

Media Release:

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Important New Research into Enigmatic Outback Icon

Department of Natural Resources, Environment, The Arts and Sport (NRETAS) biodiversity scientist Peter Dostine has completed a three year PhD project on the ecology of the iconic Flock Bronzewing Pigeon.

This distinctive pigeon once occurred in vast numbers across the outback plains of northern Australia, but are now rarely seen in most areas where they were formerly common.

Mr Dostine says that the grasslands of the Barkly Tablelands in the Northern Territory are one of the few places where large numbers can occasionally be seen.

"You can still see flocks today of several thousand birds but earlier records from the explorers and the early pastoralists suggest that the birds were quite frequently in enormous flocks," Mr Dostine said.

"They were lost from southern parts of their range soon after the introduction of domestic stock.

"Flock Bronzewing Pigeons feed and nest on the ground which makes them more susceptible to changes in the ground layer vegetation caused by grazing and fire management.

"They are a so-called 'boom-bust' species which can respond quickly to good conditions – this year looks like being a boom year for wildlife from the Barkly to the Channel Country in Queensland after the recent heavy rainfalls, so I expect to hear reports of large numbers of Flock Pigeons this year.

Mr Dostine said the project employed a range of methods and perspectives to examine patterns of distribution, movement, and resource use.

"We conducted mail-out surveys of pastoralists who provided us with information on patterns of occurrence over the previous 30 years and we used miniature satellite trackers to track movements across the Barkly Tableland," Mr Dostine said.

"Additional monthly surveys of pastoralists and data from satellite imagery showed large shifts in population configuration, caused by increased rainfall and plant growth.

"The future of the Flock Bronzewing Pigeon is closely linked to the future management of pastures on the black-soil plains.

"This is fundamental ecological research which will contribute to ideas as to how best to conserve an outback icon."

This research was conducted with the aid of an Australian Research Council Linkage Grant and in collaboration with the Australian National University's WildCountry Hub of the Fenner School of Environment and Society.

Ends

Media Note – for more information contact Peter Dostine on 8999 3629

Image 1 Adult male (right), adult female (left) and juvenile (centre) Credit: Martin Armstrong

Image 2 Flock of Flock Bronzewing Pigeons near Bedourie in Queensland Credit: Angus Emmott

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