



# AROUND THE MOUNDS

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## Vic Update...

### Lessons from Malleefowl Monitoring in Victoria

A recent paper<sup>1</sup> published by the Royal Society of Victoria draws lessons from a malleefowl monitoring program that has continued for more than 15 seasons at a number of sites in the Victorian Mallee. Monitoring in Victoria has involved a number of organisations and individuals over the years, but since 2000 has been fully managed and implemented by the Victorian Malleefowl Recovery Group (VMRG) with annual grant assistance from Parks Victoria.

A group of 20 grids has been monitored regularly since the mid-1990s. Collective results from this sampling provide a broad perspective of trends in malleefowl breeding populations. The results point to regional variation in population trends. In the eastern Big Desert, there has been a significant decline in breeding activity since 1995. This decline was not evident at all six grids: populations declined at three grids but remained stable at the other three.

In the northeast Mallee, there has been a significant increase in breeding activity from 1995 levels. Increases occurred at two of the three grids and followed the 2002 drought when the density of active mounds almost doubled. In the northwest Mallee, breeding densities are lower in absolute terms and showed a slight decline over the past nine years, although this was not statistically significant.

There are a number of possible explanations for the observed trends in malleefowl populations for the Mallee region. Since the early 1990s, the Mallee has experienced three severe drought years (1994, 2002, and 2006). Higher mortality of malleefowl in severe droughts has been observed elsewhere, but in general the effect of occasional drought appears to be short-term. How populations might respond to more

frequent droughts, predicted by climate change models, is uncertain but impacts are likely to be more severe.

Several studies have shown that long-unburnt habitat is preferred by malleefowl, but monitoring has shown that malleefowl occasionally recolonise burnt habitat much faster than previously thought. At Wandown Flora and Fauna Reserve, malleefowl recolonised habitat burnt by wildfire in 1991 within six years, and from 13-15 years after the fire (to date) the density of active mounds was similar or greater than in neighbouring unburnt habitat. This response was observed within two kilometres of the edge of wildfires and thus may be more typical of small rather than large fires.

Foxes are often cited as being the major threat to malleefowl populations. However, the results



Female malleefowl laying and mate watching (Photo: H. Buckingham, courtesy Ouyen History Resource Centre)

of monitoring in Victoria suggest that malleefowl can coexist with foxes over long time periods. There has been only limited fox control practised at some locations where malleefowl populations have remained stable or increased. Fox abundance appears to be relatively high at these same locations, based

on the evidence from scats deposited on nests. These observations are not conclusive and it remains to be seen whether more effective control of foxes would in fact benefit malleefowl populations and perhaps reverse declines where they have occurred.

Ongoing monitoring will allow management actions that aim to reduce threats to be evaluated in terms of their effectiveness in reversing malleefowl declines. The experience in the Victorian Mallee has shown that a group of committed and well organised volunteers, such as the VMRG, can contribute greatly to the body of scientific knowledge through field data collection.

Peter Sandell, Parks Victoria,  
[PSandell@parks.vic.gov.au](mailto:PSandell@parks.vic.gov.au) and Dr Joe Ben-shemesh, La Trobe University

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*Reference:*

<sup>1</sup>The paper by Joe Benshemesh and Peter Sandell is titled "Malleefowl (*Leipoa ocellata*): The Lessons from a 15+ year Monitoring Program".

### Search Near Hopetoun, Victoria Reveals High Activity

As part of the NHT-funded National Malleefowl Monitoring, Population Assessment and Conservation Action Project, a number of new monitoring sites are being established in Victoria and South Australia.

On the weekend of 5-6 May 2007, 20 friends of the Hopetoun Pre-school searched a new site for malleefowl mounds, guided by experienced members of the Victorian Malleefowl Recovery Group (VMRG). This new site is in the Paradise Flora and Fauna Reserve (FFR), to the south of Wyperfeld National Park. Paradise has long been known to support malleefowl, but nobody had any idea how many. The area has never been systematically searched previously, but occasional sightings on the edge of the reserve and in the wheat fields beside the reserve motivated the VMRG to select this site for further investigation. A few transects were walked many months prior to the search, and some inactive mounds were located, enough to justify establishing a search area.

The Register of The National Estate describes the Paradise Flora and Fauna Reserve as "*containing a long unburnt isolate of the Big Desert dune fields. It therefore provides continuing habitat for plant and animal species that require older mallee vegetation. In particular, the place is considered a major reserve for the malleefowl (Leipoa ocellata) which is nationally endangered and vulnerable in Victoria. The Reserve provides an intact example of aeolian landforms (dune ridges and swales) in an area where agricultural activity has greatly modified similar terrain*". See: <http://www.aussieheritage.com.au/listings/vic/Yaapeet/ParadiseFloraandFaunaReserve/17662>

The search proved to be highly productive with some 90 mounds being found within the four square kilometres.



Friends of Hopetoun and District Pre-school inspect a newly found mound (Photo: R. Wiseman, VMRG)

This number of mounds is amongst the highest density yet recorded in Victoria. Of these 90 mounds, 17 contained

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recent signs of malleefowl presence (prints, scratchings and scats easily identified), and at least half of these were being actively worked, some at the stage of establishing the egg chamber, and others showing distinct litter trails.

The Hopetoun and District Pre-school parents were approached by the VMRG to establish whether they would be prepared to be involved in the search as a fund raising exercise. As a component of the NHT Malleefowl Monitoring Grant, the VMRG was able to provide reimbursement of all of the costs involved in the search, in particular fuel and food, which the parents donated to the Pre-school. In total, the exercise raised \$1,000 for the Group. Collectively, the group's activity conservatively totalled 240 hours of volunteer time and at least 200 kilometres of fairly tough bush walking. Travelling time and arrangements for families left at home were all part of the planning that needed to be taken into consideration. Timing the activity to coincide with a bye for the Hopetoun FC in the Mallee Football League made it easier for child minding to be organised.

The Paradise FFR will now become the 34th site in Victoria to be monitored by the VMRG. All of the mounds are currently being staked and tagged in preparation for annual monitoring for breeding activity during the summer months. It will be interesting to discover how many of the mounds are classified as "active" as a result of the monitoring data being collected. Also of interest will be the trend information gathered in years to come.

Victorian Malleefowl Recovery Group (VMRG)  
<http://www.malleefowlvictoria.org.au/welcome.html>

### SA Update...

#### SA Malleefowl Recovery Project Officer

My role as Project Officer in malleefowl recovery began in October 2005, with the main aim to assist in an integrated and coordinated approach to malleefowl conservation in SA, in line with the National Recovery Plan. Along the way, relationships and networks were established, lots of information was investigated, and progress made at both a state-wide and a national level. With the help of staff and volunteers across the state, many recovery actions were put in place.

There are too many things to list, but some major achievements include: the collection and interpretation of all historic malleefowl data, and distribution into relevant databases; and the state-wide adoption of the electronic monitoring method. State-wide meetings and training workshops were held, information was shared, issues discussed, plans were made. New grids were set up and some restored. State and national monitoring systems have been reviewed and refined, and other on-ground recovery actions have taken place.

After 22 months in the position, malleefowl conservation strategies in SA have really picked up and moved ahead in leaps and bounds, driven by the great enthusiasm of

many people. With strategies now in place to keep the malleefowl conservation ball rolling, the position came to a close at the end of July. Whilst I will continue to have some involvement in malleefowl activities and can still be contacted, regional coordinators will continue to be the first point of contact for volunteers participating in monitoring activities. Jason van Weenen, Threatened Fauna Ecologist based in Adelaide, will be the state-wide contact. I will begin work on a new project, still within the SA Dept for Environment and Heritage (DEH).

My involvement in malleefowl conservation initiatives has been challenging, exciting and very rewarding. This has been due not only to the passion I have developed for Malleefowl, but also the many wonderful and interesting people I have met, had the pleasure of working with and developed friendships with.

A big thank you to everyone - your support has helped make everything possible, and given me enormous job satisfaction. A great deal has been achieved, with many more projects and developments in progress and being planned. It's up to all of us to keep up the good work in aiding the conservation of the magnificent malleefowl.

Sharon Gillam, Threatened Fauna Project Officer,  
SA DEH, [Gillam.Sharon@saugov.sa.gov.au](mailto:Gillam.Sharon@saugov.sa.gov.au)



Sharon Gillam, SA Project Officer

### **Monitoring Malleefowl in the SA Murraylands**

The 2006/2007 season marked the third year of a SA Department for Environment and Heritage (DEH) project to adopt best practice malleefowl monitoring in the SA Murrayland region. The main objective has been to implement the system developed by the Victorian Malleefowl Recovery Group (VMRG), which uses GPS

units linked to palm handheld computers to collect the data. Over 400 hours of volunteer time was contributed to the monitoring effort and DEH would like to thank those involved for their input. A total of 13 grids were monitored during the 2006/2007 breeding season, which involved the surveying of 505 mounds. Another seven grids (96 mounds) were also surveyed on Birds Australia's Gluepot Reserve, with kits and support provided by SA DEH.



Malleefowl (Photo: S. Gillam)

Despite the drought, a total of 34 active mounds were recorded in the region. This suggests that breeding activity may not necessarily depend on the total amount of rain, but rather the timing of rain, which was highlighted by the recent analysis of national data. The patchiness of rain in 2006 was also highlighted, as active mounds were found in both the drier northern areas and further south, where rainfall is, on average, higher and more reliable.

A number of grids were included in the project for the first time. Two of these are in Heritage Agreements on private land in the Murray Mallee, which were originally established by the Murray Mallee Local Action Planning Association (MMLAP). Another significant area that was included for the first time was the Murray Bridge Army Training Range. DEH would like to thank the MMLAP, the Department of Defence and Sinclair Knight Mertz Consulting for their cooperation and assistance with bringing these grids into the project.

2006 also saw historical monitoring data collected from the Murraylands entered into the national system, ready for the new database under development. With grids in the region having been established from the late 1980s, it was a major step forward for the accumulated data to be analysed in detail for the first time.

A training workshop was also held in Berri in September 2006 in conjunction with the VMRG, with over 40 people attending from Victoria, the region and elsewhere in the state. A number of new volunteers were recruited for the monitoring program.

For further information or to become involved, contact Jody Gates, Regional Ecologist, SA DEH on 08 8595 2204 or Dave and Heidi Setchell, Monitoring Coordinators on 0428 873 090.

*A SAMDB NRM funded project.*

## **Nganamara monitoring in SA Aboriginal Lands**

### **Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands**

Around 20 Nganamara (malleefowl) mounds spread over a wide area have been monitored over the past 10 years. Monitoring of mounds near Watarru and Walalkara continues by traditional owners (Anangu), APY Land Management, the SA Dept for Environment and Heritage (DEH) and Alinytjara Wilurara NRM staff.

The most recent surveys indicate that only two of the known mounds are active. However, only continued monitoring will determine whether this is because fewer birds have chosen to breed this year, or whether there has been a decline in Nganamara numbers. A meeting was held with Joe Benshemesh in March 2007 to discuss better ways of monitoring in the APY Lands, so the status of Nganamara can be determined in the region. A simple monitoring manual for Nganamara in arid areas is also in development.



Map, dots showing fresh Nganamara tracks recorded June 2007, in MT Lands

### **Maralinga Tjarutja (MT) Lands**

The DEH Aboriginal Lands Regional Ecologists recently facilitated a comprehensive animal track survey across the MT lands and Mamungari (previously Unnamed) Conservation Park, involving Anangu from Oak Valley and scientists Rick Southgate and Rachel Paltridge. This survey turned up six new locations for Nganamara in the MT Lands, and Mamungari and Tallaringa Conservation Parks. The new mounds occurred in a variety of habitats, from mallee to open mulga woodlands.

These areas will form the basis of targeted Nganamara mound surveys in August 2007. It is hoped that these

mounds will be monitored in the future by Anangu from Oak Valley and provide further information on the population and breeding dynamics of arid zone Nganamara.

Matthew Ward, Regional Ecologist, Aboriginal Lands SA DEH, [Ward.Matthew@saugov.sa.gov.au](mailto:Ward.Matthew@saugov.sa.gov.au)

### **SA Yorke Peninsula Grid Progress**

The one grid on Yorke Peninsula, the Innes grid, has been restored from a partly established and monitored grid with little external support to a valuable grid in SA's monitoring program. There has been much progress with the grid's past history established, every known mound now located, GPS recordings in WSG84 datum, corners of the grid located and mapped and lots of people involved and interested. As a bonus, it appears the malleefowl are breeding well, with a record 11 active mounds out of the 47 recorded mounds last season. How's that!

The grid was partly searched in July 2006, with some follow-up in September, which resolved problems with many 'missing' mounds. This grid was thoroughly searched again in July 2007, coordinated by National Parks and Wildlife SA Rangers based at Innes National Park (NP) and supported by volunteers and a group from Youth Conservation Corps.

The intensive fox baiting that has been occurring in the park as part of a Tamar Wallaby reintroduction program may be benefiting the malleefowl, and there have been no fox scats or tracks seen on the grid during the past two seasons' monitoring efforts. Fox baiting has been conducted in the park over the past three years, on a fortnightly basis.

A story on malleefowl at Innes NP appeared on the "PostCards" television program in May 2007, complete with footage of a bird tending a mound taken by volunteer Graeme Tonkin (PostCards promotes tourism in SA).

Ranger staff based at Innes NP have shown great support for the malleefowl project this year, including John Gitsham and Aaron Smith, along with new volunteer Deb Brine, and not forgetting the continued support of Graeme Tonkin. Thanks also to Julia Bignall who put lots of time and effort into restarting the Innes grid in her previous role based at Innes NP.

Sharon Gillam, Project Officer, SA DEH  
[Gillam.Sharon@saugov.sa.gov.au](mailto:Gillam.Sharon@saugov.sa.gov.au)

## Monitoring on SA's Eyre Peninsula

Malleefowl conservation/monitoring efforts on Eyre Peninsula (EP) in 2006 were successful for a number of reasons.

- It was the first year we used Palm Pilots to collect mound attributes from all five malleefowl grids.
- On October 2<sup>nd</sup> 2006, a workshop in Lock brought together enthusiasts from around EP who are passionate about malleefowl and interested in their conservation. This was a huge success with over 20 community members attending the day.
- Another initiative led to approximately 260 hectares of malleefowl habitat on EP being protected from the effects of stock grazing. This was achieved through the hard work of six landholders across the northern part of the region.

Monitoring of the five grids last year was interesting and exciting and I was surprised at the number of active mounds that were worked last year given the lack of rain early in the mound-building period (July to September). This may demonstrate that malleefowl are able to manage their limited water availability, which is essential for the hatching of young. Water in the mound promotes decomposition of leaf litter, which in turn produces heat to incubate the eggs.

It was exciting to see so many people involved in monitoring last year, including a number of volunteers from all over EP. Some volunteers were also keen to take some ownership of grids into the future, which I feel is important for sustaining long term monitoring of the five malleefowl grids we have in the region.

The Pinkawillinie Malleefowl grid was 95% burnt during a fire in late January 2006. Although unfortunate, no active mounds have been found for a number of years in this grid and the vegetation has not been burnt for a very long time. We are hopeful that in 20-30 years this will once again be prime malleefowl habitat. This grid was searched in December 2006 with no active mounds found, but tracks were found on one inactive mound. This grid will now not be searched for at least five years as it is unlikely malleefowl will use this area again to breed in the short term.

The Cowell grid had five active mounds, Lock had four, and the Hincks and Munyaroo grids had three each. Opportune mounds also continue to be monitored around the Peninsula, including the Gawler Ranges.

A BIG THANKS to all those people who were involved in malleefowl conservation in our region in 2006 whether you attended the workshop, built some fences, helped monitor a grid or reported an incidental sighting.

Andrew Freeman, NRM Officer – Southern Eyre,  
Eyre Peninsula Natural Resource Management Board  
[Freeman.Andrew@saugov.sa.gov.au](mailto:Freeman.Andrew@saugov.sa.gov.au)

## Community Land Management Inc. in the Murraylands

Community Land Management Inc. (CLM) is a voluntary, community environmental organisation that has a focus on native Australian threatened species like the malleefowl.

This year 25 volunteers participated in malleefowl surveys across 10 malleefowl grids, totalling 88 nests on Calperum and Taylorville Stations, Danggali Conservation Park and Chowilla Regional Reserve. Four malleefowl grids were not monitored this season as they were completely burned in the December 2006 fire across Bookmark Biosphere Reserve.



Grid 15, active mound at Danggali CP (Photo: G. Geyer)

CLM volunteers committed 356 hours to monitoring this year and 1,631 km were travelled. A Riverland Greencorp Mission Australia group also helped with the surveys.

CLM volunteers found three active malleefowl nests this season, one nest on each of the two Danggali grids and one on Chowilla. Mounds within these grids have been inactive for some time. It was noted by survey teams that most of the grids had at least one nest in each grid that had been visited by a malleefowl this season and some activity had occurred. One malleefowl was sighted while CLM members were surveying the Chowilla grid.

Grant Geyer  
CLM Project Manager Malleefowl nest surveys

### An interesting observation from Gluepot Reserve

The large fire that burnt almost 120,000 ha of mallee north of Waikerie in December 2006 burnt two of the seven marked malleefowl monitoring grids on Gluepot Reserve. All seven grids were searched again in January 2007, over one month after the fire. Only one active mound was located in one of the unburnt grids, however an active mound was also found in one of the burnt grids.

The area where the mound was located was on the edge of a small unburnt patch in the middle of a large burnt area. This mound had obviously survived the fire, as there was

evidence of a chick having hatched in the two to three days prior to the survey. This timing could be determined as the event described below had occurred after quite heavy rain a couple of days before the survey.

Around the mound was a mass of fresh fox prints. There was a feather embedded in the mound and a search of the surrounding area revealed a pile of feathers from a juvenile malleefowl under a bush nearby. These feathers were fresh and not affected by rain. The spot where the fox had sat was clearly outlined, was not rain marked and was very fresh.



The Gluepot Mallee (Photo: D. Edey)

These observations are very interesting, as the contents of the mound survived the fire and the young chick hatched over a month after the fire had passed. Whether the adult bird returned after the fire to tend the mound, or the mound had independently maintained a suitable temperature range during that time is not certain. There were no fresh malleefowl prints near the mound, but the fox could have frightened the adult bird away and it had not returned after the chick had been taken.

Hopefully some chicks hatched out of this mound and managed to avoid the fire and predators. Whether any successfully hatched and escaped after the fire will remain a mystery.

Kevin Smith  
Gluepot Reserve volunteer

### **Busy in SA's South East**

Three grids are now up and running in the South East – a fantastic achievement that would not have been possible without huge support from National Parks and Wildlife SA Rangers, who collectively contributed more than 120 days of fieldwork. All three grids have been completely searched over the past 12 months, an arduous task that can wait now for another five or so years. The monitoring effort this year found five mounds active out of 39 at Mount Scott; three out of 14 mounds active on the new Naen Naen grid at Gum Lagoon Conservation Park (CP),

no activity in the 31 mounds on the Coorong grid, and only one active mound regularly monitored outside this grid. The breeding effort of birds on this grid is thought to have been severely affected by the recent deaths of two birds.

Additional sections of Gum Lagoon CP were assessed to determine potential areas to establish future grids. The Siberia Block on Duck Island was partially surveyed. Site inspections were also undertaken on several private properties (including Verne McClaren's scrub and Emery's scrub) to determine their suitability for grid establishment. Members of the Australian Deer Association are keen to undertake malleefowl monitoring on their Suwinski scrub property.

Two palm pilots were purchased, with a third acquired from the Riverland, and monitoring kits have been set up.

As part of the Nest Excavation Project coordinated by Sharon Gillam, SA DEH, all of the active mounds on the three grids in the South East were excavated in late February. The results confirmed an extremely low laying rate in the region during the past breeding season, which is not altogether surprising given the dry conditions. This study has provided some very interesting and valuable data, and it is envisaged that this work will continue in future years.



Keen diggers on the Nest Excavation Project, Mount Scott CP (Photo: D. Harley)

Recently, concern has been raised about the potential impact of increasing numbers of feral deer on malleefowl mounds in the region. In the third week of March 2007, 280 deer were shot in a feral animal control exercise in Gum Lagoon CP.

We expect that two more malleefowl monitoring grids will be established in the South East during 2007. Likely sites are Gum Lagoon CP and Mount Boothby CP. Future activities in the region will attempt to increase opportunities for local volunteers in the monitoring process and continue to raise the malleefowl's profile in the region.

Vicki Natt, Malleefowl Project Officer (SE) and  
Dan Harley, Threatened Fauna Ecologist, SA DEH,  
[Harley.Dan@saugov.sa.gov.au](mailto:Harley.Dan@saugov.sa.gov.au)

### **Landholder knowledge of Malleefowl in the WA Wheatbelt**

Blair Parsons interviewed some 121 landholders about malleefowl in the Western Australian wheatbelt, as part of his PhD research. Information offered by landholders provides insights into the ecology of this iconic species. Some of the more interesting observations are detailed below, with quotes from landholders.

It seems that the density of malleefowl mounds across the wheatbelt was highly variable at the time of clearing. For example, in the central wheatbelt where habitat was dominated by woodland, a landholder stated, "I was involved in clearing in 1958 and only came across a couple of mounds when clearing many hundreds of acres of bush." This is in contrast to the mallee dominated south-eastern wheatbelt, where a landholder could recall seeing up to three mounds in a paddock.

Despite widespread clearing for agriculture, farmers were sympathetic to the needs of malleefowl, but unfortunately, attempts to reserve habitat appeared inadequate. One landholder mentioned seeing lots of malleefowl mounds when clearing: "we used to leave a bit of bush a couple of chains in width around the mounds and clear a one-chain firebreak around them also. The malleefowl did not stay at the mounds even with the small amounts of bush left for them."

Landholder recollections painted a picture of relative abundance of malleefowl in times gone by, and a declining trend. One said, "I would often see up to 30 malleefowl on the eastern boundary of my property near the bush block but now I only see less than six."

In some areas of the wheatbelt declines were not as obvious, but numbers fluctuated. A farmer offered: "I may see up to six at a time but their numbers fluctuate. This has been the case for 40 years."

However, increases in abundance have also been noted due to broad scale 1080 baiting for foxes in nature reserves. A government employee noted, "Lake Magenta and Dragon Rocks had large increases in birds after baiting commenced. We used to see two a year but that went up to about ten per two week field trip."

Grazing of remnants by livestock is regarded as a major threat in eastern Australia, but in Western Australia it appears very few remnants are actually grazed. When asked about grazing, landholders typically responded with statements such as "we do not let our sheep graze in our remnants because of the presence of poison bush". They considered the bush off limits to stock, as *Gastrolobium* plants containing the deadly poison 1080 were common. Their presence acted to protect much of the remaining malleefowl habitat in the wheatbelt from degradation due to grazing.

Furthermore, it may have protected the birds themselves, as they are known to eat the seeds of the *Gastrolobium* plants. "We used to eat Malleefowl in the old days. Once we accidentally poisoned our dog by feeding it malleefowl bones." This statement provides evidence that foxes, like dogs, would likely be poisoned after ingesting the bones of a malleefowl, as the bones accumulate the 1080 toxin.

Older landholders are a rich source of knowledge about malleefowl as they have often lived alongside them throughout the cycle of clearing and consolidation of new farms in the wheatbelt, often for periods of more than 50 years. Their local knowledge is invaluable in informing research and conservation action.

Every effort should be invested in ensuring that this knowledge is retained over the long term.

For more information about this project, contact Blair Parsons University of WA, on (08) 9333 6451 or [blair.parsons@csiro.au](mailto:blair.parsons@csiro.au)

Blair is a PhD student at the University of WA based at CSIRO Sustainable Ecosystems in Perth. He works with community groups in Western Australia devoted to malleefowl conservation and with the consultancy Wildlife Research and Management.



Malleefowl active at mound (Photo: J. Benshemesh)



**WA readers: 'Bush Walking for Malleefowl'**

**Date: 30th September - 12th October**

**Area: North Ongerup, WA**

**Good degree of fitness essential**

Survey will focus on two sites – cnr Cowcher & Rabbit Proof Fence Roads and Hill's private remnant north of the Tieline Road

**A completed registration and attendance to the 'Welcome BBQ/ Induction' either Sunday 30<sup>th</sup> Sept or Sunday 7<sup>th</sup> October are essential**

**Registrations Close: Friday 14th Sept**

For further information and an application form contact:

Susanne Dennings, ph: 08 9828 2083

email: [sdennings@westnet.com.au](mailto:sdennings@westnet.com.au)

*Editor's note: Apologies to organisers that this edition of Around the Mounds was distributed after the 'Bush Walking for Malleefowl' event, completion delayed by illness. If you would like to find out more information about the event contact Susanne Dennings at: [sdennings@westnet.com.au](mailto:sdennings@westnet.com.au).*

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