



# Conservation

Jenny Lau and Don Saunders

Eastern Great Egret. Photo: R. Mackenzie

## Brolgas in south-western Victoria

Habitat loss and degradation, predation by feral animals, poisoning and shooting have all contributed to a significant reduction in the Brolga population in south-eastern Australia. Thousands of Brolgas once inhabited wetlands across Victoria, including areas around Melbourne and East Gippsland. Today the species is listed as threatened under the Victorian *Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988* and the remaining population of 600-650 birds is largely confined to wetlands in the south-west of the State. Significant threats to the population include the ongoing drought, continuing degradation of wetlands and chick predation by foxes.

A potential new threat to the species is the construction and operation of wind farms in south-western Victoria. Much of the remnant Brolga habitat coincides very closely with ideal wind farm sites. Potential impacts from wind farms include direct mortality due to collisions with turbines and overhead powerlines (powerlines are known to be a significant cause of mortality in cranes across the world), disturbance and displacement of birds from nesting and flocking sites and interruptions to migratory movements of birds between flocking and breeding sites. While much is known about the characteristics of Brolga flocking and breeding sites (the species undertakes seasonal movements between these distinct habitats), very little is known about Brolga flight patterns around and between these two habitats. Without this information it is difficult to assess the potential impact of wind farms on the south-west Victorian Brolga population.

Two recent developments should greatly improve our ability to predict and minimise the negative impacts of a wide range of actions on the Brolga. One is the development of a population viability analysis (PVA) model for the species, which will improve our understanding of the sensitivity of the population to various threats. The second is the announcement of a South-West Victoria Brolga Research project. While the project will gather information on many aspects of Brolga population dynamics, a major aim of the project is to examine flight patterns of Brolgas around and between flocking and breeding sites using satellite tracking. Results from the project will also be used to refine and strengthen the PVA model.

The project is being undertaken by a post-graduate student at Ballarat University and has significant funding from the Australian Government's Department of Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts (DEWHA), the Victorian Government and representatives of the wind industry. BOCA will have two representatives on the project's steering committee and looks forward to engaging in productive dialogue with wind industry representatives with regard to wind farm impacts on birdlife.

## Can you help?

Inka Veltheim, the post-graduate student undertaking the South-West Victoria Brolga Research project, is asking for volunteers to assist with the capture and monitoring of wild Brolgas in south-west Victoria from January-April 2009. Inka can be contacted via email: [inka\\_veltheim@yahoo.com.au](mailto:inka_veltheim@yahoo.com.au) or via Jenny Lau at BOCA National Office on 03 9877 5342

## Senate inquiry into the EPBC Act

BOCA has made a submission to a Senate Inquiry into the operation of the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act). As the cornerstone of the Australian Government's environmental legislation, the EPBC Act was designed to protect matters of national environmental significance. The Inquiry will examine the effectiveness of the Act in its first eight years of operation, with the Senate noting the failure of the Act to halt the "continuing decline and extinction of a significant proportion of Australia's unique plants and animals".

BOCA's submission noted our long history of advocacy for Australia's bird life and their habitat and highlighted aspects of the EPBC Act in need of urgent attention. BOCA commented on: the need for a comprehensive system of biological monitoring to support the listing process for threatened species and communities; the need to assess the cumulative impacts of multiple developments on species' habitat, particularly for dispersive species; the restrictive nature of the ten day period for public comment on referred matters; the lack of clear protocols for project assessment by the Department of

Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts (DEWHA); the need for survey standards and an accreditation system for ecological consultants; and the lack of biologically meaningful off-setting and mitigation strategies for many projects. Uncertainty over the impacts of climate change on birds and their habitat increases the imperative for Australia to have strong and effective environmental legislation that actively protects our plants and animals.

**Note:** On 31 October 2008, the Minister for the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts commissioned an independent review of the EPBC Act. Details of the Inquiry may be found at the EPBC website: [www.environment.gov.au/epbc](http://www.environment.gov.au/epbc). Submissions close on 19 December 2008.

## Swift Parrot threats

Habitat loss and degradation are major threats to the nationally endangered Swift Parrot. Agriculture, forestry and urban and industrial developments have all contributed to the decline in the species' feeding and breeding habitat in south-eastern Australia. Despite the existence of recovery plans at the national and state level, Swift Parrot habitat continues to be lost or degraded across the species' range.



Swift Parrot. Photo: G. Jones.

Of major concern is the proposed logging of known Swift Parrot nesting habitat in southern Tasmania, particularly in Wielangta Forest. In October, BOCA wrote to both the Federal Minister for the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts, Peter Garrett, and the Tasmanian Minister for Energy and Resources, David Llewellyn, calling for a five-year moratorium on logging of Swift Parrot nesting habitat. This would allow time for an in-depth study of the habitat and conditions required for successful breeding of the species.

David Llewellyn responded, saying that discussions between the Department of Primary Industries and Water and the Forest Practices Authority (FPA) had resulted in a recommendation that surveys of Swift Parrot activity should be undertaken prior to finalising specific management prescriptions. BOCA was also given assurances that the FPA does not intend to harvest coupe WT19D in Wielangta Forest during the 2008/09 Swift Parrot breeding season. The Minister also hoped that this response would allay our concerns.

Sadly, this is not the case. The Minister fails to realise that Swift Parrots do not utilise the same breeding sites each year. Their choice of breeding sites is dependent on the proximity of reliable food resources to suitable nesting sites. Some sites may only provide suitable conditions once in a decade, yet the site may be critical for the ongoing survival of the species. Single season surveys and the decision to 'hold off' on logging until the current breeding season is over will do nothing to ensure the long-term survival of the species.

A second major threat to Swift Parrots is collision with man-made structures. A recent World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) report, 'Minimising the swift parrot collision threat', estimated that up to two per cent of the total Swift Parrot population is killed each year as the result of collisions with windows, fences (especially chain-link fences), and vehicles. While two per cent may seem low, the loss of a single breeding adult may represent the loss of up to six chicks each year. With the continuing drought pushing more Swift Parrots into urban environs, collision deaths are likely to rise.

The WWF report discusses practical ways to reduce the collision risk. Careful urban planning, thoughtful building design and construction, and alterations to existing buildings and other structures may all contribute to a reduction in collision risk to Swift Parrots. The report highlighted that measures that reduce the reflectivity of a window, creating 'visual noise' and making it less mirror-like or transparent, will reduce the collision risk for all birds. The full report may be viewed on the WWF website: [www.wwf.org.au/publications/swift-parrot-report](http://www.wwf.org.au/publications/swift-parrot-report)

## Identifying similar-looking species

From *Canberra Bird Notes*

Vol 33 No 2, September 2008

Well-known Mt Isa birder, Bob Forsyth, has developed seven bird identification tables which are available in PDF format at the Birds Queensland website: <http://www.birdsqueensland.org.au/>

The identification tables currently available cover:

- Collared Sparrowhawk vs. Brown Goshawk
- Crows and Ravens
- Cuckoos
- The *Meliphaga* Honeyeaters (Lewin's, Yellow-spotted and Graceful)
- Fairy Martin vs. Tree Martin
- Grey-tailed vs. Wandering Tattler
- The Terns of Queensland.

The first of these, for example, covers some 16 characteristics that are useful in differentiating the species in the field. As is always the case with the excellent birding resources that Bob produces and makes publicly available, he requests that users make a donation to the Royal Flying Doctor Service, rather than seek any remuneration for himself.