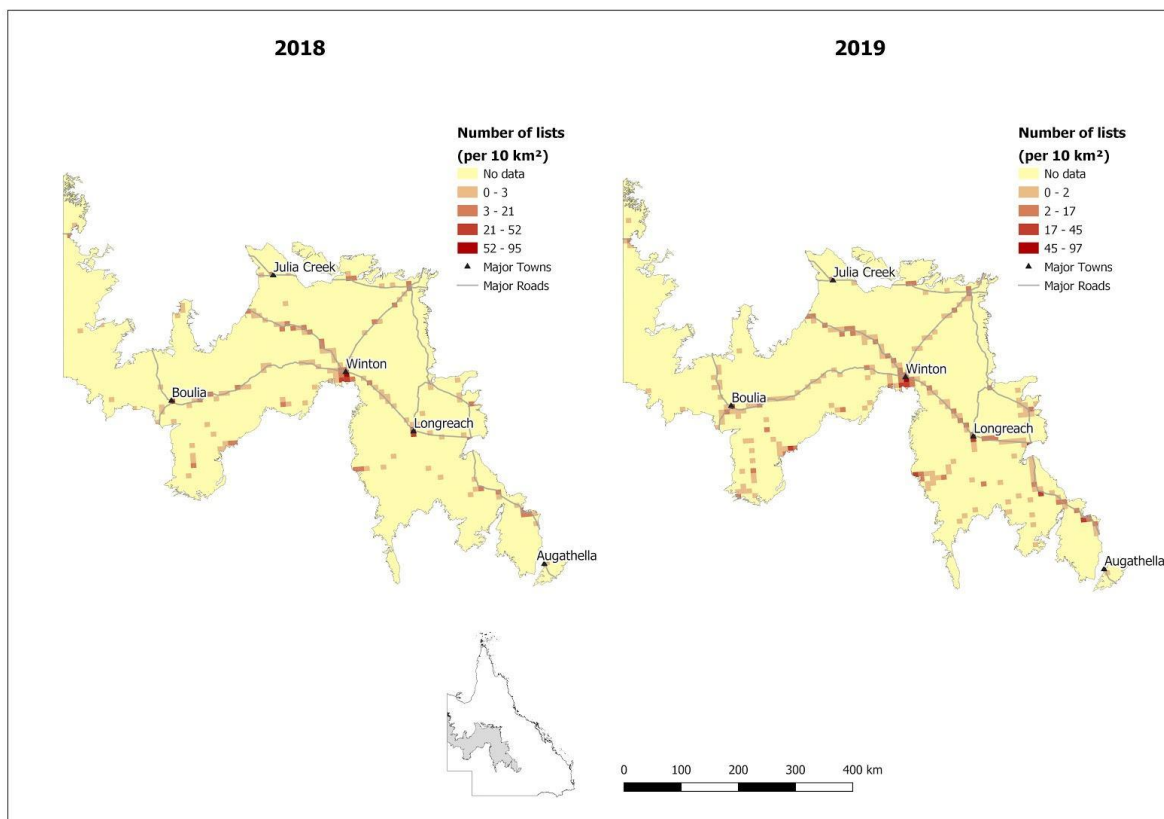


## 10. Mitchell Grass Downs

Andrew Ley and Allison Roberts



Map of Mitchell Grass Downs Bioregion showing eBird survey effort



Flock Bronzewing (Graham Donaldson)



Australian Pratincole (Graham Donaldson)



Rufous-crowned Emu-wren (Graham Donaldson)

## Geography

The Mitchell Grass Downs Bioregion (MGD) is the largest bioregion in the State and covers 14.1% (241,620 km<sup>2</sup>) of Queensland, extending further west into the Northern Territory. The bioregion encompasses primarily open plains of Mitchell tussock grasslands with few trees. There are a few rivers, gorges, jump ups, and ridges. Cattle and sheep grazing are the primary land use (AWE 2008). The major towns in MGD are Longreach, Blackall, Hughenden, and Winton. The major roads in the region are the Landsborough Highway, Kennedy Development Road, Hughenden–Muttaborra Road, and the Flinders Highway.

The climate of the bioregion lies in the Desert and Grassland Zones but varies significantly with the south having a dry monsoonal climate and the north experiencing a more humid tropical climate (BoM 2016). The large geographic extent of this bioregion is reflected in variation in rainfall patterns. Although the average for MGD is 332 mm, the arid western areas receive very low annual rainfall while some eastern areas receive over 500 mm (AWE 2008).

## Birds of the bioregion and their conservation

The Queensland Government historically lists 334 native and four introduced bird species in MGD. The 15 species of concern are: Black-throated Finch, Yellow Chat (two subspecies), Painted Honeyeater, Carpentarian Grasswren, Rusty Grasswren, Powerful Owl, Night Parrot, Paradise Parrot (presumed extinct), Major Mitchell's Cockatoo, Curlew Sandpiper, Australian Painted Snipe, Plains-wanderer, Grey Falcon, White-throated Needle-tail, and Squatter Pigeon (southern subspecies). The four introduced species are: House Sparrow, Common Starling, Rock Dove, and Northern Mallard (DES 2013).

National Parks (NP) wholly or partially in MGD are Astrebla Downs, Bladensburg, Boodjamulla (formerly Lawn Hill), Diamantina, Idalia, Lochern, Welford, and Wiliyan-ngurru. In addition, small Queensland-owned conservation parks are Waltzing Matilda Billabong, Lark Quarry, and Elizabeth Springs. Privately-held and often difficult-to-access nature refuges partially or wholly in MGD are: Ballara protecting

Kalkadoon Grasswren habitat, Castlevale protecting Squatter Pigeon habitat, Edgbaston protecting wetland indicator species, Mount Windsor protecting Night Parrot habitat (QG 2018), Mulligan River protecting Curlew Sandpiper and Grey Falcon habitat, The 1959, and Toko Range (DES 2013).

Many conservation sites in MGD are either in remote, difficult-to-access areas or on inaccessible private or public lands, so sites most visited by birders and documented through eBird are the Sewage Treatment Plants (STP) at Winton and Longreach. It would be beneficial to get more records for the more remote areas of the bioregion.

In 2013 photos and other evidence of a Night Parrot population was discovered in MGD by naturalist John Young, and in 2016 Bush Heritage established the 56,000-ha inaccessible Pullen Pullen Reserve for the conservation and study of the species (BHA 2022b). Bush Heritage also protects natural springs and wetlands at Edgbaston which lies in both the MGD and Desert Uplands Bioregion. This reserve is critical habitat for several non-avian endemic species, as well as Australian Bustard, Brolga, and Squatter Pigeon (BHA 2022a).

### Major events in 2018-2019

MGD was drought declared for all of 2018 and 2019 (QG 2022), but rainfall was highly variable. In 2018 Blackall received only 51% of average rain while Winton received 97%. Most of the area exceeded average rain in March of both years. Both years were also hot, and mean maximum temperatures exceeded average at towns across the region. Longreach recorded its highest daily minimum temperature of 31.8° C, compared to 15.9° C average, on January 13, 2018 (BoM 2019, 2020).

Birds Queensland conducted two expedition surveys that included small parts of MGD: Bladensburg NP in 2018 and Welford NP in 2019. A brief summary of these trips is included in the Channel Country Bioregion Chapter.

eBird recorded 214 species from 9,503 records in 2018 and 235 species from 10,950 records in 2019 for MGD. The following list highlights selected bird species and occurrences of interest for 2018 and 2019 from eBird.

### 2018 Notable bird records

**Australasian Shoveler.** Two observations recorded from the STPs at Longreach and Winton respectively.

**Australian Crake.** 16 observations recorded at the Winton STP.

**Baillon's Crake.** 13 observations recorded at the Winton STP.

**Barking Owl.** One observation recorded at Blackall in June.

**Buff-banded Rail.** One observation recorded from Barcaldine in October. The small rails are generally scarce in western Queensland.

**Chestnut Teal.** Only one observation recorded of three birds at Tambo, which is north of the usual range.

**Common Myna.** Introduced. Four observations recorded, all from the Winton Cooling Ponds.

**Common Starling.** Introduced. One observation recorded at the Winton Cooling Ponds in August.

**Diamond Dove.** 228 observations recorded which represents a good year for this boom-bust species.

**Dusky Woodswallow.** The occasional record keeps cropping up in the region, but the species is easily confused with Little Woodswallow.

**Fan-tailed Cuckoo.** Only one observation recorded from Longreach in April. Historically, there are only scattered records from the Queensland interior for this species.

**Great Bowerbird.** The only record, at Blackall in September, is well outside the usual range of what is considered a sedentary species.

**Latham's Snipe.** Two observations from Barcaldine recorded in October and November respectively for this uncommonly observed species in the interior of Queensland.

**Opalton Grasswren.** The only record was at Bladensburg NP in September. Additional and more detailed information on this sighting would be useful for confirmation.

**Pale-headed Rosella.** 24 observations recorded including two outlying records at Bladensburg NP in June.

**Paperbark Flycatcher.** Four observations recorded for the year.

**Plum-headed Finch.** A high count of 800 recorded at the Winton STP in July.

**Red-backed Fairywren.** The two records for the year included one from Tambo in May and one from the unusual location of the Winton STP in September.

**Red-chested Buttonquail.** Only one observation of this elusive species recorded at Boulia in June.

**Spinifexbird.** Most observations recorded at Bladensburg NP.

**Spotless Crake.** Three observations recorded: one from Bladensburg NP and two from the Winton STP.

**Superb Fairywren.** The single record for the year, at Tambo in July, is at the western limit of the species' range in Queensland.

**Varied Lorikeet.** The only record, from Boulia in June, is near the species' southern limit.

**Varied Triller.** The two records for the region, at Glenagra Station and on the Landsborough Highway respectively, are well out of the usual range for the species.

**Wood Sandpiper.** One observation recorded of this uncommon species at the Winton STP in October.

**Yellow Chat.** The only record, at Gum Hole in Diamantina NP in August, contains insufficient information for it to be considered confirmed.

## 2019 Notable bird records

**Australian Bustard.** A prolific year with 98 observations recorded including 43 birds observed at Tambo in April.

**Baillon's Crake.** Twelve observations recorded throughout the year with all at Winton STP.

**Black-eared Cuckoo.** Three observations recorded.

**Black-shouldered Kite.** 44 observations recorded for the year which is an unusually large number for the species in MGD.

**Buff-banded Rail.** Three observations recorded at two locations: Winton STP in June and at Gum Hole in Diamantina NP in August.

**Chestnut Teal.** One observation of a single bird recorded at Winton STP in October.

**Common Myna.** Introduced. Records at Winton and at Noonbah Station are at now well-established locations.

**Common Sandpiper.** One observation recorded at Camooweal in August.

**Great Bowerbird.** The one record at Tambo in May is well beyond the species' usual range.

**Latham's Snipe.** Three observations recorded in November: two at Tambo and one at Winton.

**Pectoral Sandpiper.** Accidental. One observation with description provided by experienced observers recorded near Boulia in October.

**Pied Currawong.** One observation recorded at Bladensburg NP in July.

**Red-backed Fairywren.** The records at Tambo in July and at Barcaldine in October are at the species' western limit at this latitude.

**Red-chested Buttonquail.** One recorded at Noonbah Station in September.

**Redthroat.** One observation recorded at Bladensburg NP in August.

**Spotless Crake.** Two observations recorded, both at Winton STP in August.

**Superb Fairywren.** The single record from Tambo in April is at the species' western limit at this latitude.

**Varied Lorikeet.** Three records at Boulia in May were near the species' southern limit.

**Wandering Whistling Duck.** One observation of three recorded at Noonbah Station in September.

**White-browed Babbler.** The only record, at Noonbah Station in July, is out of range for the species and requires corroboration.

**White-throated Honeyeater.** One record at Longreach in July is out of range, and its vetting status is not known.

**Wood Sandpiper.** Three observations recorded: Boulia in October, Winton in November, and Camooweal in December.

**Yellow-tinted Honeyeater.** One observation recorded at Longreach in June, but this is an unusual record for the area with unclear vetting status.

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