



West Region

Red-lored Whistler *Pachycephala rufogularis*

Vulnerable



Description and habits

A medium-sized, brownish-grey bird with striking cinnamon colouration on the lores (the area between the eyes and beak), throat and belly. The male and female are almost identical, though the male is slightly bigger and is often more brightly coloured. The Red-lored Whistler is easily confused with the Gilbert's Whistler, which is similar in colouration, but has black lores rather than cinnamon.

The Red-lored Whistler can be quite difficult to locate and follow through the mallee due to its shy behaviour and rapid flight. It spends a lot of time on the ground or in low shrubs foraging for beetles, grubs and other insects, as well as plant material such as berries.

Red-lored Whistlers are poorly known. They tend to be sparsely dispersed throughout the mallee and are capable of long distance movements. Recent research conducted in Gluepot Reserve in south-east South Australia found that established Red-lored Whistler pairs form quite large territories (greater than 200 ha), which they occupy throughout the year.

The birds form breeding pairs and, come spring, the male and female build a neat, compact nest close to the ground, often in a clump of spinifex, but sometimes on

a fallen branch, in a low fork in a tree, or amongst peeling bark. Two or three eggs are laid and it is believed that both the male and female brood and feed the chicks.

Seasoned travellers

The Red-lored Whistler has a reputation for turning up in strange places, sometimes far outside its usual range of the Murray Mallee in South Australia and Victoria. For example, the very first specimens ever seen were near Adelaide in 1839, and the astute ornithologist (or lucky amateur) can still occasionally find one there. One bird was found in a swamp near the Coorong, one in the Mt Lofty Ranges, and a small population was discovered in central NSW in 1964.

The first confirmed sighting of Red-lored Whistlers on Eyre Peninsula occurred in 1993 in Pinkawillinie Conservation Park – a record that extended their range hundreds of kilometres west from their previously known distribution.

It is unclear whether the Eyre Peninsula birds represent a recent population founded from the Murray Mallee, or whether they were historically established when suitable mallee habitats were continuous across southern South Australia.

Where are they found?

The only confirmed record of Red-lored Whistlers on Eyre Peninsula is from Pinkawillinie Conservation Park, north-east of Wudinna. It is expected that the species has a restricted distribution on the peninsula, however there have been few detailed surveys of mallee birds in the region. Large areas of suitable mallee habitat occur near Sheoak Hill Conservation Park and, potentially in Heritage Agreements on private land.

Red-lored Whistlers are also found in the Murray Mallee of South Australia and Victoria, and a small population occurs in central New South Wales.

What do they need to survive?

The habitat requirements of Red-lored Whistlers are poorly understood. The birds prefer open mallee around 5 m tall, with a sparse layer of tall shrubs and a dense, but patchy, understorey.

On Eyre Peninsula, the birds have been recorded in mallee/heath habitats on parallel dunes, as well as mallee (predominantly Ridge-fruited Mallee and Narrow-leaf Red Mallee) with Spinifex, Broombush and native pine. In general, vegetation aged between 5 and 30 years post-fire is most likely to be suitable.

Why are they threatened?

Given their ability to move long distances and use a variety of habitats, it might seem that the Red-lored Whistler holds an advantage over many other mallee-dwelling animals. So why are they threatened? Why is a bird that was once described as 'numerous' and 'plentiful' now 'rare' and 'scattered'? It is likely that a combination of factors impacts on their survival:

- frequent and large fires
- habitat loss and degradation (e.g. vegetation clearance, weeds, grazing)
- feral predators
- the likelihood that they have very specific habitat requirements for breeding.

What can you do to help?

All records of Red-lored Whistlers are valuable, so if you see one please report the date and location to the Threatened Fauna Officer, DEH West Region, Phone (08) 8688 3111.

Further information contact

Threatened Fauna Officer, West Region
Department for Environment and Heritage
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www.environment.sa.gov.au/biodiversity/west_bcp

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What are we doing to help?

To learn more about the small Eyre Peninsula population of Red-lored Whistlers, surveys were conducted in 2005-2006 throughout Pinkawillinie Conservation Park. Unfortunately, in 2005, fire burnt the only confirmed Red-lored Whistler habitat on Eyre Peninsula and the surveys did not locate any of the whistlers. However, being a generally secretive species by nature, it is possible that the bird persists on Eyre Peninsula.

The priority now is to confirm the species' status and distribution within the region through further research and field surveys. Community awareness is also being raised through publications and community workshops.

The Red-lored Whistler is also included in a recovery plan that is being implemented in the Murraylands region, and a University of Adelaide study is investigating the species' habitat requirements and biology.



Locations of Red-lored Whistlers

