

Observation and Photography Guidelines for the South-eastern Red-tailed Black-Cockatoo



Bob McPherson

June 2014

Background

The South-eastern Red-tailed Black-Cockatoo is one of five sub-species of Red-tailed Black-Cockatoo to occur in Australia. It is currently listed as nationally endangered and is restricted to the South East of South Australia and South West Victoria. Its natural range covers an area of around 18000km² from Keith to Mount Gambier in South Australia and Nelson to Nhill in western Victoria.

Despite ongoing efforts to recover the species, the single population of around 1500 individuals is believed to be still in decline in response to declining habitat. Unlike the other sub-species, the south-eastern Red-tailed Black-Cockatoo is an ecological specialist feeding almost exclusively on the seeds of Desert and Brown stringybark and seasonally on Buloke.

Food shortages are considered to be the biggest threat to the cockatoo, while the availability of nesting hollows, although not currently limiting, is likely to become an important issue in the future as large, dead hollow-bearing trees fall over.

Over half of the historic feeding habitat has been cleared, with remaining feeding and nesting habitats at risk of decline and further losses due to ongoing land clearance and reduced productivity due to inappropriate agricultural practices, catastrophic fire, inappropriate burning practices, invasive wood weeds, and impacts of pathogens and pests of food trees.

Since 1997 the South-eastern Red-tailed Black-Cockatoo Recovery Team has been working collaboratively with partner organisations and regional stakeholders to manage and restore critical habitat, reduce key threats and halt the rate of decline.



Observation and Photography of Red-tails



When observing or photographing South-eastern Red-tailed Black-Cockatoos in their habitats please aim to do so without altering or disturbing their natural behaviour at the time. South-eastern Red-tailed Black-Cockatoos are very wary birds that can easily become anxious or skittish when approached whilst feeding or at a nest site. They will often fly off if the observer comes too close.

Any activity that causes the bird to exhibit alert, skittish or anxious behaviour, such as cessation of feeding, moving from branch to branch, flying from the tree or nest site is considered to be disturbance, as it disrupts the normal behaviour. We recognise that in some situations mild disturbance to birds may be unavoidable. This is particularly the case for survey events, such as the annual count, where observers are under the instruction of survey protocols. In these instances we ask that observers keep any disturbance to a minimum.



South-eastern Red-tails are easily disturbed, particularly during nesting. The impacts of nest site disturbance can be very serious with the worst outcome being the loss of the nestling. Nest site disturbance can interrupt incubation and provisioning of visits to the incubating female and/or nestling. Approaching nests too closely, repeatedly and/or for prolonged periods can cause abandonment of nests or premature fledging of nestlings, which are highly susceptible to injury or predation.

Observers should also be mindful not to disturb or disrupt feeding birds during the breeding season (Sept – Jan). Uninterrupted feeding time is critical particularly during this period as the birds have higher energy demands for egg-laying and/or provisioning of a nestling.

When observing or photographing Red-tails or any wildlife their wellbeing should be paramount and considered at all times.

The following section aims to provide information and a series of guidelines for the ethical observation and photography of SERTBC's. It is intended for use by the general public as opposed to researchers operating under Scientific Permits.

Guidelines for Observation not Interaction

Below is a list of recommended guidelines for the safe observation and photography of the South-eastern Red-tailed Black-Cockatoo.

1. **Maximum Approach Distances:** (Please note these distances are a guide only. If you detect signs of disturbance or distress move away).
 - a. 30 metres for general observations or observing feeding cockatoos
 - b. 100 metres for observing drinking cockatoos
 - c. 100 metres for observing cockatoos at nest sites.
2. **Do not pursue cockatoos if they flush (fly away) or move away from you unless otherwise instructed as part of a survey (i.e. annual count).** The fact that they have moved indicated your presence was a disturbance.
3. **Do not approach, touch, or bang on a nest tree.**
4. **Do not disturb feeding cockatoos, particularly during the breeding season.**
5. **Minimise the frequency and duration of your observations, especially on visits to nest sites.** Always consider collective impacts. If an area is over-visited, consider another location or a different time of day.
6. **Where practical/possible try to make observations of nest sites, feeding and/or drinking birds from a hide or vehicle.** If this is impossible observe from the edge of vegetation or against isolated trees to conceal your presence rather than standing exposed in open areas.
7. **Limit or avoid flash photography as this can startle wildlife.** Try to use natural light at all times.
8. **Minimise group size visits to nest sites.** No more than five people and preferably much less.
9. **Minimise noise and presence.** Approach birds quietly, talk softly, turn off mobile phones and mute camera sounds. Wear clothes that will blend in with the environment. Do not purposefully make noise to attract the cockatoo's attention.
10. **Please ensure to obtain landholder permission prior to entering private land.**
11. **Follow all laws and regulations governing use of roads and public areas.** Park your vehicle responsibly and safely.
12. **It is your responsibility to be aware of South Australian and Victorian Legislation protecting native wildlife.** Harassing a protected species is a breach under the *South Australian National Parks and Wildlife Act (1972)* and *Victorian Wildlife Act (1975)* and liable to prosecution.

Other Considerations:

- Sudden appearance of an observer at close range will startle cockatoos. Approaching slowly so that cockatoos are aware of observers is preferable.
- Cockatoos are intelligent birds and acutely aware of your presence. They can be very skittish and startle easily making them difficult to approach. Make sure to be patient. Use of a hide or vehicle to take photographs is recommended and is likely to make photographing easier.
- Powerful optical zoom lenses can ensure high-quality close-up images taken from a distance. The ability to take photographs from a distance will reduce disturbance to cockatoos.
- Never purposefully flush cockatoos to obtain flight photographs. Camera multi-shoot functions can help capture the perfect moment, particularly birds in flight.
- Contact project staff or recovery team members for help on information about the best locations to observe cockatoos. Red-tails are highly mobile (moving throughout the range in search of food). They are also very unpredictable so even if birds are known to be feeding/drinking in a particular area their sightings from day to day cannot always be guaranteed.

For more information contact:

Bronwyn Perryman
Project Coordinator for the South-eastern
Red-tailed Black-Cockatoo Recovery
Project
PO Box 392,
Port MacDonnell SA 5291
Phone: freecall 1800 2626 062
Email: redtail@birdlife.org.au



Other Resources

Ethical Birding Guidelines, Birdlife Australia 2012. Downloadable PDF document from:
<http://www.birdlife.org.au/education-publications>

Photography Code of Ethics, *Australian Birdlife* magazine, Birdlife Australia. Downloadable PDF document from: <http://www.birdlife.org.au/documents/MAGcodeofethics.pdf>