

The National Malleefowl Monitoring Database

why it's so important



Back in 1987 Joe Benshemesh started setting up sites for monitoring Malleefowl mounds in Victoria. Similar programs soon sprung up in SA and WA and grew steadily over the years, supported by volunteers in each state. Now, every year, hundreds of people gather information from more than 3000 mounds.

At the 2004 Malleefowl forum in Mildura it was decided that all this information needed to be gathered into the one place...a national database! This immediately highlighted the problem that not everyone was collecting the same data in the same way. Some people would record the location and if the mound was active, others recorded a lot of extra information on things like size and shape of mounds and even fox scats. We needed to make sure that the information gathered was uniform and easily fed into the database. This led to a set of guidelines on collecting data and saw the birth of the *National Malleefowl Monitoring Manual*.



A team of volunteers gathering data on Malleefowl mounds

With the growth of the digital age, we have seen vast improvements with data collection (using Palms and then GPS PDA's and now smartphones), gathering of digital images of each mound, and the growth of the data base into an incredibly useful tool that also allows volunteers to see the outcome of their combined efforts. All volunteers can get access to the site. Of particular interest is the file of all past photos of the mounds. Each year another photo is added for each mound, resulting in a slide show of the many stages a mound can go through. Keep in mind that our wonderful volunteers now collect information on over 3000 mounds annually. The database is also an incredibly powerful tool for scientists to use when analysing mound use over the years, although its main function is to track trends in Malleefowl populations. Remember that we use mound activity as the best indicator of species survival; the greater the number of active mounds, the more Malleefowl out there in the bush.



A mound ready for recording and adding to the National Malleefowl database

The database is still getting a few refinements but is already a fantastic resource just waiting to be taken to the next stage. It's an amazing credit to all of our volunteers' efforts over the many years of data collection and makes available some very important pieces of information. That is, how Malleefowl populations are going; where Malleefowl numbers are increasing and where they are decreasing. Knowing what the trends in Malleefowl populations are in different areas is not just an interesting thing to know. It immediately leads us to ask '*why are Malleefowl doing better here than there?*' Answering this question informs us what the species requires to survive. The annually updated information also allows managers to target certain areas where the birds seem to be struggling, and to measure how effective different management actions are.

And that leads us to the next stage of the National Recovery Team's work. Two important processes are just getting underway;

1. A National Coordinator has been appointed. One of his tasks is to gather information that relates to the *How are Malleefowl populations doing?* question. Things like fox & goat control and fire management.
2. An Adaptive Management Team is commencing work to combine the database information on *How are Malleefowl populations doing?* with information gathered by the National Coordinator on the many elements that might have contributed to the question of why a population might have gone up or down.

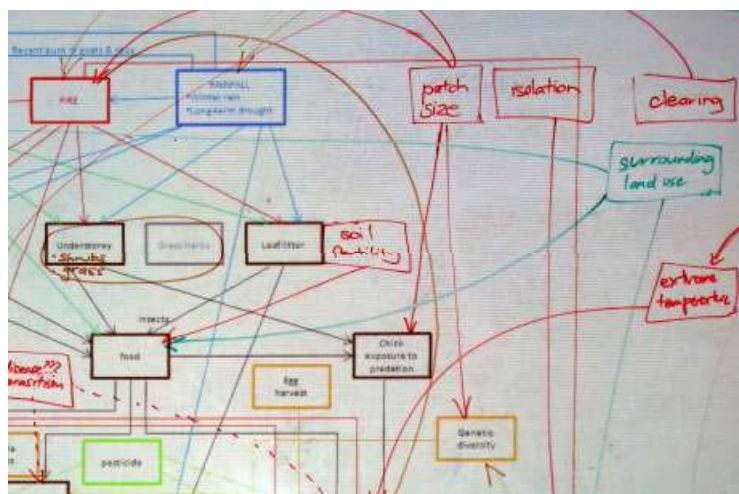
The Adaptive Management Team has a three year timeframe to use statistic modelling to crunch all the data into information detailing what sorts of actions will be most likely to produce benefits for Malleefowl populations. Examples of the sort of information we are looking for are:

- fox control and annual timing that will have the most effect;
- the amount of goat control needed;
- fire management regimes; and
- grazing practices.



Foxes, goats, cats, fire; just some of the elements being looked at by the Adaptive Management Team

Some people might argue that this is just common sense and that we need to do all of these things to help save the Malleefowl. The problem is that there's just not the money to do it all across the vast range of our bird...we have to be strategic and do work where it will have the best results. Added to this is the fact that past actions have had mixed results, even with something as seemingly obvious as fox control.



Sorting out the important elements!

The Adaptive Management Team intends to gather all this information and work with the National Recovery Team to turn it into straight forward action guidelines that can be used across Australia. We will also be able to identify where and when these actions are going to have the best impacts on saving our much loved Malleefowl.

In the meantime it is important that we encourage and help our wonderful team of volunteers across Australia to continue gathering Malleefowl data in a uniform way that can be added to the database. This task will always be important.

As we start to measure the impacts of improved management practices we will use mound monitoring data to adapt our management as we learn what works where and when. Note that Adaptive Management goes on forever. We can always improve what we do!

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