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Territory Plan Section
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**RE: Draft Variation to the Territory Plan No 351/National Capital Plan Draft
Amendment 85 – West Belconnen Urban Development, Belconnen District, May 2015**

The Canberra Ornithologists Group (COG) wishes to provide comments on this Draft Variation to the Territory Plan.

COG is a volunteer-based community group with around 350 members whose mission includes the conservation of native birds and their habitats.

COG is essentially concerned with better protection for native vegetation which provides habitat for various species of birds, especially birds which are associated with grassy woodlands.

A number of birds, woodland-dependent species particularly are declining. The primary cause of declines is the overall loss of and fragmentation of habitat, overlaid by a variety of other pressures and threats including urban-related pressures.

Overview

The Canberra Ornithologists Group is concerned about further greenfields urban expansion generally in Canberra, and the impacts this may have on the habitats of two birds in particular, the Little Eagle and the Superb Parrot. Both these species utilise large areas of the landscape as feeding territories/areas. There is a continuing loss and fragmentation of natural habitats, and compromised movement corridors for birds, especially what remains of woodland and grassland habitats, and more generally open rural lands. This is against a background of declining trends in a number of bird species, especially woodland-dependent species. Both Little Eagle and Superb Parrot are listed as ‘vulnerable’ in the ACT, and the Superb Parrot is also listed as ‘vulnerable’ under Commonwealth legislation.

In previous ACT Government planning exercises and the strategic environmental assessments undertaken in relation to the broader Molonglo Valley development, West Belconnen has been noted as zoned for broadacre use. COG considers this an appropriate land use for an area abutting a major river system and movement corridor for animals and birds, and especially an area abutting endangered species’ habitat.

COG notes that the development proponents have undertaken a number of environmental studies and are proposing a large conservation zone to conserve woodland as well as Pink-tailed Worm-lizard habitat, and this also include a buffer from the urban edge around the river system. However, we do remain particularly concerned about the Little Eagle and believe the best chance for this species to persist in the area is for this to remain as low impact use.

COG commends the process for the investigation of this area for development. This process has been reasonably open and transparent, has involved meaningful consultation with the community, and also has included various detailed studies to inform planning and decision making, prior to suburbs going in. This is in contrast to the manner in which the East Molonglo development (north of Weston Creek) has been progressed, where planning decisions were made and new suburbs developed, prior to proper studies and management plans which should underpin and inform such development; the community has had little opportunity to influence process or decisions, and the approach is being seen by many in the community as having little regard to the existing habitats. The Molonglo East development is regarded by many experts as too close to the river.

Little Eagle

While the proposal for an exclusion zone of 200 metres around the known nesting site at Strathnairn and further research is welcome, COGs view is that Little Eagles continue to be squeezed in terms of loss of feeding habitats and loss of suitable breeding sites, as well as other factors contributing to their decline. In COGs view, there is a significant level of uncertainty that the species will persist in breeding there, as a large area of the adjacent landscape will be lost as a potential feeding site. Also, birds of prey generally are very sensitive to disturbance, especially increased levels of human presence.

It should be noted that the Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds Vol 2: Raptors to Lapwings, Marchant, S. and P.J. Higgins (eds), Oxford University Press, states that that the Little Eagle tolerates major land-use except urbanisation, providing some trees remain. An indication of the required territory size is that five pairs required an area of 134 km² and again 16 kms² per pair was required to feed and breed.

Little Eagles have declined dramatically in the ACT, indeed in the south-east of Australia. In the ACT, Little Eagles have declined from an estimated 13 breeding territories in the 1980s to only 1 or 2 (this varies from year to year). The ACT Government, following COGs nomination of the species to the ACTs Flora and Fauna Committee, was the first jurisdiction to recognise the serious decline of Little Eagles, and list the species as 'vulnerable'. Other jurisdictions, Victoria, NSW, have followed.

Little Eagles have disappeared from major reserve areas such as Mulligans Flat in now urbanised Gungahlin. They have significant competition from the larger Wedge-tailed Eagles. They have also suffered loss of native food species; they have come to rely on rabbits, particularly to feed their young, and are believed to be susceptible to rabbit poison. The urban development in the Molonglo Valley (East Molonglo) has already meant loss of a large area of suitable foraging habitat for the Little Eagle on the western edges of Canberra.

Superb Parrot

According to the studies undertaken, Superb Parrots have been recorded in West Belconnen, largely flying over the site, and no breeding has been reported to date. Most likely the birds cross that landscape moving between feeding areas and a major breeding site in the Central Molonglo, utilising the river corridor and also vegetation corridors/lines of trees. COG has not been involved in targeted surveys for Superb Parrots there. Based on the known information, it would appear that any impact on Superb Parrots would be considered low. The retention of remnant woodland, mature trees and movement corridors in West Belconnen is important.

Cat Containment

COG supports cat containment in any new suburbs proposed. This is an important measure to protect threatened species and biodiversity more generally.

If you wish to follow up or discuss any matter, please contact me by email (jbbounds@optusnet.com.au) or phone ph. 02 62887802.

Yours sincerely



Jenny Bounds
Conservation Officer
2 July 2015