



Photo: Justin McManus

# Looking up in wonder

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deeply concerned about the future of the subspecies, whose numbers have dwindled over decades. “Our ancestors, our elders and people have fought too hard to let the red-tail become extinct.”

The south-eastern red-tailed black cockatoo is one of five subspecies of the bird across Australia, and the most endangered, with between 1000 and 1500 remaining in the wild.

Loss of habitat, especially tree hollows for nesting and food supply, along with bushfires, predators and illegal birding, are among its greatest challenges.

On a foggy Saturday morning in May, *The Age* joins the annual red-tail black cockatoo count, teaming up with Richard Hill, Evelyn Nicholson and a troupe of volunteers before they set out on the rolling red gum country outside Casterton in search of the cocky.

Hill is a member of the south-eastern Red-tailed Black Cockatoo Recovery Project and a veteran of 30 years’ monitoring and helping to protect the red-tail. He’s less than optimistic that we will spot a red-tail, let alone manage to photograph one.

Nicholson’s form on the cocky count is also less than encouraging. She has been doing it for 18 years, but in all that time she has never seen a red-tailed black cockatoo during the annual survey.

“It’s because they are so mobile

and the likelihood of surveying an area that currently has cockatoos is not that high,” she says.

Birdlife Australia project co-ordinator and count organiser Bron Perryman briefs the band of volunteers before they set out.

“We do an annual count each year, and it gives us an idea of the minimum number of birds on that day,” says Perryman. “But more importantly, we do the count to find the location of large flocks, and from there we go out and do flock counts.”

“We do a count of the male birds” – with the distinctive bright red tails – “and the barred birds; the barred birds are females and juvenile, which have banded-orange tails. But the flock counts give us our best indication of

breeding success from the previous season.

“Unfortunately, over the last 20 years that we’ve been counting, the trend is that the females and juveniles are declining, so we feel there is a declining population,” she says.

Perryman says the birds are their own worst enemy. “They are notoriously fussy eaters. They only feed on two types of stringybark [seed], and seasonally on buloke seed.”

And those specific food sources are becoming scarcer as more habitat is cleared across the red-tail’s range, which covers parts of the Wimmera, Mallee and western Victoria, as well as south-eastern South Australia.

“We’ve taken about 50 per cent

of their stringybarks and 97 per cent of their buloke habitat across their range,” says Perryman. “That loss of habitat has seriously reduced the red-tail population. They are endangered, and there are only around 1200 to 1300 birds left in the wild.”

‘It’s reassuring that there hasn’t been a population crash and there’s been another year of good breeding.’

**Bron Perryman, Birdlife Australia**

To begin the count, volunteers are assigned an area to search, marked by a grid on a map. Hill and Nicholson’s grid is a patch of stringybark state forest near the hamlet of Poolajelo, population 26, about 45 kilometres from the South Australian border.

As we enter the woodlands, Hill explains how we go about finding red-tails: it’s a simple matter of stopping every 500 metres or so, turning our engines off, and listening for the bird’s distinctive cry.

It’s a good day for counting red-tails. The bush is still and silent, making it easy to hear their call. But after several hours of searching, we’ve neither seen nor heard one. We stop for lunch and Nicholson laments that her luck

may be out again on count day.

She may not have seen any during their official counts, but she has managed to spot them in the wild at other times over the 20 years she has lived in the area.

“Not long after I moved to Casterton I was out with Richard in the bush. He was telling me about the red-tails, when a flock of about a hundred birds turned up and started feeding around us.

“The experience of these majestic birds turning up as Richard was talking about their plight was profound, and I fell in love with them instantly,” she says.

“I think they are absolutely beautiful, particularly the female – they are so stunning – and the young birds with gorgeous orange-banded tail feathers; the males have an incredible presence with their strong red tails.

“Hearing them is a deep feeling; it’s reassuring knowing they’re there ... I think their presence in the landscape is really significant.”

After lunch, we have a smaller sector to survey. As we drive along bush tracks under bright autumn sunshine, our expectation of seeing the birds is starting to waver.

Then, in the mid-afternoon, Richard stops and steps out of his car. He cups his hands behind his ears as he tries to hear the cocky’s cry.

He lingers this time, eyes scanning the landscape, and he motions for us to step out of the car as he walks further into the trees. He soon spots some cockies not far into the bush. Then we all start to



With its distinctive crest and flashy tail (above), the red-tailed black cockatoo is a totem animal for Indigenous people. Photo: Mike Sverns