

Wettenhall environment trust

Brief summary of your project in plain English in 50 words or less>

The project trained Indigenous rangers of Kowanyama to help them to manage and monitor habitat and numbers of the Endangered White-bellied Crimson Finch (WBCF). The training included bird recognition, understanding habitat needs in relation to the impacts of fire, livestock, pigs, weeds and management effort, plus outcome monitoring.

What are your aims?

The project aimed to provide specific guidance to indigenous rangers and community to enable them to more effectively manage and monitor the habitats of the White-bellied Crimson Finch (*Neochmia evangelinae*) and potentially Cape York Star Finch (*Neochmia ruficauda clarescens*). We aimed to provide the Kowanyama Aboriginal Land and Natural Resource Management Office (KALNRMO) with targeted field training which comprised surveying for finches, managing habitat, and monitoring habitat and finch numbers ideally under specific management regimes. The project also involved simple data handling including recording, downloads and analyses in collaboration with technical support from Cape York NRM. This approach built on a recently completed habitat management plan via Cape York NRM, which in turn follows the recommendations of the 2007 recovery plan for these two Cape York Finches. The work will help the KALNRMO and community to better implement best practice for ecological management and monitoring of finches and other species and potentially also provide some simple research outcomes. It builds on the existing KALNRMO programmes of fire management.

What did you achieve?

We achieved more than the original aims of the project. Late wet season surveys in May, specifically for finches, took place for the first time. The training involved a combination of office (including power point presentations, databases) and increasingly fieldwork, focussing on detecting and recording details of finches and their habitats. The Rangers have great field skills, which are needed, given that there are many other small bird species with “chip” calls emanating from the riparian zone. They also learnt other new skills including how to distinguish the sombre-coloured juveniles (see photos). It was rewarding to witness, after initial ranger training, the senior rangers helping us to train the newly formed junior rangers (see photos).

For the Kowanyama community, we created a poster and reporting flyers to enable them to identify and report significant observations to the ranger office (see photos). We also developed and presented a power-point presentation on the “Red Birds” for the Kowanyama School and left this with the school and KALNRMO.

We downloaded Australian Bird call apps and a Fulcrum software program onto Tough Pads to help the Rangers identify bird calls and record the birds and the condition of their habitat in detail while in the field. The Fulcrum program was developed especially for the finch-training project by our supporters, Cape York NRM.

We also created a Finch Training plan; ‘White-bellied Crimson Finch at Kowanyama – Ranger Training to Assist in Managing and monitoring the Red Birds, Phase 1: May 2017’, and after our August field trip a ‘Finch Survey and Habitat Management plan.’

How did you do it?

A late wet season visit was undertaken by ornithologist Ray Pierce who flew to Kowanyama for one week and stayed at accommodation within walking distance of the Ranger Station. There, he

surveyed with the Rangers for White-bellied Crimson Finches and other finches around the township of Kowanyama and further afield. The KALNRMO provided their four-wheel buggy for more distant survey sites. Ray was also able to visit areas in and outside the town during the weekend to survey and monitor for finches. Wet season grass growth was monitored and photographed so that during the dry season visit in August, we were able to see the difference between wet and dry habitats juxtaposed to relative finch populations. We also monitored burnt finch habitat. Natural and artificially lit fires affect Kowanyama grassland from the late wet to the early wet (April/May to Dec) and during the whole of the dry season (May to Dec).

In August, we travelled to Kowanyama by 4WD and were able to travel further afield to gauge the extent of the WBCF range and impacts of fire, livestock, pigs and weeds. We also gave a talk at the local school to the newly appointed 'junior rangers' who showed their keenness by summarising finch needs on the whiteboard and especially by sneaking up on the finches when we practiced field surveys with them (see photos). Before and after we left Kowanyama, we distributed flyers of the various finches of Kowanyama and provided them with bird lists and copies of the management plans.

Discussions were held with the senior rangers throughout on ways of managing the threats better, including advocating for and practising earlier burns and implementing firebreaks for riparian habitats, keeping livestock and weeds out of key wetlands, and maintaining lower pig densities. We also discussed different monitoring approaches and agreed on sites for monitoring and a simple and meaningful ranking and counting approach for the birds and their habitat. These discussions and agreements were incorporated into the management and monitoring plan.

Were any changes made to the original project, and if so, explain?

The only content changes to the original project were:

- a) the introduction to the local school and the field training of the Junior Rangers.
- b) support from NGRMG enabled us to extend the project to other finch species and localities.

What was inspiring/innovative/surprising?

Our first surprise was that the KALNRMO manager was inducting seven new rangers, so this gave us the opportunity to include them into our training program. The second surprise was that our project was the first project introduced to the newly formed Junior Ranger Program.

It was inspiring to witness the heightening interest of the Junior Rangers, especially the girls, when we took them out of the classroom into the field. This showed that physical, hands-on activities were appreciated more. It was a great opportunity to connect with young people in and outside the school. The senior rangers greatly assisted in this by providing compelling, probably inspiring, accounts to the junior rangers of what it means and takes to be a ranger. Thus, our WET finch-training project was their initiation into being rangers, hopefully into the future.

The training process has revealed some very useful baseline data on the WBCF population, e.g. this breeding season has been very productive with c.70% of birds seen being juveniles (see photo). BirdLife Australia are keen to use the WBCF data as an example of annual monitoring of Endangered birds being undertaken in Australia, so this direct formal link should be useful for the KALNRMO going forward. During surveys, we were surprised to discover previously unrecorded since 2015 the Cape York Star Finch. In addition, the Black-bellied Crimson Finch (photos attached) was previously unrecorded here.

Is there anything else you'd like to share?

We also received a Community Landcare grant focussed on Black-throated Finches in the Mitchell Catchment. We used this grant to expand the time and work achieved with the WET grant. Repeating surveys with the KALNRMO Rangers not only strengthened the techniques learnt earlier in the year (May), but were useful in connecting with locals who joined the Junior Ranger program. Bear in mind that Kowanyama is a remote Aboriginal community on the Gulf of Carpentaria about eight hours drive from Mareeba. It is completely isolated by road during the wet season making surveys during the wet difficult to achieve.

Indiscriminate use of fire still seems to be the major impediment to WBCF habitat and population stability, and this is a key focus to change via the management plan. Fortunately, the WBCF has a generalist diet and some seeds of some weed species, e.g. grader grass (*Themeda quadrivalvis*), are readily consumed. The same cannot be said of Cape York Star Finch locally, which is now very rare.

And photos?



A pair of mature white-bellied crimson finches, female is on the left.



A juvenile white-bellied crimson finch



Rangers and Ray examining plant species, seeds providing the bulk of the WBCF diet



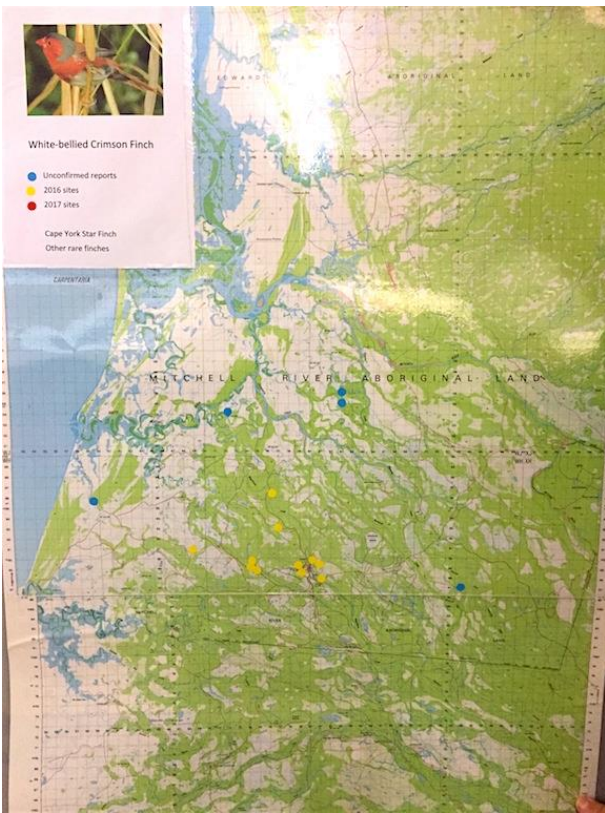
Trainer Dr Pam Schultz teaching the new rangers how to listen for the birds using the Morecombe & Knight bird call and ID App.



Darby, a senior ranger, discussing with the Junior Rangers why the finch project is important to the environment.



Junior Rangers excitedly spot some white-bellied crimson finches along Magnificent Creek, Kowanyama.



Interactive map for Rangers to quickly record their finds during ongoing work. Regular photos of the map are taken to keep recordings.



Cape York Star Finch



A Black-bellied Crimson Finch