Western Ground Parrot In The Wild Research

Western Ground Parrot Behavior Revealed

By Angela Pham

Courtesy of Arthur Ferguson
Tagging and tracking using radio technology has allowed scientists to track the habits of the Western Ground Parrot.

The western ground parrot of Australia is a bird that defies typical parrot stereotypes. It nests, feeds and roosts on the ground instead of in trees. It can fly, but prefers to keep low to the ground and will hide rather than take flight. It doesn't become active or call out until the sky becomes dark and freckled with stars.

Because of this, the parrot is rarely spotted by humans, and its dwindling population makes this bird species even more elusive. The bird is currently the fourth remaining rarest parrot in mainland Australia, with only about 150 breeding-age birds left. Though the parrot's population continues to decline in western Australia, the country is taking great strides to save the bird from extinction.

The Department of Environment and Conservation of Australia initiated the Western Ground Parrot Recovery Program in 2003 with the intention to translocate birds from Fitzgerald River National Park to a new site south of Walpole to start a new population, Berryman said.

"However, a preliminary survey of the source population at Short Road revealed that the population had declined to the point where there were no longer sufficient numbers to remove birds for translocation," Berryman said.

For the next several years, the project then focused on monitoring known populations and looking for new ones. In 2004, the parrots' population size was estimated at under 200 individuals. By 2008, the population estimate had declined to approximately 140 individuals.

Then, on August 15, 2008, a radio-tracking program began, lasting through September 17, 2008, to further assess population trends and study breeding biology.

Abby Berryman, project officer for the program, said that mist nets were used to capture the ground parrots. The first bird was captured on August 18, 2008, when he was weighed, measured, banded and fitted with a radio-transmitter underneath his tail. Berryman said the bird, dubbed "Ramsey," was radio-tracked from first light until dark each day. Severe weather sometimes hampered the efforts to capture and track more birds, but the monitoring of Ramsey unveiled significant information.

"[Tracking him] revealed where he fed, roosted, and when and where he met up with his mate," she said.

By monitoring Ramsey with the radio-transmitter technology, daily movements of the mysterious bird were now made visible. Berryman reported that the parrot would cross the road to feed on young vegetation and would even cross the road again in the evening to presumably feed his mate.

"In the evenings, he would wait until it was nearly dark and then fly back across the road, meet up with his mate to feed her, and then roost nearby," Berryman said. "Unfortunately, we did not manage to locate the nest."

Radio-tracking Ramsey continued until September 7, 2008, when the project's team discovered the sad remains of the bird, where it appeared he had been sitting on top of a bush, feeding on seed. Berryman said it is assumed that Ramsey was consumed by a raptor, as he was in a position to be an easy target for a bird of prey.

Efforts still continue to learn more about what can be done to save the western ground parrot from extinction. Berryman said the long-term goals for the recovery project are to halt and reverse the population decline.

"Fire and feral predators are the two major threats to the species," she said.

Along with Friends of the Western Ground Parrot, a community dedicated to the recovery of the bird, Berryman and the

DEC hope to combat the factors that are cutting the parrot's population down.

A comprehensive survey of the Cape Arid National Park area is planned for 2009, Berryman said, to help develop appropriate fire management strategies. A feral predator control program is also in the works. With such efforts already slotted for the months to come, the parrot's numbers might soon rise again.