
The Superb Lyrebird *Menura novaehollandiae* in Sherbrooke Forest: A Comment on Smith (1994)

In a paper on the decline of the Superb Lyrebird *Menura novaehollandiae*, Smith (1994) takes the Sherbrooke Lyrebird Survey Group (the Group) to task for their estimates of the population of Lyrebirds and the Victorian Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (CNR) for the predator-control program and the management of the forest. Smith's views have been expressed previously (Smith 1992, O'Neill 1993). The author of the following comments is a member of the Group.

Unfortunately the data on which the statistical arguments are based have been misconstrued, and the logic leading to the conclusions is very dubious. The general reader will not have access to the original data regarding the Lyrebird population or the full history of the fox-control program, so that some clarification is necessary.

The population of Lyrebirds in Sherbrooke Forest

For over 20 years the Group has made estimates of the population based on the numbers of male Lyrebirds calling in the period before and immediately after sunrise during the breeding season in June and July. This figure is then scaled up by a factor that takes into account the likely number of female Lyrebirds, surviving juveniles and males not holding territories. The known nesting success rate, number of Lyrebird deaths, and the numbers of Lyrebirds seen by the members of the Group during their frequent visits to the forest are also incorporated into this factor. In 1989 the estimate was 60 Lyrebirds in the forest and in 1993 it was 75 (Bradley & Bradley 1989, 1993).

Obviously judgement has to be used in arriving at the final estimate. It has never been claimed that the figures provided by the Group are anything other than a reasonable estimate (Bradley 1992, Bradley & Bradley 1993). It will be appreciated that population trends are more important than exact numbers.

The figures given by Smith (1994) in his Table 1 (p. 240) are taken from a histogram in the Dandenong Ranges National Park Management Plan prepared by the then Victorian Department of Conservation and Environment (DCE 1991). This histogram was, in fact, derived from the Group's estimates. Perhaps the issue might not have become confused if the heading to the histogram had stated more clearly that the figures were estimates. The only actual counts in Smith's Table 1 are those for the numbers of calling males and the number of known fatalities. The numbers of chicks potentially (theoretically) produced and the numbers lost are extrapolations by Smith and are a very insecure foundation for the analysis of the population structure outlined on p. 245.

Members of the Group are in contact with CNR on a regular basis, and report on the state of the forest as they see it, but it is misleading to imply that CNR bases its management strategies solely on their recommendations.

Perusal of the Management Plan (DCE 1991) will show that a number of interested parties made submissions, which were evaluated and considered. The remarks attributed to J. Twentyman on p. 243 are in keeping with the current practice of using indicator species to gauge the condition of the environment. The Lyrebird is obviously one such candidate for Sherbrooke Forest, though other species could also be used.

The fox-control program

The control of foxes in Sherbrooke Forest and elsewhere has been a problem for

many years, and various methods have been adopted at different times. Unfortunately Smith has been less than candid on this topic. Reference to his book (Smith 1988, p. 25) will show that strychnine was used in the past as well as 1080, but no mention is made of this in his recent paper. Enquiries at CNR indicate that strychnine was used to a considerable extent. Strychnine is an intensely bitter substance, and it is difficult to imagine a fox chewing at a poisoned chicken carcass tied to a tree for any length of time. The mechanics of the method are thus questionable, and it would seem much more likely that pieces of the carcass would have been torn off and distributed in the forest as the fox tasted the poison. Chicken feet and claws remaining tied to the cords are not proof that the bait was consumed on the spot. The poison 1080 does not take its effect immediately so fox carcasses are not found near bait stations. That fox carcasses are only rarely seen can be explained by the following personal observations. In one year recently this writer found three fox carcasses close to the edge of a track, within a 100-metre stretch. One was lying in the open, but the other two only drew attention to themselves by the smell of decomposition. In their dying moments the foxes had concealed themselves in the undergrowth. The chances of finding a carcass away from the tracks are slight. There seems to be no good reason to promote the crude method of tying poisoned chicken carcasses to trees over the much more carefully controlled and investigated method of burying baits. This method is Department policy (CNR 1993).

It is recognised that Smith has made major contributions to our knowledge of the Lyrebirds of Sherbrooke Forest. However, their cause might have been better served if the case against those who are also deeply concerned for their welfare had been presented in a more balanced fashion.

References

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