

16. A landowner's story of Malleefowl conservation in the SA Murray Mallee and the establishment of the Browns Well Landcare Group

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Abstract

On my property, seventy kilometres south of Renmark, and to the north-west of Billiatt Conservation Park, I have seen the vegetation recover since early land clearance for farming and the bushfires of 1983-1987. The area provides key habitat for Malleefowl and with around 1200 hectares of this vegetation under Heritage Agreement, the protection of these birds is a priority for my wife Trish and I. Over many years I have carried out rabbit and fox control in an effort to protect the Malleefowl and its habitat. In the 2010/11 nesting season, an active Malleefowl mound was monitored using a motion detecting camera, with the assistance of the local Bush Management Advisor Chris Grant (Department of Environment and Natural Resources). This has provided information about the activities of the birds throughout the exceptionally long laying season this year.

Landholders in the Browns Well area play a key role in Malleefowl conservation. The Browns Well Landcare Group was formed in 2007 to coordinate rabbit and fox control and has gone on to play a key role in the control of goats which are causing damage to vegetation in the area.

In January 2011, I travelled with six other Malleefowl conservationists from the South Australian Murray Mallee to Ongerup in Western Australia to share and learn about experiences in Malleefowl conservation with the Malleefowl Preservation Group.

In 2011, foxes and cats remain the key threats to the Malleefowl in the Browns Well area and are the priority for the conservation of the species.

Presentation

Back in 2006 whilst seeding one of my paddocks, we happened to see a fox stalking a pair of Malleefowl on the edge of the cropping ground. Up until this time, we may have seen a couple of Malleefowl a year.

I decided to do a fox-baiting programme. In the first 4 weeks, I lost 208 baits. Within 8 weeks and using 28 baiting stations, I lost 381 baits. I realised then that maybe this was the reason we had not seen too many Malleefowl as well, as farmers were losing lambs to foxes.

In September 2007, we formed the Browns Well Land care Group with the idea of a co-ordinated approach to rabbit, fox and goat control in our area.

Working with National Parks and Wild Life and Sporting shooters in both SA and Victoria and Kelvin Barr a professional shepherder, we have eliminated 3 – 4,000 goats in the last two years in our parks and heritage areas. Kelvin has achieved the best results so far. On one occasion, Kelvin and his son took a trip along the border when his dogs could smell goats. He released the dogs to round up the goats in the scrub but darkness fell, so he went home and got back at day break next morning to find his dogs sitting in the paddock with 126 goats rounded up.

Within two years of laying fox baits, the sightings of Malleefowl were increasing. We were seeing 25 – 30 Malleefowl feeding in 500 acres. A friend told me, back in the late 70's early 80's one afternoon they saw 34 Malleefowl feeding in a paddock bordering my property and that same night they shot 70 foxes in that paddock. That was when fox skins were worth money but how vulnerable were these birds.

Until this year, we had never seen a Malleefowl chick or a half grown Malleefowl. Since June 2010 with the help of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR), we set up a motion camera over one of our Malleefowl mounds. We have certainly learnt a lot on the preparation of the mound from moisture needed to egg laying to heating the sand. The number of foxes as well as feral cats visiting the mounds is a huge problem. We have also seen a couple of Malleefowl chicks; one appeared while watching the adult birds working on the nest. I caught one of the chicks to take photographs, and then called him Lucky Lewy wished him good luck and I hope he is still alive today. I have also witnessed in 2007 a Wedge-tailed Eagle attack Malleefowl. They abandoned the mound that year.

In January 2011, seven of us visited Sue Dennings and her volunteers in WA to see the new Malleefowl centre at Ongerup. We had the chance to see the work they are doing with Malleefowl on the few scrub blocks that are left - they have set their sights high. We thank Sue for her enthusiastic work in WA.

This past year I have monitored 15 active mounds on my property. I have had over 540 baits taken from 35 bait stations - the most ever. All 15 active mounds had signs of foxes at those mounds, especially from January to April, which coincides with the hatching season. Also at the mound with the camera, there were photos of feral cats present.

Maybe a breeding programme to set up in each state and letting them grow to adults before releasing them. Maybe an education programme for the Malleefowl through the schools.

In closing, I see foxes and cats as the biggest danger to this vulnerable bird. Fox baiting is only a part of the solution. To have a good price for fox /cat skins or a bounty on foxes could encourage more people. We need to get more people involved in the eradication of these feral pests. Farms are getting bigger and country towns are dying. People are moving to cities or larger country towns and there are less people to volunteer their time. Let us hope there is a solution before it is too late to save this unique bird.