



## Conservation through Collaboration

The steps that the WA Malleefowl Network is taking to achieve increased malleefowl conservation

Raquel Carter

TSN Coordinator WA, WWF on behalf of WA Malleefowl Network

### Introduction

The Threatened Species Network is a joint program of the Australian Government's Natural Heritage Trust and WWF Australia. WWF works on the conservation of global biodiversity through the development and maintenance of partnerships with government, other NGOs, business and community.

The Threatened Species Network is a program that falls within WWF's global theme of "species conservation" and takes a community-based approach to threatened species conservation on a statewide and national level. In Western Australia, WWF works actively on threatened species conservation in 4 key ecoregions - the Kimberley, Central Deserts, Tropical Marine and South West Australia.

WWF has been committed to malleefowl conservation for over eight years. This has been reflected in various attempts to establish a WA Malleefowl Network, through the work of Threatened Species Network (TSN) coordinators and the provision of TSN Grant funding to community groups including the Malleefowl Preservation Group and North Central Malleefowl Preservation Group. Additionally, malleefowl have been used as a flagship species to engage landholders in remnant conservation through WWF's Woodland Watch Program.

### South West Australia – malleefowl in a global biodiversity hotspot

Southwest Australia, ranging from Esperance through to Shark Bay, is globally unique, as it is a 300 million year old landscape. Millions of years of continuous leaching have left the soils of Southwest Australia with typically low nutrient levels. Southwest Australia has particularly rich plant diversity and of 8000 - 9000 plant species, three-quarters are not found anywhere else on earth (*Southwest Australia Ecoregion Initiative*, 2003).

European landuse practices have left much of Southwest Australia, in particular, the wheatbelt, with only scattered remnants of the native vegetation. The conservation of malleefowl and their habitats, much of which is remnant vegetation on private land,

can play a major role in the conservation of native vegetation in this world-class biodiversity hotspot.

## **Historical and present distribution of malleefowl**

In the past (pre 1900's), malleefowl populations were distributed across most of Southwest Australia, mostly in acacia scrub, mallee and sometimes wandoo vegetation communities (Prof. Stephen Davies, personal communication, 4 February 2004). The former distribution ranged from just south of North West Cape to Augusta in the south, and both north and south of the Nullarbor to the Western Australian border (Benshemesh 2000). Today, there are scattered populations across a vast area with the majority of populations outside the current Conservation (Benshemesh 2000). The key malleefowl populations now exist in the Northern and Eastern Wheatbelt, south coast and central wheatbelt regions and a translocated population has been established at Shark Bay (Benshemesh 2000). The extent of malleefowl occurrence and population status east of the clearing line out towards Balladonia (Rangelands) and north of the wheatbelt between the Northern Agriculture Region and Shark Bay is unknown (Benshemesh 2000)

Malleefowl are a “flagship species” in rural communities and over the past few decades there has been a growing interest in malleefowl among landholders and the community. This has led to an increase in the formation of community groups and on-ground activities with the objective to conserve malleefowl and the associated habitat of this flagship species in Southwest Australia.

## **Malleefowl as a Flagship Species**

There are number of reasons why the malleefowl is an excellent species to engage the rural and broader communities in conservation and natural resource management in Southwest Australia.

Firstly, its distribution covers most of Southwest Australia. It occurs throughout the majority of the wheatbelt and is an excellent flagship for habitat protection, reconstruction and linkage. It is an iconic species and many landholders are passionate about its protection and conservation (Sally Cail. Personal communication. 28 January 2004). It is also an excellent species to stimulate an interest in sustainable land management practices. The broader benefits of protecting malleefowl can include:

- Indirect salinity management – fencing, rehabilitation and protection of good quality remnants can indirectly lead to salinity management (depending on where habitat falls in the landscape)
- Increased funding opportunities that can include fencing remnants with malleefowl habitat (relates to feral animal control, native vegetation conservation and threatened species regional targets)
- Malleefowl have specific habitat requirements that include intact and good condition habitat for breeding. Protecting breeding habitat also assist the protection of other layers of biodiversity.

- Social benefits – creating a basis for community cooperation that can then be used as a support network during difficult times such as drought (this has occurred in northern and southern wheatbelt communities)
- Cross boundary collaboration – as the distribution of malleefowl crosses over regional and state boundaries, its conservation provides an excellent opportunity to drive natural resource management and strategic planning over and beyond these administrative and catchment boundaries and can encourage people to come together on a national level
- Creating a sense of stewardship and ownership of broader biodiversity values in isolated rural communities – this has occurred in Ongerup and in the Wubin/Dalwallinu area in the northern Wheatbelt

The iconic nature of the malleefowl has led to the formation of a number of groups and many individuals have commenced work to conserve the malleefowl in Western Australia.

In the absence of a coordinated support network, this has meant that work on malleefowl conservation tended to be *ad hoc* and poorly communicated. In an attempt to increase collaboration in Southwest Australia and coordinate action, the many players in malleefowl conservation have come together to form what is known as the Western Australian Malleefowl Network.

## **The Western Australian Malleefowl Network**

The WA Malleefowl Network (WAMN) was formed to undertake a strategic approach to malleefowl conservation in Southwest Australia and link efforts nationally.

Although there have been attempts in the past to establish a WA Malleefowl Network, conflicts between groups, communication barriers and the inconsistency of meetings have led to the virtual collapse of the Network.

The re-formation of the network was driven by the -

- Increasing number of malleefowl-focused community groups
- Growing threats to malleefowl and malleefowl habitat
- Increasing interest in research and scientific studies of the species
- Geographical separation between groups
- Large percentage of malleefowl populations that occur on private or leasehold land
- Limitations to resourcing action (funds, coordination, advice and support)
- Need for a support network for community groups
- Need for a pathway for communication and knowledge exchange

The following groups are members of the WA Malleefowl Network:

- Australian Wildlife Conservancy

- Better Bencubbin Progress Association
- Birds Australia, WA
- CSIRO Sustainable Ecosystems
- Curtin University
- Department of Conservation and Land Management
- Dumbleyung Land Conservation District Committee
- Gnowangerup Shire
- Goldfields Naturalist Club
- Gondwana Link
- Kent Districts Hunting & Conservation Group (KDHCG)
- Kent Land Conservation District Committee
- Koorda Land Conservation District Committee
- Malleefowl Preservation Group Inc.
- Mid-West Biodiversity Network
- Mullewa Land Conservation District Committee
- Narembeen Land Conservation District Committee
- Newdegate Land Conservation District Committee
- North Central Malleefowl Preservation Group
- Nulla Nulla Malleefowl Group
- Trayning Land Conservation District Committee
- University of Western Australia
- WWF/Threatened Species Network
- Yilgarn Land Conservation District Committee
- Yongergnow Malleefowl Interpretive, Environment & Research Centre

In the 6 months since the WA Malleefowl Network has been re-established, the Network has produced the following outcomes:

- Agreed objectives for the Network
- Gap analysis and prioritisation of actions in National Recovery Plan from a WA perspective
- Draft Malleefowl Conservation Strategy for Southwest Australia
- Attraction of new members including the Yongergnow Environment Centre

### **Objectives of the WA Malleefowl Network**

- Encourage a state-wide coordinated approach to the conservation and recovery of malleefowl through the implementation of the National Malleefowl Recovery Plan
- Strengthen partnerships and working relationships between groups working on malleefowl conservation issues in WA
- Increase communication between players and increase state-wide awareness of malleefowl activities and projects
- Take a collaborative approach to resources and funding for malleefowl related activities in WA
- Link to regional NRM planning processes and regional groups and ensure that projects that are developed are strategic and in line with NRM Strategy Objectives
- Establish a central database for malleefowl sightings to evaluate the success and progress of the implementation of National Recovery Plan

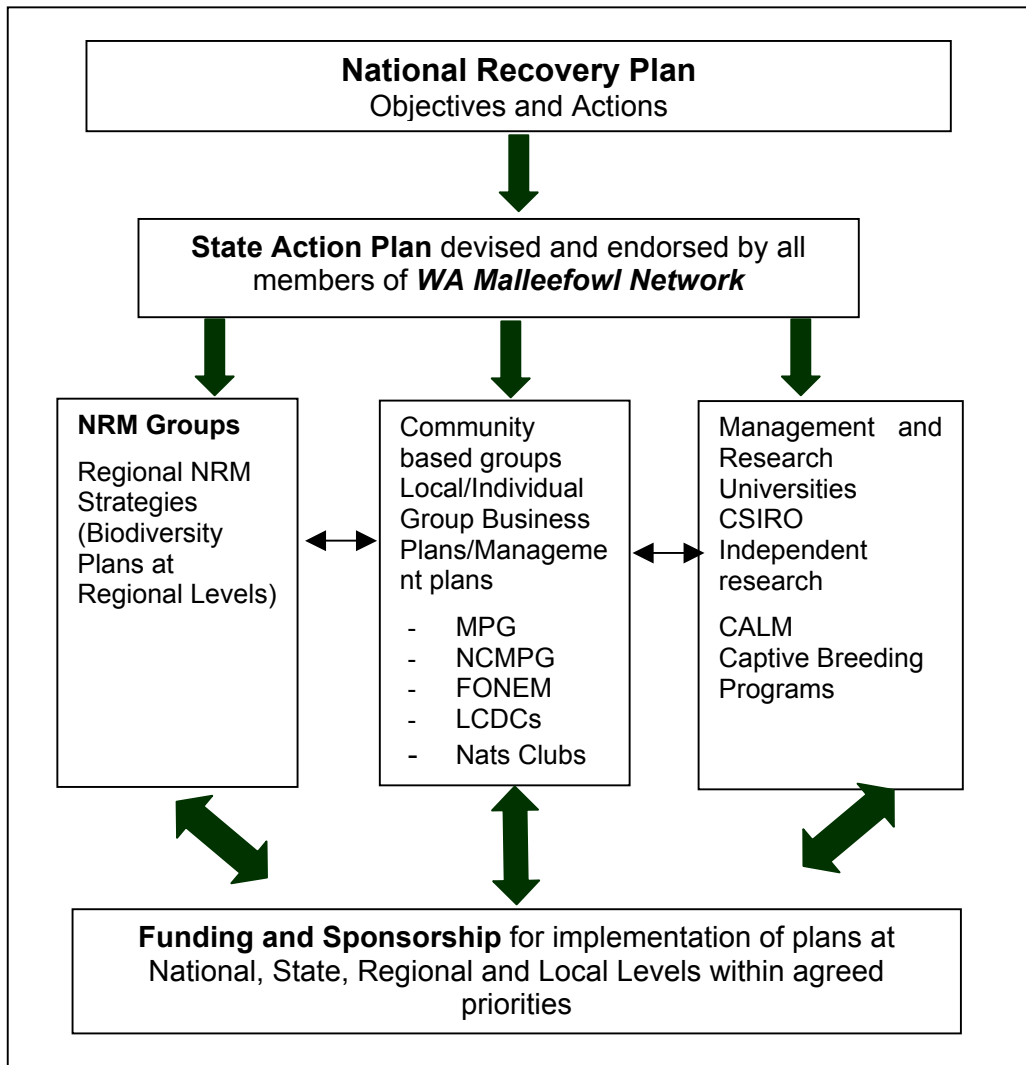
## **Gap Analysis**

During a mini workshop between the Malleefowl Preservation Group, WWF/TSN and the Department of Conservation and Land Management's Threatened Species and Communities Unit with input from other WA Malleefowl Network members, the following actions were identified as priorities in Southwest Australia:

1. Reduce the impact of over grazing in key malleefowl habitat areas across the state
2. Decrease feral animal impacts on malleefowl across the state
3. Include Malleefowl conservation projects in NRM Biodiversity Conservation Investment Strategies
4. Reduce habitat fragmentation through strategic habitat reconstruction in regions
5. Determine survey and monitor distribution and abundance of malleefowl population in WA
6. Develop, maintain and analyse data on a state-wide basis by developing an independent malleefowl database
7. Identify research priorities for application to malleefowl conservation in WA
8. Increase community group and landholder involvement and general public education and awareness for malleefowl and habitat conservation throughout south west Australia
9. Increase state and national communication and partnerships for malleefowl conservation
10. Raise funds for state-wide strategic and collaborative malleefowl conservation and ensure projects are implemented and coordinated adequately

These form the basis of the State Malleefowl Conservation Action Plan.

## State Malleefowl Conservation Action Plan



### Need for coordinated action (activities in WA)

The development of a State Malleefowl Conservation Action Plan and the WA Malleefowl Network will help to draw groups closer together and ensure that all activities are strategically planned and communicated so that resources and malleefowl recovery can occur in a resource efficient and effective manner. Below are examples of projects that some members of the WA Malleefowl Network are currently undertaking that will impact on the recovery of malleefowl in WA.

#### WWF Australia

**Woodland Watch** - A program aimed at improving the conservation status of priority remnants on private land in the WA wheatbelt. To date Woodland Watch has been responsible for a number of covenants and conservation management agreements that include malleefowl habitat. By working with landholders to reduce stocking densities or remove stock completely, in conjunction with assistance in fencing and management planning, Woodland Watch has minimised grazing impacts to malleefowl habitat and/or adjacent areas in the North Eastern Wheatbelt.

**Species and Community Program (includes TSN)** is responsible for community education events, Acting WA Malleefowl Network Coordinator, grants through TSN community grants, facilitating the development of WA Malleefowl Conservation Action Plan with the WA Malleefowl Network.

### **Malleefowl Preservation Group (MPG) Inc**

Current and past projects include: community education; development of corridor/remnant linkage projects such as Mulga to Mallee link; fox control and other feral animal control programs; community capacity building; malleefowl sighting database, monitoring, hosting/facilitation of research projects, development of partnerships with Gondawana Link project and CSIRO; assistance in the establishment of the Yongergnow Environment Centre are just some examples of the MPG's activities.

### **North Central Malleefowl Preservation Group**

Current and past projects include the fencing of priority remnants that include breeding malleefowl populations, survey and monitoring, community education and awareness (developing interpretative displays) and an annual fox control program. The group has also assisted Project Eden through the provision of 60 eggs to CALM for project Eden (native animal reintroduction program at near Shark Bay) and networking with adjacent Land Conservation District Committees.

### **CSIRO**

CSIRO are working on the Buntine/Marchagee Recovery Catchment project in partnership with Department of Conservation and Land Management. The project is taking a focal species approach to conservation at a landscape scale. This will assist in the conservation of malleefowl through the identification of priority remnants for restoration and enhancement, and corridor and habitat construction to meet the needs of the most sensitive bird species in the catchment.

CSIRO and MPG have plans to work together to develop use the MPG's sightings database and generate a spatial analysis of the distribution and abundance of malleefowl in the southern wheatbelt region with key recommendations for future management.

### **Birds Australia**

BA is currently undertaking annual monitoring of malleefowl populations at Eyre and will be involved in monitoring and survey for malleefowl in northern Wheatbelt with NCMPG

### **Land Conservation District Committees (e.g. Koorda and Trayning)**

LCDCs have commenced annual fox baiting programs, have installed malleefowl signage in conjunction with local authorities and are looking to establish survey and monitoring projects.

### **Friends of North Eastern Malleefowl (FONEM)**

FONEM is a newly formed group that has developed from a past TSN Grant. The group has been responsible for working with local authorities in Bencubbin to erect signs on road verges alerting drivers to “malleefowl crossing” hotspots. This project has stimulated a number of interested landholders and has commenced the collection of sighting information

### **Gondwana Link**

This project is a partnership project between Malleefowl Preservation Group, Greening Australia WA, Fitzgerald Biosphere Group, Wilderness Society, Friends of Fitzgerald River National Park and Australian Bush Heritage Fund. The project aims to restore ecological integrity across Southwest Australia, protect and re-plant native vegetation over 500 km and build a living link that reaches across the continent.

### **Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM)**

Frankland District of CALM has been completing the following recovery actions for protection of the malleefowl, -

1. Fox baiting
2. Malleefowl mound search work in areas where malleefowl have been historically or recently recorded
3. Researching the effect of threatening processes such as fire regimes, feral animals, weeds, salinity and *Phytophthora* on other threatened species with known distributions for extrapolation to those with lesser known distributions, such as the malleefowl.

At present, the Department’s conservation efforts are indirect owing to limited information regarding the occurrence of the malleefowl in the District.

### **Universities (Curtin University and the University of Western Australia)**

Universities are providing the delivery of priority research projects that close the gap in our knowledge of malleefowl biology and their ecological requirements.

### **Australian Wildlife Conservancy**

The AWC is currently de-stocking sheep and goats at Mount Gibson Reserve (138,000ha); this is a major contribution to malleefowl conservation. Malleefowl mounds, fox and cat sightings are being recorded and the AWC are seeking funding for an aerial fox control program. AWC are also keen to establish monitoring programs.

### **Future Action**

During meetings with individual members of the Network, the following actions were highlighted as priority actions in the State Strategy (these priorities are in line with the gap analysis):

- Investigate the impacts of grazing on malleefowl populations on leasehold land
- Projects to minimise the impact of grazing in regions, in particular in the rangelands
- Increased liaison with landholders and leaseholders in key malleefowl breeding areas to increase fencing of priority remnants and reduce stocking densities
- Broad scale fox control program coordinated across regions



- Liaison with landholders to gain increased effort and infill fox haven properties within fox control areas
- Identification of priority research projects
- Continued monitoring and reporting of malleefowl occurrences across the south west
- Capacity building of small groups to become self-sufficient and sustained
- Engaging in the Regional Natural Resource Management Planning and delivery frameworks
- Eliminating communication barriers and creating increased accessibility of information for groups
- Development of a centralised database for the acquisition of malleefowl data to allow for annual reporting against the recovery plan and state strategy
- Ongoing funding for the implementation and coordination of malleefowl activities across Southwest Australia

## **The next steps for the WA Malleefowl Network?**

- Coordination of the development and the delivery of the State Malleefowl Conservation Action Plan
- Strategic use and allocation of funding across the region
- Establishment of a broad scale monitoring program
- Integration of learning's/future directions from National Malleefowl Forum into state, regional and local plans
- Increase two way communication with State and national malleefowl networks (such as the National Recovery Team).

## **Sourcing funding to employ a State Malleefowl Network Coordinator to continue facilitation of and maintenance of the WA Malleefowl Network**

Collaboration is the key to conservation in a world of limited resources and funds.

The need for a Statewide Coordinator has been the highest priority for the Network at the past few meetings. It is clear that the Threatened Species Network Coordinator cannot take on this role effectively in the long-term as the job will require support network for community groups, assistance in the development of strategic project, maintenance good communication flow, responsibility for coordinating monitoring and survey activities and report against the implementation of a state Action Plan in WA and National Recovery Plan. Effectively, the Coordinator will provide the “glue” for collaborative approach to malleefowl conservation in southwest Australia.

## **References**

- Southwest Australia Ecoregion Initiative. Dir. Sophia Hall. Videocassette. Prod. WWF Australia 2003
- Benshemesh, J. (2000). National Recovery Plan for Malleefowl. Department for Environment and Heritage, November 2000.