

Threatened Species of the South Australian Murray-Darling Basin

Western Whipbird (eastern subspecies)

*Psophodes nigrogularis leucogaster***Vulnerable**

Description and habits

A peculiar bird of the mallee that is rarely seen but has a loud, unusual song likened to a squeaking gate, heard most often in winter and early spring. Adults are olive-grey with a white belly, a black throat edged in white, and a small crest.

Western Whipbirds live in pairs and have territories of 10-20 hectares. They spend most of their time on or near the ground, foraging for insects such as caterpillars, ants and beetles, as well as spiders and skinks. They find food in the leaf litter, in flowers, on leaves and under bark.

In late winter or early spring they build a cup-shaped nest out of twigs, bark, grass and other vegetation in a dense shrub close to the ground, and lay two pale blue eggs.

The name 'Whipbird' actually comes from a related species—the Eastern Whipbird—which makes a loud whipcrack noise when it calls.

Mystery in the Murray Mallee

The Western Whipbird can be so hard to catch a glimpse of that the ornithologists who first discovered it in the Murray Mallee were collecting its nests and eggs, and hearing its strange call in the same place for more than 10 years before they finally identified it in 1933.

Isolated Populations

The Murray Mallee population of the Western Whipbird is one of three separate populations of the eastern subspecies, all of which are rare or threatened. In fact, due to the fragmentation of the Whipbird's mallee habitat, the Murray Mallee population is now probably split further into 2-4 isolated groups.

What do they need to survive?

Western Whipbirds need dense mallee or mallee-heath habitat, which occurs on limestone ridges, interdunal flats and sand dune slopes throughout the Murray Mallee. Populations require large patches of habitat, or a well-connected series of smaller patches, to allow genetic flow through the population and so that birds can escape to refuges in harsh conditions.

Fire—friend *and* enemy

Fire plays an essential role in the Australian landscape. Western Whipbirds rely on periodic fires to regenerate their habitat, keeping the shrub layer suitably dense. However, very large or frequent fires can have a devastating effect on the birds' habitat and their ability to disperse through the landscape.

Why are they threatened?

Past broad-scale clearance of vegetation in the Murray Mallee was responsible for large declines in many native animals, including Western Whipbirds. The threats they now face are more complex and perilous due to the fragmented landscape they now exist in. Frequent, large fires have reduced the population size and available habitat such that recovery may not be possible without our intervention

What are we doing to help?

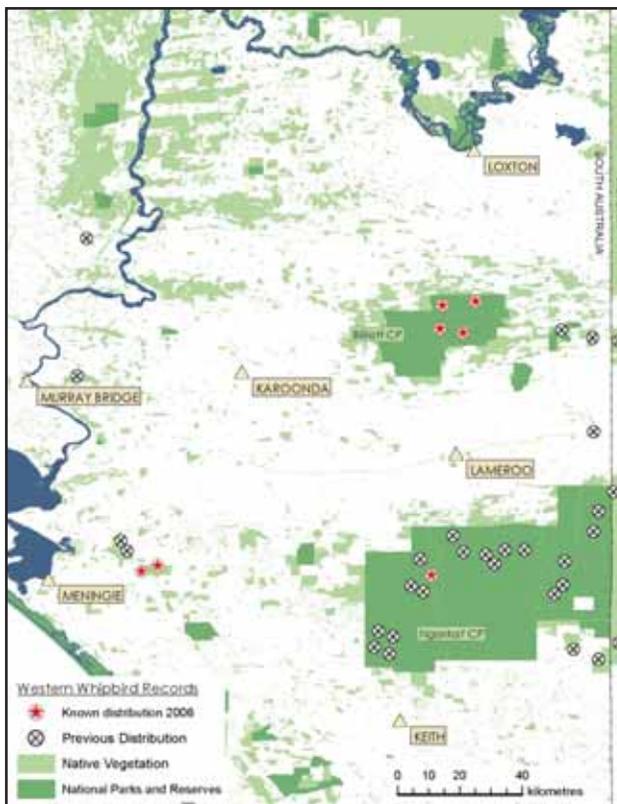
A regional Recovery Plan is in place for a group of mallee birds, including the Western Whipbird. Surveys will help to establish its distribution and better define its habitat requirements. Its needs will then be incorporated into Park and Fire Management Plans, with important areas being protected from threats.



Typical Western Whipbird habitat

Where do they occur?

In the Murray Mallee, Western Whipbirds now have only a small and patchy distribution. They have disappeared from Victoria and have been declining in South Australia for some time. Billiatt Conservation Park is probably the most important habitat patch remaining after the majority of suitable habitat in Ngarkat CP was burnt in 2005 and 2006.



How can you help?

If you see or hear a Western Whipbird, record the time, date and exact location and report it to the Regional Ecologist, DEH Murraylands, Ph (08) 8595 2111. Every record is extremely valuable.



Western Whipbird habitat 9 months after a wildfire.

Further information contact

Biodiversity Conservation Programs
Department for Environment and Heritage, Murraylands Region
Telephone (08) 8595 2111
www.environment.sa.gov.au

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