

Ecology and management of the Flock Pigeon



What is the project about?

The Flock Pigeon is a characteristic bird of the Mitchell grasslands of northern Australia. Formerly these birds occurred in “countless millions”, but have declined substantially over the last century, probably due to the combined impacts of sheep grazing and introduced predators. More recently, due to improved management of its habitat, numbers have stabilised and it remains periodically and patchily common in parts of the semi-arid tropics.

Ecological knowledge of this bird is sparse. They are thought to be nomadic and traverse large distances to productive feeding areas, appearing outside their normal range after a sequence of good breeding years. This mobility makes it difficult to devise conservation strategies for them based on a small fixed reserve system. This species is now listed as near threatened. An adequate and effective conservation strategy is required if the Flock Pigeon is to remain an inspiring feature of our landscape.

Research

A research student at the Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Environment, and the Australian National University has commenced a 3-year project to examine the ecology and management requirements of the Flock Pigeon. The aim of the project will be to investigate aspects of the bird's ecology including:

- current and historic distribution
- diet and feeding habitat
- movement patterns in relation to the large-scale patterns of food abundance
- effects of introduced predators on nesting birds

The study hopes to locate areas on the Barkly Tableland in the Northern Territory and in the Channel Country in Queensland to concentrate research efforts. At sites in each of these areas birds will be regularly captured and sampled to give data on diet and body condition. Some birds will be fitted with satellite transmitters to provide data on large-scale movements and to identify what types of habitat they are using throughout the year.

Resident pastoralists in the Barkly Tablelands and Channel Country can make a significant contribution through involvement in this work. Landholders in these areas will be asked to provide information on the occurrence and biology of the Flock Pigeon through a mail-out survey.

The management challenge will be to identify management options that may best allow for pastoral productivity along with maintenance of Flock Pigeons populations to guarantee the survival of this iconic grassland bird.



Photo by: Graeme Chapman

