

22. LITTLE DESERT NATURE LODGE MALLEEFOWL

Ray 'Whimpey' Reichelt OAM Little Desert Nature Lodge, Nhill, Victoria

The Little Desert Nature Lodge is situated 16km from Nhill on the Nhill – Harrow Road. Our shire was named the 'Shire of Lowan' in 1888, which is aboriginal word, which is a call the Malleefowl use when in danger. It was the largest shire in Victoria until broken up into smaller councils.

Whimpey started observing Malleefowl in 1967 with son Phillip. From their house they could easily get to the mound that was only 7 km from their home. Half of this block of land was cleared for farming in 1969 which stopped them watching these birds, as once cleared, the birds disappeared from this area.

In 1972 they started watching Malleefowl on the 'Malleefowl Block' now known as the Malleefowl Sanctuary. This was to be cleared in 1973, they purchased this unburnt block of land to save it from being cleared. Maureen and Whimpey had to borrow half of the money to purchase the property, Maureen had put money away for kids education, which they had to use to pay for half of the block.

In 1979, Whimpey started seriously recording mound shapes, temperature and humidity and behaviour in the bush and at the mounds, paying a lot of attention to their diet. In 1988 they put a Conservation Covenant on the Sanctuary to protect it forever. In 1999 the blocks of land (including the Lodge Property) were feral proof fenced at a cost of \$371,000 and finished in 2000, this was to keep out feral cats, foxes, rabbits and hares. This block of land was put into a tax deductible foundation in 2000.

The pair Whimpey has been watching, Charlie and Di, were together from 1979 – 1995. In that year Romeo lost Juliet and came and belted Charlie and took Di back with him to his mound known as Buckshot. Whimpey didn't see Charlie for three months, and at that time presumed he was dead. He returned after three months. Whimpey released three 12 month old chicks with Charlie and he eventually paired up with one in 1996. Di ended up with Romeo and they were together on Buckshot Mound from 1995 – 2000 when we lost old Romeo. Di called for a couple of months and a young male turned up, he has taken her to his mound called Phillips mound. Whimpey firmly believes that after watching these birds for so long that Malleefowl are not monogamous as Di is now with the third male.

Over the many years, Whimpey has hatched 147 chicks, these chicks are held between 8 -10 months until they are surgically sexed and get a new wing tag and leg band. The birds are then released in unrelated pairs into the National Park and on to private land.

Some 18 years ago, the female started with her high pitch call on the mound, the male moved to the mound and also started, it resembles the sound Lowan, very close to the mound was a fox coming in, it is a call they make when in danger.

After watching Malleefowl for some years, Whimpey heard the female calling one particular morning and went to see where she was. That morning he saw the birds copulate 4 times, shortly after she entered the mound and laid an egg. Not every time but most times before they cover the egg up, the male comes and scratches the pink off the egg. No one can tell me why, but I have caught on film on a number of occasions.

Whimpey is still uncertain what the birds use to check the temperature, My opinion is that the birds must have heat sensor in the roof of their mouth, why otherwise would the birds put their beak right up to their eyes into the hot sand of the mound?

Whimpey has been watching Malleefowl since 1979 making records of mound shapes, temperature, humidity and food sources. Until the 5/9/07 Whimpey has made 4,198 day visits to the mounds, filming and making many records. In autumn the birds gorge themselves with Mushrooms, Toadstools and Fungus. Their droppings have been analysed by Dr Tom May of the Melbourne Herbarium and the same year, during the summer of 35 – 40 degrees the birds were digging in the grey clay and they were eating some small round tubers that resembled yams. Whimpey grew some

of these and they turned out to be the *Terestylus nana* (Greenhood Orchid). There was nothing above the ground to see, so whether they can smell or remember where they were, we are still trying to work out.

Professor Darryl Jones and Whimpey have just finished the Food Chart that is now at the referees prior to being published this year. Our next two papers will be based on behaviour at the mound and mound shapes. They will most likely be published in 2008.

This year Whimpey recorded in Tower mound 6 Echidnas, and one in Phillips mound during the June/July period. The Echidnas lift the rotting vegetation and aerate the litter that assists with the composting of the vegetation.

In 1984 Joe Benshemesh brought 9 Malleefowl eggs from Wyperfeld National Park for Whimpey to hatch. Once hatched these chicks had transmitters attached to their backs. To Whimpey's knowledge they were dead in a matter of 6 weeks.

Maureen and Whimpey have recently purchased a 276 hectare property close by. This property is prime bush unburnt since 1958, used to protect more endangered species of flora and fauna including reptiles. This block is used by Swunburn University to further their environmental studies.