Noisy scrub-bird—then and now

Noisy scrub-bird as pictured by John Gould in 1848.

A modern noisy scrub-bird near its nest.

Mention the noisy scrub-bird, and many ornithologists get excited. It's a bird that has always been rare, and for 50–60 years it was thought to be extinct. Nevertheless, a quite extraordinary amount of effort was expended on trying to find this hard-to-see bird. It also has an important place in the history of Western Australia.

John Gilbert, the explorer and collector of so many of the specimens illustrated by John Gould in his *Birds of Australia* and *Mammals of Australia*, discovered it in 1842 near the south-western coast of Western Australia. During the next 47 years it turned up at two other places—at Torbay, 30 km west of Albany, and Margaret River. It was last seen in 1889. From then on it remained lost, but not forgotten, until 1961.

In December that year, Mr Harley Webster, headmaster of Albany High School and a keen bird-watcher, heard an unfamiliar bird song at nearby Two People's Bay. Could it be the noisy scrub-bird? Later on he saw the bird, and it certainly looked like it. Dr Dominic Serventy, the well-known ornithologist, then confirmed that it was indeed the noisy scrub-bird.

The bird appeared to be living in eucalypt-covered gullies on a hilly headland. It must always have been there, but nobody had noticed it. This isn't really so surprising, since the eucalypt cover in which this medium-sized, brown bird lives is thick, and the bird rarely shows itself. As its name implies, it's easy enough to hear, but then not many people know enough about bird songs to spot one that's unusual.

Finding the bird caused quite a stir; the first one to be discovered lived on the site of the proposed new township of Casuarina. The cause of the scrub-bird prevailed, so instead of being developed for holiday homes, its habitat is now protected in a reserve. Management of this reserve is under the control of the Western Australian Wildlife Authority, although the State Department of Fisheries and Fauna actually administers it.

Mr Norman Robinson, an authority on bird songs at the Perth laboratory of the CSIRO Division of Wildlife Research,

began studying the bird's song at Two People's Bay in 1966. Dr Graeme Smith of the same laboratory began a full-time ecological study in 1970. The two researchers now have detailed knowledge of its habits.

Historic notes lost

But first, here's some more history. John Gilbert visited Western Australia (then known as Swan River Colony) twice—in 1839–40, and 1842–43. After both visits he sent back large numbers of specimens to Gould in England, along with detailed notes about each one. He also wrote a number of letters to Gould, who was paying his expenses. For many years most of the originals of the letters and notes were lost. Some edited versions of Gilbert's notes were available in Gould's books, but that was all.

Then in 1939, Mr Alec Chisolm, the well-known ornithologist, found most of the letters and notes from Gilbert's first visit at two villages in rural southern England in the homes of Gould's two great-grandsons. But there was still no trace of any original material from the second visit, during which Gilbert discovered the noisy scrub-bird.

But only 2 years ago Mr Ederic Slater of the CSIRO Division of Wildlife Research, Canberra, spotted the handwritten notes from Gilbert's second visit in the British Natural History Museum.

The notes had lain for many years in the bird section of the Zoology Department of the British Museum. They turned up in 1960 when this Department was moved out of London and they were duly catalogued as Gould material about Australia. Being unsigned, nobody guessed what they really were.

Mr Slater was studying original historical pictures and documents about Australian animals and plants when he came across the notes. He quickly suspected that they were notes written by Gilbert. Information that they contained about the noisy scrub-bird confirmed his suspicions. If anybody else had written the notes they would have referred to the bird by both its common English name and its Latin name. But in the notes it was referred to only by its Aboriginal name—jee-mul-uk. Gilbert would have had no choice in 1842—Gould didn't name the bird until 1844. It was Gilbert's habit always to record the local Aboriginal name.

To clinch the argument, Mr Slater compared the hand-writing of the notes with examples of Gilbert's that Mr Chisolm had already published. There could be no doubt that all had been written by the same man.

Mr Slater still has not had the time to work through all the notes—he has photographic copies, while the originals remain in the Natural History Museum in London. However, he is sure that they are complete for the whole of Gilbert's second visit to Western Australia.

Legends laid to rest

The modern observations of Dr Smith and Mr Robinson about the noisy scrub-bird differ quite markedly in places from those of the last century. A number of legends seem to have grown up around the bird, and possibly it has been attributed with some of the features of its close relative, the rufous scrub-bird. This rather smaller bird lives about as far away as it could from the noisy scrub-bird—in coastal rainforest on the border between New South Wales and Queensland. It also now inhabits a very small range, since much of its rainforest was cleared for dairying.

Legend has it that the noisy scrub-bird is a superb mimic. The CSIRO researchers do not agree. They made tape recordings of the songs of five males (the sex that does most of the singing) at all seasons over an 8-year period. They regard mimicry as uncommon among this species, and very rare during the breeding season.

'. . . singing in its loudest key within 2 yards of me, till I thought my head would split from the effects of its piercing tones'

The bird also has the reputation of being a ventriloquist—of being able to throw its voice so that it seems to be coming from somewhere else. Again Dr Smith and Mr Robinson don't agree. They found that the bird's voice is designed to show where the singer is. However, a male does vary the intensity of his song in a way that may give the impression that he is advancing or retreating when he is in fact stationary. He may also move rapidly while singing, which tends to confuse the observer.

Males sing to mark their territories. Females normally use only single call notes. On a calm day a singing male can be heard about 1·5 km away. The song itself contains four or five different patterns, but it changes continuously. The song of any one group of scrub-birds may be quite different from one year to the next.

When approached by a human intruder, the male reacts strongly. It will often come quite close, usually flitting from branch to branch in a wide circle, but being careful to keep out of sight. All the time it sings loudly. In his notes Gilbert recalls its singing thus: 'I remember one in particular, singing in its loudest key within 2 yards of me, till I thought my head would split from the effects of its piercing tones'.

For the time being, the noisy scrub-bird's future is probably secure at Two People's Bay. But its long-term survival will depend on how the reserve is managed. Fire is probably its greatest enemy. The bird's dramatic disappearance soon after the arrival of European Man must have been the consequence of the frequent devastating fires that often resulted from his burning and clearing operations. These destroyed its feeding places. The introduction of domestic cats would have made matters worse.

Much of the Two People's Bay reserve has been regularly fired in the past. Nevertheless, the CSIRO researchers think that the topography of the land around Mount Gardner has protected the area where the scrub-birds now live from total destruction. They suggest that controlled burning rather than total protection may well be required to maintain its habitat—a hot wildfire could be disastrous.

They also suggest that protection of the area below Mount Gardner, which has been repeatedly devastated by fire, may well allow regeneration of further habitat for the noisy scrub-bird.

And this may be very desirable, because the total number of birds at Two People's Bay seems to be fairly low. The researchers haven't been able to count the whole population, but, by counting the number of males singing on their territories, they have been able to get a good idea of how many of these are present. Counts from 1970 to 1973 gave the number of singing males in each of those years as 44, 41, 44, and 48. Less precise counts between 1962 and 1968 suggest similar numbers. So apparently the population size is remaining pretty constant.

More about the topic

The noisy scrub-bird—an interim report. G. T. Smith and F. N. Robinson. *The Emu*, 1975, **75** (in press).

The story of the scrub-birds. A. H. Chisolm. *The Emu*, 1951, **51**, 88–112; 258–97.