

hear the call: a piercing, haunting and sometimes squawking cry. It seems to echo through time and place, pervading the landscape.

Then we catch our first sight of the cockies. Flashes of red and banded-orange tails glide through the trees. It's a big buzz moment. We settle in their presence for a few minutes. Richard counts about a dozen birds, until they suddenly disappear, flying off deep into the bush.

With both our grid maps searched, we decide to look for some cockies that were spotted the previous day near the hamlet of Chetwynd, about half an hour's drive away.

Arriving at the outskirts of town, we're stunned by cockatoos flying all around the car from trees next to the road. We pull up, finding a position to view the birds as they settle in nearby trees.

This is a much bigger flock of about 50 birds, and they seem more at ease with us being around.

With some stealth, we find a great viewpoint among the waist-high bracken fern. But as soon as we settle, the sound of a trail bike erupts from a nearby bush track. In a flurry of red, black and orange the birds take flight. Then to make sure of his work, the trail bike rider fangs past again; the cockies are long gone, and our counting for the day is done.

That night, I check in with Perryman about the day's count. She says only about 300 birds have been reported so far, and that it will take weeks before a true indication of numbers can be determined.

She explains the difficulties the red-tail recovery project is having with ongoing funding to support population monitoring, a supplementary nest program, and revegetation and protection of stringybark and buloke habitat.

"[It's] currently waiting on the next iteration of five-year funding from the Australian government's Natural Heritage Trust, which was meant to start in July 2023.

"It's been a long and drawn-out process, which has affected staffing. Without continuity in funding we are unable to retain staff and consequently we lose skills, knowledge, efficiency and capacity."

This masthead put questions regarding funding delays to the Natural Heritage Trust, the national body responsible for funding red-tail projects and recovery.

A trust spokesperson replied that regional delivery partners Glenelg Hopkins Catchment Management Authority and the Wimmera Catchment Management Authority had received \$2.87 million between them for red-tail recovery, while Birdlife Australia had received \$129,056 for the south-eastern



Red-tailed Cockatoo Recovery Project.

The next day, I follow up a lead from Perryman about a large flock that farmer Evan Roberts had found near Edenhope, about 75 kilometres north of Casterton. I meet Roberts at lunchtime, along with Mark Sverns, another dedicated red-tail birder.

It's another perfect day for spotting red-tails. Roberts, an ex-shearer turned farmer, says he's always been interested in the environment and explains how he first got involved with helping to protect the cockatoos.

"When I saw red-tails on my farm I rang Wayne Calow, who had just started the recovery team in 1996. The recovery team wanted a farmer's representative to go to meetings of the United Farmers Federation as it was called back then. I was told I should do it, and I've been on it ever since, and that is to represent the farmers' perspective on the recovery team.

"Farmers are pretty good, but a lot say 'This is my domain, and we don't want anybody on it', and we accept that. Other people are very supportive, and the recovery team has built up a very good rapport with the community.

"There's also the Cockies for Cockies program, organised by [the] recovery team, which has been successful in recruiting farmers to revegetate with red-tail

habitat and to check their property for nests."

As we drive into a state forest and onto bush tracks, Roberts starts pointing out the "trash" on the ground. Trash is the mess of stringybark leaf litter under trees from feeding red-tails. He laments that the trash is brown and old, but it's still a good sign.

'We want to work with people to be able to turn this around, so our totems can live forever...'

Travis Lovett

Further into the woodland, he asks to stop. We get out of the car and stand quietly. And then very faintly we start to hear the cockies' wail through the trees.

The call still seems a way off as I make my way towards it. Suddenly, in a surreal and surprising moment, cockies start appearing around me in loping flashes of red, orange and black. I walk on for a better vantage point and more birds are taking to flight and voice. This is the flock of 150 or more birds that Roberts saw on count day.

I'm surrounded by red-tails, and smaller flocks are swarming above

the tree tops. I sit and photograph the cockies. It's a rare experience. These totemic birds overwhelm the landscape; they unleash an ancient spirit into the bush, lighting it up in colour, their blazing tails painting a Dreaming story across the landscape.

Hours later, I find my way out of the bush in a red-tail delirium to the spot where we parked our cars. Evan and Mick are waiting with a look of wonderment about them; we share sightings and moments of our red-tail encounter with a sense of reverence and awe.

Driving back to Edenhope, though, Roberts makes a sombre prediction: "I couldn't guarantee that in 50 or 100 years' time there are going to be any red-tails left.

"I wouldn't put a lot of money on it, but we're trying," he says.

It takes almost two months for the recovery team to locate the large flocks and calculate an accurate count. After that, Perryman calls me with what she describes as pleasing count numbers. "We counted 1303 birds, and that's up from previous years," she says.

"It's reassuring that there hasn't been a population crash and there's been another year of good breeding. We've had a great year for stringybark in terms of [seed] on the trees, and a reasonable supply in the last four years.

"But we're still concerned about

the long-term trend of declining numbers of barred birds [females and juveniles] and feel the main driver is food availability and nest failures. We need to understand that rate of failure and what are the factors causing it."

The count is 99 birds higher than last year and the best count since 2015, when 1545 birds were tallied.

"If you see a lot of barred birds in flocks, that's considered a good breeding season," says Perryman. "But it's hard to say. We don't know the demographic of the population; that is, if we have an increasingly ageing population with declining breeding rates. That's my main concern."

Travis Lovett finds it hard to fathom a world without his native totem in it, and what that might mean for future generations. He makes a heartfelt plea for Australia to better care for native species that are traditional totems and culturally significant.

"We want to work with people to be able to turn this around, so our totems can live forever, and everyone can enjoy the red-tail," Lovett says.

"We need to look after Country and return habitat to a natural form so that our totem species can survive into the future."

For more information, visit the south-eastern Red-tailed Black Cockatoo Recovery Project at redtail.com.au.



Richard Hill and Evelyn Nicholson, of the Red-tailed Black Cockatoo Recovery Project; stringybark seeds are a favoured food; Birdlife Australia's Bron Perryman. Photos: Justin McManus

NATAGE A027