

Bush Stone-curlew conservation project – North-east Victoria

Bush Stone-curlews (*Burhinus grallarius*), also known as Bush Thick-knees, are elusive, curious-looking birds. They are largely nocturnal and their presence is often announced by their eerie, unnerving call. The species was once widely distributed in Victoria but it is now endangered across the State.

Whilst they can still be reliably seen in Northern Victoria – if you know where to look – it's clear that this woodland bird has suffered significantly in the last 60 to 70 years and its conservation status is now precarious. There is much still unknown about this unique bird, so the exact reasons for their decline remain unclear – though, like many threatened species it's likely a combination of factors including habitat loss and predation by introduced species. The accumulation of toxic agricultural chemicals in its habitat is also suspected of playing a part in the curlews' plight.

Most conservation actions to assist curlews involve habitat protection and improvement, and feral predator control. Whilst important, having good curlew habitat isn't much use if curlew numbers are declining anyway. And whilst controlling foxes and cats appears logical, the impact of feral predators on curlews is poorly understood and very difficult to measure.

In recent years, more active intervention has led to the development of programs that release captive-bred birds into areas where there are still wild curlews, the goal being to increase the number of curlew pairs in a local area and an increase breeding success. Trust for Nature is developing several feral predator-free areas in the Goulburn Broken Catchment suitable for release of captive-bred curlews to increase the number of breeding pairs.

Two ten hectare areas of high quality curlew habitat have recently been dedicated to protecting these threatened birds. The sites have been fenced to exclude foxes and cats, and the vegetation is being managed to provide nesting, daytime roosts and feeding areas for curlews.

These newly protected sites are located on privately property in the Koonda Hills, near Benalla, where several pairs of breeding curlews are still known to occur. These landholders have a long-term interest in supporting curlew conservation and managing woodland habitat. With plenty of suitable habitat and a landscape unlikely to undergo radical land-use change in the coming decades, it's a secure site for a long-term project that should provide much-needed insight into the curlew's recovery.

With these predator-free sites now established, Trust for Nature is preparing to source and release the first captive-bred curlews onto these properties. The dedication shown by the landholders and the launch of this new Trust for Nature initiative is an exciting and positive step towards increasing the local curlew population in the coming years.

The Grassy Woodland Field Days are an opportunity to show how and where the fenced-sites have been established and discuss the ongoing management required to ensure they remain high quality curlew habitat.



With fox- and cat-proofing an expensive and involved process, Trust for Nature gratefully acknowledges funding received from the Victorian Government for this project.

B. Lobert, October 2015.



Caption: Slim, delicate and well camouflaged in woodland, the Bush Stone-curlew is primarily known for its shrill, strident call and known by some as the 'screaming woman bird'; it's also a herald of events in several Aboriginal beliefs. (Image: B.Lobert)



Caption: High quality woodland habitat of the Bush Stone-curlew. (Image: B.Lobert)



Caption: New fox- and cat-proof fencing recently installed at a protected site. (Image: B.Lobert)