

# **CONSERVATION CORNER**

## **Rare Find on Outback Plains**

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There was some nocturnal excitement on the Birdsville Track recently. During a recent field trip, ecologists Harald Ehmann (Wildcare SA Rangelands program) and Luke Geelen did a typical night run of spotlighting for wildlife. “We were especially on the lookout for Kowari (a medium-sized endangered mammal) and of course there is a more ambitious wish list that includes species like the Night Parrot, which has been reported by lessees and managers in the district,” Harald said.

“It was about 11pm of a long tiring day. We had earlier spotted Little Button-quail, a Quail-thrush and Inland Dotterels. Another bird flew up and we almost passed it by. But I wanted to check it because it was different. After several attempts to get close enough I caught the bird. It was very vary, and its short flights were noticeably different to those of the earlier birds. Luke had checked the bird’s identity in the field guide but it took a few further checks to firmly convince us we had never seen this species in the wild.”

“We were jubilant at finding a Plains Wanderer, a bird listed as vulnerable and rarely reported in the State these days. The last proven occurrence of a wild Plains Wanderer in South Australia was in 1992 when one was caught in a street in the Roxby Downs Township by John Read,” said Harald.

While at the site Harald and Luke searched the immediate area carefully for a nest because the caught bird was a male and in this species the male does the brooding and raising of the chicks.

During the search they heard the distinctive call of two, or possibly three, more Plains Wanderers within about 250 metres. “On the now very late drive back to our camp we flushed four other Plains Wanderers into low flights within about 20km of the first sighting, which suggested that there was a significant group of birds in the area”, said Harald.

The Plains Wanderer is a nomadic and mainly nocturnal quail-sized bird with long legs and neck, and with predominantly brownish feathers, marked

with fine concentric black flecks. The males are well camouflaged and it is the female that has a striking darker colour marking. The Plains Wanderer is adapted to forage at ground level and is essentially a wader without water that belongs to a very ancient lineage of Southern Hemisphere birds. It is fairly timid and is well adapted to the open mixed grass and herb country found after good rains on inland plains. Its numbers have diminished since European arrival through land use change (cropping) in the agricultural areas, predation by foxes and cats and its habitat has been extensively damaged by over-stocking in some higher rainfall areas. It is thought that the stronghold of the species is on the inland plains of NSA and Victoria but this find suggests that the northeast region of SA is also an important area following good rains.

Harald complemented local farming practices; “The lessees deserve a big commendation because their conservative grazing practices have helped this vulnerable species to survive and possibly breed”