

4th NATIONAL MALLEEFOWL FORUM

PRESENTATIONS - Oral

1. Welcome

Peter Sandell, Chair, National Malleefowl Recovery Team; Environmental Program Manager (Mallee District) Parks Victoria, Mildura, Victoria

It is my privilege to welcome you all to the fourth National Malleefowl Forum, on behalf of the National Malleefowl Recovery Team and the Organising Committee. Each of us here will have different reasons for becoming involved with Malleefowl, but we all have in common a desire to do what we can to conserve this species into the future. Is it the work ethic of Malleefowl that we find so attractive – a species that makes the most of the limited resources in our semi-arid environment? Or is it their poor parenting skills that we identify with?

Whatever it is, volunteers in each of Victoria, South Australia, and Western Australia collectively contributed more than 4000 hours of their own time to the cause of Malleefowl conservation in the past year alone. There is no doubt in my mind that these efforts are having a positive influence on conservation outcomes at a national level.

As you know, the management of public land and hence the vast majority of Malleefowl habitat is the responsibility of state governments, although the Commonwealth gets involved where a species is considered to be threatened nationally. There is a dichotomy in the case of Malleefowl which is considered endangered in some states but only vulnerable nationally. So what are the consequences of this situation?

One implication is that funding for recovery initiatives can be difficult to obtain. This is not to say that the species does not receive government support – it has been the beneficiary of a number of grants from both the Commonwealth and state governments in recent years. But each jurisdiction tends to be variable in their support for the conservation effort.

The Commonwealth funded the recent revision of the National Recovery Plan (in partnership with DENR in South Australia), the initial development of the national database, the multi-regional project with the trend analysis and other outcomes. Hopefully, the development of a framework for adaptive management will also be funded via an ARC Linkage Grant.

There has been considerable progress since the previous national forums in Adelaide (1995), in Mildura (2004), and Katanning (2007). We now have a Federally approved National Recovery Plan, a national manual for monitoring, a national database for storage and interrogation of data, an educational kit to help with extension to schools. Each state has also been proactive with their own activities, such as the 'It's Gnow or Never' documentary produced by the MPG in Western Australia and screened on the ABC last year. These initiatives collectively have put us in a better position in terms of an agreed and strategic approach to national conservation. They have also raised the profile of Malleefowl in the community and with government agencies.

Despite this progress, we need to remain conscious of risks associated with overlapping jurisdictions for a species which has as large a geographical extent as does Malleefowl. A species that is spread from the edge of the Indian Ocean in the west to the outskirts of Bendigo in the south-east, and from near Naracoorte in the south to the southern NT can't be in trouble, can it? Well, yes it can.

It can for a number of reasons, some of which are specific to the Mallee belt. This is a region which historically had a very high level of clearing for cropping and extensive pastoral use in the areas that remained uncleared. The remnant vegetation in many cases is likely to

represent marginal habitat for Malleefowl. These areas are projected to become even more marginal as our climate becomes warmer and drier. I am conscious of the advice that Sally Cail provided from the northern Wheatbelt recently. Of the 160 nests they monitor, 13 were active in 2008/09, 11 in 2009/10, and only 3 in 2010/11 after a series of dry years, and particularly low winter and spring rainfall. There has been little or no recorded breeding activity in the grids north of the Murray in the SA Riverland for some years. We would hope that these trends will reverse, but the reality is that the south west of Australia has been relatively dry since the 1970s. If Malleefowl populations decline in the north, how does that change the longer term picture for the species?

Most of us live in the more southerly extent of the range of Malleefowl where changes may not be so obvious. The National Forum provides us with the opportunity to raise our focus from what is happening in our own patch and consider the broader national picture. The bigger picture for me is that the future of Malleefowl depends on their being sufficient large contiguous blocks of suitable habitat within the southern Mallee belt, and that these large blocks (I would suggest 10,000 ha as a minimum size) need to be managed in a way which optimises the prospects for this species. In so doing, we will also be improving the long term prospects for a suite of other species which co-exist with Malleefowl. We need to use our collective energy and skills to communicate this message back through all levels of government, including our NRM bodies which are now vested with considerable land management authority.

Along with the risks we need to be able to look at the opportunities as they present. Areas that are becoming more marginal for cereal cropping may lend themselves to revegetation with mallee eucalypts for the purpose of carbon sequestration. These in turn may become suitable as habitat for Malleefowl and other species.

The Organising Committee for the Forum, led by Sharon Gillam, have put together a stimulating and topical program. They have done a wonderful job. I am personally looking forward to the presentations and the discussions (formal and informal) which will ensue over the next couple of days and I would encourage everyone to make the most of this event.