

INFORMATION SHEET

CALM 2811.03 **SCARLET ROBIN** (*Petroica multicolor*)

History and Distribution

Historically the Scarlet Robin was a widespread resident of temperate woodlands in southern Australia, with a distribution stretching from south-east Queensland around to south-west Western Australia, broken only by the Nullarbor. Although it still occupies all of this range, recent records indicate that its abundance has declined alarmingly. Preliminary results from the national Bird Atlas suggest it is being observed only half as often as 20 years ago. In the Adelaide region, Scarlet Robins are most common in the wetter areas of the southern Mt Lofty Ranges and Kangaroo Island.

Description and Ecology

Scarlet Robins are small, plump flycatchers, 12-14 cm in length and weighing about 13g. They are jet-black on the back, throat and crown, with a brilliant scarlet breast, a prominent white patch on the forehead and a white wing-stripe. They spend between 60 and 80% of their time foraging for insects, using different strategies according to the season: mainly aerial hawking in spring and summer; and mainly pouncing on ground-dwelling prey from a low perch in autumn and winter.



Scarlet Robin (*Petroica multicolor*)

Photo: Brian Furby

Habitat

The favoured habitat for Scarlet Robins is eucalypt woodland with a relatively open understorey, a good supply of low perching sites and an abundance of leaf litter. In line with their specialised foraging strategy, their preferences seem to be more aligned with the physical structure of the vegetation rather than the presence of particular plant species. Their territories often include forest edges, which they use in the cooler months when they join mixed feeding flocks in more open country.

Conservation and Threats

Vegetation clearance in the Mt Lofty Ranges has brought mixed blessings for scarlet robins - although it has created an abundance of 'edge' habitat suitable for inclusion in their territories, the massive reduction in overall habitat availability has undoubtedly driven their population numbers to dangerously low levels. There are likely to be less than 2000 Scarlet Robins now left in the Mt Lofty Ranges, and their propensity for ground foraging puts these birds at constant risk from predation by cats (both domestic and feral) and foxes. In addition, weed invasions that crowd out the understorey and reduce the amount of litter available may also impair their ability to forage. Their dependence on the density and structure of the understorey may also make fire regimes an important conservation issue. However, perhaps the most pressing issue for study is nest failure; in some areas they suffer a 90% failure rate, one of the highest of any Australian bird.

For more information contact AHC Natural Resource Management Unit on 8408 0400.