

Threatened Species of the Northern Territory

MALLEEFOWL

Leipoa ocellata

Conservation status

Australia: Vulnerable

Northern Territory: Critically Endangered



Malleefowl. (Photo: Graeme Chapman)

Description

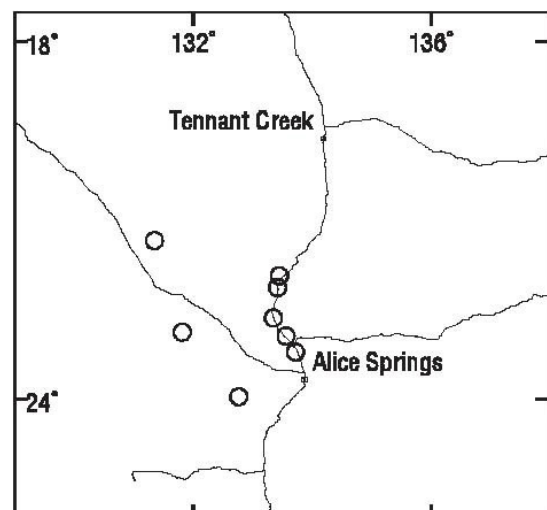
The malleefowl is a large bird, about the size of a domestic hen with a head-body length of up to 60 cm and body mass of 1.5-2.5 kg. It has powerful grey legs, a short dark bill and a flattish head. The tail is long, greyish in colour and rounded at the tip. The head, and sides and rear of the neck are bluish-grey to grey-brown, and the chin and throat are pale chestnut. There is a broad black stripe from the throat to the upper breast. The upperbody is strikingly barred and mottled grey, white, black and rufous. The rest of the underbody is creamy white (Marchant and Higgins 1993).

Distribution

This species has a patchy distribution in semi-arid regions of southern Australia including central New South Wales, the mallee region around the New South Wales-Victoria-South Australia border, south-central South Australia, and south-west and central coastal Western Australia. In the Northern Territory, it has been recorded from 12 one-degree grid cells, mostly west of the Stuart Highway and south of the Tanami Desert, with no records since the early 1960s (Benshemesh 2000). Storr (1977) located nine records from the southwest corner of the Northern Territory, from the Petermann Range in the extreme southwest, north across the MacDonnell Ranges as far as Central Mount Wedge.

Kimber (1985) obtained additional distributional information during interviews with Aboriginal people. Locations identified by these sources include the Petermann Range, Hermannsburg, Mt Theo (Tanami Desert), Idracowra Station, Burt Well, Tea Tree, Connors Well, Aileron and Central Mount Stuart.

Benshemesh (2000) noted more recent sightings by Aboriginal inhabitants and rangers near the South Australian border that he considered to be credible.



Known locations of the Malleefowl

□ = pre 1970; • = post 1970.

Conservation reserves where reported:

None.

Ecology

The malleefowl is a ground-dwelling, diurnal bird that occupies large, permanent home ranges of 1.7-4.6 km² in the breeding season and 0.5-

0.75 km² in the non-breeding season (Marchant and Higgins 1993). The species is best known for its breeding

system which involves the male building a large mound up to 3 m wide and 60 cm above the ground composed of organic material and soil. When the temperature in the chamber reaches 26-33°C, females begin to lay eggs that are incubated by a combination of solar radiation and heat produced by rotting organic matter in the egg chamber. The young have to dig themselves from the mound and are self-sufficient from hatching.

The malleefowl occupies woodland, shrubland and scrub and favours areas with a shrubby understorey. It is strongly associated with mallee in most parts of its range. In arid Australia it occupies (d) mulga scrub; either pure stands or mixed with mallee. It feeds on the ground and roosts in the foliage of shrubs and trees at night. The diet consists mostly of seeds, although other plant material and invertebrates are also taken.

Conservation assessment

The malleefowl could be extinct in the Northern Territory. The last definite record given by Storr (1977) was in 1931, whereas Kimber (1985) located records up to the 1950s. However, the bioregions that are most likely to support any remaining individuals – the Central Ranges and Great Sandy Desert – have never been adequately surveyed. The species may still occur in isolated pockets in these regions. If so, numbers will be low and the remaining individuals under threat of extinction. Therefore the species is classified as Critically Endangered (under criterion D) due to:

- a population size estimated to number fewer than 50 mature individuals.

Threatening processes

Threatening processes that have caused the decline of the malleefowl in the Northern Territory are likely to include predation by introduced carnivores, hunting by humans, environmental stress resulting from drought (Harlen and Priddel 1996), and changes in fire regimes (Kimber 1985). Predation by European foxes and feral cats is likely to be the major threat faced by any remaining individuals (Priddel and Wheeler 1990, 1999; Benshemesh 2000; Garnett and Crowley 2000).

Conservation objectives and management

There is a national recovery plan for malleefowl (Benshemesh 2000).

There is no existing management program for this species in the Northern Territory.

Management priorities include:

- (i) searches for individuals and mounds as an integral part of biological surveys of the Central Ranges and Great Sandy Desert bioregions; and
- (ii) rapid follow-up of any potential sightings.

Compiled by

Chris Pavey [April 2006]

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