



Cocanarup Conservation Alliance Inc.

Protecting and promoting the environmental and cultural integrity of the Ravensthorpe region

NEWSLETTER – OCTOBER 2019

Over five days between October 16th and 21st teams of local volunteers worked with staff from BirdLife Australia and DBCA to monitor this year's Carnaby's nesting season out in the Cocanarup salmon gums. This was a substantial effort by all involved and, satisfyingly, it produced the best set of figures recorded thus far.

Nest monitoring surveys in Cocanarup began in 2005 and this remarkable piece of "citizen science" has continued ever since, primarily due to the knowledge, commitment and energy of two locals, John Tucker and Chris Biddulph, who have remained the "backbone" of the program throughout. Others who've made substantial contributions over the years include staff from BirdLife, DBCA and RAIN, the Esperance Bird Group and a number of other dedicated locals.

This year surveys were undertaken in three phases:

- The first two days were led by Adam Peck, black cockatoo project coordinator for BirdLife, working with three local volunteers from CCA and Hannah Bannister, regional ecologist with South Coast NRM;
- The now-traditional weekend camp-out involved 13 people, many being local residents but some coming from as far afield as Albany. These folk worked under the guidance of Vicki Stokes, WA program manager for BirdLife – and of course, John and Chris, whose knowledge of the "lay of the land" helped keep the process more targeted than it may have been otherwise;
- And lastly, Vicki stayed on for a final day's work, investigating some potential new nesting areas and filling in some gaps.

Surveys used the "tap and flush" method and live-feed cameras to identify breeding activity. Work involved visiting known confirmed nest trees from years past, checking trees with potentially suitable hollows, looking and listening for signs of breeding (such as males perched near nests and listening for breeding calls and begging females) and searching some new areas.

The "tap and flush" process

For those unfamiliar with the process, it generally goes something like this:

- Members of the team target a known or potential nest tree either via BirdLife's live tablet-based mapping or Chris & John's prior knowledge (and/or their gps records)– or simply by looking carefully for a potential nesting hollow;
- The tree is surrounded by 2 to 4 people, one of whom taps the trunk with a sturdy stick;
- If occupied, a female Carnaby's will "flush" from her hollow, usually climbing out into the entrance to peer down quizzically at the source of this rude knocking, as if to say "now what on earth do you lot want?";
- The camera is then deployed on an extendable column, which usually results in the bird flying off to a nearby tree;



Some of the team at work. Note female Carnaby's perched close to her hollow (top right)



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A female Carnaby's peers down from her hollow, perhaps wondering what all the fuss is about

- It is then carefully lowered into the nest hollow to beam down poor-quality but exciting images of the contents – potentially eliciting a cry of “two eggs!” or “one egg, one chick!” or even “two chicks!” from the monitor operator;
- Details of the tree – the height, type and orientation of the hollow, the height and diameter of the tree, the contents or empty condition of the nest - are recorded in a spreadsheet, and the tree is identified with a unique number to enable easy reference in future years.

Days were long and quite tiring (for most, at least), but full of satisfaction and more than a little delight. Of course, the results were an ample reward in themselves, underlining the importance of this work no matter how demanding. And the red wine and camaraderie around the campfire helped too – though in truth the campfire was a rather quiet one that night as weary bodies and minds began to unwind.

The numbers tell no lies

This year set new records on most fronts, with some of the key statistics being as follows:

- 179 trees were subject to the full survey process outlined above, with many more tapped in hope as the team moved by;
- Of these, 143 were already in the BirdLife database, either as known trees from the past or as potential nest trees;
- 34 entirely new nest trees were located and added to the growing database;
- 62 trees were checked with the camera, which was fewer than hoped due to batteries failing along the way;
- Of these 62 camera-checked trees 38 were checked because females were flushed and the other 24 because they showed signs of active use
- Of the 38 camera-checked hollows from which females were flushed 33 were confirmed to have either eggs or chicks or a combination there-of. These figures are important, as they indicate that 87% of hollows from which females are flushed are likely to be active breeding attempts – which is useful when cameras are not available;
- There are now 199 trees which are known to have been used for nesting across the years, some of them repeatedly.
- Best of all, 72 females were flushed across the 5 days survey work – and of these it is thought just 3 may still have been “prospecting” for a nest site – which means **there were 69 breeding pairs confirmed, a new record by far for Cocanarup.**

While this is an impressive number, as is indicated by the comment below, it is also likely to be still a significant underestimate. There are likely to be many more breeding pairs because:

- There are still confirmed trees and areas not surveyed;
- Breeding is still in the early stages with most females sitting on eggs and pairs still prospecting;



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- Listening surveys on the Sunday evening and ground explorations on the Monday morning indicated more breeding pairs in areas as yet never assessed.

A summary of the outcomes

In considering the outcomes of this work, BirdLife's Vicki Stokes indicated that ***"Given what we've found this year, Cocanarup is quite likely the single most important entirely natural nesting site for Carnaby's anywhere in the State (and therefore the world)."***

This underscores the critical importance of the rigorous process of survey work and data collection as these figures significantly enhance our efforts to have the wider Cocanarup area set aside as a Class A Reserve.

Camera evidence throughout the survey period backed up Chris and John's anecdotal observations that the breeding season is late this year. The biggest chicks were no more than 1-2 weeks old, and with some birds still "house hunting" it is likely that the extended dry conditions have caused the birds to delay nesting. Those same drought conditions are likely to impose additional stress on the adults as they seek to feed growing young well into the heat of the summer – especially as it is quite possible forage species in the Kwongan shrublands in the wider Cocanarup-Kundip area will also have suffered. This too, underscores the importance of conservation of the *whole* Cocanarup-Kundip area, not just the salmon gums of the timber reserve.

Other critters of Cocanarup

During the surveys a number of other species were recorded using hollows in the nest trees including:

- Barn owls
- Boobook owls
- Regent parrots
- Galahs
- Kookaburra

The barn owls in particular aroused some speedy responses as they're known to let loose a stream of white-grey excrement as they flee the nest. Fortunately, most tree-tappers were quick enough to escape unscathed...

Two gorgeous carpet pythons were seen, one curled up into a tight and complex knot on a brisk spring morning, and the other moving gracefully through the open understorey, and passing without concern less than a metre from the feet of some of the team.

But throughout it was the Carnaby's who provided the greatest delight, with their ethereal ululating calls and unique looping flight a constant reminder of the reason to be out there – and the importance of conserving this critical home range for the species. We trust the information coming from this work will further assist the cause.

The survey team at the campsite early on Sunday October 20th





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Progress with Plan for Our Parks

We've been recently informed that our submission for a Cocanarup-Kundip Class A Reserve is currently under active consideration as part of the state government's Plan for Our Parks program, and that recommendations are likely to be made to the Ministerial Council in coming months. Whilst the outcome of this situation is far from certain, we've been somewhat heartened by the feedback received from various agencies and Ministerial offices.

However, it has also been made very clear that the strength of community support for any of the parcels of land under consideration will be a significant factor in its assessment. Hence, we urge members – and, in particular, member organisations – who have not yet accessed the draft letter on our [Take Action](#) page to do so in the near future. *Your voice is critical – and the time to be heard is now!*

Ongoing interactions with mining companies – and local developments on that front in the wider Ravensthorpe Shire – remind us that there is another entirely different view of the value of this landscape: one built on extraction of resources and further reliance on the very capitalist system that so threatens the natural world we love. This is no time to be looking the other way, to be “too busy” to act, to leave it to somebody else: if you love this landscape and the myriad life-forms it contains, if you honour and respect the natural world that sustains and supports human existence *you need to act now.*

A win-win for exploration tenement holders?

Following communication to and from the office of the Minister for Mines, CCA has written to the mining companies who hold exploration tenements over the proposed Class A Reserve area, outlining what we felt might be a “win-win” situation.

Under the conditions of their exploration tenements these companies are required to spend quite substantial funds on exploration activity each year. In normal circumstances they do not have the option to “do nothing”.

However, the Minister for Mines was kind enough to inform us that tenement holders could apply for relief from this requirement under a limited number of circumstances – one of which was “if a government decision is pending”.

Clearly in this case a very significant government decision is pending – one which might impact the future of these exploration tenements. In light of this we have suggested that these companies consider applying for relief from the requirement to spend, given that continuing to do so in the current state of uncertainty could be considered poor use of shareholder funds.

It is fair to say the response has been mixed. Some have simply acknowledged our letter and provided no insight into their thinking, others have indicated a robust intent to “press on”, whilst yet others have not responded at all. From our perspective the important issue here is that we have reached out to these companies, reminding them of this opportunity, as an act of goodwill.

Throughout this process we have sought to interact with these companies respectfully and openly, and we will continue doing so in the hope of a response in kind.

The AGM and its subsequent actions

CCA's Annual General Meeting was held on the evening of October 24th in Ravensthorpe, and we appreciate the many messages received from members near and far who were unable to attend. A solid group of core local members re-elected the existing Committee and accepted both the Chairperson's and Treasurer's reports.

The key outcome of general business was a decision that CCA would make a limited submission to the EPA regarding ACH Minerals proposed Kundip Gold Project, focussing on issues that had the capacity to negatively impact the Class A Reserve area.

For those not familiar with the location of this proposed mine, it would be immediately adjacent the proposed reserve, on the east side of the Ravensthorpe-Hopetoun Road. The submission zeroed in on two key points:



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Carpet python (Morelia spilota)

- The proposed mine would be located adjacent to the Steere River, potentially putting at risk the vital freshwater springs and pools further downstream – which can provide an essential roosting and watering point for huge flocks of Carnaby's in late summer and autumn, and
- If the mine were to proceed it would inevitably lead to ACH ramping up exploration work in the proposed reserve area where they hold a significant number of tenements in areas known to be of exceptionally high biodiversity which are currently largely undisturbed.

In addition to the "official" CCA submission it is known that a number of core members also submitted powerful personal statements of concern about this proposal, and we now await the EPA's assessment of all the matters that have been raised. It is unknown how long this process will take, but it is likely to be many months.

Albany strategy session – and the way forward

A major strategy and forward-planning session was held in Albany late in September, attended by a number of key players around the Cocanarup-Kundip Class A Reserve proposal, including:

- Greg Mair, Regional Manager DBCA
- Justin Bellanger, CEO, South Coast NRM
- Prof. Stephen Hopper AM, UWA
- Nathan McQuoid, landscape ecologist
- Vicki Stokes, state program manager, BirdLife
- Keith Bradby, CEO, GondwanaLink

Harley Coyne, regional heritage officer with the Department of Planning, Lands & Heritage was a late apology due to the funeral of an important elder.

CCA is deeply grateful to these folk for giving their time and substantial expertise, and for helping shape priorities for the next phase of the campaign. Much discussion revolved around gaining a better understanding of the Plan for Our Parks program, and how to best engage with Noongar people with a connection to the area.

To this end, a key outcome was to focus on attracting grant funds for a combined "Biological and Cultural Survey" of the area – and this process is currently absorbing the majority of the attention of the committee. Other goals included:

- Attracting positive media coverage, ideally of the current Carnaby's nesting season;
- Sourcing funds and/or skilled volunteers to accumulate quality video footage of the area and, in particular, drone footage;
- Working with the Traditional Owners to have the Phillips River valley and its tributary creeks registered as a mythological site, and
- Briefing other local politicians.

Beyond these specific actions, the priority task remains ensuring that DBCA and DMIRS continue to be highly conscious of the substantial natural and cultural values of the Cocanarup-Kundip area. Spending days out in the bush with the cornerstone endangered species that depend on this area has clearly underlined why this area has been listed as "Proposed Nature Reserve" since 1992 – and why it should now be a high priority for reservation through the Plan for Our Parks program. All those Carnaby's chicks out there in the salmon gum hollows of Cocanarup have a right to a viable future too.

Can you help fund the work of CCA?

While CCA is a low-cost volunteer-driven organisation, we appreciate **tax-deductible donations** very much. We have regular website, printing and other admin expenses, and members of the committee frequently travel long distances and pay for accommodation to attend lobbying meetings on behalf of the campaign. If you can help in any way please go to: <https://cca.asn.au/donate>