

Joy of chasing Plains-wanderers

IT'S NO wonder PhD student Kylie Eklom admits to getting very excited every time she spots a Plains-wanderer. The birds are few and far between. Because of the prolonged drought in the Murray Darling Basin (MDB), the population of the species listed as vulnerable nationally and endangered in NSW, may have dropped by as much as 90%.

In spring 2007, Eklom spent two months out in the field at Oolambeyan National Park, 81 kilometres south-east of Hay, NSW, but found only 13 birds over 15 nights (58 hours and 226km) of spotlighting.

Her biggest thrill was to find a male bird with four chicks on Oolambeyan, evidence that despite the harsh conditions, the birds are still managing to breed.

Eklom is in her third year of a PhD looking at food resources in grasslands and how that relates to the survival of the Plains-wanderer. As often is the case with PhD research projects, the focus of her research has changed.

Originally, she was going to radio-track the Plains-wanderers, looking at their movement and habitat use, building on similar work done 20 years ago.

"However, that original research was probably carried out in favourable conditions," says Eklom, whose supervisors are Associate Professor Gary Luck and A/Prof Ian Lunt, of Charles Sturt University's Institute for Land, Water and Society.

"I think while their habitat preference probably hasn't changed, I would imagine how they use habitat or move around the landscape could have changed quite a bit," she says.

In 2006 Eklom worked with the Department of Environment and Conservation (funding her research), to radio-track birds for a joint project with the Plague Locust Commission to see if pesticide use was affecting the birds.

"Unfortunately, there were quite a lot of technical difficulties as the birds were moving a lot further than anticipated — my guess is because of a lack of resources," says Eklom, who in 2007 shifted her research focus to the birds' food resources.

All of her field work is at the National Park, a former Merino stud property, bought by the Government in 2001 because of its importance as habitat for the Plains-wanderer, and on some neighbouring private properties.

Grasslands national park

Oolambeyan National Park is one of just a handful of grassland national parks in NSW, and one of only two where sheep grazing is used as a management tool.

As part of her data collection, Eklom is assessing vegetation; setting up invertebrate traps to catch beetles and other ground-dwelling insects; and collecting seeds using a domestic vacuum cleaner (powered by a generator set up in the back of the ute.)

While spotlighting (by foot or car) for Plains-wanderers (which are easier to find at night), Eklom records "other critters" that she spots such as curl snakes, the hooded scaly-foot (a legless lizard), burrowing frogs, and dunnarts.

To date, she has caught and taken small blood samples from seven Plains-wanderers to help her determine the proportion of seeds and invertebrates the birds are eating. She is about to complete the final season of field work.

"It won't be as intense as the last couple of seasons, with the focus of this trip on collecting more data on the Plains-wanderers' diet," she says.

"Speaking to the locals, though, it appears finding Plains-wanderers is going to be more challenging this year compared to other years because conditions are just so dry and vegetation cover quite sparse."

Eklom says prime habitat for Plains-wanderers is

LEFT: Like emus, the adult male Plains Wanderer sits on the eggs and rears the chicks (inset).
RIGHT: As part of her data collection, Kylie Eklom sets up invertebrate traps to catch beetles and other ground-dwelling insects.

country with sparse vegetation, 40%-60% bare ground, with plants mostly less than five centimetres tall. But they do need some vegetation that is taller, up to 30cm high, so they have somewhere to hide from predators.

She says the birds are relatively small, 10-15cm in height, and look a bit like quails even though they are not related. Unlike quails, they stand erect.

Males are brown with yellow legs and bills. The female, which is larger and more brightly coloured than the male, has a black and white collar and a chestnut-coloured breastplate. It is the female that looks for a mate to breed with.

"Like emus, it is the male that sits on the eggs and rears the chicks," Eklom says. "Plains-wanderers don't mate for life and can have multiple partners each breeding season.

"The female lays her eggs out in the open simply on the ground or in a small scratching. Although I haven't heard one yet, apparently they sound like a low-pitched cow mooing in the distance."

Eklom says the biggest threat to the birds is the loss of their habitat with suitable grasslands being used for cropping and overgrazing of these grasslands by domestic stock, particularly during drought.

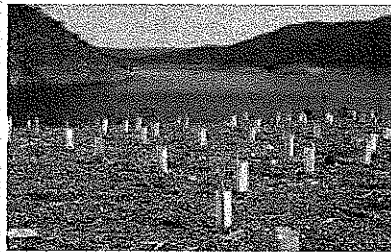


"However, based on anecdotal and information from an on-going monitoring program, the bird is able to respond quickly when it rains and can breed a number of times over an extended season," she says.

Find out more:

Kylie Eklom, (02) 6051 9831, keklom@csu.edu.au

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