

Project summary: Australian Brush-turkey

Brush-turkeys are increasingly being seen in peoples' gardens and backyards. During the months of July to approximately February, when they breed, these birds build huge compost heaps in which they incubate their eggs. They sometimes destroy gardens by scratching all available mulch, leaf litter and small plants onto one big mound. Some people also become annoyed by the noise they make, and by the birds' habit of stealing pet food or digging up pot-plants.

The National Parks and Wildlife Service (now part of the Department of Environment Conservation) receives many complaints about these birds. In order to develop a successful and sustainable management plan we need important information on survivorship and behaviour. The aim of this project is to address the following questions:

- How common are Brush-turkeys in New South Wales?
- Do they move into suburban backyards because their densities have become too high in their natural habitat, or are they leaving their natural forests while moving into suburban areas?
- What is it that attracts them to suburban areas?
- How high is the survival of the chicks in suburban areas?
- What is the communities' attitude towards the birds – what percentage of the community likes them, how many people want them removed?
- What types of management strategies can be applied without harming the brush-turkey population, while addressing peoples' complaints?
- How can we increase community awareness about these unusual and special birds?

In order to address these questions, National Parks and Wildlife Service, in conjunction with Macquarie University, will apply high-tech methods, such as radio-tracking adult and hatchling Brush-turkeys, and helicopter surveys using infrared heat sensors to find the birds' incubation mounds in natural forests. Questionnaires will be handed out to explore the communities' attitudes and collect information about the status of the birds in suburban areas. Sightings will be collected in a database, and some individuals will be marked with coloured leg bands to study the population.

The chief investigators in this project are Geoff Ross (Wildlife Manager for the National Parks and Wildlife Service NSW), Dr. Ann Göth (Brush-turkey researcher at Macquarie University in Sydney), and Dave Kelly (Ranger, National Parks and Wildlife Service in Gosford). They will be assisted by Kirsty Nicol and other volunteers. The project will also benefit from support provided by Dr. Darryl Jones from Griffith University (Brisbane), a well-known specialist for human-wildlife conflicts in Australia.

This study will take place on the Central Coast, Northern Sydney and the Illawarra. However, our initial focus will be on the Central Coast. The project starts in 2004 and will last for 2-3 years. You can find out more about the project at <http://www.npws.nsw.gov.au> and http://galliform.bhs.mq.edu.au/megapode_project/main.html