

# On the right track

A group of volunteers heads into the bush to track malleefowl, a vulnerable, elusive species of ground-dwelling birds. Charlotte Francis was part of the group.

**W**e are looking for footprints; not just any old footprints, but those of the malleefowl. This large ground-dwelling bird belongs to the megapode family – as in big feet – and the trick is to find the tell-tale three toes pointing forward and one back.

One of many species to have declined since European settlement, the malleefowl is listed as a nationally vulnerable species. The survey we are doing is part of a National Recovery Plan to monitor malleefowl populations and take action to protect them from predators and habitat loss.

A group of volunteers ranging from a family with school children to TAFE students and retirees, we are based at conservation organisation Bush Heritage's Eurardy Reserve in Western Australia.

And 150km north of Geraldton, Eurardy lies within Australia's only 'global biodiversity hotspot', one of 34 areas rated as the most biologically rich in the world. A plant lover's dream, the reserve is home to 700 species of wildflower, including five rare species.

Some of our group – the hardier among us – camp out; spring has only just sprung and there's still a sharp nip in the air mornings and evenings. Eurardy's campground has five powered sites but there are also comfortable share rooms adjacent to the pool, camp kitchen and dining area.

We start the survey at the eastern boundary of the reserve where it borders the Kalbarri National Park. Led by malleefowl network facilitator Carl Danzi from WWF-Australia, and armed with GPS navigators and palm pilots to record our findings, all



PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL DANZI

18 of us plunge enthusiastically into the bush.

We are not so much on the lookout for the birds as for evidence of their activity and so, as well as footprints, we are also searching for their nest mounds. The first one we find turns out to be a washed-out termite mound, but a little further on – we record activity, take photographs and mark the spot with ribbon every 200 metres – we come across one of the crater-like mounds. Looking at the sparse vegetation scattered over the hollowed-out mound, Carl explains that it looks unfinished. "There probably wasn't sufficient rain to dampen the leaves and twigs to generate enough heat for the eggs to incubate," he says.

Walking through the bush we get up close and personal with the natural world. Yellow orchids peek out from the scrub, the delicate purple flowers of the fringe lily tumble from tree trunks and a cream-coloured grevillea wafts a honey-like scent. Bright orange jewel beetles forage in the leaf litter and dragon

lizards bask in the sun. We hear but don't catch a glimpse of pardalotes, wrens and whistlers.

Sometimes we see everything but signs of the malleefowl: echidna diggings; goat hooves; crescent-shaped scorpion holes; rabbit burrows and the mini ski tracks of the hopping mouse. I come tantalisingly close to spotting a malleefowl track, or so I think, but the lack of backward-pointing toe shows it to be an emu footprint.

A cheer goes up when we do see our first malleefowl track. Clearly imprinted in the sand, its large, firm footprint is unmistakable and it's exciting to have come close to one of these hard-working birds – they spend up to 300 days a year digging and maintaining their nest mounds which can reach over one metre high.

Hot, sticky and sporting a few scratches, we emerge from thick scrub at the end of the first day with a tally of two mounds and 15 tracks. We are rewarded with views of a square-tailed kite as we wait for transport back to the reserve, and later, with a delicious barbecue put on by our warm and wonderful hosts, reserve managers Paul and Leanne Hales.

Splitting into groups we manage to cover more ground over the next three days. Not only have we got the hang of our



detective work, but the going is easier through stands of York Gum and areas of open bush.

We learn to identify sandalwood trees and I sample a just-ripe quandong (native plum) and find its tartness refreshing. A golden orb spider busily weaves a web while tiny purple-grey butterflies hover over a fallen branch and a black-breasted buzzard glides overhead.

With beers and chitchat flowing around the dinner table on our last evening, Carl tells us we have searched 37km and found 18 tracks and 11 mounds, at least four of which are malleefowl rather than termite. These results are encouraging and warrant a more extensive survey at Eurardy next spring.

Feeling fit and healthy from the walking, we all share a sense of wellbeing and achievement. It is a rare treat being able to immerse yourself in the bush away from the cares of everyday life, and at the same time help to protect a vulnerable species.

Leaving early on the last morning, the buds of the parakeelya flower are still tightly closed. By the time I reach Geraldton and step onto the plane, they will have opened up under sunny blue skies and Eurardy Reserve will be carpeted in swathes of crimson pink. •

## TRAVEL TIPS

**Being there:** BYO wine and beer, but you can either self-cater or put money in the kitty (\$10 p/p a day) for shared meals – there is a well-equipped camp kitchen and barbecue. Apart from the annual malleefowl survey, willing volunteers can take part in other conservation activities at Eurardy ranging from fauna trapping to vegetation surveys and fence building. Check out Bush Heritage's website (see below) for more details.

**People survey:** Paul and Leanne Hales and their young daughters recently moved to Queensland to set up Bush Heritage's Yourka Reserve. Eurardy is now managed by Matt Warnock and Elizabeth Lescheid.

**Insider's tip:** Water bottle, long-sleeved top, long pants and hiking boots. It's also a good idea to take binoculars and a torch.

**Getting there:** Qantas and Virgin Blue have regular flights to Perth from the East Coast. Skywest flies from Perth to Geraldton daily. Hire a car at Geraldton airport or BYO; it's about a six hour drive from Perth or an hour and half from Geraldton. Eurardy Reserve is sign-posted and easily accessible from the North-West Coastal Highway.

**Further information:** Bush Heritage Australia is a national, not-for-profit conservation organisation and currently has 31 reserves across Australia. Several of these offer opportunities for volunteer involvement. Visit: [www.bushheritage.org.au](http://www.bushheritage.org.au) or tel.: 1300 NATURE (1300 628 873)

WWF-Australia is part of the WWF International Network. Visit: [www.wwf.org.au](http://www.wwf.org.au) or tel.: Toll Free on 1800 032 551  
The malleefowl survey at Eurardy Reserve was supported by a grant from the Threatened Species Network.