

DRAFT ACTION PLAN

SCARLET ROBIN PETROICA BOODANG

A VULNERABLE SPECIES

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PREAMBLE

The Scarlet Robin (*Petroica multicolor*) was declared a vulnerable species on 20 May 2015 (Instrument No. DI2015-88) under the former *Nature Conservation Act 1980* (NC Act 1980). The declaration followed a recommendation by the Flora and Fauna Committee guided by criteria formerly set out in Instrument No. DI2008-170. On 3 June 2015 the Committee recommended the scientific name for the Scarlet Robin be changed to *P. boodang* following a molecular study (Kearns *et al* 2015) and a revision of the taxonomy of Australian passerine bird species (Dickinson and Christidis 2014). The former NC Act was repealed and replaced with the current *Nature Conservation Act 2014* (NC Act 2014) on 11 June 2015. Part 2.4 of the NC Act 2014 established the Scientific Committee to replace the Flora and Fauna Committee. On 29 July 2015 (Instrument No. NI2015-438) listings of threatened species as declared under the NC Act 1980, including the formerly declared vulnerable species, the Scarlet Robin, were listed under the NC Act 2014. The scientific name of the Scarlet Robin listed as vulnerable under the NC Act 2014 will be updated to *P. boodang* as soon as practicable in 2016.

Under subsection 100(a)(i) of the NC Act 2014, an action plan:

- A. sets out proposals to ensure, as far as practicable, the identification, protection and survival of the species, and;
- B. if there is a known critical habitat for the species, identifies that critical habitat and
- C. for regular migratory species may include maps of potential habitat of the species* and
- D. may propose management strategies to ensure the persistence of the species and
- E. may state requirements for monitoring the species and its habitats.

*the Scarlet Robin is not a listed regular migratory species under section 209 of the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (Cth).

Measures proposed in this action plan complement those proposed in the Action Plan for Yellow Box/Red Gum Grassy Woodland (ACT Government, 2004) and component threatened bird species such as the Hooded Robin (*Melanodryas cucullata*), Brown Treecreeper (*Climacteris picumnus*), White-winged Triller (*Lalage sueurii*), Varied Sitella (*Daphoenositta chrysoptera*), Painted Honeyeater (*Grantiella picta*), Regent Honeyeater (*Xanthomyza phrygia*), Superb Parrot (*Polytelis swainsonii*) and Swift Parrot (*Lathamus discolor*).

SPECIES DESCRIPTION AND ECOLOGY

DESCRIPTION

The Scarlet Robin, *P. boodang* is 12–14 centimetres in length and averages 13 grams in weight. Adult male birds have bold red, black and white plumage and females are brownish with a red/orange wash on the breast (Pizzey and Knight 2012). See Figures 1a and 1b. Young birds resemble the adult female.

Figure 1a. Scarlet Robin, *P. boodang* (male). G. Dabb.

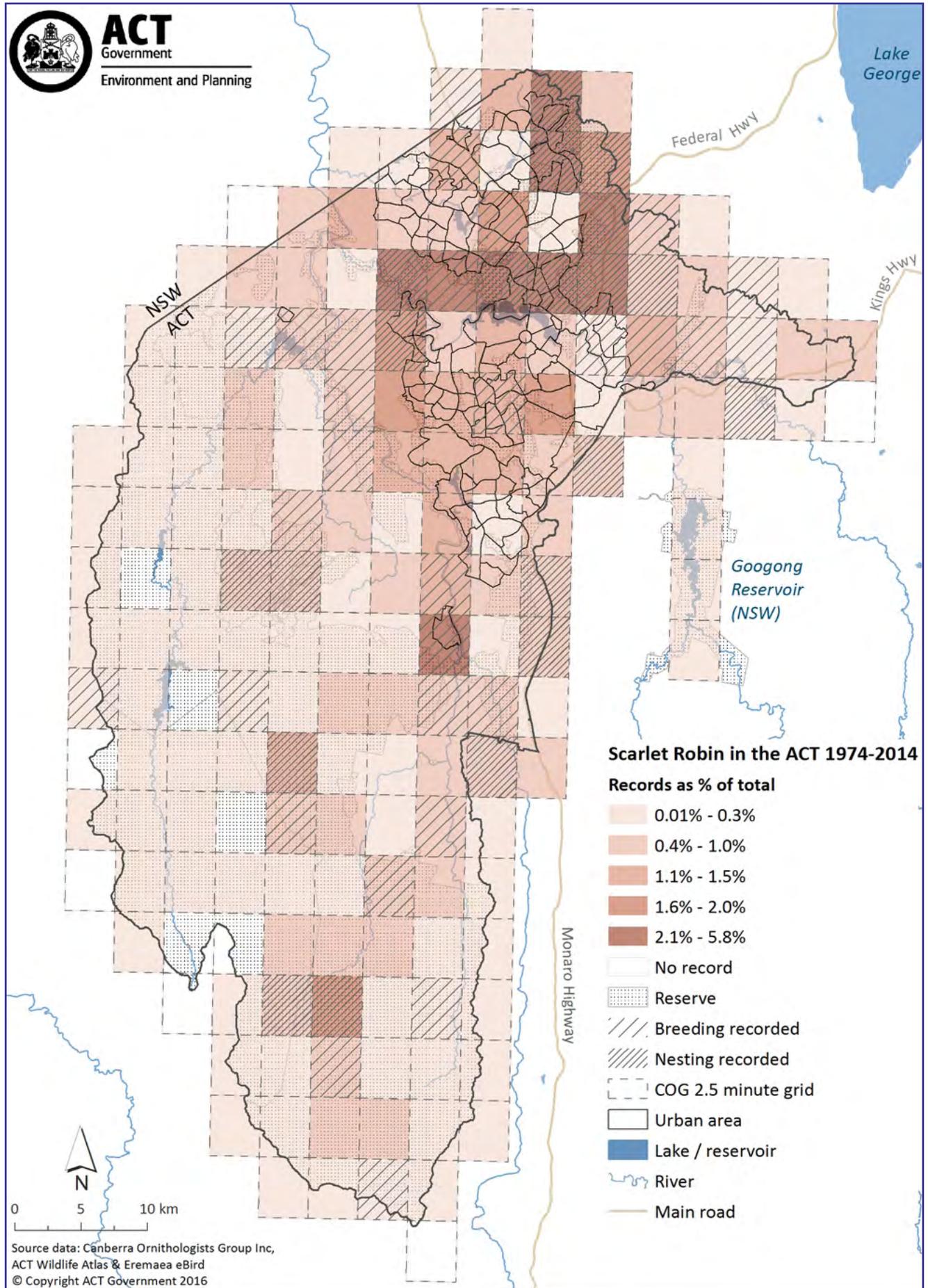


Figure 1b. Scarlet Robin, *P. boodang* (female). G. Dabb.



P. boodang is one of three red breasted robins in Australia, the others being the Flame Robin, *P. phoenicea*, and the Red capped Robin, *P. goodenovii*. *P. boodang* is distinguishable from the two other red breasted robins by the obvious white forehead and red wash on the breast in females. Unlike *P. phoenicea*, the red breast plumage colour of *P. boodang* does not continue up the throat to the bill. Distinctions from *P. goodenovii* are *P. boodang*'s lack of a scarlet red cap in the males and *P. goodenovii*'s lack of a dull reddish wash on the forehead in females (Pizzey and Knight 2012).

Figure 2. Distribution Map of *P. boodang* in the ACT.



DISTRIBUTION

P. boodang is found in south-eastern Australia (extreme south-east Queensland to Tasmania, western Victoria and south-east South Australia) and south-west Western Australia. In NSW it occupies open forests and woodlands from the coast to the inland slopes (Higgins and Peter 2002), with dispersing birds sometimes appearing in autumn or winter on the eastern fringe of the inland plains (NSW Scientific Committee 2010).

P. boodang is distributed widely across the ACT in eucalypt woodlands and dry, open forest, particularly where shrubs, logs, coarse woody debris and native grasses are present, but is generally absent from open areas where no trees remain (Taylor and COG 1992). Figure 2 shows a distribution map of *P. boodang* in the ACT, summarised for 1 July 1982 to 30 June 2014, based on records of observations submitted to Canberra Ornithologists Group (COG) and Eremaea eBird. For details of the mapping method and caveats on data quality refer to the last paragraph below and to COG (2015a).

In the warmer months, *P. boodang* can be found mainly at higher altitude in the foothills of the ranges, in open forest and shrubby habitats. Occupancy rates decline significantly at higher elevations over the cooler months and birds are more often seen in open woodland in nature reserves, peri urban gardens and parklands at lower altitude during winter. The current COG Annotated Checklist describes *P. boodang* as an 'Uncommon breeding resident/altitudinal migrant' in the ACT (COG 2015b).

The *P. boodang* records were supplied by Canberra Ornithologists Group (COG Database) for the period 1/7/1975 to 30/6/2014, including from Eremaea eBird (Eremaea eBird 2016), and excluding Garden Bird Survey data (COG 2014). *P. boodang* distribution has been summarised for 187 2.5 minute grids covering the ACT and the Googong Reservoir in NSW, currently managed by the ACT. The mapping classes recognise natural breaks inherent in the data to best group similar values using Jenk's Natural Breaks algorithm (Jenks 1967).

HABITAT AND ECOLOGY

P. boodang lives in dry eucalypt forest and woodlands, usually with trees and shrubs present and an open or grassy understorey. The species lives in both mature and regrowth vegetation. It occasionally occurs in wet forest or near wetlands. Abundant logs and fallen timber are important components of its habitat.

P. boodang are quiet and unobtrusive foragers found on or near the ground and on branches and the trunks of shrubs and trees (Frith 1984; Higgins and Peter 2002). They forage from low perches, fence-posts, tree trunks, logs or the ground, pouncing on small insects and other invertebrates. They sometimes forage in the shrub or canopy layer.

Birds usually occur singly or in pairs, occasionally in small family parties. Pairs stay together all year round. In autumn and winter *P. boodang* joins mixed flocks of other small insectivorous birds that forage through dry forests and woodlands.

P. boodang breeds on ridges, hills and foothills of the western slopes, the Great Dividing Range and eastern coastal regions of NSW; and occasionally breeds up to 1000 metres in altitude. A similar pattern of breeding occurs in the ACT.

P. boodang forms breeding pairs that defend a breeding territory. They mainly breed between July and January although in more recent years earliest breeding dates in the ACT have tended to be later in August or early September (COG 2014, 2015a).

P. boodang may raise two or three broods a season. The nest is an open cup made of plant fibres and cobwebs and is often built in the fork of a tree, usually more than two metres above the ground. Nests are often found in a dead branch on a live tree or in a dead tree or shrub. Eggs are pale greenish-, bluish- or brownish-white, spotted with brown; clutch size ranges from one to four. The generation time of *P. boodang* has been estimated at five years based on the congeneric Flame Robin, *P. phoenicea* (Garnett and Crowley 2000).

CONSERVATION STATUS

P. boodang is recognised as a threatened species in the following sources:

Australian Capital Territory: Vulnerable, Section 91 *Nature Conservation Act 2014*; Special Protection Status species, Section 109 *Nature Conservation Act 2014*.

New South Wales: Vulnerable, listed in Part 1 of Schedule 2 *Threatened Species Conservation Act 1991*.

South Australia: Rare, listed as 'P. m. boodang (eastern subspecies)' in Schedule 9 *National Parks and Wildlife Act 1972*.

THREATS

The main threat to *P. boodang* is the loss of its open forest or woodland foraging and breeding habitat (NSW Scientific Committee 2010) and habitat degradation (Radford and Bennett 2007). In comparing surveyed woodland sites stratified by habitat and land use category, *P. boodang* was found to be:

- less common in habitat patches less than 30 hectares in area with no tree cover within 200 metres and less than 2% cover within 1 kilometre
- less common at sites surrounded by cattle grazing
- absent from sites surrounded by cereal cropping (Barrett *et al* 2003).

Nest sites, food sources and foraging substrates (e.g. standing dead timber, log and coarse woody debris) are susceptible to depletion by firewood collection and 'tidying up' of rough pasture (e.g. mowing, slashing) and overgrazing (Recher *et al* 2002, Olsen *et al* 2005). However, *P. boodang* occurrence (presence/absence) can be positively associated with habitat patch size and components of habitat complexity such as increasing tree canopy cover, shrub cover, ground cover, logs, fallen branches and litter (Watson *et al* 2003).

P. boodang habitat may become unsuitable if dense regeneration (e.g. wattles) occurs after bushfires in forest or woodland. Research into bird and animal responses to fire in dry forests and woodlands has identified *P. boodang* as a 'Response C' species. Response C species show a long-term decline post-fire with or without a short-term increase in numbers.

The response may be favourable to these species in the short term, but regeneration of the shrub layer renders the habitat unsuitable after a few years. Eventual species recovery is expected as the shrub layer thins out over time. However, there is insufficient knowledge about when this would happen (MacHunter *et al* 2009).

An assessment of *P. boodang*'s likely response to climate change has been undertaken as part of the Climate Change Adaptation Plan for Australian Birds (Garnett and Franklin 2014). The comparison of climate suitability for the *P. boodang* species as a whole showed the suitability as mapped for 1985 contracting southwards by about 50% in total area by 2085, but remaining relatively extensive including the entire ACT within the modelled species distribution. The two Australian mainland subspecies *P. b. boodang* (eastern Australia) and *P. b. campbelli* (south-western Australia) were assessed as being of 'medium' sensitivity to climate change (Garnett and Franklin 2014).

Open nesting, small, passerine birds (e.g. robins, flycatchers, whistlers and honeyeaters) experience poor nesting success in fragmented and degraded eucalypt woodlands (Woinarski 1985, Robinson 1990, Ford *et al* 2001, Higgins and Peter 2002). The Pied Currawong *Strepera graculina* is a nest predator whose population has increased significantly in eastern Australia to become a common breeding bird in urban and peri-urban areas (NSW Scientific Committee 2010). A Pied Currawong population increase is also evident in urban Canberra (COG 2009, COG 2015c). Debus (2006 a,b) investigated whether the Pied Currawong has become a threat to *P. boodang* and Yellow Robin's (*Eopsaltria australis*) breeding productivity by testing whether culling of currawongs during the robins' breeding season led to increased breeding success in remnant woodland at Imbota, near Armidale, northern NSW. It was found that culling led to a twofold increase in nest success, higher fledgling rates and increased nest survival rates for both robin species. The study confirmed that predation by the Pied Currawong was a major cause of nest failure together with a wide range of other nest predators (e.g. mammals and reptiles) in the cull area (Debus 2006a,b).

Barratt (1997) studied predation by house cats on wildlife in Canberra. Information on the composition of vertebrate prey caught by cats was collected by recording prey deposited at cat owner's residences over 12 months. A total of 1961 prey items comprising 67 species were collected or reported. Birds comprised 27% of the total (14% native, 10% introduced, 3% unidentified). Of the 47 bird species identified as prey, 41 were native bird species.

On Norfolk Island the Scarlet Robin (*P. multicolor*, formerly *P. b. multicolor*) is thought to be affected by cat (*Felis catus*) and black rat (*Rattus rattus*) predation and cat and rat control measures were recommended (Director of National Parks 2010; Garnett and Franklin 2014). Predation by feral cats (*F. catus*) and robbing of nests and predation of fledgling by rats (*Rattus sp.*) are recognised as threats to *P. boodang* in NSW (NSW Office of Environment and Heritage 2016).

P. boodang has been classified as one of three ‘urban avoider’ bird species (including the Striated Thornbill and Rufous Whistler) which all show a long term declining population in the ACT (Rayner *et al* 2015; Rayner 2015 *unpubl.*). Urban avoider species are more likely to be observed at sites at an increasing distance from the urban fringe (0–3 kilometres); are likely to be migratory or dispersive species; and are likely to be smaller-bodied, woodland-dependent species that rely on mid to upper canopy structures for nesting. By contrast, ‘urban exploiter’ species increased in reporting rate and abundance close to urban areas and tend to be larger-bodied species which are more opportunistic in their nesting requirements.

The Australian Government (March 2013) and the NSW Government (September 2013) have listed the ‘Aggressive exclusion of birds from forest or woodland habitat by abundant Noisy Miners’ as a Key Threatening Process under legislation (Department of Environment 2014). In making the declaration, the NSW Scientific Committee recognised *P. boodang* as one of a range of listed threatened species which may be adversely affected by aggressive exclusion by abundant Noisy Miners (NSW Scientific Committee 2013). The Noisy Miner, *Manorina melanocephala* has benefited from the large-scale vegetation changes, such as fragmentation, that have accompanied the European settlement of Australia (Higgins *et al* 2001; Grey *et al* 2010, Maron *et al* 2011) and, as a result, has increased in abundance (Szabo *et al* 2010). In the ACT, since 1991 the reporting rate for the Noisy Miner in COG’s Annual Bird Report increased from 4.3% to 21% in 2010–11 (COG 2015d). Data analysis from across south-eastern Australia has shown Noisy Miner densities of 0.8/hectare or larger are strongly negatively correlated with small to medium sized native birds (Mac Nally *et al* 2012). The experimental removal of Noisy Miners from habitat patches results in the re-colonisation of small to medium sized birds (Grey *et al* 1997, 1998; Debus 2008), even in the absence of restoration of habitat structure.

MAJOR CONSERVATION OBJECTIVE

The priority management objective is to arrest the decline in abundance and, in the long term, maintain a viable, stable, wild breeding population of *P. boodang* as a component of the indigenous biodiversity of the ACT and region.

SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES OF THE ACTION PLAN

- Identify and protect breeding and foraging habitat critical to survival of the species in the ACT.
- Management of critical habitat to conserve the species in response to the identified threats.
- Promote the survey, monitoring and research of the species in the ACT to better understand its ecology and conservation needs.
- Co-operate with state and local government agencies in formulating and implementing conservation measures.
- Increase community awareness of the need to protect the species in its habitat in the ACT and support of community-based conservation action.

CONSERVATION ISSUES AND INTENDED MANAGEMENT ACTIONS

The following table identifies the proposed management actions to:

- A. reduce the decline of the species or community
- B. support the recovery of the species or community.

Table 1. Key objectives, actions and indicators

Objective	Action	Indicator
1. Identify, protect and restore <i>P. boodang</i>'s breeding and foraging habitat	1a. For environmental offsetting purposes treat <i>P. boodang</i> as a 'significant species' predicted by vegetation types assessed according to the method for assessing ecological community credits.	1a. <i>P. boodang</i> is included within the Environmental Offsets Calculator for assessing ecological community credits.
	1b. Retain currently occupied <i>P. boodang</i> breeding and foraging habitat in open forest and woodland on public and rural leasehold land and increase the size of these habitat patches through planting indigenous trees and shrubs to provide additional foraging habitat for <i>P. boodang</i> .	1b. The area of currently occupied breeding and foraging habitat for <i>P. boodang</i> is increased.
	1c. Restore degraded <i>P. boodang</i> 's open forest or woodland habitat by replacing missing structural layers to provide protection from predation (e.g. Pied Currawong) and deter Noisy Miners (e.g. mid-layer wattles, shrub layer and ground layer species) using locally indigenous species.	1c. The areas of treated open forest or woodland habitat are more structurally diverse.
	1d. Where feasible, establish 'fenced corridor' or 'stepping stone' plantings (plots a minimum 20x20 metres wide and a maximum of 100 metres apart) to reconnect isolated habitat and deter Noisy Miners.	1d. Established plantings are at least 20x20 metres wide and a maximum of 100 metres apart to deter Noisy Miners from newly planted areas.
2. Manage habitat to conserve <i>P. boodang</i>.	<i>Coarse woody debris</i> 2a. Maintain a program to place 'coarse woody debris' on the ground in known or potential breeding or foraging habitat suitable for <i>P. boodang</i> .	2a. Area of breeding or foraging habitat enhanced by placement of 'coarse woody debris' or by similar ground layer enhancement treatments.
	<i>Grazing</i> 2b. Encourage landowners to fence areas of known forest or woodland habitat suitable for <i>P. boodang</i> to facilitate shrub and tree regeneration.	2b. Area of forest or woodland habitat fenced to control grazing of areas planted for regeneration or biomass control purposes.
	<i>Fire</i> 2c. For areas of known suitable <i>P. boodang</i> habitat in open forest or woodland, take account of research findings on the optimum prescribed burning regime favouring Category C species (i.e. <i>P. boodang</i>).	2c. Ecological guidelines for maintaining habitat conditions for Category C species (e.g. <i>P. boodang</i>) are incorporated into planned prescribed burning regimes.
	<i>Predation</i> 2d. Maintain existing predator proof fencing and cat containment zones where they coincide with known <i>P. boodang</i> breeding sites or potential breeding habitat (e.g. Mulligans Flat/ Gorooyarroo, Molonglo Valley) and monitor their effectiveness.	2d. Existing predator proof fencing and cat containment zones and monitoring continues for known or potential <i>P. boodang</i> breeding sites.

Objective	Action	Indicator
	2e. Maintain control of exotic, berry-bearing trees or shrubs e.g. sweet briar rose, hawthorn, blackberry) in open forest and woodland and replace these removed woody weeds with locally indigenous species, particularly bi-pinnate wattles (<i>Acacia</i> spp.), native shrubs (e.g. <i>Bursaria</i> sp., <i>Kunzea</i> sp., or she-oaks (<i>Allocasuarina</i> spp.) to reduce food resources for the abundant, predatory Pied Currawong (<i>Strepera graculina</i>).	2e. Area of exotic trees or shrubs cleared and replaced with locally indigenous species.
3. Undertake a survey, monitoring and research program	3a. Continue monitoring <i>P. boodang</i> occurrence at permanent forest and woodland monitoring sites including measuring relevant habitat parameters (i.e. canopy cover, shrub cover, ground cover, logs, fallen branches and litter).	3a. The COG Woodland Survey (Bounds <i>et al</i> 2010), including the relevant habitat parameters, or its equivalent, continues to be conducted each year on a quarterly basis.
	3b. Additional monitoring by volunteers of <i>P. boodang</i> occurrence to capture responses to climate change (e.g. arrival/departure times at lower altitude sites, timing/altitude of breeding).	3b. Data on <i>P. boodang</i> 's arrival/departure times and timing/altitude of breeding is recorded and analysed.
	3c. Work with volunteers to map the location and extent of prime occupied breeding and foraging habitat of <i>P. boodang</i> in the ACT to guide management activity.	3c. Up-to-date maps of breeding sites and the current extent of foraging habitat occupied by <i>P. boodang</i> are prepared.
	3d. Take account of research currently being undertaken to better describe the foraging ecology of <i>P. boodang</i> and the habitat variables determining optimum foraging habitat.	3d. Findings are incorporated into management actions when new research becomes available.
4. Co-operate with state and local government agencies.	4a. Participate in joint monitoring and research initiatives that take into account management issues for threatened species dependent on open forest and woodland habitat (e.g. <i>P. boodang</i>).	4a. The number of research projects the ACT is involved in that take account of threatened species in open forest and woodland (e.g. <i>P. boodang</i>).
5. Increase community awareness of and engagement in managing <i>P. boodang</i> as a vulnerable species.	5a. Collaborate with community groups (e.g. COG, Canberra Nature Map, Landcare, Parkcare and catchment groups) to promote both incidental and systematic data collection of <i>P. boodang</i> sightings, in particular A. breeding behaviour (i.e. nest site location, characteristics, breeding success and predation) B. altitudinal migration (i.e. arrival/departure, breeding dates, use of wildlife corridors/habitat patches, proximity to urban areas).	5a. Records of submitted and targeted information collected on <i>P. boodang</i> behaviour, distribution and altitudinal migration show the rates of recording have increased e.g. as reported in the COG Annual Bird Report for the ACT, COG (2015a).
	5b. Collaborate with volunteer community groups and rural landholders to demonstrate conservation actions (e.g. woody weed control, planting, coarse woody debris placement, temporary grazing) that will improve habitat conditions for small, passerine birds, including <i>P. boodang</i> .	5b. Conservation workshops are conducted with volunteers and rural landholders to promote management actions to improve the extent and quality of habitat suitable for <i>P. boodang</i> .

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GLOSSARY

Altitudinal migrant

A species that breeds at higher altitude in summer and migrates to lower altitude areas in winter.

Breeding record

A breeding record for *P. boodang*, including any of the following activities: carrying food ('cf'), copulation ('co'), display ('di') or dependent young ('dy').

Congeneric

A species which is a member of the same genus as another species.

Dispersing

A species spreading to other areas, often after breeding has ceased.

Migrant

A bird that moves between locations in a regular annual cycle, usually breeding in one and wintering in another.

Nesting recorded

A breeding record for *P. boodang* including any of the following nesting activities: sitting on ('on'), building a nest ('nb'), a nest with eggs ('ne') or a nest with young ('ny').

Passerine

A member of the order Passeriformes, a perching song-bird with three forward-pointing toes and one rear-pointing toe.

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