

3. Emergency Summit for Threatened Mallee Birds

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Summary

With a number of mallee birds facing a significant risk of extinction, BirdLife Australia's 'Emergency Summit for Threatened Mallee Birds' gathered together experts to address priority conservation actions.

Abstract

The Murray Mallee provides habitat for six nationally-listed threatened species: Mallee Emu-wren (Endangered), Black-eared Miner (Endangered), Regent Parrot (eastern) (Vulnerable), Red-lored Whistler (Vulnerable), Malleefowl (Vulnerable) and Western Whipbird (eastern) (Vulnerable).

Fire is a major threat to many of these species as they require relatively long unburnt mallee. Earlier this year, large wildfires burnt out 90 per cent of Bronzewing Flora and Fauna Reserve (VIC) and Billiatt Conservation Park (SA). The Bronzewing fire most likely wiped out the 'insurance' population of the Black-eared Miner and a significant population of Malleefowl. The Billiatt fire resulted in the global population of the Mallee Emu-wren now being confined to one contiguous area that covers Murray-Sunset and Hattah-Kulkyne National Parks. Mallee Emu-wren and Black-eared Miner are now highly vulnerable to a reserve-wide fire extinction event. In addition, fires have recently destroyed large tracts of habitat for other nationally threatened mallee species including the Red-lored Whistler, Western Whipbird (eastern) and Regent Parrot (eastern).

In response to this, BirdLife Australia recently hosted an 'Emergency Summit on Threatened Mallee Birds', attended by fire and mallee species experts from universities and representatives from State and Federal governments, to identify urgent actions needed to prevent these species from becoming extinct. Key outcomes of the summit include the ongoing development of Conservation Action Plans for a number of species, captive breeding and translocation feasibility studies for Mallee Emu-wren and agreement on the need to finalise the national Threatened Mallee Bird Recovery Plan and form a Recovery Team.

Threatened Mallee Bird Emergency Summit: *Outcomes and Actions*

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Why we held the Summit

In early 2014, extensive wildfires in south-east Australia burnt large areas of mallee habitat known to be important refuges for a range of threatened mallee birds. Given the grim situation that these birds already faced, BirdLife Australia organised an 'Emergency Summit' to assess their current situation and to identify urgent recovery actions needed to prevent these species from becoming extinct. The **Threatened Mallee Bird Emergency Summit** focussed on the region of Murray Mallee habitat extending across three states; South Australia, Victoria and New South Wales.

Summit participants

The summit was held over three days in mid May and early August 2014 at BirdLife Australia's national office in Carlton, Victoria. It was attended by 36 experts in fire and mallee species ecology from universities, NGOs and representatives from State and Federal governments.



Major discussion points emerging from the Summit

- Most of these species require long unburnt mallee habitat (>15 years).
- Historically, extensive land clearance, large scale fires and habitat degradation by grazing herbivores has resulted in small isolated populations.
- Active management for these species is currently limited due to funding and there are still large knowledge gaps around ecological requirements.
- Under Recommendation 56 of the Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission all of the Victorian mallee would be burnt over the next 20 years resulting in a significant threat to threatened mallee birds.
- Large wildfires in early 2014 have significantly impacted threatened mallee bird populations with five populations lost from large conservation reserves (see table):

2014 Fires in Conservation Reserves	Impacted Species
Bronzewing Flora and Fauna Reserve (VIC)	Black-eared Miner – insurance population lost Malleefowl – significant population lost
Bilibillia Conservation Park (SA)	Western Whipbird – last population in Murray Mallee lost Mallee Emu-wren – population lost
Ngarkat Conservation Park (SA)	Mallee Emu-wren – population lost
Riverland Biosphere (SA)	Black-eared Miner – extensive critical habitat lost



The situation for Mallee Emu-wren, Western Whipbird and Black-eared Miner is now dire with Mallee Emu-wren and Black-eared Miner now highly vulnerable to extinction events from fires.

Recommended actions

- The current draft of the *National Recovery Plan for Mallee Emu-wren, Red-lored Whistler and Western Whipbird* should be endorsed by Federal and State governments.
- There is an urgent need for a full Conservation Action Plan (CAP) to be developed for threatened mallee birds, to build on the draft CAP developed at the Summit.
- The following emergency actions are required for the endangered Mallee Emu-wren over the next 12 months.
 - Improve information sharing
 - Improve initial fire response
 - Prepare translocation feasibility study
 - Prepare captive breeding feasibility study
 - Formation of a Mallee Emu-wren working group



¹ Baker, J. et al. 2012. Draft National Recovery Plan for the Mallee Emu-wren, Red-lored Whistler, Fairybush and Western Whipbird. Department of Sustainability and Environment, Melbourne.

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Photo credits: Chris Tzanos (bird species & background), Zoe Reynolds (burnt mallee vegetation), Dean Ingwersen (mallee vegetation), Paul Sullivan (workshop)

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Conservation Action Plan (CAP) for Threatened Mallee Birds

A draft Conservation Action Plan was developed during the summit to assess the status and threats and devise conservation strategies for the six threatened mallee birds.

Goals and Targets

Scope: To protect and help maintain mallee >15 years post-fire for threatened mallee birds.

Vision: Protect, improve and conserve mallee habitat to decrease the extinction risk of threatened mallee bird species.

Goals for Species

- **Mallee Emu-wren** – Establish and maintain > 4 populations that are stable or positive trending, in large reserves across northern and southern reserve systems in 20 years.
- **Black-eared Miner** – Five subpopulations with a total effective population of 1000 birds of high genetic integrity by 2034, each with habitat of sufficient quality and extent to maintain these subpopulations.
- **Malleefowl** – Increase distribution and abundance of Malleefowl in south-eastern range in 10 years.
- **Regent Parrot** – Secure and improve core habitat within 10 km of breeding sites to increase populations for Regent Parrots in 20 years.
- **Red-lored Whistler** – Five subpopulations of 500 each by 2034 each with habitat of sufficient quality and extent to maintain these subpopulations.
- **Western Whipbird** – Four subpopulations of 500 each by 2034 each with habitat of sufficient quality and extent to maintain these subpopulations.

Target Species	Population Rating
Black-eared Miner	POOR
Mallee Emu-wren	POOR
Malleefowl	FAIR
Red-lored Whistler	FAIR
Regent Parrot	FAIR
Western Whipbird	POOR

Threats

Threats were ranked across all species according to the scope, severity and irreversibility of the threat. An overall rating was given to the threat (low, medium, high and very high).

Thirteen threats were identified with seven of these ranking *Very High, High or Medium* as listed in the table.

Threats	Overall Threat Rating
Catastrophic wildfire	Very High
Past habitat loss and fragmentation	Very High
Drought	Very High
Inappropriate fire management	Very High
Total grazing pressure	High
Inappropriate water management	Medium
Action or inaction drives hybridisation	Medium
Overall threat rating for threatened mallee birds	Very High

Strategies

Summit participants devised nineteen *strategies* to mitigate the effects of threats ranked *Very High and High*. The following seven strategies rated as high priority:

- Trial in-situ habitat manipulation
- Control genetic introgression for Black-eared Miner
- Work with fire crews on bushfire response plans
- Strategic risk-based bushfire planning
- Remove artificial watering points
- Gear existing recovery actions to the current situation for conservation outcomes
- Find alternative funding sources

Actions - Summit participants determined actions required to achieve each strategy with costings, timeframes and the agency best placed to deliver them.



Priority actions identified in the Conservation Action Plan are now underway - a great first step for threatened mallee birds

