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To: Max Hudson **From:** Georgina Niessen
At: Yarra Yarra Catchment Management **Our Ref:** 00260
Via: Email **No. Pages:**
Date: 4 May 2008
Subject: **Clearing Permit:- Purpose permit Number CPS 1969/1**

Dear Max,

This short report addresses condition No 5 (a) "Fauna Management" of clearing permit number CPS 1969/1 which has been issued to the Yarra Yarra Catchment Group for the purpose of clearing native vegetation to allow for the construction of a drain. Specifically Condition No 5 (a) States:

" Prior to undertaking clearing the areas of the remnant vegetation in Plan 1969/1b and Plan 1969/1c shall be inspected by a fauna specialist for the presence of suitable habitat for Idiosoma nigrum (Shield-backed Trapdoor Spider), Cacatua leadbeateri (Major Mitchell's Cockatoo) and Pomatostomus superciliosus ashbyi (White Browed Babbler)"

Georgina Niessen and Peter Gardner inspected the site on 19 April 2008. Aerial photography was examined prior to the site visit and a series of waypoints locating the centre line of the proposed clearing line was loaded into a GPS to ensure the exact location was inspected. Two transects one on the eastern side of the centre line and one on the western side of the centre line were walked for the entire length of the proposed clearing as identified on Plan 1969/1b and 1969/1c.

Background information on the three identified species (ie Shield-backed Trapdoor spider, Major Mitchell Cockatoo and White Browed Babbler) was researched prior to the site visit to ensure all key indicators of the species were known.

Habitat Description

The remnant vegetation identified on Plan 1969/1b York Gum over Acacia and Melaleuca. The vegetation is very degraded and appears to have been grazed in the past. The understorey is very limited and there is evidence of salinity that has impacted on tree health, resulting in a decline in tree health and the death of more than 50% of the trees in the remnant. The remnant is currently fenced and appears to be no longer grazed. A small section of the remnant on the southern end of the clearing line is within a cropped paddock and is not fenced. The understorey of the section within the paddock is absent. Encroaching salinity within the remnant is evident from the location in the landscape, numerous tree deaths, "spongy" ground and salt crystals on the surface of the soil.

Similarly the remnant vegetation identified on plan 1969/1c is York Gum over Acacia and Melaleuca. The vegetation within this remnant is extremely degraded possibly due to continuing grazing (there is no fencing from the surrounding paddock) and the impact of saline water ponding on the surface within the remnant. There is virtually no living understorey and very little leaf litter.

Habitat

Shield Back Trapdoor Spider

Leaf litter, where it was present, beneath all trees within the clearing line was examined for the presence of spider borrows with radiating twig lines attached. The limited amount of leaf litter present on the site made it possible to thoroughly survey all possible habitat sites within the clearing line. No burrows were identified during this survey indicating it is unlikely that the Shield-back Trapdoor spider is present within either of the remnants identified on Plans 1969/b or 1969/c. Communication with Professor York Main (pers com) suggested that while the remnant York Gum and Acacia is typical habitat for Shield-back Trapdoor spider it is unlikely this species would be present in degraded salt affected vegetation. Advice from Professor York Main is that the trap door spider burrows are obvious in the litter due to the radiating arrangement of leaf litter from the burrows and it is unlikely if they were present for the burrows to be missed if the litter was search specifically for the burrows.

Major Mitchell Cockatoo

No Major Mitchell Cockatoos were seen or heard in either of the remnants (Plans 1969/1b or 1969/1c). No Major Mitchell's were noted at all along the travel routes to or from the site. Major Mitchells have a varied diet of seeds nectar and insects. Within the remnants present on Plans 1969/1b and 1969/1c the vegetation is very degraded offering little by the way of native seeds to support this species. Populations of Major Mitchell's in this area most likely to rely on the seasonal wheat harvest for much of their diet and are often present near wheat storage facilities in the area. The consultant (Georgina Niessen) has seen them previously north of the site in flocks near Perenjori during harvest time most likely taking advantage of grain spill near the wheat bin.

There are numerous dead and dying mature York Gum trees which have dead branches and tree hollows that may be suitable habitat for nesting Major Mitchell Cockatoos, however given the limited availability of fresh water, and food source other than seasonal wheat it is unlikely the tree hollows in the remnants identified on Plans 1969/1b and 1969/1c would provide preferred or suitable breeding habitat for this species. Additionally there are numerous dead and dying trees outside of the clearing line for the drain within the remnants that have the same habitat potential as the trees within the clearing line.

White Browed Babbler

No White Browed Babbler were seen or heard in either of the remnants (Plans 1969/1b or 1969/1c). The White Browed Babbler is a busy and verbal species, which are readily seen or heard if present. Three nests were located in the low growing Acacia and Melaleuca species on Plan 1969/1b, which may have belonged to the White Browed Babblers. Each nest was inspected and it was determined that the nests may have belonged to a number of small bird species identified as being present on the site. All of the inspected nests were abandoned at the time of the site visit. It is likely the nests identified in this remnant were used during the last years breeding season and have since been abandoned as the young birds have fledged.

Conclusion

The remnant vegetation on both Plan 1969/1b and 1969/1c is in very poor condition and is unlikely to be able to support populations of any of the three fauna species of interest identified by the DEC.

Advice from Professor Barbara York Main from University of Western Australia is that given the poor vegetation and soil quality due to encroaching salinity in

the remnants it is unlikely suitable habitat is present for the Shield -back Trapdoor spider.

Both bird species, Major Mitchell Cockatoo's and White browed Babblers are mobile species. The White Browed Babblers will build new nests for each breeding season and are unlikely to return to abandoned nests identified during this survey (even if they did belong to the White Browed Babblers).

Major Mitchell Cockatoos often return to the same breeding hollow for a number of years however given there is no suitable year round feed available in this remnant or nearby it is unlikely tree hollows in this remnant are currently being used by this species. Given that White Browed Babblers build new nests with each breeding season it is advised that the clearing from drain construction be undertake outside of the breeding season. The main breeding season is from July to December.

The clearing permit is for a 30m wide corridor however site conditions will determine the exact width of the corridor to be cleared and it is likely the clearing will account for less than the full 30m width. Clearing of native vegetation within the corridor will reduce the number of habitat trees present within the remnant but will not decimate the habitat. Additionally the construction of the drain is designed to reduce the water table and alleviate the salinity within the remnants which will in the long run result in an overall improvement in the remaining remnant vegetation.

Please don't hesitate to contact me directly if further clarification is required regarding this report.

Yours Faithfully

Georgina Nielssen

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