Action Statement No. 255

Large Brown Tree Frog *Litoria littlejohni*

Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988

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ISBN 978-1-74326-930-5 (pdf)

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Large Brown Tree Frog *Litoria littlejohni*

Description

The Large Brown Tree Frog *Litoria littlejohni* (White *et al.* 1994) is part of the *Litoria ewingii* species complex, which is a group of closely related species, similar in appearance and behaviour (Barker *et al.* 1995, White *et al.* 1994). Other common names include the Heath Frog and Littlejohn’s Tree Frog (Lemckert 2010, NSW OEH 2014).

Adult females are larger than males and range in size from 48 to 72 mm from snout to vent, males from 38 to 56 mm (Barker *et al.* 1995, White *et al.* 1994). Large Brown Tree Frogs are pale brown on the dorsal surface, with dark speckles and a broad, sometimes indistinct, dark brown band running from the head to the vent (Barker *et al.* 1995, White *et al.* 1994). The ventral surface is white or cream and the groin, armpit and back of the thighs are bright orange (Barker *et al.* 1995, White *et al.* 1994). There is also a narrow dark brown to black band running from the nose past the eyes to the shoulder (Barker *et al.* 1995, White *et al.* 1994).

Large Brown Tree Frogs are similar in appearance to the Jervis Bay Tree Frog, *Litoria jervisiensis*, with which it was previously confused. The Large Brown Tree Frog has a broader head and lacks the white glandular stripe of the Jervis Bay Tree Frog (White *et al.* 1994). The mating call of the Large Brown Tree Frog is described as a series of rapidly repeated notes sounding like a slow, reedy whistle that is distinct from other related species (White *et al.* 1994, Barker *et al.* 1995). Large Brown Tree Frog tadpoles are black or very dark grey, grow to 65 mm in length and can be distinguished from other tadpoles of the *Litoria ewingii* complex by their moderately large size,dark colour and blue belly (Anstis 2002; Anstis 2013).

Distribution

The Large Brown Tree Frog is relatively widely distributed within its south east coastal range, but has only been recorded at a small number of sites within that range (Lemckert 2004b, 2010). Records extend along the eastern coast of the Great Dividing Range from near Newcastle in New South Wales, to East Gippsland in Victoria (White and Ehmann 1997).

As of March 2014 there are 79 Victorian records of the Large Brown Tree Frog in the Victorian Biodiversity Atlas (VBA) (DEPI 2014). The most recent record is from 1996. These records are confined to East Gippsland and extend from the NSW border in Croajingalong National Park to approximately 18 km west of Ensay. Within Victoria, the majority of records are associated with the wetter forests of the Errinundra Plateau (DEPI 2014). The limits to the Large Brown Tree Frog’s distribution in Victoria are unknown as there have been no systematic surveys. Therefore, information on the occurrence of the Large Brown Tree Frog is likely to be conservative record of where and when the species has been found, rather than an accurate picture of where the it does and does not actually occur.

Habitat

In comparison, the NSW and Victorian species appear to occupy different habitat types and have differing breeding requirements. In NSW the species occupies a range of habitats including heath, woodland and dry and wet sclerophyll forest, at higher elevations and near the coast. Its distribution is patchy however, and the characteristics that determine the species’ presence are unknown (Lemckert 2004b, Lemckert 2010, White and Ehmann 1997). Meanwhile Victorian records are predominantly from wet sclerophyll forests away from the coast (Martin and Littlejohn 1966; Chesterfield *et al.* 1988; Opie *et al.* 1990). Habitat recorded from NSW is primarily woodland (to 15 m height) with a thick shrub layer (Daly and Craven 2007).

Breeding has been observed in a variety of habitats including stationary and ephemeral water bodies such as road side ditches, fire dams, ponds, swamps, oxbow lakes, rain-filled tree stumps and logs and more commonly in NSW, in slow-moving streams (Chesterfield *et al.* 1988, Daly and Craven 2007, Lemckert 2004b, 2010, Martin and Littlejohn 1966; Opie *et al.* 1990, Scroggie *et al.* 2011).

The area of terrestrial habitat around breeding sites and the specific habitat characteristics required by Large Brown Tree Frogs are unknown (Lemckert 2010). An average distance of 300 m around breeding sites has been proposed as adequate to protect a range of amphibian species, although there is considerable variation between species (Lemckert 2004a, Semlitsch and Bodie 2003).

Life history and ecology

Breeding (tadpoles and calling males) has been recorded throughout the year and in NSW appears to be more common in late summer/early autumn, late winter/early spring and after heavy rain events (Lemckert and Mahony 2008 and Scroggie *et al.* 2011). There are too few records in Victoria to estimate peak periods of breeding activity, although Scroggie *et al.* (2011) recommend surveying for the species in June, July and August and following significant rain events in spring and summer. Calling sites used by males vary and include low lying vegetation and the ground around water bodies (White *et al.* 1994, Anstis 2013).

Large Brown Tree Frogs have a relatively low number of eggs per clutch (Anstis 2002, Daly and Craven 2007) in comparison to other tree frog species which can have a complement of several hundred to several thousand eggs (Gillespie 2002a; Morrison and Hero 2002). Females lay clusters of up to 60 eggs attached to submerged twigs, stems or overhanging branches. A single female may lay multiple egg clusters, however the total number of egges laid in a year is unknown (Anstis 2002, Daly and Craven 2007).

Conservation status

National conservation status

Large Brown Tree Frog (*Litoria littlejohni)* is listed as Vulnerable under the *Commonwealth Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999.*

Other States conservation status

Large Brown Tree Frog (*Litoria littlejohn*i) is listed as Vulnerable under the New South Wales *Threatened Species Conservation Act 1995.*

Victorian conservation status

Large Brown Tree Frog (*Litoria littlejohni*) is listed as threatened under the *Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988.*

Large Brown Tree Frog (*Litoria littlejohni)* is listed as Endangered in Victoria according to the Advisory List of Threatened Vertebrate Fauna in Victoria – 2013 (DSE 2013).

Threats

Since the Large Brown Tree Frog was first described in the 1980s, very little information on the species biology has been published (Daly and Craven 2007). The most recent Victorian record in the VBA was in 1996 and it is not known if the Large Brown Tree Frog has experienced a contraction in its distribution or decline in abundance (Scroggie *et al.* 2011). In the months preceding the development of this Action Statement, East Gippsland experienced large bushfires which may have impacted on Large Brown Tree Frog habitat and individual survivorship. Daly and Craven (2007) indicate fire frequency may be an issue for the sustainable management of *L. littlejohni* but the authors note “an important finding was that wildfire (intense at some sites) did not eliminate populations of frogs”. Further research is needed to determine the impact of this event.

Australia’s frogs are threatened by a skin infection known as Chytridiomycosis which is caused by the amphibian Chytrid fungus (Batrachochytrium dendrobatidis) (DEH 2006). Chytrid fungus was first detected in Australia in the 1970s and now occurs in four zones in eastern Australia (from Big Tableland in north Queensland to Melbourne in Victoria, south-western Western Australia, Adelaide, and Tasmania) (DEH 2006). Chytridiomycosis is strongly implicated in severe declines and losses of a number of Australian frog species on the east coast (Osborne *et al.* 1999, Speare *et al.* 2001, Hero *et al.* 2006, Clemann *et al.* 2009, Hunter *et al.* 2010, Clemann and Gillespie 2011, Gillespie and Clemann 2011). The impact of Chytridiomycosis on Large Brown Tree Frog populations is unknown, however it is likely to be a threat as the disease is believed to affect other species of the *Litoria ewingi* complex (Clemann *et al.* 2009). If the Large Brown Tree Frog has declined in abundance and distribution due to Chytridiomycosis, maintaining potential habitat will be important to facilitate re-colonisation if populations recover and expand (Scheele *et al.* 2014).

South-eastern Australia has recently experienced one of its worst droughts (Bond *et al.* 2008). While it is likely that the drought and seasonally high temperatures have had adverse affects, no direct research has been conducted of the impacts on the Large Brown Tree Frog.

Studies conducted on other frog species have shown that similar climatic changes have caused the loss of breeding sites and therefore may impact on the reproductive success (Lemckert and Penman 2012). Future climate projections for south-eastern Australia predict reduced rainfall, increased average temperatures, more frequent droughts and increases in the frequency of weather events associated with high fire risk (CSIRO and Bureau of Meteorology 2002). If these predictions eventuate they could have severe negative impacts on the Large Brown Tree Frog’s available breeding and non-breeding habitat, fecundity and reproductive success.

In Victoria, records of the Large Brown Tree Frog are restricted to East Gippsland and are associated with forest habitats. The majority of these records occur outside of the parks and reserve system and often occur in areas available for timber harvesting. However, past surveys that detected the Large Brown Tree Frog were predominantly performed in State Forest as part of a pre-harvest survey program. Therefore the higher occurrence of records in State Forest in the distribution of the records may reflect a skew in survey effort rather than the true distribution of the species. Timber harvesting may adversely impact on Large Brown Tree Frog populations by causing habitat degradation, clearance and fragmentation. Timber harvesting may also indirectly affect this species by reducing availability and viability of breeding habitat, affecting availability of food, increasing predation rates by removing or altering vegetation, altering habitat (e.g., light penetration, soil moisture, thermal regime etc.) and isolating populations (Gillespie 2009).

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| Standard threat | Source of Threat | Explanation |
| Carnivory | Introduced predators, including foxes, cats and rodents | Although no direct research has been conducted, Foxes (*Vulpes vulpes*) and Cats (*Felis catus*) prey on frog species which is very likely to include the Large Brown Tree Frog.  |
| Disease  | Disease - Chytrid Fungus | Chytrid fungus has had a devastating impact on frog populations worldwide and may be impacting on Large Brown Tree Frog populations. |
| Habitat damage or loss | Climate change | Future projections of climate suggest reduced rainfall, increased average temperatures and more frequent droughts across much of south-eastern Australia, with associated vegetation change and increased risk of more frequent and severe bushfires (CSIRO and Bureau of Meteorology 2002). These potential changes may alter the suitability of current breeding and non-breeding habitat for Large Brown Tree Frog. |
| Habitat damage or loss  | Timber harvesting  | Timber harvesting may adversely impact the species by creating habitat fragmentation, degradation and loss (Gillespie 2002b; Gillespie and Hollis 1996, 2006) |
| Inappropriate fire regime | Fire frequency | Little research has been conducted on the impact of fire on the Large Brown Tree frog. Daly and Craven (2007) observed a decline in abundance at sites following a fire, however the effect could not be isolated from other impacts such as drought. Fire frequency may be an issue for the management of the species. |

Important populations

As a nationally threatened species that is subject to significant threatening processes and whose Victorian populations have not been monitored, all known and discovered populations should be considered important until such time as rigorous investigations indicate that they are not. The intended management actions address the lack of knowledge about the distribution and abundance of the species and thus important populations.

Past management actions

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| Action | Result explanation |
| Survey | Records of the Large Brown Tree Frog have been predominantly generated by pre-harvest fauna surveys in forest blocks in the 1980s and 1990s (e.g. Opie *et al.* 1990). These records are available through the Victorian Biodiversity Atlas (DEPI 2014).  |

Conservation objectives

Long term objective

The long-term conservation objective for the Large Brown Tree Frog is to ensure that the species persists across its range and maintains its potential for evolutionary development in the wild.

Objectives of this Action Statement

• To secure populations or habitat from potentially incompatible land use or catastrophic loss

• To increase knowledge of biology, ecology or management requirements

• To maintain or improve condition of habitat

Intended management actions

To assist the conservation of the Large Brown Tree-frog, DEPI will consider the following actions when developing regulation, investment strategies and ecological, fire and land management policies.

The intended management actions listed below are further elaborated in DEPI’s Actions for Biodiversity Conservation (ABC) system. Detailed information about the actions and locations, including priorities, is held in this system and will be provided annually to land managers and other authorities.

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| Standard objective | Targets |
| To increase knowledge of biology, ecology or management requirements |  A key objective of the Large Brown Tree Frog Action Statement is to increase the knowledge of biology and ecology in order to effectively manage this threatened species. The key areas of focus are distribution and abundance and the impacts of known and likely threats.  |
| Action | Details | Responsible agents |
| Conduct survey to determine abundance/extent | Conduct systematic surveys for Large Brown Tree Frogs and their tadpoles across all public tenures to increase our knowledge of the species’ distribution. Surveys should be conducted by experienced amphibian biologists according to the standard described in Scroggie *et al.* (2011) and initially would target sites of historic records. Surveys must also apply suitable hygiene precautions (Murray *et al.* 2011) to minimise as far as possible the risk of introducing or spreading pathogens. All populations of Large Brown Tree Frogs that are detected during surveys should be concurrently sampled for the Amphibian Chytrid Fungus. Improving our understanding of the species’ distribution and ecology will inform future actions to manage the impacts of threats.  | DEPI, Parks Victoria, East Gippsland CMA  |
| Undertake research to determine habitat  | When more information on the species’ current distribution is obtained (see above), investigate breeding and non-breeding habitat requirements of the species and the key aspects that influence the quality, availability and occupancy of suitable habitat. Improving our understanding of the habitat requirements of the species will inform habitat modelling and habitat based approaches to managing the impacts of threats.  | DEPI  |
| Undertake detailed population monitoring and collect demographic information  | When more information on the species’ distribution is obtained (see above), important populations should be monitored. Understanding any trends in the status of populations will coincide with and inform the assessment of threats (see below) and will inform management actions.  | DEPI, Parks Victoria |
| Assess threats | When more information on the species’ distribution is obtained (see above) , investigate the impacts on the Large Brown Tree Frog of timber harvesting and associated forestry practises, fire management, introduced predators, drought and climate change, and the impacts of Chytrid fungus. Improving our understanding of the impact of threats will inform management priorities and approaches.  | DEPI  |
| Conduct priority research projects as specified | Conduct research into the biology and ecology of the Large Brown Tree Frog. Key attributes for investigation include breeding requirements, larval period, fecundity, home range, dispersal ability, diet and sensitivity to disturbance.  | DEPI, Universities |
| Conduct priority research projects as specified | A Habitat Distribution Model (HDM) for the Large Brown Tree Frog has been produced by DEPI, but requires refinement before it is suitable for the Action Statement’s purpose. Improve the Large Brown Tree Frog HDM as new information from the research actions described above becomes available Habitat distribution modelling will inform future management of the Large Brown Tree Frog and reviews of this Action Statement.  | DEPI |
| Ensure records of species, communities and locations are documented on the relevant databases | Submit all records of Large Brown Tree Frog to the Victorian Biodiversity Atlas. | DEPI |

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| Standard objective | Targets |
| To maintain or improve condition of habitat |  A key objective of the Large Brown Tree Frog Action Statement is to identify major threats and to begin the process of mitigating their impacts on important populations. Possible threats operating on the Large Brown Tree Frog include, but are not limited to, loss and / or degradation of habitat and disease (especially Chytridiomycosis).  |
| Action | Details | Responsible agents |
| Manage disease | Minimise the arrival and/or spread and impact of the pathogenic Amphibian Chytridiomycosis. Appropriate protocols have been prepared by Murray *et al.* (2011).  | DEPI, Parks Victoria |
| Provide input into regional fire management and operations plans | Ensure that locations of known or discovered populations are included in planned burning and fire suppression planning so that efforts can be made to minimise the impact of fire on these populations. | DEPI  |
| Control introduced animals | Undertake concurrent fox and cat control near key locations.Continue fox control in East Gippsland, using the most efficient control protocols available.Implement broad scale cat control across as much of the distribution of the Large Brown Tree Frog as possible when an effective technique becomes available. | DEPI, Parks Victoria, East Gippsland CMA |
| Establish Management Areas or Special Protection Zones | A strategic review of biodiversity management in Victoria’s forests is underway and may change the way timber harvesting and threatened species are managed in the future. Pending a new approach it is necessary to adopt the following management: • If a Large Brown Tree Frog (adult, sub-adult, tadpole or egg cluster) is detected in State Forest and the record is verified by DEPI according to the standards in Scroggie *et al.* (2011), establish a 28 ha protected area by creating a special protection zone (SPZ) that includes the detection site. As far as possible, the SPZ boundaries should follow recognizable landscape features such as ridges, spurs, watercourses or roads but must not be less than 300 m wide at any point. The new SPZ may include areas of pre-existing SMZ, SPZ or areas otherwise unavailable for harvesting. The new SPZ may be smaller than 28 ha where a detection is adjacent to an existing park or reserve and the total 28 ha protected area is comprised of both SPZ and park and reserve. • Create a new 28 ha protected area, subject to the conditions above, for important past records in State Forest. Important past records will be determined by DEPI. Review this prescription by 2017 or when 25 records, that provide additional information (30 percent in novel 10 minute grids), from within any tenure are verified; whichever occurs first. The review will be informed by the results of the research actions outlined above. All records must be spatially and temporally independent. For example ten tadpoles within a pool or repeat detections at the same location would each constitute one record. Any record verified during or after 2014 constitutes a new record, even if it occurs at the same location as an historic record. Rationale:The detection based prescription above is designed to afford interim protection to potential sites of conservation significance while further research is being carried out. 28 ha is approximately equal to the area of a circle with a radius of 300 m; a distance estimated as an average terrestrial buffer from breeding sites adequate to protect a range of amphibian species (Lemckert 2004a, Semlitsch and Bodie 2003). | DEPI |

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