

THE GREAT WESTERN WOODLANDS

An introduction to the last, vast temperate woodland on earth

By Keith Bradby,
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For many birdwatchers, the region between the endemic-rich south west corner of Western Australia and the rest of the country is merely somewhere to drive through or fly over to get to other well-known birding hotspots. Yet what they are missing out on in that stretch of country that lies between the eastern edge of the Wheatbelt and the Nullarbor Plain is one of the most remarkable and precious environmental areas in Australia—the Great Western Woodlands.

In the absence of a TARDIS, going to the Great Western Woodlands could be the best time-travel a lover of woodland birds can hope for. From Yellow-Plumed Honeyeaters in the Salmon Gums, to Rufous Treecreepers on the fallen timber and Square-tailed Kites cruising the canopy looking for a meal, there is a feeling that this is how a woodland should be; healthy and diverse. What's more remarkable is that it's the same feeling whether you drive down the road 100 metres or 100 kilometres.

At 16 million hectares, the Great Western Woodlands is the world's largest remaining temperate woodland. Here you can drive for days and still be under the canopy of tall woodland, yet every few kilometres you can also stop and marvel at a never ending sequence of change; these woodlands are a mosaic of habitats, holding 14 of Australia's 23 main vegetation types, and are immensely rich in species. The Great

Western Woodlands include part of Australia's South West Floristic Province, currently Australia's only internationally recognised biodiversity hotspot. The woodlands hold over 4,200 different plant taxa and over 3,300 species of flowering plants from 119 families—around 80 new species of eucalypt alone have been discovered here in the last 30 years.

Here the woodland birds so decimated in other parts of Australia still survive and thrive. In the south-east of the country, land clearance, habitat fragmentation, grazing, fire and feral animals have taken their toll on woodland birds, many of which are barely hanging on in their splintered, disconnected and largely degraded remnant refuges. While large swathes of the south western woodlands were stripped bare for the development of WA's Wheatbelt—more than 90 per cent of the vegetation has been cleared in most places—the clearing stops at the edge of the Rabbit Proof Fence. On the other side stand the Great Western Woodlands, a region unique for both its size and continuity.

The size of the area ensures that species have the capacity to follow their preferred food resources across the entire landscape. When conditions are poor, the birds of the Great Western Woodlands are not trapped on isolated habitat islands as is the situation in Australia's other remaining temperate woodlands. Many species that have become

Main image:

You can drive for days in the Great Western Woodlands and still be under the canopy of tall woodland. Photo by Amanda Keesing

Opposite, right:

Blue-breasted Fairy-wren, one of the many species that thrive in this intact environment. Photo by Chris Tzaros



scarce elsewhere in southern Australia therefore remain common in the Great Western Woodlands. According to studies by Dr Denis Saunders and his colleagues at CSIRO, of the 195 species recorded in the Wheatbelt since European settlement, nearly half have declined in abundance. The Great Western Woodlands are a haven for many of these birds, including Yellow-plumed Honeyeater, Shy Heathwren, Blue-breasted Fairywren, Malleefowl, Rufous Treecreeper, Crested Bellbird, and Crested (Western) Shrike-tit.



Emeritus Professor Harry Recher of Edith Cowan University, who has spent many years monitoring woodland birds across Australia, has said that “only in the Great Western Woodlands can we still see woodland and heath bird communities that have all the species that were here when Captain Cook landed at Botany Bay, and

in which they can still interact with and use their environment as they have for millennia.”

That we still have this incredible natural asset has been largely through luck rather than wise management. Currently only 3.6 per cent of the Great Western Woodlands sits in secure, high protection conservation reserves, and while not immediately threatened in the short term, the region is of great interest to many stakeholders. There have been a number of attempts at large-scale agricultural clearing in the southern and western sections of the woodlands, and while some 60 per cent of the woodlands remain as Unallocated Crown Land, it also sits above one of the richest mineral regions of Australia. Pastoral leases cover 20 per cent of the area, and virtually all of the Crown Land is currently under Native Title claim. Uncontrolled wildfires and feral animals are currently the most pressing threats to the region’s biodiversity. Both of these threatening processes have no regard for land tenure boundaries—neither will respectfully halt their advance at the gates of a national park—and exemplify the need for an integrated management approach, working with all stakeholders across the region.

So how do you manage and protect the conservation values of 16 million hectares? The process began in 2002 when The Nature Conservancy became involved in

the establishment of Gondwana Link, an ambitious 1,000 km-long effort to improve the protection and management of linked habitats from the wet forests of the South West to the edge of the Nullarbor (see www.gondwanalink.org). It was only as this process got underway that the future of the eastern end of the Link, the big bit of bush adjoining the Rabbit Proof Fence, came into focus.

In 2003 The Nature Conservancy funded some initial work by the Wilderness Society, and the Australian Research Council funded additional work led by Professors Brendan Mackey and Henry Nix at Australian National University. This has led to a much greater understanding of the area’s values. In 2008, Pew Environment Group and The Nature Conservancy came together in a ‘Wild Australia’ program to continue working for conservation of the woodlands. One of the early products of this support was the publication of *The Extraordinary Nature of the Great Western Woodlands* in mid-2008.

At that point, governments started to take notice. Before the 2008 State election, both major parties gave bipartisan support for improved conservation of the Great Western Woodlands, and once elected the Barnett Government developed a ‘Biodiversity and Cultural Conservation Strategy’ for the area, allocating \$3.8 million for improved management.

Above: A healthy woodland understorey.
Photo by Mark Godfrey

Below: Rufous Treecreeper. Photo by
Chris Tzaros

Map: The Great Western Woodlands
are about the same size as Switzerland.



This is a promising start, but there is a long way to go, and finding the mechanisms that can integrate improved conservation management with other current and future land uses will prove to be a great challenge.

While there is considerable goodwill and understanding building across the spectrum of interests in the Great Western Woodlands, the critical missing ingredient is detailed environmental knowledge on where the most important areas for conservation are and what major wildlife movement patterns and requirements we need to cater for. For the interests of the birdlife of the region to be effectively represented at the table where major land use decisions are made, we need this information urgently.

As each drought or poor season takes its toll on our woodland birds across the rest of the

country, we lament what we are losing—a once vibrant, functioning ecosystem. If only we could turn back time to try and restore them to their former glory. The Great Western Woodlands still retain their glory. We cannot allow something so special to slip through our fingers yet again.

Further reading

Watson, A., et al (2008) *The Extraordinary Nature of the Great Western Woodlands*, The Wilderness Society of WA

www.greatwesternwoodlands.org.au/content/extraordinary-nature-great-western-woodlands

Government of WA (2010) *A Biodiversity and Cultural Conservation Strategy for the Great Western Woodlands*
www.dec.wa.gov.au/content/view/6115/2183

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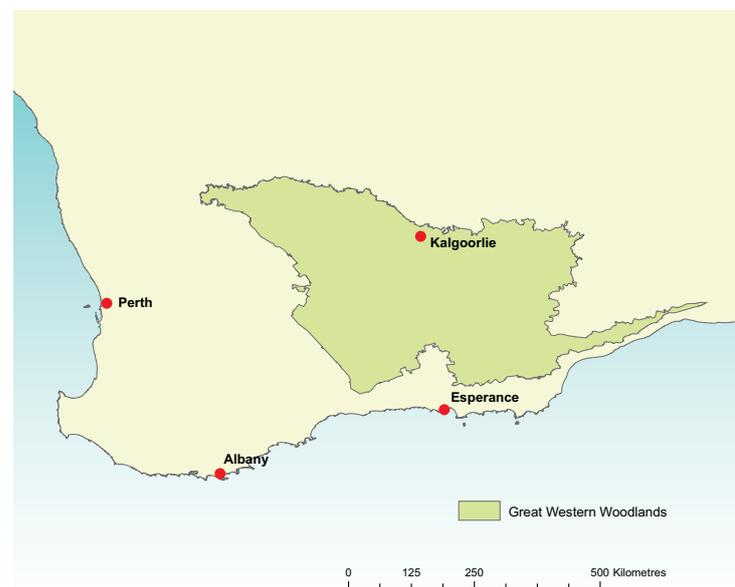
Birds Australia's involvement with the GWW

Birds Australia has joined forces with The Nature Conservancy to embark on a bird research and conservation project in the Great Western Woodlands. This huge area is still relatively poorly surveyed for birds, and much of the survey work has been concentrated around roadsides and the more accessible south-western areas. The intention is to conduct systematic bird surveys using a combination of project officers, skilled volunteers and university researchers, to construct reliable baseline information on the avifauna of the region.

Baseline data will help us to understand what birds are present, where they are and how they use and interact with this vast area. It is a question we can no longer ask in the south east, simply because there are no longer stands of woodland of sufficient size and quality remaining. This baseline data will be critical if we are to eventually determine how populations of birds are faring. Mapping the birds' movements and occurrence against components of the landscape such as soil and vegetation types, landform and land-use, will also help to inform us in making critical choices for protecting areas of the GWW, and how best to manage the landscape. It will also provide information on how an intact woodland ecosystem functions, which will be invaluable as we consider woodland rehabilitation projects elsewhere in the country.

The project will aim to mobilise community involvement in surveys, and enhance community appreciation for a natural asset which is every bit as important and unique as Australia's better known natural heritage icons.

Birds Australia's partnership with The Nature Conservancy means we are eligible to receive matched funding for the GWW project from The David Thomas Challenge. The Challenge committee has approved an



in-principle allocation of \$300,000 for Birds Australia to fundraise against, commencing in 2011. To obtain these funds, however, we need gifts from individuals of over \$10,000. Donations for the GWW project which meet the criteria will be matched on a one-to-one basis.

For further information about the David Thomas Challenge or the *Birds in the Great Western Woodlands* project, please contact James O'Connor: j.oconnor@birdsaustralia.com.au