

**Approved Conservation Advice for
Psophodes nigrogularis nigrogularis (western whipbird (western heath))**

(s266B of the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*)

This Conservation Advice has been developed based on the best available information at the time this Conservation Advice was approved; this includes existing and draft plans, records or management prescriptions for this species.

Description

Psophodes nigrogularis nigrogularis (western whipbird (western heath)), family Cinclomatidae, is a medium-sized ground-dwelling songbird with a short crest, powerful legs, short wings and a long tail. Higgins & Peter (2002) describes it as 19–25.5 cm long and weighing 45 g. On adults, the upper body is olive and the underbody is olive or greyish, except for: a distinct, narrow, black submoustachial stripe bordered below by a narrow white submoustachial stripe; a black chin and throat; an off-white stripe along the centre of the breast and the belly, with fine blackish mottling on the latter. The sexes are alike and juveniles are similar to adults, but lack the sub-moustachial stripes, chin-throat patch and pale belly-stripe of adults, and are generally paler.

The subspecies is shy, elusive and seldom seen, though it is often heard, and is usually detected only by its vocalisations, which are most intense at dawn and, to a lesser extent, at dusk (McNee, 1986). The subspecies calls most often between May and July.

Conservation Status

The western whipbird (western heath subspecies) is listed as endangered under the name *Psophodes nigrogularis nigrogularis* Western Whipbird (western heath). This species is eligible for listing as endangered under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (Cwlth) (EPBC Act) as prior to the commencement of the EPBC Act, it was listed as vulnerable under Schedule 1 of the *Endangered Species Protection Act 1992* (Cwlth).

The species is also listed as endangered in Western Australia (*Wildlife Conservation Act 1950*). *Psophodes nigrogularis* (inc all subspecies) is listed as Least Concern in the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species (Birdlife International, 2012).

Distribution and Habitat

The western whipbird (western heath) is restricted to a small area east of Albany in coastal south-west Western Australia. Its range is from Two Peoples Bay-Mount Gardiner east to Turner Road Reserve 7041 (west of Cape Riche) with the South Coast Highway as an approximate inland boundary (Gilfillan et al., 2009;). Previously this subspecies occurred west of Albany along the coast to Perth but its range has contracted greatly due to land clearing for agriculture and changes to fire intensity and frequency in south-west Western Australia. The western whipbird (western heath) is now found only in conservation reserves (Garnett et al., 2011), including in Two Peoples Bay Nature Reserve and Waychinicup National Park (McNee, 1986; Smith, 1991).

The extent of occurrence of the western whipbird (western heath) is estimated at 500 km², and the area of occupancy of the subspecies is estimated at 350 km², both estimates have a high reliability (Garnett et al., 2011). The total population of the western whipbird (western heath) is estimated at 500 breeding birds across five locations (Garnett et al., 2011). Up until 2000, the overall population size of the western whipbird (western heath) was increasing (Garnett & Crowley, 2000; Smith, 1985b; 1991); the subspecies is now considered “not to be declining” though there is a continuing decline in habitat quality (Garnett et al., 2011).

At the species level, the distribution of the western whipbird is severely fragmented, with populations occurring at various disparate sites across WA, South Australia and Victoria (Barrett et al., 2003; Blakers et al., 1984; Higgins & Peter, 2002). In contrast, the distribution of the western whipbird (western heath) is highly restricted and not considered fragmented (McNee, 1986; Smith, 1991).

The western whipbird (western heath) inhabits dense heath-like shrubby thickets on coastal dunes, and mallee woodland or shrubland with an open upper storey above a dense shrubby understorey (Schodde & Mason, 1991; Smith, 1991). The subspecies are insectivorous, feeding generally on or near the ground (Smith, 1991). At Two Peoples Bay, the Western Whipbird (western heath) nests in dense low heath, up to 50 m from thickets of taller vegetation. The frequency of burning determines the structure of the component vegetation; in Two Peoples Bay, territories were established in some areas 4 – 6 years after fires had burnt the area, and 7–10 years in other areas (Smith, 1985a, 1991).

In Two Peoples Bay, the western whipbird (western heath) coexists with other EPBC Act threatened species such as the vulnerable western bristlebird (*Dasyornis longirostris*), noisy scrub-bird (*Atrichornis clamosus*) and the endangered western ground parrot (*Pezoporus wallicus flaviventris*); all of which are listed as threatened taxa under Australian or State Government legislation (Gilfillan et al., 2009; Garnett et al., 2011).

The species occurs within the Jarrah Forest and Esperance Plains IBRA Bioregions and the South Coast Region Natural Resource Management Region in Western Australia. The distribution of this species is not known to overlap with any EPBC Act-listed threatened ecological community.

The Department of the Environment has prepared survey guidelines for *Psophodes nigrogularis nigrogularis*. The survey guidelines are intended to provide guidance for stakeholders on the effort and methods considered appropriate when conducting a presence/absence survey for species listed as threatened under the EPBC Act. <http://www.environment.gov.au/epbc/publications/threatened-birds.html>

Threats

The current main threat to the subspecies is extensive or frequent fire (Garnett et al., 2011; Gilfillan et al., 2009; Higgins & Peter, 2002). The subspecies is less sensitive to fires than the Noisy Scrub-bird (*Atrichornis clamosus*) (Garnett & Crowley 2000), and can survive a fire, provided that there is adequate unburnt vegetation nearby (McNee 1986). The topography of the Mount Gardner prevents the whole area being burnt at once, thus allowing the species to persist in unburnt refuge areas (Smith, 1985a). There have been a number of bushfires since 2001 that have caused substantial population declines (Gilfillan et al., 2009) and the habitat of approximately half of the population of this subspecies was burnt by bushfires between 2001 and 2005 (Burbidge et al., 2005; Gilfillan et al., 2009).

Lindenmayer et al. (2009) considered eastern bristlebirds (*Dasyornis brachypterus*) post-fire re-colonisation, and found that the species could persist on burned sites or return within two years and this was dependent on pre-fire occupancy; vegetation type, heterogeneity, and structure; as well as areas of unburned vegetation available to the birds. Another factor was an extensive predator baiting program at the time of the study, indicating that control of predators could have significant influence on post-fire populations and occupancy. This may also apply to the western whipbird due to the very similar biology and habitat requirements.

The Western Australian Department of Parks and Wildlife is implementing a series of conservation measures aimed at decreasing the incidence and extent of wild fires in the Manypeaks-Two Peoples Bay area (Burbidge et al., 2005; Comer & Burbidge, 2006).

A potential impact on nestling and adult mortality (as it is for other heath dwelling bird species eg western bristlebird), is the influence of predators such as introduced mammals, especially foxes and feral cats (Gilfillan et al., 2009), and possibly the heath monitor

(*Varanus rosenbergii*) (Smith, 1991). Terrestrial foraging habits would make individuals vulnerable to predation, though the dense nature of the foraging habitat may mitigate this.

Grazing and agricultural land clearances are no longer considered a threat to the subspecies as most individuals are now found in conservation reserves (Garnett et al., 2011). Other potential threats include dieback caused by *Phytophthora cinnamomi*, weed invasion and hydrological regime changes (Gilfillan et al., 2009).

Research Priorities

Research priorities that would inform future regional and local priority actions include:

- Identify optimal fire regimes for regeneration of vegetation structure required for western whipbird habitat; including investigating interactions between post-fire re-colonisation and predation impacts.
- More precisely assess the impact of predators (including foxes, feral cats and the heath monitor) on breeding success and on adult mortality.
- Undertake survey work in suitable habitat and potential habitat to locate any additional populations/occurrences/remnants and consider translocation trials if suitable areas are identified.
- Investigate the relationship between *Phytophthora* die-back and the species habitat requirements.

Priority Actions

The following priority recovery and threat abatement actions can be done to support the recovery of the western whipbird (western heath):

Habitat Loss, Disturbance and Modification

- Ensure there is no disturbance in areas where the western whipbird (western heath) occurs, excluding necessary actions to manage the conservation of the species/ecological community.
- Control access routes to suitably constrain public access to known sites in conservation reserves.

Animal Predation

- Implement the threat abatement plan for predation by the European red fox (DEWHA, 2008a) and feral cats (DEWHA, 2008c) within reserve areas where western whipbird (and other heath dwelling, threatened bird species) occur.

Fire

- Develop and implement a suitable fire management strategy that assists in generating habitat appropriate for the western whipbird (western heath).
- Engage with Department of Parks and Wildlife to ensure the subspecies requirements are considered when planning for wildfire management in the Manypeaks-Two Peoples Bay area.
- Where appropriate provide maps of known occurrences to local and state Rural Fire Services and seek inclusion of mitigative measures in bush fire risk management plan/s, risk register and/or operation maps.

Conservation Information

- Raise awareness of the western whipbird (western heath) within the local community.
- Engage with land managers responsible for the land on which populations occur and encourage these key stakeholders to contribute to the implementation of conservation management actions.

- Investigate options for linking, enhancing or establishing additional populations including consideration of the outcomes of similar species translocation e.g., western bristlebird translocations in Walpole in 1999/2000 (Burbidge, 2003; Garnett & Crowley, 2000).

This list does not necessarily encompass all actions that may be of benefit to the western whipbird (western heath), but highlights those that are considered to be of highest priority at the time of preparing the Approved Conservation Advice.

Existing Plans/Management Prescriptions that are Relevant to the Species

Management documents relevant to the western whipbird (western heath) include:

- Research Plan for the Western Ground Parrot, Western Whipbird and Western Bristlebird (Cale & Burbidge 1993)
- Action Plan for Australian Birds 2010 (Garnett et al. 2011) and 2000 (Garnett & Crowley, 2000)
- South Coast Threatened Birds Recovery Plan (Gilfillan et al. 2009).
- Threat abatement plan and background document for predation by the European red fox (DEWHA, 2008a,b).
- Threat abatement plan and background document for predation by feral cats (DEWHA, 2008c,d).
- Threat abatement plan and background document for dieback caused by the root-rot fungus *Phytophthora cinnamomi* (DotE, 2014).

These prescriptions were current at the time of publishing; please refer to the relevant agency's website for any updated versions.

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