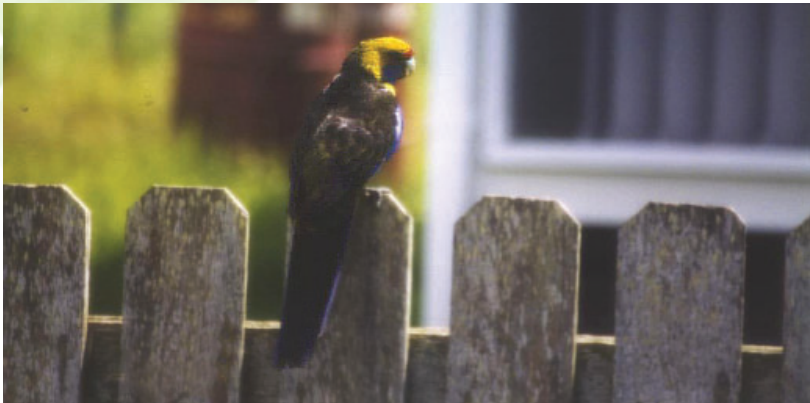


Are we losing our native birds on King Island?

How can we make sure we don't?



Recovery of Threatened Forest Birds of King Island

A project of the Threatened Species Network Community Grants Program, a joint initiative of World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) Australia and the Australian Government's Natural Heritage Trust.



King Island
Natural Resource Management Group Inc

The Threatened Species Network is a community-based program of the Australian Government's Natural Heritage Trust & WWF Australia.

The Threatened Species Network project focussed primarily on three listed threatened forest birds (**green rosella**, **scrubtit** and **brown thornbill**) and secondly on two other endemic subspecies not yet listed (**yellow wattlebird** and **black currawong**) and the **yellow-tailed black-cockatoo**.



Green rosella

Platycercus caledonicus brownii

Green rosellas in Tasmania have a different voice than the vulnerable King Island subspecies whose recovery is limited by a shortage of tree hollows for breeding. Hollows take up to 100 years or more to form, and the remaining eucalypts on the island are mostly less than 60 years of age. Hence some islanders observe **rosellas** eating away the corners of their roofs! The population seems to be recovering gradually. Pairs and small groups are frequently sighted in the more vegetated southern half of the island. Some young birds have been observed.



Scrubtit

Acanthornis magnus greenianus

This little brown bird is hard to recognise, but its white throat, body shape and foraging habit of creeping up paperbark trunks all help with identification. The Nook Swamps, where several sightings of adults feeding fledglings confirmed successful breeding, is the critical breeding habitat for **scrubtits**. It also inhabits Colliers Swamp. These discoveries highlight the importance of protecting these special places from fire. This bird is no longer found in other areas and is considered 'critically endangered'.

King Island brown thornbill

Acanthiza pusilla archibaldi

This small brown bird unique to King Island was thought to be virtually extinct until two were seen in Pegarah State Forest in 2002. It is critically endangered, and survival prospects are not good. Its buffy undertail and thinner longer bill distinguish it from the abundant **Tasmanian thornbill** that has a fluffy white undertail. Securing critical habitat is crucial for this and many other threatened forest birds.



Black currawong

Strepera fuliginosa coleii

The King Island subspecies is not to be mistaken for the common **forest raven (crow)**. The **currawong** is distinguished from the **raven** by its massive bill, yellow eye (not white), more slender body, white tipped wings and tail and distinctive flight and voice. The population of this fruit-eating bird seems to be declining.

The more abundant **raven** may be out-competing the **currawong** for breeding territories and nest sites.



Yellow wattlebird

Anthochaera paradoxa kingi

The King Island subspecies is well known by its large size and its annoying guttural voice when you are trying to have an afternoon nap. The population of this bird has recovered since its decline around the 1940s. It is now widespread and fairly common throughout the island in forest, scrub and heath with banksia and eucalypts and has adapted well to rural and urban gardens. It has recently bred successfully in and around gardens but there have been no detailed studies of its breeding success.

Yellow-tailed black-cockatoo

Calyptorhynchus funereus

The status of this magnificent bird is still uncertain. Flocks of up to 70 birds have been sighted during spring. Observations suggest that flocks visit the island from Tas and Vic. It is unknown how much successful summer breeding occurs on King Island. **Yellow-tailed black-cockatoos** are long-lived and the age of birds is unknown, so it may be years before a population decline is evident. The presence of juveniles with adults indicates some successful breeding. Juveniles have similar plumage to females and are identified reliably by harsh rasping calls when begging for food. **Black-cockatoos** require large, deep hollows for breeding, and the lack of suitable tree-hollows may hinder the population recovery.



Distribution of target birds

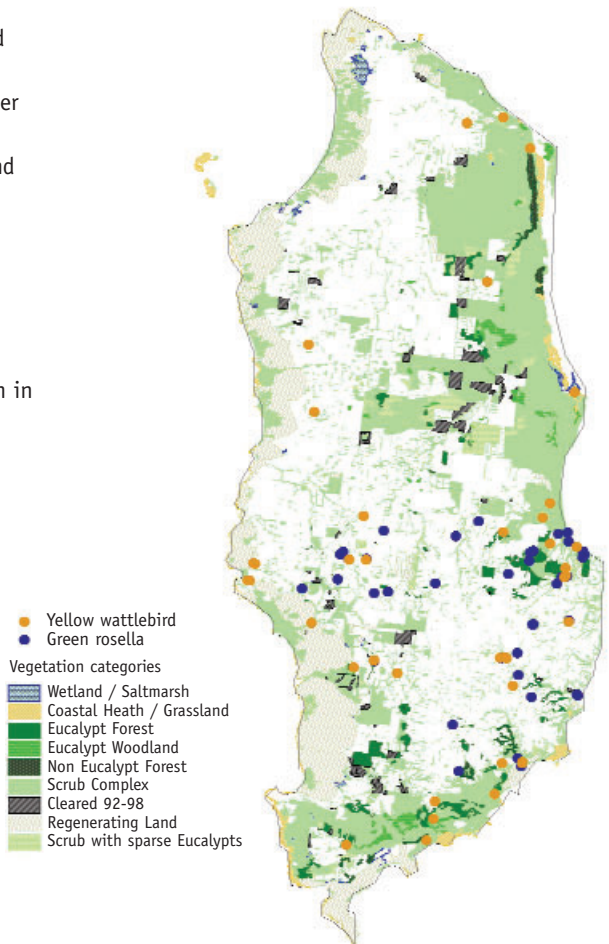
An idea of the distribution of the focus birds has been gained through surveys by experts and records of sightings by the King Island community Threatened Species Network. Notably, most sightings of hole nesting birds (**green rosella** and **yellow-tailed black-cockatoo**) have been towards the south-east of the island, where most of the larger forested areas remain.

Many of the most diligent recorders of sightings were in this area, and the maps may reflect that. Late recordings of **yellow-tailed black-cockatoo** flocks in the Tin Mine and Reekara areas illustrate this.

Yellow wattlebirds were seen across the island in good numbers. It seems they will live happily in home gardens.

Black currawongs are distributed around the island, particularly in coastal vegetation. Autumn–winter flocks of 40–50 birds forage on pastures in the north of the island and smaller flocks occur in the south, but most sightings are of 1 or 2 birds. A total of just 173 were reported throughout 2004.

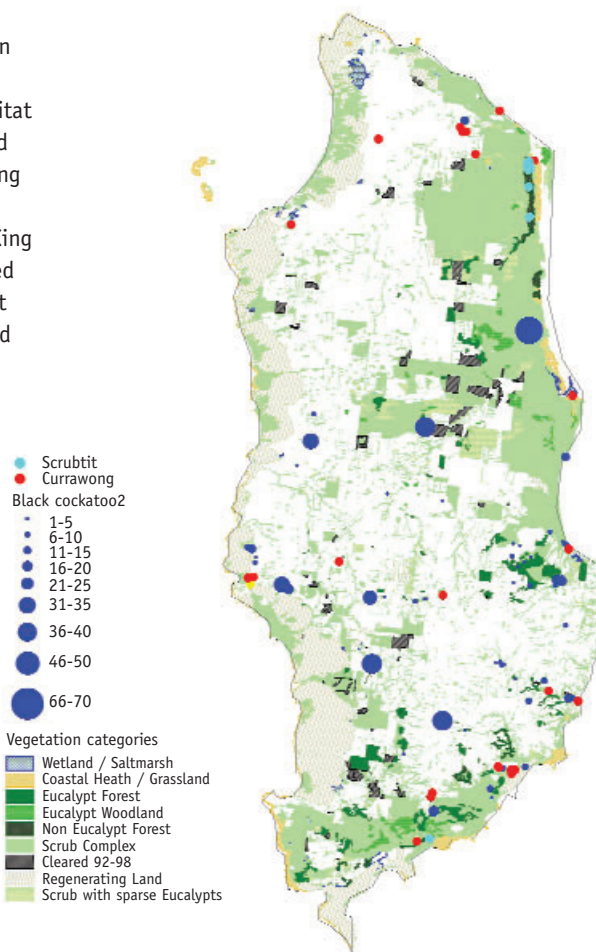
With these four species, larger flocks and more activity was seen in autumn.



The map below shows that **scrubtit** have a very limited distribution on King Island with just 34 sighted on two concentrated searches. Most are in the Nook Swamps, and only one was sighted in Colliers Swamp in the south. Other likely and previously known habitat areas were searched, including Pass River and Pegarah State Forest, but none were found. It is estimated there are 50–100 **scrubtit** on the island.

The **King Island brown thornbill** was last seen in 2002 in Pegarah State Forest, and there were a few sightings around Loorana in the last three decades.

- Threatened birds occur on King Island in forests, coastal vegetation, wetlands and on beaches.
- King Island is essential habitat for the critically endangered **orange-bellied parrot** during migration.
- The top avian predator on King Island is the now threatened **white-bellied sea-eagle**. It forages along the coast, and large trees are critical for nesting.
- Beaches and wetlands are important foraging and resting places for migratory waders and provide nesting sites for resident waders such as the **hooded plover**.



What is threatening our birds?

Loss of habitat

The major threat to forest birds of King Island is further loss and fragmentation of habitat through clearance of native vegetation. Only about one-third of the native vegetation remains with the rest converted to pasture. Uncommon and threatened hole-nesting birds such as **green rosella**, **yellow-tailed black-cockatoo**, **southern boobook** and **striated pardalote** require tree hollows for breeding. An adequate supply of hollows now and in future is needed for their continuing survival. Declining condition of bush remnants is another factor that influences bird populations. Bush in good condition has intact ground layer, understorey and canopy vegetation. Understorey shrubs and trees are essential for many birds for foraging and nesting. The quality of ground layer and understorey vegetation deteriorates with heavy browsing by livestock and native animals.

Weeds and pests

Another big threat to birds is the impact of invasive weeds and feral animals. Feral and domestic cats prey on native birds. Introduced **starlings** and **house sparrows** compete aggressively with hole-nesting birds for nest sites and nestboxes. Feral honey bees also compete for hollows. Native **ravens** prey on eggs and young birds and may have a significant impact on breeding success of threatened birds and coastal birds.

Nestboxes

Nestboxes are being trialled for **green rosellas** with limited success due to competition from **starlings**. It is imperative to avoid providing a nest site for feral birds or bees by diligent monitoring and removal. While nestboxes can never replace natural hollows, they may assist breeding with careful placement and management. Once the **rosellas** use a nest site, they are likely to return year after year, so initial persistence can pay off.



What can you do to help save King Island birds?

1 Protect native vegetation

- First priority is to retain and protect existing native vegetation remnants.
- Manage native vegetation as habitat for fauna on properties and within catchments.
- Maintain and restore vegetation structure such as the canopy eucalypts and understorey layers of trees, shrubs and ground layer ferns, sedges and grasses by fencing, allowing natural regeneration, revegetation, control of browsing animals and weed management.
- Maintain a range of tree ages by leaving mature and old trees and through regeneration and revegetation.
- Develop an effective fire prevention and management strategy for public and private land.

2 Restore native vegetation

- Connect remnants and riparian native vegetation with habitat linkages within and across properties.
- Restore habitat and revegetate sites with local tree and understorey plant species.

3 Conserve and improve habitat

- Identify and protect trees with hollows and large, old trees in general.
- Leave fallen branches, logs, rocks and leaf and bark litter as shelter and foraging and nest sites.
- Continue to erect and manage nestboxes for hole-nesting birds.
- Seek better incentives to secure and manage critical habitat through covenants and stewardship agreements.
- Recognise and value State Reserves such as Lavinia and Colliers Swamp as critical habitat for threatened birds.
- Identify critical habitat for threatened birds. Support the protection of critical habitat for uncommon and threatened birds within Pegarah State Forest.
- Protect and manage important wetlands such as Pearshape Lagoon, Lake Flannigan and the Sea Elephant estuary for waders, waterbirds and the **orange-bellied parrot**.

4 Control pests and weeds

- Manage and control environmental weeds, feral and introduced animals and native pest animals.

5 Monitor, monitor

- Learn to identify birds and plants on properties and within catchments.
- Continue to monitor the distribution and abundance of uncommon and threatened birds.
- Continue to search for the endemic subspecies of **brown thornbill** and **scrubtit**.

Contacts and further information

King Island Natural Resource Management Group Inc.
PO Box 293 King Island TAS 7256
Ph: 03 64621825

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www.ea.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened Environment Australia, Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act (1999)

Acknowledgements: Richard Donaghey, volunteer consultant on the project, thanks for the weeks of your time and expertise. King Island Threatened Species Network, Pirmin Niettisbach, Carolyn Donaghey and all those who participated in field days and recorded sightings of the birds. Eve Woolmore, King Island Natural Resource Management Group committee and Sarah Lloyd.

Photos kindly provided by Trevor Waite & Nature Conservation Branch, DPIWE, cover photo: Robyn Fairchild, nestbox photo: KINRMG

Publisher: King Island Natural Resource Management Group Inc.

Designer: Cate Lowry, Fine Print

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