

Donation to Bird's Australia Bushfires and birds seminar

For some years the Wildlife Preservation Society of Australia has sponsored seminars conducted by Birds Australia and in 2005 we provided this support again. The seminars have been of high quality in the past and the program in April 2005 was no exception. Birds Australia decided to hold the seminar in Canberra to provide a greater opportunity for their ACT members to participate and, following on from the serious bushfires in the ACT in 2003, the focus on birds and bushfires was appropriate.

Six papers were presented at the seminar covering a wide range of habitats from coastal to mallee to spinifex grasslands. Recurrent fires affect birds in most Australian ecosystems. However, the message from all speakers was that a single major fire can have long-term effects on bird populations, particularly ground-dwelling species. It was pointed out that we have not yet learned enough about fire management and the clamour for regular or fixed interval burning should be avoided as this could lead to total loss of habitat required by a particular species. It is better to avoid fires altogether through the use of mechanical methods of fuel reduction, until more knowledge is available.

Some birds benefit from fires, but those birds benefiting are often not those which inhabited the area before it was affected by fire. Thus, species populations and distribution can be changed by fire. It is only by closely monitoring bird populations that such information can be obtained. This is a costly process but it is necessary if we are to learn how to manage and conserve threatened species. Considering that the same process is needed for the management of mammals, the cost of a co-ordinated fact-finding exercise for the management of all wildlife can be imagined.

An interesting paper of particular relevance to Canberra examined the impact of the 2003 fires on the Superb Lyrebird in the Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve. The fires destroyed 88% of the reserve system, were extremely hot and completely destroyed both canopy and understorey. The last major bushfire in Tidbinbilla occurred 64 years ago. Chris Davey and fellow researchers had access to lyrebird data from the 1960's and were able to compare their findings with these data. The research is on-going. The evidence so far suggests that the lyrebird population is far from recovered. Only seven birds have been recorded, no nesting mounds have been found and there is no evidence that any breeding has taken place. There is some evidence that other species have returned in returned in reduced numbers but survival for ground dwellers is clearly very difficult.

The evidence from a number of papers was that ecosystems are not destroyed by fire, but altered. The survival of birds and other animal species depends on how they adapt to the alteration. It was pointed out that the greatest diversity of animal species is to be found in multi-aged forests and that alteration through fire regime is second only to land clearing as a threat to animal species.

It was rewarding to see the painstaking scientific efforts being invested in an effort to acquire the necessary knowledge to develop proper management systems.