



# Conservation

DON SAUNDERS AND JENNY LAU

Better than bait for rodent control: Black-shouldered Kite. Photo: Sonja Ross

## MOUSE BAITS AND BIRDS

With a mouse plague affecting areas of eastern and southern Australia, this should be a time of feasting for many of Australia's raptors. However, millions of hectares of agricultural land are being treated with mouse bait and BOCA has received a report from the NSW Riverina of large numbers of dead birds (including Galahs, Magpies, falcons, Kestrels and Barn Owls) in an area where landholders are using poisoned grain to control mice. Birds Australia has had similar reports from Queensland and Biosecurity South Australia reported large numbers of poisoned birds in the Adelaide Hills.

All commercial mouse baits present a level of risk to bird life. Seed-eating birds such as parrots and finches may be killed when they eat poisoned grain and small carnivorous birds such as kestrels, falcons and owls may be killed when they eat poisoned mice. However, when applied according to government guidelines, registered agricultural chemicals such as zinc phosphide (eg MOUSEOFF® ZP bait) and bromadiolone present a low level of risk to wildlife. Bromadiolone, which is an anticoagulant, may affect granivorous birds that eat poisoned grain or carnivorous birds (such as raptors) that eat mice that have fed on poisoned grain.

The real problem occurs when landholders resort to making their own illegal baits using cocktails of chemicals, including insecticides such as Lemat. Illegal baits are not mouse specific and may not result in a reduction in mouse numbers, but they can be particularly lethal to birds that eat poisoned grain or poisoned mice. While we have every sympathy for landholders who have struggled through drought, floods, locusts and now, a mouse plague, there are very good reasons for restrictions and regulations around the use of agricultural chemicals.

Domestic users of products such as Ratsak and Talon should follow manufacturers' directions very carefully. This includes the safe disposal of poisoned mouse and rat carcasses, to reduce the risk of off-target poisoning of pets and carnivorous birds.

BOCA and Birds Australia issued a media release to raise awareness about the potential for illegal baits to have off-target impacts on our bird life. Illegal mixtures can have far-reaching effects on humans, pets, wildlife and the environment.

The BOCA/BA media release can be viewed on BOCA's website.

Further reading: [www.wildlifemountain.com/poisons.html](http://www.wildlifemountain.com/poisons.html);  
[www.tvwc.org.au/help/article5/poisoning%20our%20wildlife.pdf](http://www.tvwc.org.au/help/article5/poisoning%20our%20wildlife.pdf)

## PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY INTO THE MURRAY DARLING BASIN PLAN

The controversy around the Murray Darling Basin Plan (the Plan) continues. Released in May, the findings of the Parliamentary Inquiry into the Plan criticised the Murray Darling Basin Authority (MDBA) for its lack of community consultation and engagement prior to the release of the Guide to the Plan. This is fair criticism, as much of the controversy around the Guide could have been avoided if the MDBA had worked more closely with the many communities that depend on the Murray-Darling system for their livelihoods.

To counter this, the Parliamentary Inquiry focussed on community concerns and opinion, ignoring much of the scientific evidence presented in the Guide. The Inquiry called for a greater emphasis on improved efficiency of water use in the MDB rather than significant reductions in the amount of water diverted from rivers. However, modelling indicates that increased efficiencies will never return sufficient water to the environment to improve the health of rivers and wetlands.

And so the debate lurches further towards a 'business as usual scenario', seriously threatening the chances of a good outcome for our rivers and wetland.

The proposed Plan is due to be released in mid-2011. More details can be found at: <http://thebasinplan.mdba.gov.au/>.



White-winged Chough entangled in fishing line, Barmah National Park. Photo: Rolf Weber, DSE

## FISHING LINE STRIKES AGAIN

An officer of the Victorian Department of Sustainability and Environment came across a trapped White-winged Chough near a billabong at Ulupna Island, in Barmah National Park. The bird's foot was wrapped in fishing line, tethering it to a sapling.

Biodiversity Officer Rolf Weber said the Chough was cut free and rejoined its family group that had maintained a vigil around the trapped bird; the only visible sign of damage was to the bird's feathers.

"And as a communal species it may receive assistance in finding food, so the chances of recovery are good," Rolf said.

But he warned that finding the Chough was lucky.

"The outcome for native animals tangled in discarded rubbish isn't always so good and if the bird had not been found, it could have starved to death," he said.

Rolf said lazy recreational fishers who didn't pick up after themselves were a menace to wildlife.

"All it comes down to is that some people are too lazy to take their rubbish with them," he said.

Birds and aquatic animals such as turtles and Platypus are particularly vulnerable to discarded fishing line.

*From a DSE Media Release, 31 May 2011*

## BASS YABBY POACHER JAILED

Ghost shrimps, locally known as Bass yabbies, are a very important component of the diet of some of the larger waders, including migratory species such as Eastern Curlew. They are also popular for use as fishing bait and, despite a legal bag limit of 100, they are sometimes taken in large numbers. It is therefore pleasing to see that the law can crack down heavily on offenders.

The following report is taken from *The Age*, 4 May 2011.

*A Broadmeadows man jailed and penalised \$5000 for taking illegal quantities of the protected Bass yabby has been branded an environmental rapist by a magistrate.*

*Bach Dan Nguyen, 42, was yesterday banned for five years from any involvement with fishing and lost his \$10,000 boat and his fishing equipment.*

*Frankston Magistrates Court heard when Nguyen was arrested in June last year with 2201 yabbies, he was serving a suspended jail sentence for similar offences. A daily bag and possession limit was introduced in 2008 for the Bass yabby over fears they were being harvested for bait to poach freshwater native fish.*

*Nguyen, who pleaded not guilty, was convicted of five offences including possessing and selling fish in contravention of the Fisheries act. He was arrested by fisheries officers at Crib Point with yabbies estimated worth up to \$1100. Nguyen denied the allegations and claimed he had the yabbies for a camping trip.*

*Magistrate Rod Crisp said Nguyen was a crafty, dishonest man whose business was persistent poaching that was raping the environment. He jailed Nguyen for three months and fined him \$2000 with \$3000 costs.*

*Steve Butcher*

## SPIRONUCLEOSIS – A WASTING DISEASE OF PARROTS

In May this year BOCA was contacted by a member from Gippsland seeking an explanation for numbers of Australian King-Parrots dying from a wasting disease. The following information is from the ACT Parks and Wildlife Service.

*During the months of late March to September when the weather is starting to cool off, a number of juvenile birds, particularly King-Parrots and Galahs, are reported as suffering from a wasting syndrome.*

*The birds are weak and easily caught. They show signs of severe loss of body weight noted by the sharpness of the keel bone, normally not noticeable due to the surrounding chest muscles. In addition they have diarrhoea with green faeces adhering to the vent feathers around the cloacal opening. As this is a severe condition with a rapid onset some birds are simply found dead.*

*The disease is known as Spironucleosis after a small protozoan parasite which attacks the gut lining of mainly the small intestine but also parts of the large intestine. This results in the inability to digest food hence the resulting loss in body weight and diarrhoea.*

*It is assumed that the young birds are infected by sharing food from the adults. This in combination with the stress of cooler weather, weaning and a growing shortage of food through the winter challenges the bird's immunity and results in the disease.*

*Diagnosis can be confused with a number of other diseases including Aspergillosis, Salmonellosis, Psittacosis and Chlamydiae. All of these diseases have symptoms with some similarities and are associated with small microscopic organisms. However Spironucleosis is seen every year within the ACT and should be high on the probable diagnostic list.*

*Successful treatment of these birds depends on rapid intervention and the prognosis depends on the initial extent of bodyweight loss. Treatment is initially intensive involving forced feeding and fluids. A warm environment and the use of anti-protozoan medication such as dimetridazole or metronidazole are also required. Treatment programs can last from 7-14 days with a gradual increase in body weight, increased appetite and cessation of diarrhoea. Carers are reminded to maintain a high level of hygiene when nursing these birds due to the high level of cross contamination caused by the droppings.*

## INVASIVE BIRD SPECIES

As part of its High Risk Invasive Animal Project, the Victorian Department of Primary Industries (DPI) is seeking information on the presence and distribution of a number of invasive bird species in Victoria. Ostriches, Indian Ring-necked Parakeets (Rose-ringed Parakeets), Red-whiskered Bulbuls and Barbary Doves in the wild are a priority and DPI is requesting help in detecting these species.

Reports of the above species should be made direct to Highrisk. Invasiveanimals@dpi.vic.gov.au. A standard reporting sheet is available at that site.

BOCA congratulates DPI for taking up this serious issue of potentially invasive pest species.

Questions or comments can be directed to Caleb Hurrell, Pest Management Officer, PO Box 103 Geelong VIC 3220; Tel: 03 5226 4561; Mobile: 0458 844 697; Fax: 03 5226 4725; Email: caleb.hurrell@dpi.vic.gov.au.

## CARING FOR OUR COUNTRY REVIEW

BOCA and Birds Australia made a joint submission providing comments on the Australian Government's Discussion Paper on the Review of the Caring for our Country (CfoC) program – Australia's major source of funding for large-scale biodiversity conservation programs.

The decline in Australia's biodiversity is well documented. In response, Australia must develop large-scale, targeted biodiversity conservation programs that aim to increase the resilience of species and ecosystems to climate change. However, the current funding available under the CfoC program is a small fraction of what is required and our submission highlighted the need for a massive increase in funding for biodiversity programs; at least an order of magnitude greater than the current CfoC program.

This call for greater funding is backed by recent research which showed that the present level of investment in international conservation programs and actions prevented a decline in the conservation status of 20% of vertebrates listed under the IUCN (Hoffman et al 2010); they stated that the overall pattern of decline in the conservation status of biodiversity 'conceals the impact of conservation successes, ... the rate of deterioration would have been at least one-fifth again as much in the absence of these.'

In recent years, the funding pendulum has swung from a focus on threatened species to a focus on threatened ecological systems. Our submission called for a more balanced approach: while accepting that there is a need for programs that target entire ecosystems or regions (the National Reserve System is a good example of this), these programs will not necessarily meet the needs of all threatened species. Some species will always require programs that specifically cater for their needs or address specific threats.

We also highlighted the need to adopt an adaptive management approach to biodiversity conservation; that the lack of scientific certainty around the 'best' way to restore degraded ecosystems does not mean we should adopt a 'wait-and-see' approach. Rather, we must use the best available information, sometimes based on reliable anecdotal evidence and information in the 'grey' literature, and be ready to incorporate new information as it comes to hand. A solid adaptive management program requires significant investment in science-based monitoring programs, so we continue to improve our knowledge of how to protect and restore degraded ecosystems and populations of threatened species.

Hoffman et al (2010). 'The impacts of conservation on the status of the world's vertebrates.' *Science* 330, 1503-1509.

## DON'T FEED THE DUCKS

The Shire of Nillumbik, north-east of Melbourne, has shown great initiative and awareness of the problems for ducks being fed unnatural food. The Shire has erected these eye-catching signs at wetlands in the municipality where hand-feeding occurs. It would be great for ducks if other municipalities did the same!

