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HARRIER

A serious threat - foreign ants

By Tim Low, biologist and author of *Feral Future.*

Tim Low represents Queensland Conservation Council on the Land Protection Council, a board that advises the Minister for Natural Resources, Mines and Water about pest issues and stock management. In early May 2006 the board toured north Queensland to look at new and emerging pests. He reports that the situation there is very dire.

FollOWingare excerpts from his report to QCC.

"On the outskirts of Cairns we visited a bush site invaded by crazy ants. On Christmas Island, crazy ants have multiplied out of control and wiped out 30 million of the island's famous red crabs. Some trees on the island are dying from attack by sap-sucking scale insects-an indirect consequence of the ants. The ants protect the scale bugs from predators and are fed honeydew by the bugs. Crazy ants have transformed the Christmas Island ecosystem, so it is disconcerting to know that outbreaks have been recorded in recent years from cities and towns up and down the Queensland coast, and at Yamba in northern NSW. The ants have been eradicated from some sites but new infestations keep appearing. They are coming in on ships from New Guinea and other Pacific nations.

Invasive pests often wreak more harm on islands than on larger landmasses, and the hope has always been that crazy ants will prove much less harmful on the mainland. Christmas Island has no native ants to compete with crazy ants, whereas Australia has a rich fauna of native ants. One suggestion has been that the green tree ants in north Queensland will suppress crazy ants. The Cairns infestation shows this to be a vain hope. The pest officers treating the site told us that crazy ants, before they were treated, had eliminated all other insects. Whenever you turned over fallen leaves you found crazy ants nesting underneath and nothing else. Now that the site has been treated green tree ants are coming back.

Having seen the situation on Christmas Island, and now Cairns, I strongly suspect that crazy ants pose a greater threat to biodiversity than fire ants, because they readily invade undisturbed forest while fire ants are confined to disturbed settings such as grazed paddocks and parks. Crazy ants may take over all the rainforests and other humid forests in northern and eastern Australia, stripping them of all insect life in the understory. The consequences for insect-eating birds, mammals and reptiles will be cataclysmic.

The Queensland government is treating all the known crazy ant sites, but no effort has been put into searching for new infestations. The site we saw is at the base of a very tall forested hill, but no one has ever climbed that hill to see if crazy ants have invaded the slopes. The department is seeking additional funds to conduct a proper state survey, from which it will be possible to estimate the cost of a state-wide eradication. There is no certainty that eradication will be funded, especially if it proves expensive. Crazy ants are not considered an agricultural pest, nor do they sting people. The conservation movement in Queensland should be campaigning strongly to raise awareness about invasive ants and the grave threat they pose to biodiversity. The recent discovery of electric ants in Cairns adds to the urgency of this issue. These tiny ants also invade wet forests and strip them of all understorey life. Their impact in New Caledonia has been disastrous."

Note: BOCA is a member of the Queensland Conservation Council and the above extract is taken from their magazine, *Spinifex,* September 2006.

Bush Stone-curlews

Two notes from Catherine Price, the Bush Stone-curlew Recovery Co-ordinator, Department of Environment and Conservation (NSW).

1. Some interesting Bush Stone-curlew news-we have just received a report of a juvenile Bush Stone-curlew approxlrnately 50 km from its nest site (alive). It was a colour-banded bird and it appeared to have made the journey in about a week (Gosford to Swansea) after being pushed out from its parents. As far as I know this is the longest recorded movement to date, but only because so few birds are banded at the moment.

2. The Australian Museum will be examining the genetics of the Bush Stone-curlew over the next few months. It has been a matter of debate as to whether subspecies occur across northern, south-eastern Australia and Kangaroo Island. This information is vital for the future conservation of the species, particularly across south-eastern Australia where the Bush Stone-curlew is threatened.

But to make the analysis as complete as possible they need feathers (wild birds only) from all over Australia.

If you find Bush Stone-curlew feathers, or dead birds (sadly), please send all material to: Walter Boles, Australian Museum, 6 College Street, Sydney NSW 2010

Feathers should be handled as minimally as possible, and sent within a clean plastic bag in an envelope. Body parts should be sent as 'fresh' as possible. Please include your contact details

and as detailed information as is possible regarding the location where the feathers were collected.

If you would like further information on how to preserve specimens, contact Walter Boles on 02 9320 6228 or email walterb@austmus.gov.au

Nowingi Industrial Waste Site

As reported in *The Bird Observer,* February 2006, the Victorian Government has put forward a proposal to build an industrial waste site at Nowingi in north-west Victoria.

The EES for this project generated a huge number of public submissions opposing the proposed development. BOCA presented its case to the Independent Panel Hearing at Mildura on 3 July 2006. The Sunraysia Branch of BOCA also gave evidence to the Panel. There is no doubt that the development would have a significant impact on the natural values of the area, including its birdlife. There is at least one family group of Mallee Emu-wrens on the footprint site and others nearby. With Hattah-Kulkyne National Park to the east, and adjacent Crown land connecting south and west to Murray-Sunset National Park, this site is part of a very important conservation landscape-definitely not the place for an industrial site.

The Panel is yet to make its recommendation to the Victorian Government and a decision is unlikely before the November 2006 State election.

Mallee Emu-wren

As a contribution to the Important Bird Areas of Australia project, the Threatened Species Committee of Birds Australia has been reviewing the status of a number of bird species, using IUCN criteria (IUCN = World Conservation Union). Mallee Emu-wren is currently listed as vulnerable but that assessment is at least 15 years old and there are concerns that it has seriously declined in numbers. There is documented evidence of a major decline in the South Australian population but, at this stage, only subjective evidence for a decline in Victoria, where there are large tracts of public land which have not been surveyed for this secretive species.

A project has now commenced which should give a good indication of the status of Mallee Emu-wren and other threatened Mallee birds in Victoria. The project "Survey of Threatened Mallee Birds, with particular emphasis on the Mallee Emu-wren" is being managed by the Department of Sustainability, Vic., using Natural Heritage Trust funding. Results should be available early 2007.

California Condor problems

It was only about twenty years ago that the chances for California Condor survival seemed almost hopeless. Since then, daring approaches, solid science, hard work, and a spirit of optimism have buoyed chances for the Condor's positive future. With healthy-appearing experimental populations flying free, it seems as though we may have turned the corner, or at least approached the corner, for this species. Lead bullets in the environment (i.e. in carrion) have been seen as the only significant impediment to Condor population growth, while other things have certainly been looking up.

In August 2005 however, researchers at the Hopper Mountain National Wildlife Refuge in California had to remove a Condor chick from its nest. The chick appeared to be underdeveloped and was losing feathers; once in hand, the bird appeared to have something impacted in its crop and gut. After transporting the chick to the Los Angeles Zoo, and followinq a three-hour operation, an astounding amount of material was removed from the ventriculus and proventriculus of the Condor chick. The followinq items were among the debris removed from the chick: four bottle caps and a screw top, three electrical fittings, five washers, 13 22-calibre shell-casings, one 39-calibre shell-casing, a shotgun-shell, several pieces of plastic bags, about a quarter cup of broken glass and a similar amount of broken plastic, a few small pieces of fabric, four small stones, a metal bracket, a piece of wire, and a few small pieces of rubber. Fortunately, it did not appear that any of this remarkable collection of detritus perforated the gut, and currently the chick appears to be doing well.

BOCA recognises Keith Hately A.M.

The renowned ranger-naturalist, Keith Hately, died on 1 September 2005, aged 94. Keith had an extraordinary knowledge of the natural history of the Little Desert and in many ways contributed to the Bolte Government abandoning its plans to develop the area for agriculture; subsequently most of the Little Desert has been reserved as National Park.

In February 1967 Keith was appointed as the first ranger for Little Desert National Park, having been the voluntary ranger for the Kiata Lowan Sanctuary for many years prior to that.

During 1939-40 Keith carried out detailed measurements of the temperatures in breeding mounds of the Malleefowl and, in subsequent years, made many other studies of this fascinating species. He introduced many BOCA members to his special pair of birds, Romeo and Juliet, and opened visitors' eyes to the natural wonders of the Little Desert.

BOCA and Parks Victoria are planning an event to recognise Keith Hately's contribution to conservation and the Little Desert. This will be held at 2.00 pm on Sunday 5 November at the Sanctuary Picnic area in Little Desert National Park and will include the naming of the Keith Hately Nature Walk, in his honour.

All are welcome to attend. Contact Don Saunders at BOCA to confirm arrangements.
Tel: 039877 5342. Email: conservation@birdobservers.org.au

Funding for Orange-bellied Parrot

The Australian Government has allocated a total of $3.2 million to be spent over the next two years on protecting, enhancing and expanding habitat for the Orange-bellied Parrot.

A media release from the Australian Minister for the Environment and Heritage, Senator Campbell, outlined the four ways in which the funds would be directed.

Breeding Areas. Expand investment in improving breeding/nesting habitat at Melaleuca and Birch's Inlet in the South West World Heritage Area of Tasmania. The Tasmanian Government will be an important partner in this element.

Migratory Areas. Expand investment in migratory habitat protection and improvement in Tasmania and King Island, including predator control in key migratory habitats on King Island such as Lavinia Nature Reserve at Sea Elephant, King Island.

Winter Habitat. New investment to create new, and improve the quality of existing, wintering habitat on private land and wetlands throughout the wintering range in Victoria and South Australia. There is potential for expansion and enhanced management of habitat on private land immediately adjacent to existing important habitats throughout the winter range. Possible locations include Swan Bay (Queenscliff, Victoria); Lake Connewarre (Barwon Heads, Victoria), Andersons Inlet (Inverloch, Victoria); and The Coorong and Lake Alexandrina (South Australia).

A partnership with non-government organisations and private landholders would be sought to deliver this element. Non-government conservation organisations may also be able to attract and inject privately raised philanthropic funds to boost the work.

Commonwealth Lands. Potential new investment to enhance and expand habitat on key Australian Government lands in the winter range of the species. For example some of the internationally significant wetlands in the Port Phillip Bay area that provide habitat for the bird.

This would be carried out in partnership with relevant Government land managers, e.g. the Department of Defence.

Does this mean that all adult Condors are attracted to ubiquitous shiny objects and will bring them back to their nest for their chicks? Or does this simply mean that this chick's parents have this tendency? If the first option is the case, then the species is clearly in deep trouble, since these sorts of objects are virtually everywhere in a Condor's environment. If the second is the case-with this unfortunate chick simply havlnq 'idiot parents'-then we should remain hopeful.

From an article by Jerry W Davis in *Vulture News* No 54 (March 2006)

Funding totalling $30,000 over two years has been made available to the Australian Museum in Sydney for a study of the "Systematics, biogeography, genetic differentiation and conservation of the grasswren *Amy torn is* complex". The funding is made through the Australian Biological Resources Study (ABRS), an Australian Government research agency providing species information for biodiversity management.

The research will be undertaken on specimens and tissue samples already held by the museum, and will be a more detailed analysis of the taxon. Special attention will be paid to the Striated Grasswren and the Thick-billed Grasswren, both of which have suffered contraction of their range, whilst the taxonomic status of individual groups has been uncertain. It may be that some sub-populations are indeed separate species, and this will influence the focus of conservation efforts.

Anyone coming across further samples from grasswrens by finding dead birds or even a feather, is encouraged to send them to Dr Leslie Christidis. Ring him on 02 9320 6000 to discuss the matter.

Illustrated: Striated Grasswen. Bill Labbett (BOCA Collection)

Foxes in Tasmania

The Chair of Birds Tasmania, Dr Eric Woehler, has written a disturbing note about foxes in the August 2006 edition of their newsletter *Yellowthroat.*

"The sad confirmation of foxes in Tasmania opens yet another door to the dangers faced by many species of Tasmania's birds. With increasing habitat loss and fragmentation, predation from cats and other introduced species, and the expansion of other exotic species of birds, many species of Tasmania's birds probably will face their single greatest threat if foxes succeed in establishing themselves here in Tasmania.

"Based on very preliminary work by the Committee, at least 40 species of Tasmanian birds are at risk from foxes-perhaps none more so than our endemic Tasmanian Native-hen. The potential impact of foxes on this species will be nothing less than catastrophic. Other species such as Fairy Terns, Hooded Plovers, Little Penguins, Ground Parrots and several species of honeyeaters will face similar pressures. A real prospect is the loss of several species if foxes establish.

"Birds Tasmania will be initiating directed efforts in the near future to collect useful data in the event of foxes establishing. All members of Birds Tasmania will be encouraged to collect data that will allow us to assess the areas and degrees of impact. In combination with previous data from Atlases 1 and 2, and our incidental observations, new sightings will provide greater insights into future trends in Tasmanian bird populations and their distributions."

SAEMANGEUM LOST

The Harrier No. 19, June 2005 reported that the Saemangeum Reclamation Project in Korea had been halted as a result of a court ruling. BOCA is one of many groups to have requested the Government of the Republic of Korea to cancel the Project which would destroy a huge area of tidal mudflats, recognised as one of the most important wader habitats in the world.

Unfortunately, the Korean Government appealed to the Supreme Court and on 16 March 2006 was successful in having the Administrative Court's decision overturned and the seawall has now been completed.

The following information is taken from the Birds Korea website, www.birdskorea.org:

Saemangeum (pronounced "say-man-gum") is a 40,100 ha project in South Korea, entailing damming the estuaries of the Mangyeung and Dongjin Rivers, replacing vast bird-rich tidal-flats and sea-shallows with land and a huge freshwater reservoir, both still lacking any clear end use.

Started in 1991, a 33 km long seawall built to cut both estuaries from the Yellow Sea was completed on 21 April 2006. Further dyke-building, planned to start in 2008, will probably take another ten years to complete.

The Saemangeum 'reclamation' project is believed the largest single coastal reclamation in the world, and remains hugely controversial. It has provoked some of the largest ever environmental protests inside Korea, and the most sustained international protests ever against a South Korean development project. Outer seawall construction was stopped several times due to these protests: to allow national courts to debate the legality of the 'reclamation'; and to consider ways in which to reduce water pollution.

By 25 April 2006, only four days after seawall closure, shellfish beds in the enclosed area started to die. By the end of May, most were dead, and water quality was already deteriorating rapidly.

90% of Saemangeum's vast tidal-flats are now expected to be lost by 2007, either dried out or permanently flooded. Water pollution is expected to worsen dramatically. The area had enormous local and national importance for fisheries, supporting the livelihoods of an estimated 25,000 people.

Internationally, the natural Saemangeum system was the single most important shorebird staging area in the Yellow Sea, itself a core part of the East Asian Australasian Flyway. At least 18 species of shorebird and nine other species of waterbird were supported by the area in internationally important concentrations.

Key species included the Endangered Spoon-billed Sandpiper (highest counts of over 200), the Endangered Nordmann's Greenshank (over 60) and the Great Knot, the latter with a peak count of over 125,000: 30% of the world's population.

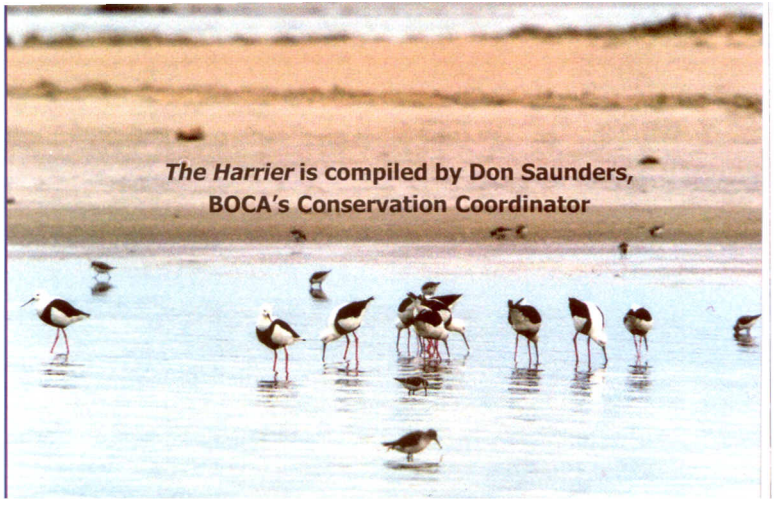
Probably over 300,000 shorebirds depended on the Saemangeum estuarine system annually.

Birds Korea and the specialist Australasian Wader Studies Group launched the Saemangeum Shorebird Monitoring Program (SSMP) in spring 2006, to monitor and publicise the impacts of this reclamation.

Surveying will continue in April and May 2007, and again in 2008 (the year that South Korea hosts the triennial Ramsar "wise use of wetlands" conference).

The SSMPis also monitoring adjacent wetlands-including South Korea's most important remaining shorebird site, the Geum Estuary. **Unbelievably, the Geum Estuary is now also targeted for complete 'reclamation'.**

The Geum Estuary is an adjacent wetland which, according to the Korean Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry was a site to which the shorebirds, displaced by the Saemangeum development, would move!



Banded Stilts - Signs of the (Drought) Times

Surveys of The Coorong, South Australia, in January and February 2006, counted more than 90,000 Banded Stilts. For the first time in the history of The Coorong, Banded Stilts and Red-necked Avocets were recorded breeding there.

A Ramsar-listed wetland, The Coorong is experiencing major changes in water quality and salinity resulting from low flows in the Murray. While the Banded Stilts and Avocets have benefited from this change, at least in the short term, other species of waders have suffered a major decline in numbers since the 1980s when The Coorong was rated one of the top 10 sites for waders in Australia.

Another victim of the drought is Lake Corangamite, Victoria, which is the largest permanent saline lake in Australia and a major component of the Western District Lakes Ramsar Site. With the on-going drought, now for 9 or 10 years, the lake is looking less permanent and its salinity has sky-rocketed. Some islands have appeared and the water is very shallow-ideal conditions for Banded Stilts. And they have arrived-in huge numbers. A helicopter survey on 10 August 2006 by Clive Minton and David Hollands found a tightly-packed flock of Banded Stilts well out from the shoreline. The actual number of Stilts was difficult to assess during the flight so photographs were taken to allow more accurate assessment, resulting in an estimate of 112,000.

Reference: Ken Gosbell & Maureen Christie, *Report on the Breeding of Banded Stilt and Red-necked Avocet in The Coorong December 2005 to February 2006;* Australasian Wader Studies Group, July 2006.

Photograph: Coorong National Park, March 2005:] Rogers