totals 4,200ha. with more than half covered by dense mallee vegetation in sand over limestone. Dominant vegetation includes *Eucalyptus socialis*, *E. gracilis*, and *E. incrassata*. Approximately 5 years ago, a fire burnt approximately half of the wooded area. Since that time the vegetation is starting to come back strongly.

Prior to acquisition in the 1960's, the area had been used as a live firing range under the Defence Act. Today it is still used for field firing. Therefore it must be considered that much of the area is contaminated with unexploded bombs (UXO). This is a real barrier against conducting a comprehensive survey of malleefowl numbers within the boundary. Despite the firing activity, the evidence exists that the bird is present in large numbers.

For some years now the vegetated areas have been designated as a conservation zone. There is no grazing permitted nor vehicle access off the main access roads. In some areas, foot traffic is permitted. Therefore the vegetation is generally pristine.

It is only in recent years that the awareness of Malleefowl has been raised. Actual sightings are occurring on a regular basis at various locations. Active and unused mounds have been found over most areas. I am proposing to establish grids over the three distinct sections initially using Army cadets and school students in the safe location and consultants in the remaining areas. By necessity this will be a slow process. Once the grids are established we will be able to conduct a census to determine actual numbers. An appropriate threat abatement plan can then be developed.

Challenges facing Defence include:

- a) Malleefowl numbers are unknown therefore no effective threat abatement plan can be implemented.
- b) Ignorance. Most users would be unaware what a mound was. A handbook is being produced to alert users to what the mounds and birds look like.
- c) Suspicion. The need to determine a balance between protection of malleefowl, as required by legislation, and Army use.

Once the census is completed and numbers identified the threat abatement plan will include:

- a) Laying Fox-off in the near vicinity of the mounds.
- b) Those mounds in the generally unused areas of the range would not be widely advertised. Mounds in areas that are used for training would need to be signposted.
- c) Users of the range will, through the education process, be encouraged to report any sightings or mounds to Range Control.

This project is only a part of the environmental initiatives Defence is currently undertaking at Murray Bridge. Other projects include:

- Erosion/rabbit control. With the help of the Australian Trust for Conservation Volunteers (ATCV) this is currently proceeding.
- Revegetation. Army has large direct seeding projects with more than 290km. completed.
- Wetlands. Each day 3 million litres of treated effluent from Murray Bridge is pumped to the range and ponded instead of dumping it into the river. The system has transformed a former dry land site into a 100ha. wetland and has attracted wildlife in huge numbers. Army uses this water now for irrigation.