

**INQUIRY INTO LONG TERM SUSTAINABILITY AND  
FUTURE OF THE TIMBER AND FOREST PRODUCTS  
INDUSTRY**

**Organisation:** BirdLife Australia

**Date Received:** 28 May 2021

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28 May 2021  
Portfolio Committee No. 4 – Industry  
NSW Legislative Council



Submission sent by online portal only.

Dear Committee,

**BirdLife Australia submission to the NSW Legislative Council Inquiry into the long-term sustainability and future of the timber and forest products industry (the Inquiry)**

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to the Inquiry.

BirdLife Australia is an independent non-partisan science-based bird conservation charity with over 200,000 supporters. Our primary objective is to conserve and protect Australia's native birds and their habitat. Our organisation is the national partner of BirdLife International, the world's largest conservation partnership.

BirdLife Australia has a long history of collaborating with the NSW Government, researchers, community groups, landowners, and the corporate sector to implement on-ground conservation projects to recover threatened bird populations and protect their habitat, including Swift Parrots through our Woodland Birds Program

Temperate forests provide important habitat for nationally threatened species such as the Swift Parrot and Regent Honeyeater as well as other woodland birds. 80% of temperate woodlands in south-eastern Australia have been historically cleared and continue to degrade due to threatening processes, including native forestry operations.

Habitat destruction from native forestry operations is recognised as the greatest threat to survival of the Critically Endangered Swift Parrot. The 2019/20 bushfires exacerbated what was an already-dire situation for Swift Parrots, impacting as much as 30% of one of their most important mainland feeding habitat, the Spotted Gum forests of the NSW South Coast. Yet forestry operations continue within Swift Parrot habitat. Unless decisive action is taken to prevent the further destruction of their habitat Swift Parrots could be extinct within the next 20 years.

The following submission provides comments to specific Terms of Reference from the Inquiry and we would welcome the opportunity to discuss these further at a public hearing.

To organise an expert witness or if you need more information, please contact BirdLife Australia Campaigns Manager, Erin Farley ([erin.farley@birdlife.org.au](mailto:erin.farley@birdlife.org.au)).

Sincerely,

Paul Sullivan  
Chief Executive Officer

**BirdLife Australia**  
Suite 2-05  
60 Leicester Street  
Carlton VIC 3053  
T 03 9347 0757  
F 03 9347 9323  
[info@birdlife.org.au](mailto:info@birdlife.org.au)  
[birdlife.org.au](http://birdlife.org.au)

ABN 75 149 124 774



## **BirdLife Australia's Submission to the Inquiry**

The following submission addresses specific Terms of Reference (ToR) of the Inquiry with a focus on the Swift Parrot. However, it should be noted that as an umbrella species, any actions that impact Swift Parrots will impact a suite of woodland dependent bird species and vice versa any conservation actions targeting Swift Parrots will have benefits to other species.

### **Summary of Recommendations**

1. Immediately suspend all current and planned forestry operations within fire impacted Swift Parrot foraging habitat.
2. Amend the CIOFA to exclude all known and emerging Swift Parrot foraging habitat.
3. Amend the CIOFA to address the effects of climate change, including increased bush fires and droughts.
4. Conserve intact native forests and facilitate the expansion and connectivity of old growth native forests.
5. Develop a forest industry transition plan with a focus on wood production from sustainable and appropriately placed plantations.
6. Establish a multi-million-dollar Community Support Funds (CSFs) and Authorities (CSAs) to manage the transition in collaboration with workers, communities, and industry.
7. Invest in sustainable tourism infrastructure and opportunities for local communities, tapping into the economic value and services of natural areas in NSW.
8. Explore nature-based solution incentives, such as carbon markets, to finance forest conservation.
9. Develop a Swift Parrot species management plan under Condition 84 of the CIOFA, informed by BirdLife Australia, the Swift Parrot National Recovery Team, and best available data.
10. Amend the trigger for Swift Parrot provisions under the CIOFA from a trigger based on Swift Parrot records to a trigger based on the presence of known or potential foraging habitat.



## About Swift Parrots

Swift Parrots are one of only two truly migratory parrot species, both endemic to Australia. Swift Parrots have a range that stretches across six state/territory jurisdictions. They breed only in the forests of Tasmania in summer before migrating to the Australian mainland in autumn where they seek out mature forests to spend the winter, feeding on abundant blossom and lerp.

Despite protection under state and federal environmental legislation, Swift Parrots have continued to decline over the last 20 years and are currently listed as Critically Endangered (EPBC 1999). They are now one of Australia's most threatened bird species, with the latest research suggesting that their effective population is 750 but could be as few as 300 birds<sup>i</sup>, far lower than previous estimates. They are one of 20 Australian bird taxa thought most likely to be made extinct in the next 20 years under current management practices<sup>ii</sup>.

The current<sup>1</sup> National Recovery Plan for the Swift Parrot <sup>iii</sup> *Lathamus discolor* (the Recovery Plan) identifies habitat loss and modification and associated predation from Sugar Gliders, introduced species in Tasmania, as the key threats and specifies habitat destruction from forestry activities as "the greatest threat to the survival of the Swift Parrot". The Recovery Plan also sets out detailed actions needed for the conservation and recovery of the Swift Parrot across its range.

While the threats to Swift Parrots and the recovery actions needed are well understood they remain in direct conflict with the native forestry industry. The Spotted Gum forests of the New South Wales south coast are well-documented as one of the most important mainland foraging areas for Swift Parrots<sup>iv</sup>. These forests have been internationally recognised for their significance to the species in their designation as part of the Ulladulla to Merimbula Key Biodiversity Area<sup>v</sup> (KBA). However, Spotted Gums are one of the most sought after and "commercially significant" timber species.<sup>vi</sup> The majority of Swift Parrot foraging sites in NSW occur outside of conservation reserves<sup>iv</sup>, including within state forests managed by the Forestry Corporation of NSW and open for logging under the Coastal Integrated Forestry Operations Agreement (CIFOA). The cumulative effects of ongoing habitat destruction, degradation and fragmentation and naturally variable food sources could result in a critical food shortage for Swift Parrots in the future, adding an additional pressure<sup>iv</sup>.

Unless decisive action is taken to protect their remaining forest habitat across their range and improve and fund management actions, Swift Parrots could be extinct within the next two decades.

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<sup>1</sup> An updated Recovery Plan is currently being developed and will be published later this year.



**ToR G – The environmental impact and sustainability of native forest logging, including following the 2019/20 bushfire season, and;**

**ToR B - The impact of external influences on the timber and forest products industry, including but not limited to drought, water, fire, regulatory structures, habitat protection and local, state and federal policies regarding climate change and plantation establishment.**

The need to conserve remaining core Swift Parrot habitat in NSW was made all the more urgent by the disastrous bushfires of summer 2019/20. The fires were unprecedented in their size and intensity and likely killed or displaced more than three billion native vertebrates.<sup>vii</sup> While the Swift Parrots were not directly impacted at that time, as they breed in Tasmania during summers, the fires significantly impacted important Swift Parrot feeding habitat on mainland Australia, including the Ulladulla to Merimbula KBA (See Map 1).

Our analysis in Table 1, demonstrates that 35% of the KBA was affected by the bushfires, with 20% of the KBA badly burnt, and that 33% of the Swift Parrot's Area of Occupancy (AOO) within the KBA was impacted<sup>viii</sup>.

**Table 1 - Key Statistics of fire extent within the Ulladulla to Merimbula KBA and impacts to bird habitat.**

Key statistics		
KBA area	217,832	
Area affected	76,621	(35%)
Area burnt (NSW)	64,920	(30%)
Area badly burnt (NSW)	43,261	(20%)
Shared monitoring sites	27(34)/139 sites burnt	
Trigger Species: Swift Parrot		
	AOO sqkm	% AOO burnt
<i>KBA Trigger Species of BirdLife concern</i>		
Swift Parrot	127	33
<i>Not KBA Trigger Species but a Commonwealth Priority</i>		
Black-faced Monarch	202	31
Eastern Bristlebird	0	0
Gang-gang Cockatoo	209	29
Pilotbird	34	18
Red-browed Treecreeper	43	37
Regent Honeyeater	20	15
Superb Lyrebird	270	41

In the aftermath of the bushfires, the NSW Environment Protection Agency (EPA) established additional protections for bushfire-affected forests including issuing site-specific operating conditions (SSOCs) to be applied to forestry operations<sup>ix</sup> which also recommended a temporary halt of forestry operations in unburnt and lightly burnt forests.

In 2020, the EPA commissioned an independent review to evaluate whether these SSOCs, and more broadly if the CIFOA, provide "adequate mitigation for ecological and environmental impacts from timber harvesting in areas impacted by the 2019/20 wildfires."<sup>x</sup> The report found that the time for recovery for threatened species could



be up to 120 years and that “fauna populations surviving in fire refuges in state forests are at risk of elimination by timber harvesting under normal Coastal Integrated Forestry Operations Approvals (CIFOA), which could prevent recovery, and cause catastrophic population decline.” The report recommended “that timber harvesting be excluded from all mapped unburnt and lightly burnt forests within state forests for a minimum period of 20 years” and to modify the scale and pattern of all timber harvesting.

Earlier this year, and against the recommendations of the independent report and the advice of the EPA, Forestry Corporation resumed pre-bushfire forestry operations under the CIFOA, including within fire impacted areas. Large areas of known Swift Parrot habitat, especially within the KBA, are still designated as Zone 4 – General Management (FMZ-4) under the NSW Forestry Management Zoning system (See Map 2). FMZ – 4 zones are “designed for a range of uses, but timber production has a high priority.” To date forestry operations have already resumed within the KBA, primarily around the Batemans Bay region, with more scheduled for the next 12 months<sup>xi</sup> (See Map 3).

While the 2019/20 bushfires were unprecedented, the number of days with very high and extreme fire danger risks will continue to increase<sup>xiii</sup> and major bushfire events are predicted to become increasingly common<sup>xiii</sup>. There is increasing evidence<sup>xiv</sup> that forestry operations have increased the severity and frequency of major bush fire events in Australia. Lindemeyer et al. go on to recommend that policy makers should prioritise conserving intact native forests and facilitate the expansion of old growth forests as they are where fire severity is lowest and allow for species persistence and recovery after fires.

Along with increased risks of bushfires, the effects of climate change will likely include more frequent and intense droughts<sup>xv</sup>, impacting temperate woodland birds, including the Swift Parrot, through reduced reproductive success, increased mortality, and long-term deterioration and reduction of habitat<sup>xvi</sup>. Coastal habitats, including the south coast of NSW, are known to act as drought refugia for Swift Parrots and are projected to be increasingly important for the species<sup>xvii</sup>.

In short, the summer 2019/20 bushfires exacerbated significantly what was an already-dire situation for the Swift Parrot. The increased likelihood of future major bushfire events coupled with the current and proposed forestry operations within intact native forests would remove and fragment much of the remaining unburnt areas that would otherwise be important for the persistence of Swift Parrots and other woodland dependent bird species. Current native forestry operations are not sustainable if we want to conserve and recover threatened woodland dependent species like the Swift Parrot.

#### **Recommendation(s):**

1. Immediately suspend all current and planned forestry operations within fire impacted Swift Parrot foraging habitat.
2. Amend the CIOFA to exclude all known and emerging Swift Parrot foraging habitat.
3. Amend the CIFOA to address the effects of climate change, including increased bush fires and droughts.
4. Conserve intact native forests and facilitate the expansion and connectivity of old growth native forests.



**ToR E – Opportunities for the timber and forest products industry and timber dependent communities and whether additional protections, legislation or regulation are required in New South Wales to better support the forestry products industry and timber-dependent communities, including opportunities for value adding, and;**

**ToR F - The role of the government in addressing key economic, environmental and social challenges to the industry, including funding and support to encourage improvements in forestry practices, training, innovation and automation, workplace health and safety, industry and employee support, land use management and forestry projects.**

BirdLife Australia acknowledges the importance of the forestry industry to NSW communities however as we have discussed in this submission current native forestry operations are not sustainable and will contribute to the decline of the Swift Parrot. There are alternative approaches that can both support and grow local community economies and benefit biodiversity.

### ***Plantation-based Forestry***

Retaining remnant native forests and restoring degraded landscapes for biodiversity remain a conservation priority. However, plantation-based forestry does not necessarily conflict with conservation goals if they are placed appropriately and managed sustainably and for biodiversity. In their review of the impacts of forestry on bushfire severity and frequency, referenced in the previous section, Lindenmayer et al recommend that the forest industry should transition away from native forestry operations to plantation operations, noting “this is important to maintain employment in the forestry sector and at the same time, limit impacts on the native forest estate”.

There is increasing science that suggests well managed plantations, which incorporate a diversity of plant species, remnant native vegetation and connectivity corridors, can have biodiversity benefits<sup>xviii</sup> by improving connectivity across landscapes and buffering existing forest fragments<sup>xix</sup>. Recent studies have found that soft wood plantations can provide foraging and movement habitat for native birds including the Crimson Rosella<sup>xx</sup> and Carnaby’s Black-Cockatoo<sup>xxi</sup> and certain bird species, including the Crested Shrike-tit, Eastern Yellow Robin, Gang-gang Cockatoo, and Jacky Winter increased in woodland remnants located in the plantation as the surrounding pines matured<sup>xxii</sup>.

New plantations must not replace native vegetation but instead should be established within already cleared and degraded areas (e.g., degraded farmland). Further, new plantations should carefully consider the potential use of threatened species and develop appropriate management plans.

BirdLife Australia is not opposed to plantation-based forestry operations. When they are placed and managed appropriately plantations can result in conservation opportunities.

### ***Nature-based Tourism; Eco-tourism and Avi-tourism***

Nature-based tourism is a significant contributor to state and local economies where tourists spent \$21.3 billion on nature-based tourism in NSW in 2018.<sup>xxiii</sup> The south coast of NSW in particular is already a weekend getaway destination for residents of



Sydney and Canberra and could see increased interstate domestic tourism as Merimbula was one of 13 regional destinations included in the Federal Government's \$1.2 billion package to support the tourism and aviation sector<sup>xxiv</sup>.

Avi-tourism, where tourists' travel is focused around birdwatching, is one of the fastest growing outdoor recreation activities and sub-sectors of eco-tourism<sup>xxv</sup> and if properly managed is unlikely to result in negative environmental impacts. Costa Rica is the gold standard for eco-tourism/avi-tourism with about US\$400 million spent by American visitors alone on birdwatching activities annually<sup>xxvi</sup>. Previous studies have estimated that as much as 41% of the entire tourist economy comes from birdwatching<sup>xxvii</sup>. Another study<sup>xxviii</sup> by Eubanks et al. 2004 found that "birdwatchers are relatively affluent tourists, sometimes with little time, hence are likely to spend more money in this niche context, over a relatively short time."

With BirdLife Australia's national and international network, and our scientific expertise, we believe we can play a part in both the promotional and technical aspects of a transition of timber dependent communities' economy to benefit from the local, national, and global growth industry of eco-tourism and avi-tourism.

#### **Recommendation(s):**

5. Develop a forest industry transition plan with a focus on wood production from sustainable and appropriately placed plantations.
6. Establish a multi-million-dollar Community Support Funds (CSFs) and Authorities (CSAs) to manage the transition in collaboration with workers, communities, and industry.
7. Invest in sustainable tourism infrastructure and opportunities for local communities, tapping into the economic value and services of natural areas in NSW.

#### **ToR J – Any other related matters.**

##### **Nature-based solutions to finance forest conservation**

Climate change and biodiversity loss are the most important – and interdependent – human induced environmental challenges that society faces today, threatening people's lives and wellbeing. Nature-based solutions are key to tackling both these challenges. Nature based solutions such as protecting native forests are key to meeting the UNFCCC's Paris Agreement goals of mitigating and adapting to climate change; Globally, they can provide over 30% of the climate mitigation action needed by 2030 to prevent global temperature rise above 1.5°C, above which the IPCC warns we would see damaging and irreversible impacts to all life on earth.

Intact, biodiverse ecosystems, such as forests, are particularly efficient and cost-effective nature-based solutions, as they sequester and store significantly more carbon when compared to monoculture tree plantations, agriculture, and grazed lands, in addition to conserving biodiversity and providing a range of other ecosystem services. They are also more resilient, functional, and able to adapt to a warming climate.

#### **Recommendation:**

8. Explore nature-based solution incentives, such as carbon markets, to finance forest conservation.



## **Regional Forestry Agreements (RFA) and the Coastal Integrated Forestry Operation Agreement**

Currently, logging of Swift Parrot habitat takes place under Regional Forestry Agreements (RFAs), and specifically in New South Wales under the Coastal Integrated Forestry Operations Agreement (CIFOA). In the 2018 *Restoring the Balance*<sup>xxx</sup> BirdLife Australia Report, we detail how RFAs allow for native timber harvesting within known Swift Parrot habitat as long as native forestry operations are carried out “in accordance with” an RFA. The RFAs act as an exemption from national oversight under the Commonwealth Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act (EPBC Act). As a result, actions taken under an RFA do not need to be consistent with the recommendations and conservation actions set by a national Recovery Plan. Under RFAs, deforestation continues across large areas of core Swift Parrot habitat, from their breeding grounds in south-eastern Tasmania to their overwinter feeding habitat in southern New South Wales.

While there are some provisions of the CIFOA and Site-Specific Operating Conditions directed to preserving Swift Parrot habitat it is clear that, following the summer 2019/20 bushfire crisis, those provisions are insufficient to prevent pushing this iconic species even closer to extinction. For example, in 2021 the NSW Environment Protection Authority fined the state-owned Forestry Corporation of NSW for failing to compile and include Swift Parrot records in pre-harvesting surveys, as required.

The 2019-2020 Independent Review of the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation<sup>xxx</sup> Act by Graeme Samuel AC found that “the environmental considerations under the RFA Act are weaker than those imposed elsewhere for MNES (Matters of National Environmental Significance)”, and noted the lack of clear, definable, and applicable environmental benchmarks against which the RFA must be consistent as requiring immediate reform.

In 2018 the NSW RFAs were renewed and extended to 2039, with statutory 5 yearly reviews. BirdLife Australia has previously requested that in light of the unprecedented 2019/20 bushfires the first statutory review should be brought forward immediately and again make that recommendation to this committee.

### **Recommendation(s):**

For the RFAs and CIFOA to meet their objective of protecting threatened species, specifically the Swift Parrot, along with Recommendation 2 and 3 BirdLife Australia presents the following recommendations for reform (in order of priority):

9. Develop a Swift Parrot species management plan under Condition 84 of the CIFOA, informed by BirdLife Australia, the Swift Parrot National Recovery Team, and best available data.
10. Amend the trigger for Swift Parrot provisions under the CIFOA from a trigger based on Swift Parrot records to a trigger based on the presence of known or potential foraging habitat.

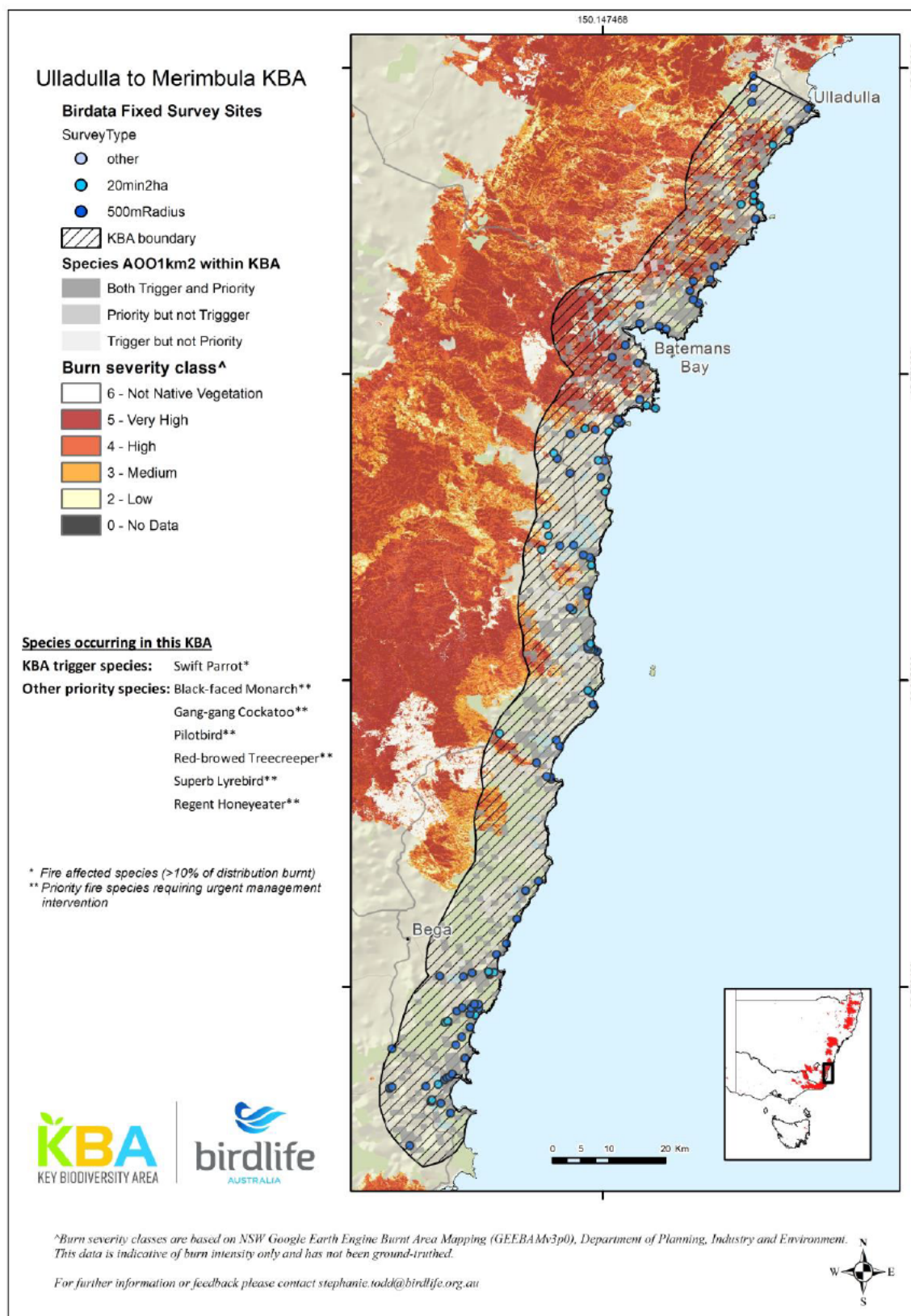


## **About BirdLife Australia**

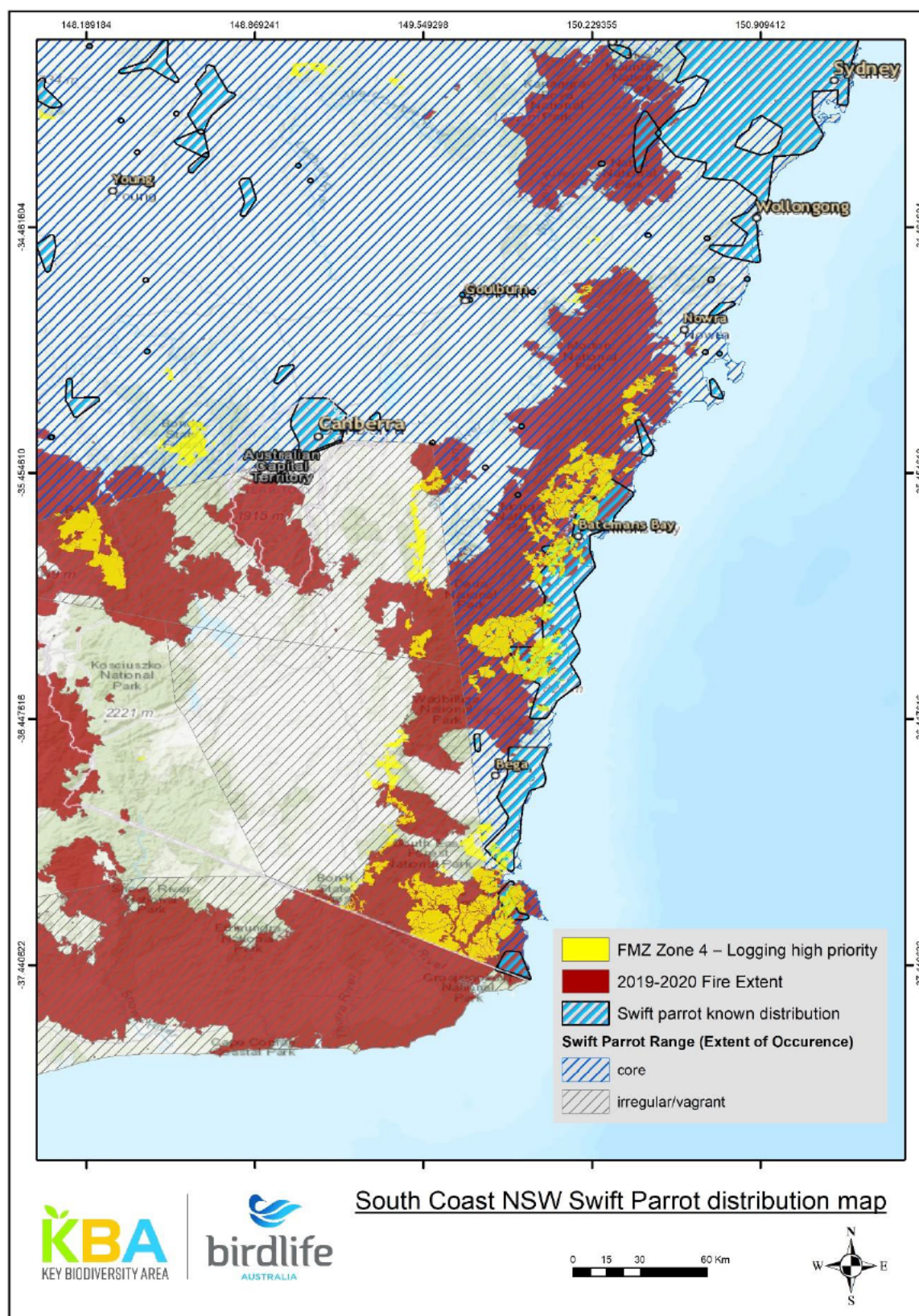
BirdLife Australia has played a major role in the conservation and monitoring of Australia's birdlife throughout our almost 120-year history. We have invested in long-term threatened bird conservation programs, often in partnership with other organisations and communities, bringing together research, education, on-ground remediation, advocacy, and campaigning. The organisation relies on thousands of volunteers and citizen scientists who play a key role in delivering our bird conservation programs.

Our core programs adopt a long-term, multi-species and landscape scale approach to conservation for Coastal Birds, Woodland Birds, Mallee Birds, and others. Our Key Biodiversity Areas program does the same for sites of recognised global importance for birds and biodiversity more broadly. Our Preventing Extinctions program focuses on threatened birds that are most likely to become extinct and require leadership from BirdLife Australia.

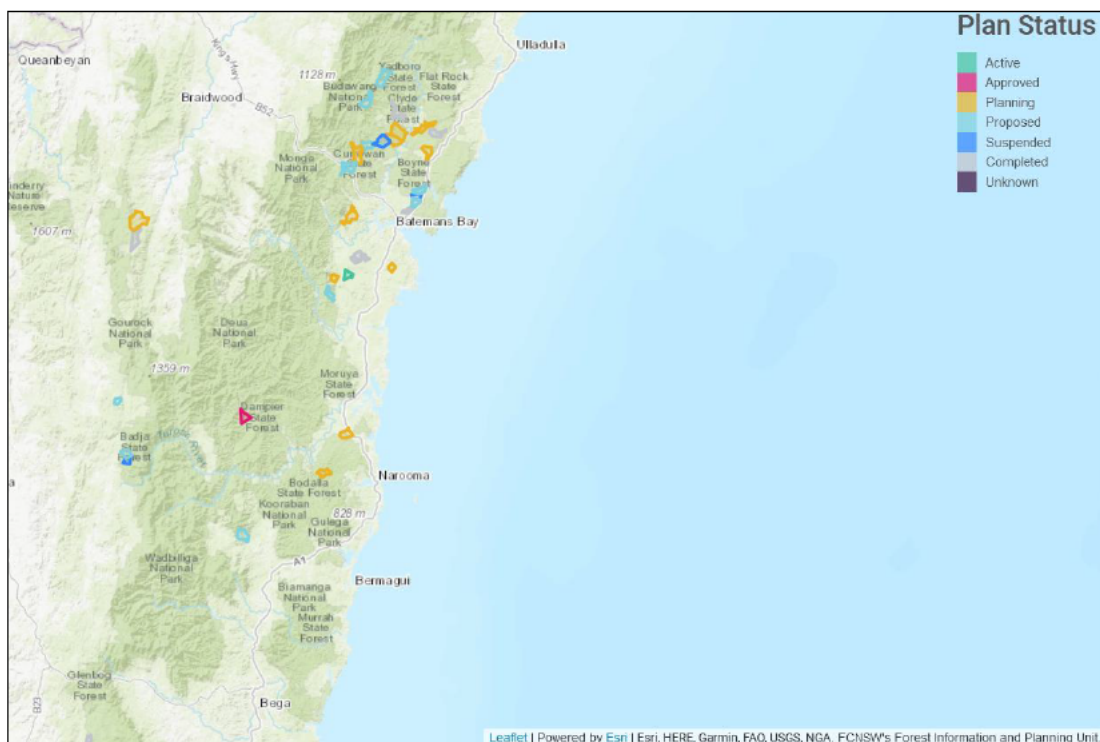
We know conservation works when we apply science and invest in long-term partnerships between government, universities, zoos, experts, landowners, volunteers, and community groups. However, our programs are only one part of the solution and it will require Governments to lead the way in developing policy and genuine reform to reverse ecosystem and biodiversity declines and restore habitats and native bird populations.



Map 1 - Fire Extent in the Ulladulla to Merimbula KBA



Map 2 - Potential logging of Swift Parrot habitat



standing together to stop extinctions



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