



**August 12th, 2019**

## **Additional submission and update to the Senate Inquiry into Australia's faunal extinction crisis**

Thank you for inviting me to resubmit to this Inquiry. As previously, I do so as the voluntary Facilitator of the community group Birds of King Island, committee member of the KI Natural Resource Management Group (KINRMG) and Coordinator of the *Wings on King* project – a project of the KINRMG, scientifically supported by BirdLife Australia. I also write in my role as a community educator and ornithologist.

While my first submission of 4<sup>th</sup> February 2019 still stands, the status of King Island's two critically endangered birds has become clearer regarding their abundance and distribution with consequent increased understanding of the priorities for conservation management. It is mainly these aspects that I am updating. I have also added my thoughts regarding the way forward, for your consideration.

### **King Island Threatened species**

#### **Updated status: King Island Scrubtit and King Island Brown Thornbill**

In March 2019, a team of scientists led by Dr Matthew Webb spent three weeks on King Island searching for both birds with the aim of establishing their distribution and abundance. BirdLife Australia and the Tasmanian State Government supported this expedition with assistance from the Cradle Coast NRM and the KINRMG.

While the team did not have resources to search all habitat remnants on the island, they established the presence of both species in several locations. These findings have since been expanded by Mark Holdsworth with individual KI Brown Thornbill observed in two further locations. However, total populations are estimated to be no more than 50 individual birds for each species leaving them both at extreme risk of extinction.

The KINRMG applied for and received funding from the Australian Bird Environment Foundation to hold a Recovery Plan workshop on King Island once we had the search results. Led by BirdLife Australia, this occurred in June. Attendees included representatives from Federal, State and Local government agencies, scientists and NGO's. A Conservation Action Plan for both species is now under development.

#### **King Island Black Currawong**

This species is listed under the EPBC Act as Vulnerable to extinction. Currently, a PhD student from University of Tasmania is researching the impact that an excessively high Forest Raven population may be having on their status. This is the first research to be undertaken into the causes of their decline.

### **King Island Green Rosella**

Also listed under the EPBC Act as Vulnerable to extinction, to date no research has been specifically undertaken to determine the causes of decline for this species. However, the major cause is likely to be the loss of appropriate habitat and nesting hollows.

### **Other King Island Species:**

Nothing is known about the status of species such as the KI platypus, Eastern Pygmy Possum, Potaroo or Painted Button-quail – as examples. However, given the extensive land clearing over decades, it is likely there are more threatened species than we are currently aware of.

## **The way ahead**

### **KI Scrubtit and Brown Thornbill Conservation Action Plan (CAP):**

While the CAP for the KI Scrubtit and KI Thornbill is not yet completed, the CAP workshop identified the major cause of decline as being the loss of habitat. Major threats to the current known populations are wildfire in the remaining habitat and continued clearing of native vegetation across the island. Priority activities were identified and first steps planned as follows:

1. Establishing island-wide abundance and distribution. Completing comprehensive island wide surveys for both species.
2. Establishing Pegasus State Forest where both species occur, as a secure refuge and conservation reserve.
3. Fire Management: Urgent education to Fire authorities and the KI Fire Management Plan to prioritise protection of important areas as well as increased support and equipment for fire fighting as required.
4. Urgent updating of TASVEG maps at an appropriate resolution to support conservation planning. Currently these are badly inaccurate and not suitable for use.
5. Community and landholder engagement to increase support for conservation of both taxa particularly in regards to ongoing clearing and fragmentation of habitat. See following discussion.

### **Protecting Other King Island Species:**

By protecting and expanding remaining habitat for the KI Scrubtit and Thornbill we theoretically could also be improving protection for other threatened species such as the Green Rosella. However, without research and actual knowledge of their and other species true status, we have no means of knowing this.

Understanding their situation **as soon as possible**, is essential to prevent them from also becoming critically endangered, assuming they aren't already.

### **Funding:**

At present there are no specific funds available to undertake any further work on protecting these species.

Birdlife Australia will apply for funding for experienced ornithologists to complete the surveys through the Conservation Action Plan. The KINRMG will undertake training of local King Islanders to assist with these surveys through their *Wings on King* project.

It should be noted that the *Wings on King* project, that monitors KI bird populations as a means of monitoring the island's sustainability, is entirely driven by volunteers and funded by local fundraising events. The KINRMG receives no federal government support for either the environment or for sustainable agriculture despite numerous applications. This makes it extremely difficult to operate, especially when we are geographically isolated from Regional NRM personnel and resources. Consequently, the added pressure and expectations that come with the presence of critically endangered species can only be met by increased volunteer activity, which verges on the impossible. I refer you to my original submission.

**Financial support and encouragement at the coalface is urgently required.**

## **Discussion: Preventing extinctions and dealing with climate change**

Note: I am writing this section within my capacity as a community educator and ornithologist and not as a representative of any of the organisations I represent. However, having worked with these issues for many years, I have considered them in depth and wish to make the following comments.

As we know, the loss of habitat and fragmentation of remaining habitat is the major cause of biodiversity loss leading to the extinction of species and loss of integrity of the world's life support systems - biodiversity. This loss mainly occurs through land clearing by farmers and developers and is being exacerbated by climate change/global warming.

On King Island land clearing is the major cause of population declines for many species. While KI eucalyptus forest is classified as an ecologically threatened community, some landholders have and continue to clear it – albeit illegally. Native vegetation generally has been cleared incrementally by exploiting annual permitted clearing to the maximum, over many years – and continues. The recent changes in rural planning laws from the Tasmanian State Government, allowing 40 hectares to be cleared at a time, is extremely detrimental given the overall size of the island and will significantly exacerbate habitat fragmentation and loss. This is very concerning given King Island is already below one third of remaining native vegetation – a recognized minimum. I understand that the KI Council, Beef Group and NRMG are all attempting to renegotiate this Plan for King Island, but that the Tasmanian Government are resisting this and other similar calls from islands such as Flinders Island. These new plans form a major threat to all the endangered species on the island.

We also know, that the driving causes of land clearing is a response to increased financial pressures, human population increase and consequent world requirements for food. Not surprisingly, persuading landholders to protect and allow natural regeneration of native remnants for threatened species protection, with no meaningful financial incentives in place, is extremely difficult.

Farming is a complex occupation with high overheads. In my opinion, farmers/landholders cannot and should not be expected to 'give up' potentially productive land at their own cost in order to maintain the world's health – biodiversity - when everyone contributes to its demise.

## **Reversing the species extinction crisis requires work from the bottom up.**

We know that land clearing is a major contributor to climate change both through a loss of carbon sequestration and increased carbon release. It is also the major cause of biodiversity degradation and the ensuing species extinction crisis. It contributes significantly to water pollution and the loss of vegetation contributes towards less rainfall overall. Research also shows that retaining around one third of land in native vegetation can significantly increase agricultural production.

Despite all this indisputable knowledge, land clearing is still being allowed/encouraged in many states – example: Tasmania's recent changes to rural planning laws. The Federal Government has not, to date, been dealing with it but rather ignoring the situation by reducing environmental funding, thus allowing it to worsen. This needs to change.

Recent research is clearly showing the importance of retaining, regenerating and replanting native vegetation as a highly effective mechanism of sequestering atmospheric carbon in response to the climate change crisis. Embracing this research would also provide an opportunity to simultaneously address the loss of biodiversity and species extinction. The cheapest, easiest and most effective method of doing so is retaining and expanding native vegetation through natural regeneration from remnants. Doing this at the landholder level requires fencing costs including labour, but much more importantly requires income to still come from that land.

**The need for incentives:** This research has already been heeded by New Zealand who has now legislated to fund farmers to plant new commercial and non-commercial native forests, expand remnant native forests through natural regeneration and retain all current old native forest. Different levels of funding are available to landholders for each category. Farmers are already taking it up. Effectively it is addressing both the biodiversity and the climate change crises simultaneously.

**Australia needs to heed this research and provide tangible incentives to farmers/landholders to generate and protect biodiversity as a meaningful method of land use.** In my understanding the current 'one billion trees' policy of the Federal Government applies only to commercial forestry plantations that will not assist biodiversity or prevent species extinctions. It will help to sequester carbon but will release it again when harvested, so in my opinion this policy is limited and not well considered.

### **Where does the money come from?**

The extinction of species crisis is the 'canary in the coalmine' of our ongoing abuse of biodiversity. They are the 'holes in the spider web' (see my first submission) decreasing the integrity of the whole system – our life support system. We have all contributed to this abuse and we are all responsible for reversing it.

Forgoing politics, funding an incentive program such as I am suggesting, will be a major cost. However, as with climate change, we cannot afford to ignore what is occurring around us and as **we are all responsible**, taxpayers should provide the funding, legislated by the federal government and administered by state and local governments.

I advocate a Medicare-type levy, means-tested across all taxpayers. After all, those of us who have the highest incomes, use the most resources.

Even a small percentage e.g. 0.5-1% levy would provide significant and desperately needed funds. It would simultaneously increase our awareness of our own responsibilities, spread the load of maintaining our life support systems and health while providing a source of income for landholders to undertake and value this work as well as producing our food. And I'm willing to bet the majority of Australians would accept it.

### **SUMMARY:**

While the status of the King Island Thornbill and Scrubtit is better than previously thought, they remain critically endangered and at the top of the 'next most likely' avian extinction list in Australia. A Conservation Action Plan is currently under development but there is no funding to carry it out. The KI community is and will do what they can to maintain the status quo, but without financial support this can only be limited. See my original submission.

Other endangered or potentially endangered species on the island are not being managed at all and little to no research is being undertaken to ascertain their status or long-term management requirements. Addressing the needs of both our critically endangered bird species may assist generally with the overall preservation of biodiversity on King Island.

Immediate funds are needed to:

- Complete searches of all appropriate habitat across the island for both Thornbill and Scrubtit
- Undertake a farmer/landholder and community-wide education program including achievable methods of population expansion.
- Update King Island vegetation maps
- Employ a full-time Field Officer for King Island who can oversee and undertake the work required.

Policies and Legislation are needed to:

- Provide meaningful and effective incentives for landholders to keep and expand remnant native vegetation habitats rather than clear them.
- Renegotiate the Tasmanian State Government new rural planning laws to prevent clearing and fragmentation of native habitat rather than encouraging it.

Addressing and preventing further land clearing is the single most important action if we are to prevent further extinctions. Funding for an Australian landholder incentive program such as that recently legislated in New Zealand, could come from a small tax-payer levy such as the Medicare levy.

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**Member, KI Natural Resource Management Committee**



**4th February 2019:**

**Original Submission to the Senate Inquiry into Australia's faunal extinction crisis**

**Introduction:**

Thank you for inviting me to present to this Inquiry. I do so as the voluntary Facilitator of Birds of King Island, committee member of the KI Natural Resource Management Group and Co-coordinator of the *Wings on King* project.

I believe my role in this Inquiry is to represent the small communities who are very often at the coalface of threatened species recovery and the impact of the current environmental laws and funding arrangements on their ability to achieve results.

As I was asked to attend this enquiry unexpectedly and without a previous submission, I have submitted a brief one to the Secretariat this morning, for your reference.

In essence this report identifies two major issues:

- . 1) The disproportional amount of responsibility expected of small communities to champion and preserve the threatened species within their area, irrespective of what expertise may be present in that community, its size or local resources
- . 2) A seeming disconnect between what the government says it is working to achieve and what it actually does.

Using King Island as an example, we have a population of about 1600 and contribute about 6% of Tasmania's GDP through our primary production industries particularly beef, cheese and lobster. Farmers, fisherman and their families work hard. Farming costs on the island are high. We have to be efficient to survive.

Virtually every adult holds at least one voluntary position outside his or her work commitments and the over 50's often hold several. These positions mainly revolve around immediate and essential services – ambulance, SES, meals on wheels, sports clubs just to name a few. They keep the community functioning.

Then we have our threatened species. King Island is biologically unique. Of our 9 King Island avian subspecies, two are so critically endangered they have been identified by experts as the 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> most likely next Australian bird extinctions, being the King Island Brown Thornbill and the King Island Scrubtit. Two others, the KI Black Currawong and KI Green Rosella, are listed as Vulnerable. Other Critically Endangered species that utilise the island include the Orange Bellied and Swift parrots and several migratory and beach-nesting shorebirds. Consequently, our entire shoreline is classified as a KBA (Key

Biodiversity Area) and our major river estuary is a listed RAMSAR wetland site.

How do we manage these species? We can't. Our volunteers are already overstretched. Threatened Species are rare and seldom seen so seem a long way away from the NOW – from the immediate demands of the day. Its not that people on the island don't care about the loss of species but without the expertise most people don't know what to do or where to start - and don't have the time.

Adding to that are the significant difficulties associated with obtaining funding or support from governments, the restrictions that come with that support if you do get it and the often nationally focused criteria, that may be irrelevant to the actual needs of the area. Consequently, many volunteers who genuinely want to make a difference become overwhelmed, burnt-out and eventually walk away.

Given that biodiversity forms the foundation of life on this planet, including our own lives, relying on small local, under resourced communities to identify and champion particular issues and then carry the load of Recovery, is NOT reasonable, NOT sustainable and NOT effective. It will NOT solve the faunal extinction crisis that is now occurring worldwide – a crisis that impacts on us ALL and that governments desperately need to take prime responsibility for.

These are national issues and we need the Federal Government to show national leadership by providing strong laws to protect habitat and tackle key threats, and significant, secure, long-term funding for Threatened Species Recovery.

## **Background**

I am not a scientist but have graduate and post graduate training in community education, ornithology and management. When I first came to King Island in 1994, I was bowled over by its uniqueness – ecologically and geologically - and its beauty. There were windbreaks sheltering paddocks and a rich diversity of flora and fauna. When I came back in 2004 there was a moratorium on land clearing as the tree cover had dropped to a third of the total island with many of the windbreaks cleared.

In 2012 the King Island Biodiversity Management Plan 2012-22 was established. This included broad recovery plans for our threatened species including the KI Brown Thornbill and KI Scrubtit; Australian bird taxa that experts have found are 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> on the list of Australian birds most likely to become extinct in the next 20 years.

At that time, no systematic long-term studies of any of the flora or fauna had been undertaken. Available data was sporadic. The Sea Elephant RAMSAR listed wetland had been declared in 1982 and the entire shoreline and Lavinia State Reserve had been proclaimed as a KBA (Key Biodiversity Area).

The *Wings on King* program, commenced in 2017 with the aim of monitoring the populations of all our birds into the long term, as a means of monitoring the islands environmental sustainability. While that includes our threatened species the resources available do not allow for their specific monitoring within the scope of the program. Our most endangered birds are now extremely rare, occur in changing locations and can be difficult to identify; their monitoring needs are not well suited to occasional, surveillance monitoring.

With very few local experienced birders – about 7 including myself - we rely on visitors from off the island to assist with surveys. This requires considerable promotional effort for each 6 monthly survey. The project has no funding, other than that what we raise through running specific events and is undertaken entirely by volunteers. Current funding opportunities do not provide for staff or support for a long-term project such as this.

In 2017 the Federal Government called for submissions for Threatened Species Recovery with particular interest in their already nominated 20 priority Threatened Species. The KI Natural Resource Management Group with assistance from experts in the field, spent many hours over several weeks building a submission that fitted in with the specific criteria of the funding application. The criteria focused on 'deliverables' for those threatened species that had clearly already had considerable work done. We did our best to meet the criteria, at the same time as trying to gather some of the essential information that we actually needed to know. We failed. No explanation was given as to why our application was rejected despite the fact we were applying for the 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> next most likely Australian bird extinctions. We (the volunteers who undertook to write the submission and the experts who assisted) were not surprised. Despite the rhetoric, the application was clearly aimed at ticking the threatened species box and getting nice photographs to prove it. It appeared to us as a cynical exercise that was not about dealing with the threatened species crisis or even achieving good management of threatened species, but was a politically motivated manoeuvre to fill a gap.

We are delighted that FINALLY we have some action towards the protection of our two Critically Endangered King Island sub-species that I trust you are already aware of through earlier expert witnesses. This action comes with thanks to the Cradle Coast NRM and BirdLife Australia who together and with some difficulty, persuaded the Tasmanian State Government to assist with funding so we can at least learn what chances we have at securing these species in the future and what would be involved in doing so. BirdLife have also provided funds for this. This breakthrough has taken years to achieve.

## **Discussion**

While research shows that the majority of successful Recovery Plans include significant community support and community champions, this is not and cannot be a strategy for preventing extinctions.

For a community to have champions it requires people within it to be passionate, knowledgeable and have the time, not only to do the work but also to be continually trying to find funding and write submissions that may or may not be approved. In many communities people like this don't exist or if they do, they don't have the confidence or time to take action. So the work isn't done.

On King Island volunteers within the Natural Resource Management Group do have some expertise and do great work, but we are all time poor. We have one employee who currently works one day a week. This is nothing like enough, but there is no funding available to support base-line employees.

The lack of funds available, the short-term, piecemeal approach to government funding and criteria that are often designed as national guidelines that have little relationship to the actual on-ground situation, all add to the workload and increases the rate of volunteer burn-out.

Rather than gaining a sense of achievement or personal satisfaction, volunteers feel as though they are on a never-ending roundabout without seeing real outcomes; just struggling on against the odds with our fingers crossed! This is further exacerbated when available funds are effectively wasted – as we plant trees to improve habitat or reconnect fragments, other legislation allows clearing. It can all very quickly feel pointless.

King Island is currently in exactly this situation. In 2018 the Tasmanian Government decided to change the planning laws, rezoning virtually the whole of King Island, apart from the State Reserves, as Agricultural Land that allows each landholder to clear 40 hectares per year. This zoning was clearly done by someone on a computer who has no knowledge about King Island, its soils etc., and is frankly quite absurd for a small island such as King Island. Even the farmers are bemused, disagree with the rezoning and, I understand, are planning an objection.

As far as the retention of biodiversity or recovery of threatened species is concerned, we have already lost at least 70% of our native vegetation and I have already discussed the consequent threatened bird species. From time to time the KI Natural Resource Management Group has applied for and received funds for vegetation and/or fencing of remnant bushland. But really what is the point when at the same time the government is allowing 40 hectares to be cleared per annum, per landholder, willy- nilly? It defies logic.

Nor is this a 'once of.' Within the King Island Management Plan, signed off by the Federal Government in 2012, to recover the KI Scrubtit and KI Brown Thornbill, is the following statement:

“Provide information and extension support to the KI Natural Resource Management committee, KI Council, Government agencies and the local community on the location, significance and management of known subpopulations and areas of potential habitat”

Despite this statement, when, in 2018 Senator Peter Whish-Wilson asked in a Senate Estimates Hearing, what was being done to save the KI endangered birds, the officials didn't know but said they would find out. The Threatened Species Commissioner, Dr Sally Box, told the Guardian the following week that she had contacted the Tasmanian Government, the King Island Community and the National Environment Science Program about establishing a Recovery Team. To date and to my knowledge, no one on King Island has heard from anyone in the government about what monitoring has or hasn't been done for these birds. Rather, as previously mentioned, our application for funds in 2017 was rejected. That being said, I wonder what resources the Threatened Species Commissioner has at her disposal to actually carry out this work? It seems likely that they too are few and far between so that good people who are employed to do important work, can't because of a lack of resources.

### **Proposals and Conclusion:**

The whole issue of Threatened Species Recovery is actually about preventing the fragmentation of the web of life from disintegrating further than it has already. Biodiversity maintains life on earth. We cannot live without it. If you imagine it as a multi-dimensional, highly complex spiders web with each connecting knot representing a species, then each time a species becomes extinct a hole forms in the web. The more species lost the more holes and when they join up bigger holes are formed. Slowly but irrevocably the integrity of the web is lost until eventually too many big holes causes it to collapse.

This potential collapse is what we are allowing to happen to our fundamental life- support system - biodiversity. We are seeing the process playing out right now in the Murray-Darling Basin. Preventing extinctions of species is essential if we are to keep the integrity of biodiversity - to keep it functional and prevent collapse.

Something of this magnitude CANNOT be left to small local communities to bare the responsibility of prevention.

### **What do communities need?**

Support. There are huge expectations placed on local communities that are often not achievable through lack of resources within it. Furthermore, the current laws and funding availability or lack of it as currently, put huge pressures on volunteers who are already overloaded.

What would help enormously is a system of Field Officers with full-time permanent positions established in communities, particularly in areas of high biological diversity and critically endangered species such as King Island. They would need broad training across ecological and agricultural sustainability and both scientific and community engagement methodology.

Their role would be to work with and support the community in a range of areas such as leading environmental monitoring, assessing change, identifying developing issues and reporting appropriately, interpreting reports and helping to write submissions. They would not be project driven, but oversee overall environmental integrity and ensure work that needed to be done, was prioritised and undertaken.

In turn they too would need to be supported by experts - just as the *Wings on King* project is supported by BirdLife Australia – and the position needs to have access to supporting financial resources depending on the need.

Finally, the community needs to report on the individual officers effectiveness on e.g. a biennial basis.

This support would provide leadership, increase the community's capacity to understand and identify issues and act effectively to mitigate them, while significantly reducing volunteer burnout.

It is also essential that Government funding has a long-term, whole of area approach as well as the specific actions required for threatened species recovery and management. While accountability for funds is essential, they need to be guaranteed for enough time to achieve the aims of the project rather than wasting the lot through a lack of continuity or conflicting inter-departmental or inter-state directions.

An example of this is the position of Regional Landcare Facilitator on King Island. Funds were provided for 2 days a week for 5 years. Luckily we had someone who was suitably trained who could take it on as no one would move to the island for a 2 day a week job. The Officer worked hard and was achieving good results, but then the funding finished. We weren't contacted about it and had no response to our efforts to find out or apply for more. Rather it just ran out – and that was the end of that. But achieving agricultural sustainability does not happen in 5 years. So really, what was the point?

Projects need to be planned WITH the local community not thrust upon them. They need to apply to the local conditions and they need to have a clear aim that has enough flexibility to be adapted to need, and they need continuity. Too often a project comes under budget through good management, but the funds are still required to be used up by the end of the financial year when they could often be used more effectively in the following financial year to further the projects goals.

There are currently no incentives to manage funds to gain their maximum benefit, but rather the opposite. A system whereby the local community can keep at least a percentage of funds left over, would help to reward and improve project management. It is a nonsense to fit environmental goals into a financial year timetable. Biological systems don't work that way.

In conclusion, the reliance governments place on local communities while simultaneously making it hard for them to obtain funds to undertake the work, is NOT reasonable, NOT sustainable, NOT effective and will NOT solve the faunal extinction crisis that is now occurring worldwide – a crises that impacts on us ALL by undermining and degrading our fundamental life support systems.

Governments desperately need to take prime responsibility for the maintenance of biodiversity including the recovery of threatened species. They need to listen to what science is telling them and act in a bipartisan fashion. Preventing species extinctions should NOT be a political issue. It is a survival issue and as such is beyond politics and should be treated accordingly.

Communities need support. They cannot be the backstop for complex work of this nature. Scientists, backed by government resources, need to drive change working with and empowering communities to engage effectively along the way.

Kate Ravich  
Birds of King Island