

**Submission
No 29**

INQUIRY INTO MANAGEMENT OF PUBLIC LAND IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Organisation: BirdLife Echuca District (a branch of BirdLife Australia)

Name: Mr Keith Stockwell

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Submission by BirdLife Echuca District (MS Word and also a pdf file).

The submission covers matters such as recreational shooting, feral animal control, grazing, forestry, fuel-reduction, passive recreation and environmental water.



BirdLife Echuca District
11 Hillview Avenue
MOAMA 2731
Phone: (03) 5480 9254
Email: stocky@mcmedia.com.au

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Director
NSW Legislative Council General Purpose Standing Committee Number 5
Parliament House
Macquarie Street
SYDNEY 2000
New South Wales

Submission re NSW Parliament inquiry into public land management

Madam/sir,

BirdLife Australia is a nation-wide non-government organisation with more than 10,000 members. The organisation aims to conserve and protect Australia's native birds and their habitat.

BirdLife Echuca District is a cross-border branch of BirdLife Australia. BirdLife Echuca District serves over 130 members who reside in southern NSW (Murray Shire, Deniliquin, Shire of Conargo, Barham and surrounding areas) and northern Victoria (including Campaspe Shire, City of Greater Bendigo, Loddon Shire, Gannawarra Shire and surrounding districts).

BirdLife Echuca District is one of four cross-border BirdLife branches in the Murray Valley.

BirdLife Echuca District provides bird-watching information to members and organises bird-watching outings, camps, bird surveys (e.g. for government agencies) and safaris. We make presentations to community groups and schools about our local native birds. The Branch is also keen to protect and enhance bird habitats in our region because if we ignore the need to protect habitat we will have fewer birds to observe.

This submission relates to public forests and wetlands in the southern Riverina, including Perricoota Forest, Murray Valley Regional Park and Murray Valley National Park.

SUMMARY

BirdLife Echuca District opposes commercial grazing, commercial logging and recreational shooting in the new red gum national parks and reserves.

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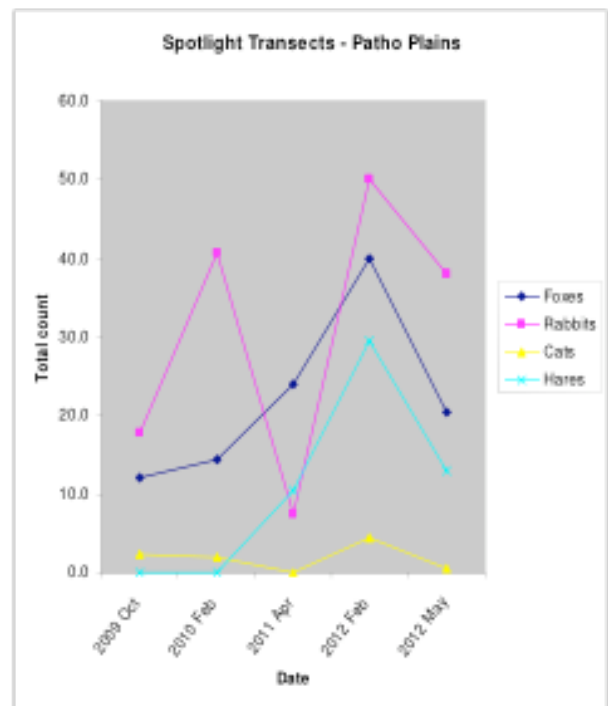
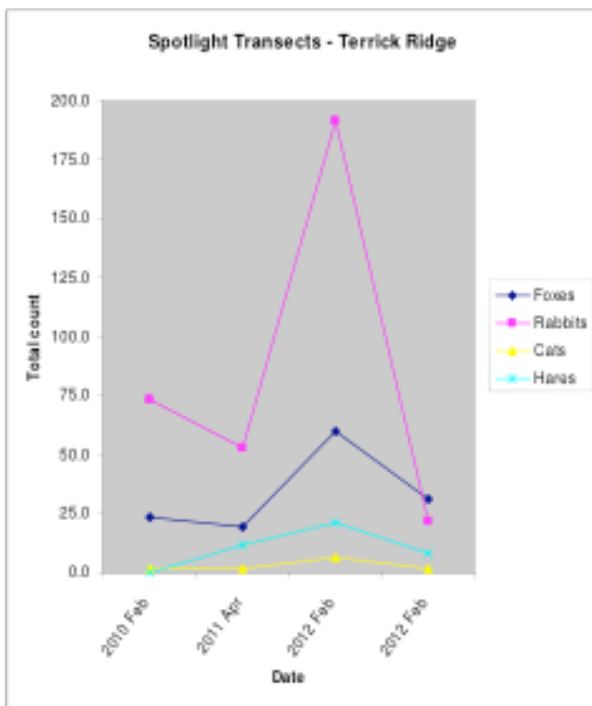
RECREATIONAL SHOOTING AND FERAL ANIMAL CONTROL

We accept that feral fauna and flora impact adversely on native bird habitats and that there is a need for measures to reduce such pests. Our branch has been involved in measures to reduce the numbers of feral animals in Kanyapella Basin, Terrick Terrick National Park and elsewhere.

In the case of Kanyapella, we are represented on the steering committee that meets quarterly. Late last year and earlier this year, contractors were employed to lay baits throughout the reserve and neighbouring land-holders were invited to lay baits at the same time. Surveys indicated that few foxes survived the baiting period. The reserve was then closed for several hours whilst experienced licensed shooters hunted for any remaining foxes. Only a few foxes were detected and shot.

In the case of Terrick Terrick National Park and the surrounding area, there was a significant increase in the number of feral animals following the rains of 2011-2012. There have been two periods of baiting so far this year, the first period being during February. Neighbouring property holders were involved over about 2,500 square kilometres. Feral animal surveys were conducted by a contractor along about 100km of transects prior to and after the baiting.

As the following graphs indicate, the result has been a great reduction in the number of foxes, rabbits, cats and hares after February 2012 without any shooting being involved.



Source: Northern Plains CMN newsletter, Winter 2012.

The collapse of rabbit numbers in Terrick Terrick National Park and nearby areas (Terricks Ridge) is partly due to an outbreak of myxamatosis and the destruction of warrens. Rabbit numbers appear to have subsequently collapsed on the Patho Plains as well.

No shooting has been involved and Terrick Terrick National Park has remained open at all times.

Feral animal eradication measures using baits, warren destruction and viruses and involving surrounding landholders over a wide area is working.

BirdLife Echuca District is opposed to amendments to the NSW Game and Feral Animal Control Act 2002 that allows recreational hunting in 79 NSW National Parks, Nature Reserves and State Conservation Areas. We are not opposed to parks and reserves being advertised as closed for a short

period to allow supervised hunting by experienced licensed shooters AFTER a period of baiting, warren destruction, virus release and surveying.

We support well-designed, sustained, targeted and humane pest-eradication strategies. Research indicates, however, that ad hoc recreational hunting is ineffective in feral animal control for a number of reasons:

- Recreational hunting can scare feral animals into new areas, make them increasingly wary to the efforts of professional shooters and can even increase localised feral animal breeding rates;
- the numbers of feral animals killed by recreational hunters are insufficient to assist genuine feral animal control. For example, Victoria had a fox bounty in 2002-03 that resulted in 170,000 dead foxes. The scheme was abandoned because it didn't work. DPI biologists found that it reduced fox abundance in less than 4% of the state and that numbers would quickly bounce back or climb even higher as a consequence of hunting, and
- there is a serious risk that maverick hunters will introduce feral animals into reserves to create better hunting opportunities.

Our members often go bird-watching alone, wearing inconspicuous clothing, and some members even have camouflaged home-made bird-hides in which they may sit silently for several hours in order to take photographs of birds. The cover photo of the enclosed brochure, for instance, was taken from such a hide after the photographer had sat quietly in his home-made hide for many, many hours.

National parks and reserves are set aside for the conservation of biodiversity and to foster "public appreciation, understanding and enjoyment of nature and cultural heritage and their conservation" (*NSW National Parks and Wildlife Act 1974*). Recreational shooting in our parks contravenes the objects of the Act and may put park users, including BirdLife members engaged in birding activities, at risk.

We fear that, if unsupervised shooters are allowed to hunt without supervision and without the reserve being closed, one or more of our members may be mistaken for game and injured.

The Game Council of NSW, a body dominated by recreational shooters, may not have the capacity to deliver effective, science-based feral animal control programmes. Shooting drives should only be undertaken by professional shooters under supervision during a short period during which the reserve is closed to the public and only after other eradication measures, including the use of poison baits and warren destruction, have been carried out.

GRAZING

As members of the committee are probably aware, cattle grazing increases the fire risk in reserves, reduces species diversity, promotes the spread of highly flammable plants like *Juncus ingens* and causes erosion of watercourses.

Cattle are not stupid. They prefer to eat the most-palatable, tender grasses like Moira Grass, Kangaroo Grass and reeds. They avoid eating coarse, less palatable plants like Giant Rush (*Juncus ingens*).

The big fire in the Top End of Barmah-Millewa Forest destroyed the argument that grazing eliminates the fire risk. Cattle had been in the area for many months, ate the less-flammable grasses, leaving the *Juncus* which spread, replacing the less fire-prone grasses like Moira Grass. When shooters allowed their camp fire to spread, the resulting inferno was ferocious and controlled only after the area was flooded with river water.

A controlled burn of *Juncus* in the Reed Beds Enclosure scared the hell out of rangers who had lit the fire and who had great difficulty in stopping the inferno from spreading.

Cattle prefer to eat the more nutritious less woody plants. One type of plant they particularly prefer is reeds (as distinct from rushes!). Reeds used to line such watercourses as Gulpa Creek. Not only have cattle eaten much of the protective reeds lining the creek but they have caused erosion where they have walked down to the creek.

Whilst camping alongside the Murray River a few years back, members were appalled to observe cattle defecating and urinating in water directly above where they were swimming.

Gulpa Creek, the Murray River and associated water courses supply drinking water for towns downstream. To help prevent residents from becoming ill, cattle must be excluded from the sides of water courses. To fence waterways in Barmah Forest, Perricoota-Koondrook Forest and other Red Gum wetlands is not practical, not only because of the cost but because, in such a flat area, fences are damaged or destroyed by floodwaters and floating debris.

Furthermore, cattle introduce and spread weeds, e.g. in their droppings.

After the Reed Beds (now part of the Moira Precinct, Murray Valley National Park) was fenced, many endangered and locally uncommon plants reappeared in vast numbers; the diversity of vegetation increased.

Cattle tend to devastate both the shrub layer and the low branches upon which bush birds such as robins depend for nesting, protection from predators and food.

Please do not allow the reintroduction of commercial grazing into the forest.

Notwithstanding the above, short-term crash cattle grazing for ecological reasons can be justified on small, fenced areas that are heavily infested with weeds. Furthermore, grazing (e.g. by sheep) can also be used as a management tool on indigenous grassland reserves (such as grasslands in Oolambyan National Park) to help ensure grassland conditions are suitable to meet the needs of such animals as the Plains-wanderer and the Fat-tailed Dunnart.

FORESTRY

Vast areas of Red Gum forest have been left outside of the park system. These areas should be sufficient to allow forestry operations for the production of high value-added forestry activities, e.g. production of fine furniture and veneers. We note that some mills have closed, not because of a shortage of timber, but because of a lack of profitability. It is particularly disappointing that many trees have been cut for firewood.

In recent years, because of a lack of deep flooding and grazing, saplings and *Juncus ingens* have taken over much of about 90% of the plains once occupied by Moira Grass plains. The Moira Grass plains used to be home to considerable numbers of Brolgas, bitterns, rails and other water birds.

Authorities have tried burning areas of saplings and *Juncus*. Over recent years, teams of indigenous workers have been cutting saplings from areas previously occupied by Moira Grass. We have no objection, and in fact welcome, the removal of saplings from areas previously dominated by Moira Grass. The annual floods used to drown and kill saplings before they could attain any great size. Today, because of a lack of flooding, many saplings have grown above the flood level. It is these saplings that could be cut for firewood and other uses.

There is also a case for thinning thick growth of saplings.

Forestry activities disturb the soil and ground plants. The result of forestry is a proliferation of multi-stemmed trees and stumps, i.e. the resultant area does not have a natural appearance.

It could be argued that, to create a natural-looking forest, there is a case for removing multi-stemmed trees and stumps from limited areas, e.g. alongside major tracks. Coppiced trees rarely

provide good habitat and are usually unable to withstand long periods of drought. Hot burns of small areas (up to 50ha) might be used to eliminate coppice growth; the result may be new healthy seedlings and a more-natural appearance to the forest.

But the stumps and saplings have a purpose, e.g. micro-bats find the splits in stumps good roosting places.

Old trees bear more blossom and provide more hollows for hollow-nesting birds and other animals. Today there are relatively few old, old trees with hollows that remain. Old ringbarked trees have served a useful purpose but more and more of them are falling down as they decay.

As far as bird habitat is concerned, there should be old trees with hollows and which have lots of nectar ~ young trees put energy into growing rather than providing nectar ~ plus bushy shrubs, rushes and Moira Grass plains. Forestry activities have adverse impacts insofar as too few trees are able to reach maturity, a process that takes hundreds of years.

FIRE

River Red Gum (*Eucalyptus camaldulensis*) does not respond well to fire. This species relies on flooding to assist with germination. As a rule of thumb, areas of Red Gum and Box should be excluded from fuel-reduction burns.

As stated above, coppiced trees rarely provide good habitat and are usually unable to withstand long periods of drought. Hot burns of small areas (up to 50ha) might be used to eliminate coppice growth; the result may be new healthy seedlings and a more-natural appearance to the forest.

Controlled burns have been successfully used to help control the spread of *Juncus ingens* and Red Gum saplings on Moira Grass plains that have not received regular flooding owing to river regulation. The annual floods used to kill the saplings before they grew higher than the flood level. Annual environmental flooding and controlled burns can help preserve the Moira Grass Plains, the area of which has been greatly diminished since the advent of river regulation. Moira Grass Plains provide a very important habitat for water birds, including Brolga and bitterns.

At present, wood camp fires are allowed in local reserves only during the colder months, and not during the warmer months. BirdLife Echuca District is opposed to camp fires over the warmer months. Some of our members argue that there should be a year-round ban on wood fires.

Some campers have had excessively large bush fires and have left fires unattended, resulting in some bush fires. Many of our members do not like us to have wood fires during our many camps because fallen timber provides habitat to invertebrates, insects, etc which, in turn, provide food for some bush birds.

PASSIVE RECREATION

Local towns can benefit by promoting bird-watching, bush-walking, nature photography and cycling. Members of our branch were instrumental in having the original bird hide built at the Reed Beds and we promoted a walking track which we envisaged eventually running from Mathoura along Gulpa Creek to the Murray River, and along the Murray River over Moira Creek to Barmah. Whilst we were successful in having part of the walking track constructed, it lacked elevated boardwalks and, following flooding, has become overgrown and is rarely used. Furthermore, it is not possible for walkers to cross the Moira Channel, an old bridge over the creek near the Murray River long since having collapsed.

The walking track system alongside Gulpa Creek at Mathoura is terrific and gets a lot of use. It would be great if the walking track system could be continued to the new Picnic Point Road waterbird hide

and on to the Murray River. This will involve the construction of some elevated board walks (i.e. so that the walk is above the flood level).

The Gunbower community has realised the benefits of eco-tourism and requested our branch to prepare a brochure featuring birds of the Gunbower area (enclosed). The community assisted us running a congress for bird photographers, various local organisations benefiting from catering. Most participants stayed in Gunbower for about a week.

We have also had two well-attended birding camps on Gunbower Island.

Communities like Mathoura and Barmah are in a position to benefit from nature tourism. Removing "anti-conservation" posters from some visitor centres and local stores might be a wise step!

The public should continue to be allowed to camp in the forest, at least in designated areas. Consideration might be given to erecting a limited number of additional toilets and tables along the waterways.

ENVIRONMENTAL WATER

Some people believe that environmental water is wasted water. In fact, riverside wetlands such as Barmah-Millewa Forest and the Perricoota-Koondrook-Gunbower Forest are like buckets with holes. By filling the "holes" with regulators, the natural flooding cycle can be replicated. Water can be channelled into the wetlands when the Murray River is high simply by opening regulators. When the level of water in the river is low, regulators can be closed to retain water in the wetlands.

A good wetland is one that is allowed to dry out completely, e.g. over winter, but which is flooded in Spring, with water being retained into Summer until the last of the colonial waterbirds (usually egrets) have completed their nesting cycle and fledged young.

Measurements taken by Victoria's Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE) and North-east Catchment Management Authority have found that about 95% of the environmental water released into Barmah-Millewa Forest eventually finds its way back into the river system.¹

Most environmental water put into Barmah-Millewa can be used again, e.g. by irrigators and towns downstream.

Once engineering works to improve the delivery of environmental water are completed in the Perricoota-Koondrook Forest, a similar percentage return is likely.

The 95% figure claimed by DSE and the CMA seems too high, possibly because some water enters the river system as underground flow from irrigated properties. Nonetheless scientists working for the Natural Resources Commission of NSW believe that the percentage of environmental water returning to the river system from the Barmah-Millewa Forest, and available for re-use downstream, is in excess of 80%.

¹ according to a Powerpoint presentation given to the Barmah-Millewa CRG by Keith Ward (CMA) and Paul O'Connor (DSE).

CONCLUSION

Allowing commercial grazing, commercial logging and uncontrolled shooting in the new national parks and reserves would be a retrograde step. We urge the committee to recommend that the status quo remains, without commercial logging, commercial grazing or recreational shooting. Shooting is not an appropriate way to eliminate feral animals from national parks and reserves. Our members should not fear being shot at whilst birding on public land.

Yours faithfully,

Keith Stockwell
Secretary
BirdLife Echuca District