

17. Twenty years of Malleefowl conservation by the Mantung Maggea Land Management Group

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Abstract

Starting in 1981 when Les and John Evans voluntarily placed the first parcel of land under Heritage Agreement, the Mantung Maggea Land Management Group was formed in 1991 by twelve landowners with Heritage Agreement land in the Mantung Maggea area in the Murraylands of SA, including Les and John. This was the first group established to protect Malleefowl in South Australia. The group of landholders continues the work today with coordinated fox and rabbit control to protect the Malleefowl and its habitat over an area of over 18,000 hectares of heritage scrub on over 55,000 hectares of privately owned land. The group carries out rabbit and fox baiting and rabbit warren destruction. After twenty years the group is still as enthusiastic as it has ever been. Even after drought, Malleefowl numbers are remaining sustainable and with the good season we have just had, active Malleefowl mounds have increased with a large number of hatchings. Over the many years of conservation work, the group has made many observations about Malleefowl and their habits. It is this long term knowledge that the group believes could guide future conservation work.

Introduction

Les and John Evans were active Malleefowl conservationists in the Mantung area in the sixties when they were in their teenage years. They recognised back then, the importance of protecting the birds' habitat and convinced their father to stop clearing the old growth mallee for farming. In 1967 Les and John's enthusiasm for the mallee grew when they met Colin Harris, a student who came to the area to do his honours thesis on 'The Hundred of Mantung'. A lifelong friendship began between the men who shared this passion for conservation. Colin graduated and went on to work for the Department of Environment.

In 1981, Les and John, with Colin's guidance, placed a parcel of land under a Heritage Agreement, which meant that the vegetation was protected from clearance but still remained owned by the landowner. This was one of the first Heritage Agreements signed in South Australia. Colin became aware of a large patch of high quality vegetation in the Mantung area that was to be cleared by the landowner and tried to protect it. The fight was hard but resulted in the government paying compensation to the landowner for protecting the vegetation with a Heritage Agreement. The patch of land is now known as Bakara Conservation Park. This began a new era of Heritage Agreements where landowners were compensated for the loss of production caused by protecting the vegetation.

A group of twelve landholders took the opportunity to sign Heritage Agreements in the Mantung Maggea area, protecting large areas of Malleefowl habitat. In 1991 this group of landholders formed the Mantung Maggea Land Management Group (MMLMG) with the aim of managing these areas of protected vegetation. The group recognised the importance of protecting the Malleefowl that used these areas and set out to actively manage the protected vegetation in the hope of protecting these birds.

Management plans

In their first year, the Mantung Maggea Land Management Group worked with the Department of Environment and Planning to develop a publication titled *How to manage native vegetation in the Murray Mallee*, which included *A Conservation Handbook*, *A District Guide* and individual management plans for each of the Heritage Agreements in the area. The management plans detailed the management issues and actions required to protect and conserve the wildlife of the area.

Action

The work began and the first job was to fence the protected areas from stock. Over the next few years the group managed to fence off all heritage scrub in the area.

Rabbit numbers were high in the area and the control work was the next priority. Over the years, the group has maintained an ongoing rabbit control program of baiting, rabbit warren ripping and fumigation. Numbers have reduced and these days, the program is carried out to maintain the good work that was done in the past.

Fox and cat predation is a major threat to the Malleefowl in the Mantung Maggea area. The group was the first in SA to be given permission to use 1080 baits. The baits are laid under small sand mounds and attract the foxes but not the birds or lizards. The meat used for these baits has varied over the years from fish, chook heads and eggs, to kangaroo and small meat sausages. The group baits for foxes in September and March. Cat control is more difficult. Traps have been trialled but shooting seems to be the most effective option.

Other issues such as bird poaching have been addressed by the group, leading to tougher laws against taking native birds from nests within the Loxton, Waikerie and Karoonda East Murray Council areas.

Kangaroo numbers have grown to be over abundant in the area and the group has worked with a local Kangaroo meat processing company to keep numbers at a manageable level.

The MMLMG is an incorporated group which makes it possible to access various sources of funding to carry out its work. It holds regular meetings and an Annual General Meeting with a bush tour included.

Results

The pest control program has resulted in reduced rabbit numbers. Rabbit warrens are smaller in both numbers and size since the regular rabbit control program has been implemented. This may provide more food sources for the Malleefowl and leaf litter for mound building. Fox numbers are managed although they vary with seasons. Lambing survival rates have increased in the area which is an indication of a successful reduction in fox numbers. Foxes and cats remain a threat to Malleefowl in the area and this is an ongoing struggle.

Malleefowl numbers do vary throughout the heritage areas. Observations by farmers show an increase in some areas and a decline in others. One observation is that the birds are building their mounds in regrowth mallee where chaining and burning has occurred around twenty five years ago. They appear to be choosing these regrowth sites over old growth areas, perhaps due to more available leaf litter.

Conclusion

The MMLMG is passionate about the mallee and the dedicated group members carry on Les and John Evans' dream to protect and conserve the Malleefowl population in the Mantung Maggea area. The MMLMG now has over forty years of Malleefowl observations through quietly watching the birds in the area. This information covers seasonal conditions, numbers of birds over the years, fire history, distribution and choice of sites. The group believes that this long term information they have gathered could be vital in understanding the Malleefowl and its conservation needs.