



Threatened Species of the South Australian Murray-Darling Basin

MALLEEFOWL *Leipoa ocellata*

VULNERABLE



Description

Described as the 'spotted egg-leaver' by naturalist John Gould in 1840, the Malleefowl is a fascinating bird that inhabits the semi-arid scrubs throughout southern Australia, including the Murray Mallee. They live mainly on the ground and have strong legs for digging and scraping in the soil and litter. The males are a little larger than the females but the sexes are otherwise very similar.

Despite their size (bigger than an average chicken) Malleefowl are well camouflaged and rarely seen. They rely on their keen sight and hearing to detect danger and move away, usually on foot, but they are also strong fliers when required.

The Malleefowl is known among the local indigenous people as 'Lowan'.

Magnificent Mounds

Malleefowl are well known for building large mounds in which they incubate their eggs. The male scrapes together the leaf litter surrounding the mound, then waits for rain. He burries the wet litter inside the mound of sand, where it starts to decompose.

When conditions are right, the female lays the eggs within the mound. Relying on heat from the rotting litter and from the sun to warm the eggs, the male uses his 'thermometer' beak to check the temperature within the mound. Each day for 2 months, he tends the mound to maintain the right temperature by opening it up or closing it.

When the chicks hatch, they must dig through a metre or more of sand to the surface before taking their first breath, and then must fend for themselves – the adult Malleefowl provide no parental care!

What do they eat?

Malleefowl eat a range of seeds, fruits and insects. The abundance of their food sources varies with seasonal conditions, and droughts can mean low food availability. Malleefowl often feed in stubble, eating spilt grain and weed seeds when other food is limited. The female can lay more than 30 eggs when food is plentiful, but may not lay at all if food is scarce.

Why are they threatened?

Past vegetation clearance reduced the range and numbers of Malleefowl. This habitat loss and fragmentation continues to limit their recovery. There are several current threats:

- grazing by stock and feral animals reduces food plants
- foxes and cats can prey on eggs, chicks and adults
- fires can reduce the availability of food, shelter, and vegetation for mound building
- droughts reduce food, limit breeding, and exacerbate fires

Climate change will also affect Malleefowl, by changing the frequency and severity of fires and droughts.

What do Malleefowl need to survive?

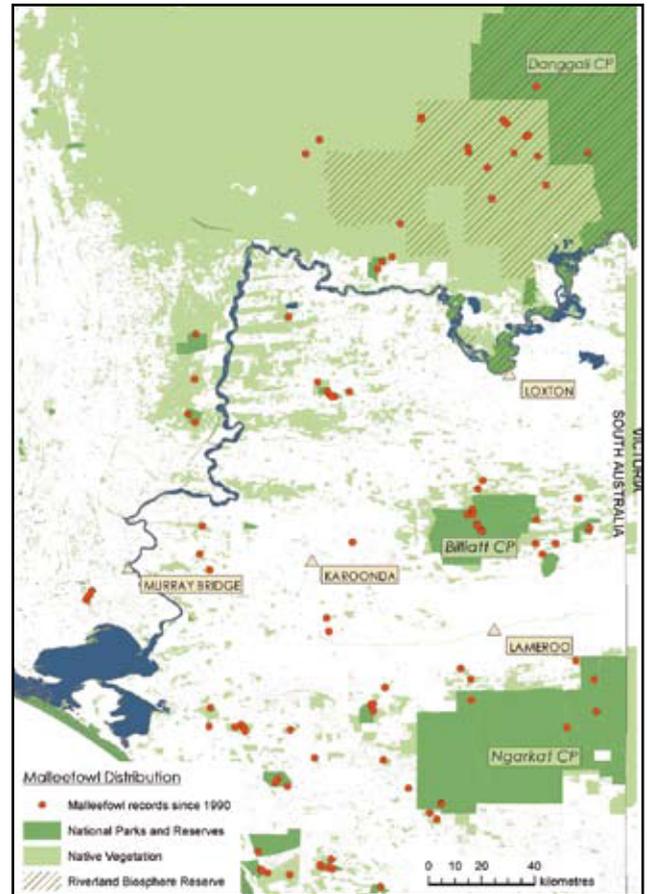
We need to keep stock out of Malleefowl habitat and control feral cats, foxes, goats and rabbits over large areas. Research is needed to help us clearly understand the impact of each threat so we can refine our management strategies. Recovery teams are helping to coordinate these efforts across southern Australia, allowing communities to get involved with Malleefowl conservation.

Where do they occur?

Malleefowl occur across the semi-arid zone of southern Australia. The map shows records in the SA Murray-Darling Basin region

What can you do?

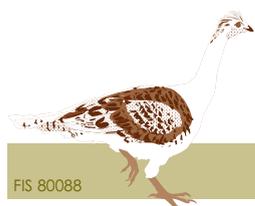
- Landholders should continue to fence habitat, and look to develop integrated control of rabbits, feral goats, and introduced predators with their neighbours.
- Report all sightings of Malleefowl – every record is valuable. Please report the date and location to the Regional Ecologist, DEH Murraylands, Ph (08) 8595 2111.
- Volunteer for surveys to monitor breeding each year.



Further information contact

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

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