

Ground parrots on the Marlo Plains



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A project by



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Acknowledgements

This brochure focuses on a region which forms part of the traditional lands of the Gunaikurnai, Bidawal and Monero people. FEVL acknowledges the Traditional Owners as custodians of the land on which it works and pays respect to Indigenous Elders past, present and emerging. Sovereignty has never been ceded. It always was and always will be Aboriginal Land.

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Eastern ground parrot

The **eastern ground parrot** (*Pezoporus wallicus wallicus*) is one of only five ground-dwelling parrots in the world, and the only one in Victoria.

Their range once extended along the east coast of Australia, from south-east Queensland to south-east South Australia and Tasmania. However, their population is now very fragmented and they are extinct or very rare on the mainland west of Wilsons Promontory. In Victoria, the remaining stronghold is east of Marlo, East Gippsland. Even here it has declined over the last four decades. Ground parrots are now listed as Endangered in Victoria.

This parrot relies on heaths and heathy woodlands and can occasionally be seen in grasslands and open forest. Unlike most parrots, the eastern ground parrot nests and feeds on the ground, making them susceptible to predation, especially by feral cats and foxes.

A BIRD OF MYSTERY

A very inconspicuous bird, the eastern ground parrot moves around mostly on the ground amid dense vegetation, making them very hard to spot. These birds call at dawn and dusk. Their call is a series of high-pitched ascending notes which can be heard from up to 300m away in calm conditions. Listening for their distinctive call is the main way that they can be detected.



Photo by Rick Goodyear.

ABOUT GROUND PARROT HABITAT

Ground parrots predominantly occur in dense coastal heathland which they rely on for nesting, food and cover. They are rarely seen unless flushed from cover. If flushed, they fly low and fast over a short distance before dropping back down into (usually denser) vegetation.

Ground parrots feed mostly on the seeds of heathland plants. Favourites include pink heath, dodder-laurel, sword-sedges, bog-rushes, raspworts and grass trees.

Ground parrots require a fairly specific vegetation structure. They tend to be absent from heathlands less than two years since fire, as these are unlikely to provide food (in the form of seeds) or adequate shelter from predators. Ground parrots become vulnerable to local extinction when all large areas of heathland are burnt at the same time in large-scale fire events.



Eastern ground parrot in low coastal heathland near the Vic/NSW border.
Photo by Adam Dzunko.



Wet heathland in the Cape Conran Coastal Park at 6 months post-fire.
Photo by Adam Dzunko.

FIRE REGIMES FOR HEATHLAND MANAGEMENT

Heathlands in East Gippsland grow on soils of low fertility, which are often subject to seasonal waterlogging, so trees such as eucalypts are absent or rare. Heathland plants are most diverse in the 10 to 15 years following fire. As they become older, they become dominated by tall shrubs that shade out the smaller species preferred by ground parrots.

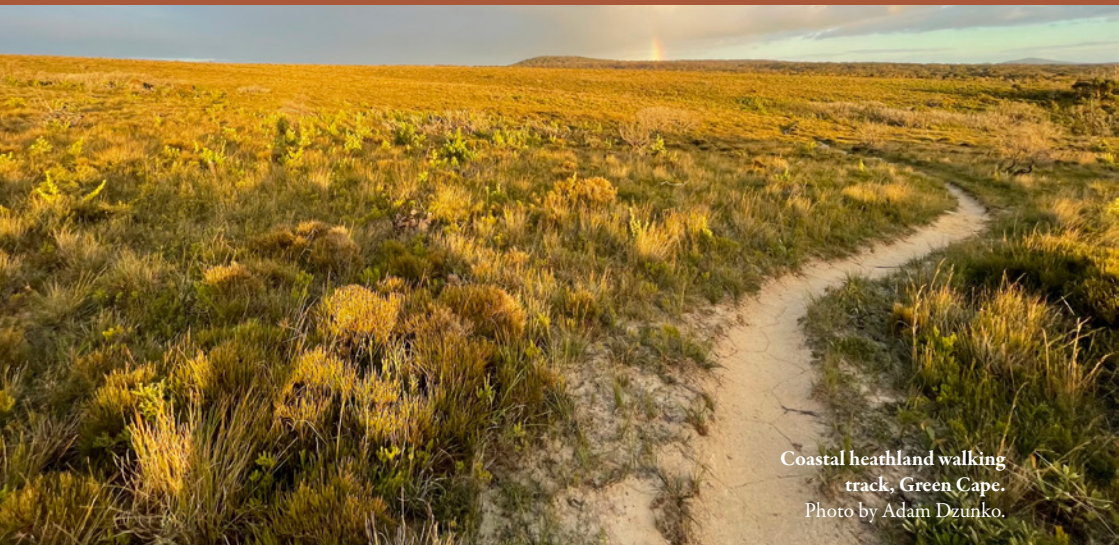
An ideal fire regime for ground parrots will maintain a mosaic of heathland aged between about 5 and 15 years since fire. Achieving this at a large scale is a difficult challenge for land managers and requires careful planning, skilled fire managers and ideal weather.

Eastern ground parrots have been recorded at highest density in heathlands up to 15 years since fire. Heathlands exceeding about 20 years tend not to support ground parrots (Meredith *et al.* 1984).

Ground parrots on the Marlo Plains

Eastern ground parrots were once fairly common in heathlands on the Marlo Plains, but due to habitat fragmentation from historic land clearing, changes to fire frequency and intensity, and predation by feral cats and foxes, numbers have decreased substantially. Today, most of the remaining ground parrot habitat occurs on public land such as national parks, with some smaller patches on private land.

According to the most recent estimate, before the 2019-20 bushfires, there were <100 individuals remaining in the Bemm River to Marlo area. This has likely declined as the fires burned most of the ground parrot habitat in this region. Most of the smaller heathlands that were spared from the 2019–2020 bushfires, both on public and private land, were burnt in the years immediately prior, rendering them sub-optimal for ground parrots. Nevertheless, these patches remain important as refuge areas with potential to support ground parrots until the larger heathlands regenerate.



Coastal heathland walking
track, Green Cape.
Photo by Adam Dzunko.

FAR EAST VICTORIA LANDCARE PROJECT

Far East Victoria Landcare (FEVL) is interested in understanding the distribution of ground parrots in the Marlo and Cape Conran area following the 2020 bushfires. Early surveys have detected small numbers of ground parrots at a few locations on public land and initial habitat assessments reveal that heathlands are regenerating rapidly as a result of high post-fire rainfall, which bodes well for the species recovery. Continued monitoring of all potential habitat in the region will be fundamental to revealing the status of this already fragile population.



Photo by Leigh Pieterse.

Field days have been held for the public to get involved in ground parrot monitoring. Feedback from community contribution can go a long way towards determining the best measures for maintaining a rich biodiversity.



Photo by Shirali Davé.

SURVEYING FOR GROUND PARROTS

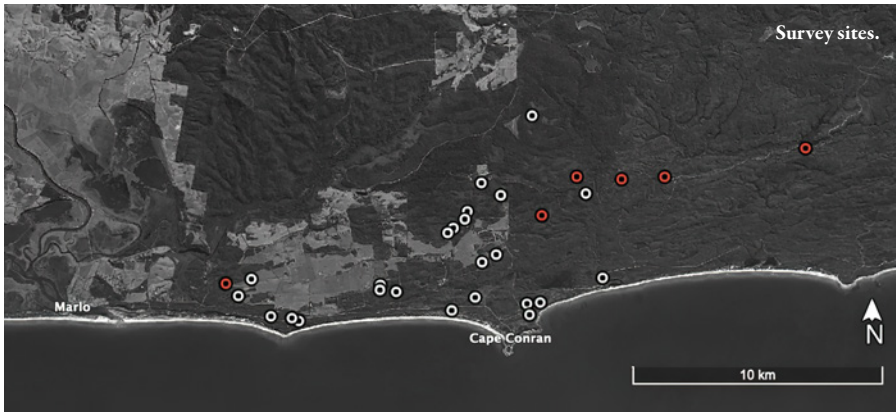
Ground parrots can be detected by listening for their unique calls, which they make at dawn and dusk. From early 2021, FEVL has been refining a monitoring protocol for ground parrots using automated recording units (ARUs). These devices are programmed to detect ground parrot calls in the field. Ground parrots have been recorded at a number of survey locations between Marlo and Bemm River as monitoring continues throughout 2022.

In addition to acoustic monitoring, listening surveys will be conducted at a number of sites and we encourage volunteers to get involved and learn how to recognise the wonderfully unique calls of the ground parrot. Some local volunteers have already expressed an interest in the plight of this iconic species, and have been trained in call identification to report any local ground parrot activity, which greatly contributes to our monitoring efforts.



Photo by Michael Drake.

Since the 2019–2020 bushfires, there have been reports from multiple landholders of ground parrots turning up on their properties, sometimes in unusual habitat like pastures and coastal woodland. While potential habitat on private land is limited, it is nonetheless extremely important, especially after the 2019–2020 bushfires, and these incidental observations are valuable to our project.



WHAT WE HAVE FOUND

Acoustic monitoring conducted by FEVL throughout 2021 detected ground parrots at six locations in between Marlo and Bemm River (see map above). Ground parrots were not detected in heathlands burnt in 2019–2020 bushfires or in any heathlands on private land despite some of these sites holding suitable ground parrot habitat. Most recordings only detected one or two calls which suggests low ground parrot density (probably only single birds). Encouragingly, two ground parrots were flushed from one of the larger survey sites in March 2022.

MANAGING HABITAT AND THREATS

Management actions required to secure the ground parrot population of eastern Victoria:

- Protect heathlands on public and private land.
- Active management of fire in all potential ground parrot habitat to achieve a mosaic of heaths aged between 5 and 15 years old.
- Feral predator control programs.



Heathland in flower and
Eastern Ground Parrot (inset)
Photos by Adam Dzunko and
Leigh Pietrise (inset).

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- Report sightings of ground parrots to FEVL or through a wildlife reporting app, such as iNaturalist.
- Take part in ground parrot surveys (contact FEVL).
- Conserve heathlands on your private land.
- Undertake feral predator control (cats and foxes) by participating in the DELWP Southern Ark project that operates across far East Gippsland.

FURTHER READING

Any good field guide to Australian birds.

Michael Morcombe's eGuide to the Birds of Australia

Available on the Play Store or the App Store

Birdlife Australia: Eastern ground parrot information sheet

www.birdlife.org.au/bird-profile/eastern-ground-parrot

SWIFFT: Eastern ground parrot information sheet

www.swift.net.au/cb_pages/sp_eastern_ground_parrot.php

Far East Victoria Landcare: Examples of ground parrot calls recorded in the Marlo Plains during 2021 surveys

www.fevl.org.au/ground-parrots-on-the-marlo-plains/



INDICATIVE HEATHLAND FLORA

Heathlands of the Marlo Plains fall into two Ecological Vegetation Classes (EVCs) which vary in their floristic and structural composition. Please refer to **An Introduction to Heathlands in East Gippsland** for a guide to the plant communities of these heathlands.

A printable PDF can be found at fevl.org.au/ground-parrots-on-the-marlo-plains/ or pick up a hard copy from the Landcare office in Orbost at 84a Nicholson Street.



