
Assoc. Prof. Simon Griffith

Just a few weeks ago the first leg of the first stage of the SparrowNet project was successfully completed by Associate Professor Simon Griffith. The aim of this stage of the project was twofold: to collect blood samples from birds from different populations across their range in NSW and to gain a basic understanding on the numbers of birds present in each place. The route travelled, starting and finishing on the Central Coast.

We surveyed for sparrows along the entire route, identifying where they occurred (and where they didn’t occur) and undertook basic population censuses in each of the main towns. Population sampling (catching birds to collect blood samples and other biological information) was undertaken in six towns and one remote outstation. These included (from east to west to east again); Dubbo, Cobar, Broken Hill, Fowlers Gap Field Station, Wentworth, Leeton and Goulburn. The Sparrows were caught using mist nets (trapping was found to be sub-optimal due to the amount of time required for the birds to acclimatise to the traps), processed and then re-released on site. Processing included taking a blood sample, recording a range of body measurements including weight and attaching an identifying leg band. At least 40 birds were caught and

The following two pictures show the mist nets set up at our first catching location, a grain storage and processing plant in Dubbo and our first sparrow caught.

Sparrows were found to occur in a variety of locations within the urban and rural areas. Within the urban areas sparrows were generally found along most main-street commercial areas, especially around cafes/fast food eateries (MacDonald’s was a favourite).
Within residential areas their distribution was a bit more patchy but numbers tended to be greater where there was some source of supplementary food such as seed put out by people for wild birds or pet chickens/caged birds. Along the fringes of the urban areas they were often found to occur, and often in greater numbers, with horses (stables, showgrounds, racetracks) and also grain storage silos. As a result, our population sampling sites included many residential backyards, stables and roadside grain storage silos. These sites that included low, dense hedges or vegetation in which the birds love to shelter (and which made the perfect backdrop for the mist nets) proved to be the most successful catching locations.

The following photos show mist nets set up at various locations (some horse stables, within an urban backyard and roadside habitat adjacent to grain storage silos) and processing of the birds.

**What next?.....** this process will now be repeated across Queensland, Victoria, South Australia and Tasmania. Once collected, the blood samples will be processed to characterise the genetic make-up of the various populations and analysed for any differences/similarities. Investigations into various behavioural, physiological and reproductive attributes of the geographically and climatically diverse populations will follow.

**Thank you....** Identifying and locating catching sites within each town was aided significantly by many kind and generous people who shared their knowledge, expertise, homes/backyards/backyards of friends! and direct assistance with the catching of the sparrows. These included: John Hunter/Collins of Cobar; Ken and Frankie Mills, Dr Jolene Goulton and Shane Guest of Broken Hill; Vicki and Gary Dowling of Fowlers Gap Station; Stuart and Dianne Collins of Wentworth; Max O’Sullivan of Leeton; Rodney Falconer of Goulburn; Dr Benn Bryant and Jane Burgess of Dubbo Zoo and Anne McAlpine and Tim Hosking of Dubbo. Thank you. Your help and hospitality is greatly appreciated.