

Flora & Fauna Guarantee Action Statement

#69

This Action Statement was first published in 1996 and remains current. This version has been prepared for web publication. It retains the original text of the action statement, although contact information, the distribution map and the illustration may have been updated.

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White-browed Treecreeper *Climacteris affinis*



White-browed Treecreeper (*Climacteris affinis*)
(Illustration by John Las Gourgues)



Distribution in Victoria (DSE 2002)

Description and Distribution

The White-browed Treecreeper (*Climacteris affinis*), is one of six species of Australian treecreepers (family Climacteridae). It is a small bird (135-150 mm long) with an earth-brown upper body and greyish crown and nape. The wings are dusky brown with a pale buff band across the flight feathers. A white eyebrow with streaked black and white ear coverts and black bill are characteristic. The breast is plain mid-grey and the belly boldly striped black and white. The female is similar to the male but with the upper breast striped rufous and dull white, with red over the eyebrow.

The White-browed Treecreeper is usually silent, but it does have a call of cricket-like trills and a strident chirrup song that is repeated by the male from a vantage point. It is an unobtrusive bird, usually seen in pairs or small groups foraging for invertebrates on the trunks of trees and shrubs and on fallen limbs. Breeding occurs from August to December. Nests are

located in hollows, particularly in Belahs (Emison et al. 1987). Nests are made from a collection of grass and shreds of bark lined with fur or hair (Pizzey 1980). Two or three pink eggs with purplish red spots are laid. The White-browed Treecreeper inhabits southern arid and semi-arid areas of Australia, from Kalgoorlie eastwards to Gawler, the Flinders Ranges and the Victorian Mallee. It is rare throughout its range (LCC 1987). White-browed Treecreepers have been recorded in areas of suitable habitat throughout the year, and are sedentary (Emison et al. 1987). In Victoria, White-browed Treecreepers are restricted to localised populations in regenerating native pine (*Callitris* spp.) and/or Buloke (*Allocasuarina luehmannii*) and Belah (*Casuarina pauper*) woodlands, or in fairly dense thickets of smaller shrubs, including Sugarwood (*Myoporum platycarpum*), Weeping Pittosporum (*Pittosporum phylliraeoides*), Small Cooba (*Acacia ligulata*), Umbrella Wattle (*A. osswaldii*) and Slender Hopbush (*Dodonaea viscosa* spp.

angustissima) (Emison et al. 1987).

It occurs mainly within National Parks, Flora and Fauna Reserves and other areas of Crown Land. There are isolated populations at Timberoo, Yarrara, Meringur, Wyperfeld National Park, Murray-Sunset National Park (Mopoke) and a few other scattered locations (LCC 1987).

Conservation Status

Current Status

CNR (1995) Vulnerable

SAC (1994) Threatened

The White-browed Treecreeper has been listed as a threatened taxon in Schedule 2 of the Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988.

Reasons for Conservation Status

The decline of the White-browed Treecreeper has been brought about by the widespread clearing of its habitat for agriculture. It is estimated that over 90% of the Belah woodland in Victoria has been cleared, and grazing pressure from stock, rabbits and kangaroos has reduced the capacity of these woodlands to regenerate and reduced nesting, feeding and foraging sites.

No accurate estimates are available of the former numbers of White-browed Treecreepers in Victoria, but the number remaining in Victoria is likely to be less than 1000 (Silveira pers. comm.).

In its final recommendation, the Scientific Advisory Committee (1994) determined that the White-browed Treecreeper was:

- significantly prone to future threats; and
- very rare in terms of distribution and abundance

Major Conservation Objectives

The long-term objective is to have a population of White-browed Treecreepers in Victoria of over 2000 within 25 years.

The short-term objectives are to:

- determine its Victorian distribution within five years;
- identify and protect all known populations on public land, and five populations on private land within five years; and
- rehabilitate its preferred woodland habitat to enable the species to expand in number and distribution throughout its potential range in Victoria.

Current Management Issues

Ecological issues Specific to the Taxon

The White-browed Treecreeper is primarily arboreal, spending less than one-quarter of its time on the ground (Readers Digest 1976). It occupies a narrow ecological niche and has adapted to the dry inland environment, showing a preference for native pine and Belah woodlands. Little is

known about its food requirements, breeding and ecological relationships.

The vast majority of the Pine-Buloke and Belah woodlands of the north-west have been cleared for agriculture or grazed by stock, kangaroos and rabbits. This grazing has inhibited natural regeneration (Sluiter, pers. comm.). Natural regeneration is relatively slow (even if assisted with direct seeding), so management of grazers must be sustained over long periods. The White-browed Treecreeper builds its nest in a deep hollow limb or trunk, which sometimes extends down to ground level. This nesting habit may make the bird susceptible to predation by introduced Cats and Red Foxes, as well as Tree Goannas. Small, isolated populations need to be adequately protected from wildfire, as a single fire could be catastrophic; Pine-Buloke woodlands are fire sensitive, so any fire has the potential to destroy White-browed Treecreeper habitat.

Wider Conservation Issues

The long-term conservation of this species lies with the rehabilitation of degraded areas of Pine-Buloke and Belah Woodlands. The distribution of these woodland communities has been greatly reduced, so any management efforts aimed at enhancing their conservation status will benefit associated flora and fauna. The White-browed Treecreeper is part of a suite of woodland species that are threatened in northern Victoria, including the Carpet Python (*Morelia spilota variegata*), Spotted Bowerbird (*Chlamydera maculata maculata*), Paucident Planigale (*Planigale gilesi*), Grey-crowned Babbler (*Pomatostomus temporalis*) and Bush Stone-curlew (*Burhinus grallarius*).

Research and recommendations for managing White-browed Treecreeper habitat in Victoria can also be applied to the conservation of this species in other states, particularly South Australia and New South Wales.

The control of grazing animals such as rabbits will benefit adjacent landholders by reducing habitat degradation and soil erosion.

Social and Economic Issues

There is likely to be little social or economic impact associated with achieving the major conservation objectives, given that the species occurs mainly within National Parks, Flora and Fauna Reserves and other areas of Crown Land already managed by the Department of Natural Resources and Environment. The distribution and abundance of the White-browed Treecreeper on freehold land is largely unknown. Landowners with freehold land containing areas of remnant woodland vegetation are encouraged to maintain these stands through the Land Protection Incentive Scheme and the Land for Wildlife Scheme. The social and economic cost in maintaining suitable habitat on private land will be negligible, as the benefits of clearing native woodlands in the mallee at the present time are considered very marginal economically. The control of grazing animals such as rabbits will benefit adjacent landholders by reducing habitat degradation and soil erosion.

Management Action

Previous Management Action

Management actions designed specifically for the conservation of White-browed Treecreeper have been minimal to date. The Atlas of Victorian Wildlife database and the Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union bird counts provide localities for all recorded Victorian populations.

Reservation of the largest remaining stands of Pine-Buloke Woodland at Hattah-Kulkyne, Murray-Sunset and Wyperfeld National Parks and subsequent removal of stock and control of rabbit grazing from these areas has reduced habitat degradation and removed a major factor limiting regeneration of the vegetation. The proclamation of Yarrara and Mallanbool Flora and Fauna Reserves in Victoria's northwest has similarly secured the conservation status of the major area of remnant Belah Woodlands in Victoria.

Intended Management Action

General

- Incorporate references to the recovery of the White-browed Treecreeper in the recovery plan for the Pine-Buloke woodlands in Victoria being compiled by NRE's Mildura office.
- Provide long-term protection of Pine-Buloke habitat from total grazing pressure.
- Clarify the distribution of the species within Victoria by mapping all populations on private and public land.
- Define the ecological requirements of the White-browed Treecreeper.
- Clearly identify the major threats to the species and prioritise actions to lessen these threatening processes.

Habitat Management and Protection

- Rehabilitate degraded areas of habitat within the core areas of the three Mallee National Parks, specifically the degraded Pine-Buloke woodland.
- Ensure that rabbits are controlled to allow the regeneration of Pine-Buloke and Belah woodlands.
- Monitor kangaroo numbers in all three Mallee National Parks so that management actions can be planned if numbers increase to levels which threaten regeneration, such as has occurred at Hattah-Kulkyne National Park.
- Encourage landholders to retain suitable habitat to provide refuge for the species, particularly through the Land for Wildlife Scheme.
- Ensure that White-browed Treecreeper habitat is protected from all fires and that it is identified on fire management plans and maps, until the implications of management burns are understood.
- Discourage the clearing of remnant native vegetation that could provide suitable habitat for White-browed Treecreeper, on a case-by-case basis.

Research

- Provide training for Rangers and other National Parks staff in the identification of the species, its habitat and methodology in population estimation.
- Conduct annual monitoring of known populations to assess fluctuations in numbers, distribution and habitat occupied.
- Report all records to the Atlas of Victorian Wildlife.

Research

- Conduct vegetation assessment in known White-browed Treecreeper localities to determine critical habitat requirements.
- After habitat areas have been clearly mapped, encourage Universities to undertake research into the ecological requirements of the species, specifically: behaviour feeding and breeding requirements, population dynamics, and the role of fire in the management of Pine-Buloke woodlands. NRE may provide field support for such projects.
- Encourage research which identifies the role of known and potential threatening processes and establishes the habitat requirements through vegetation assessment.

Community Extension

- Provide advice to the community on the extent of decline of native woodlands and their associated fauna. Suggest measures to prevent the continued decline and offer avenues for the community to become involved in restoration works and bird censuses and monitoring.
- Establish a 'Friends of the White-browed Treecreeper' group to focus community attention on this species.

Other Desirable Management Actions

- Consider further formal reservations of suitable habitat on public land.
- Expand the revegetation programs for Pine-Buloke woodlands, especially those involving direct seeding.
- Consider the introduction of artificial hollows to rehabilitating woodlands if population numbers continue to decline.
- Undertake a population viability assessment after areas of habitat have been identified and sufficient biological data has been obtained.

Legislative Powers Operating

Legislation

Conservation, Forests and Lands Act 1987 - provides for the integrated management of public land and its resources.
Flora & Fauna Guarantee Act 1988 - provides for the protection of flora and fauna in Victoria and the declaration of critical habitat which is so designated.
Wildlife Act 1975 - provides controls on the taking and handling of wildlife. The White-browed Treecreeper is protected under this Act.
Crown Land (Reserves) Act 1978 - provides for reservation of Crown Land for public purposes.
Forests Act 1958 - includes provision for management of fire protection and firewood collection activities in State Forests.

National Parks Act 1975 - makes provision for management of National and other Parks.

Catchment and Land Protection Act 1994 - provides guidelines for land management within proclaimed water catchments, and provides for the control of vermin and noxious weeds on public and private land.

Licence/Permit Conditions

A permit for research involving the species, whether dead or alive, or for handling remains of the bird, must be obtained from the Manager, Flora and Fauna Branch, NRE.

A permit is required from the Director, National Parks, for any work on land administered under the National Parks Act 1975.

Permits will only be issued if the proposed work is consistent with the conservation objectives outlined within this action statement and are sympathetic to conservation of the species.

Consultation and Community Participation

The community needs to be involved in the restoration of mallee habitat favoured by the White-browed Treecreeper, which will also provide a greater community awareness and understanding of rare and threatened flora and fauna.

Implementation, Evaluation and Review

The NRE Flora, Fauna and Fisheries Manager is responsible for the implementation of this Action Statement. The Mallee Ecosystem Coordinator in Mildura is responsible for coordinating the management actions and the evaluation of their effectiveness.

Intended actions should be evaluated every two years by NRE. The results of monitoring will determine how successful the actions have been and will form the basis of protection works.

This Action Statement should be reviewed in 2001.

Contacts

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Compiler

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Further information

Further information can be obtained from Department of Sustainability and Environment Customer Service Centre on 136 186.

Flora and Fauna Guarantee Action

Statements are available from the Department of Sustainability and Environment website:
<http://www.dse.vic.gov.au>

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