

Styx River State Forest

Investigation into the removal of threatened species records

April 2012

The dodgy practices of Forests NSW never seem to cease. The latest we have uncovered is an attempt to remove threatened Rufous Scrub-bird records from the Styx River State Forest. Unbeknown to them however, the sightings that were first



Rufous Scrub-bird (*Atrichornis rufescens*)

recorded by one of their staff in a 2007, pre-harvest survey, were also lodged with the NSW Wildlife Atlas, which remained even after they were deleted from the Forests NSW data base.

This discrepancy was picked up by one of our members, investigating for the North East Forest Alliance (NEFA), when assessing the Styx River harvest plan, prior to leading State Opposition Environment Spokesman, Luke Foley, on a fact finding tour of north coast logging operations.

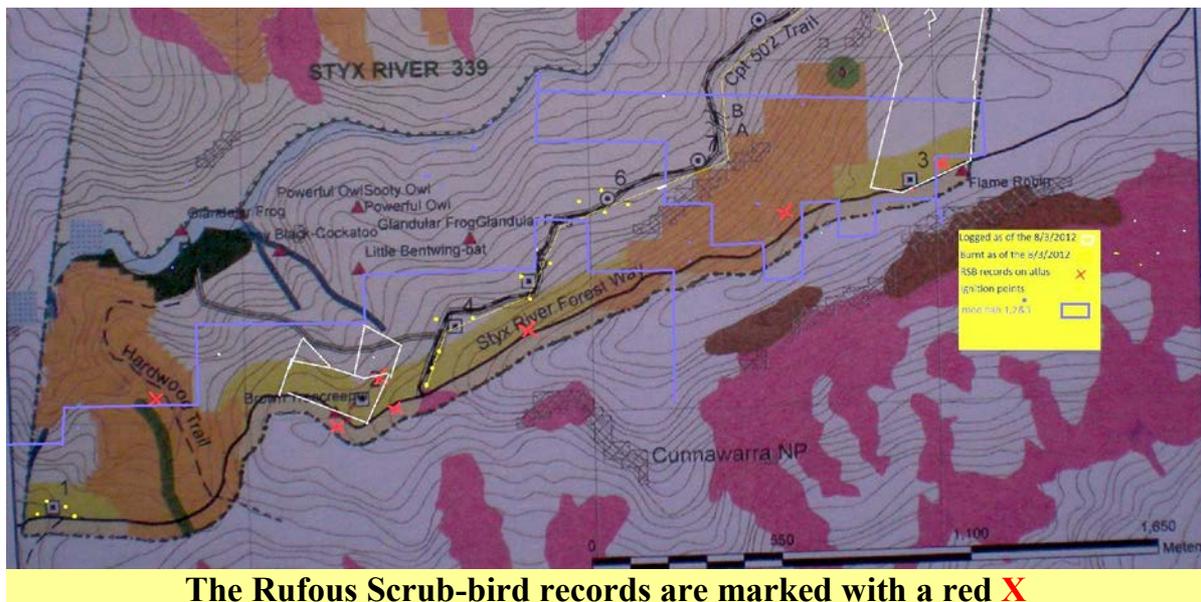
At this point it is important to explain what the implications are for forestry operations when there are Rufous Scrub-bird records present. These are clearly defined in Forests NSW's Threatened Species Licence under Section 6.10, stating:

“If there is a record of Rufous Scrub-bird in a compartment or within 300 metres outside the boundary of a compartment, the following must apply:

An exclusion zone must be implemented which encompasses all Rufous Scrub-bird microhabitat (as defined in Schedule 9 of this licence) within a 300 metres radius of the record.

a) An additional exclusion zone of at least 20 metres wide must be implemented around all microhabitat referred to in condition 6.10 (a) above.”

As it happens there were 6 records in all, extending right along the compartment boundary on Styx River Forest Way, a distance of about 2km (see map below). This means that had those records remained in place, a 300m wide strip along the boundary would likely have been excluded from logging, and any other modelled habitat within the compartment would also have been excluded from logging.



When the NEFA investigator visited the site, he discovered that there had been a very unusual pre-harvest burn off, which had damaged much of the ground cover and understorey vegetation, and heavy logging was already under way in the eastern half of the compartment.

When questioned about the deleted records, and the failure to protect the Scrub-bird's habitat, Forests NSW's response was that when the marking up for the logging was being undertaken, the foresters involved could not find any modelled habitat for the birds, which led to their questioning the original records. According to Forests NSW, a follow-up interview with the original recording ecologist found that one of the records was a visual sighting when a bird flew into a tree. This is very unusual behaviour for the species, although not altogether out of the question, so they determined the identification was an error, and promptly deleted the records without the required consultation with the Department of Environment.

We have learned from other bird experts that, while very unusual, the flying into understorey vegetation or even onto a low tree has been observed from time to time, and all reference material confirms that they seldom fly, but that they occasionally do fly short distances and venture into the understorey.

As a result, we undertook our own investigation, and were ably assisted by Dr Greg Clancy and Russell Jago, two highly experienced and respected ecologists. Both have extensive bird experience, being members and regular participants in Gould League activities, with Greg regularly organising their annual bird camps across the state. Also both regularly participate in twitch-a-thons conducted by Birds Australia.

The plan was to investigate the potential for Rufous Scrub-bird habitat, and possibly confirm the bird's occurrence at the site, although those birds are most active (in terms of calling) in the late winter – early spring breeding season.

Unfortunately the weather on the day, intermittent showers with cold wind, was not ideal for such a survey, while logging activity was in full swing along Hardwood Road, meaning the access road to the public picnic area was closed as a result.

However, we assessed the sites of all five Scrub Bird records along the Styx River Forest Way and determined that all contained, or in the case of the two easternmost sites where logging has occurred – would have contained, ideal habitat for the species. Despite extensive soil disturbance where the logging has been undertaken, and which had previously been burned, remnant fern thickets, and regenerating ferns and other ground cover species, provided sufficient evidence to suggest these areas also contained Scrub Bird habitat.



There is regenerating ferns, and other ground-cover species at this highly disturbed site of one of the previous Rufous Scrub-bird records (see logged forest behind). That regeneration, complete with old logs and partially burned litter, was enough evidence to determine that it would have provided ideal Rufous Scrub-bird habitat prior to the disturbance.

Dr Clancy had previously reported a Scrub-bird sighting in the Styx River State Forest at 'Petroi', and his personal records show this was entered on the Wildlife Atlas on 6th February 1992. However, Greg can't recall exactly where, but Petroi trail branches off Styx River Forest Way, less than 2 km from the compartment in question. At that time it was the first sighting of the species there in over 50 years.

We also assessed log dump #1, at the western boundary of the compartment which has yet to be logged, and determined it too to be ideal Rufous Scrub-bird habitat. As it happened we had lunch there and while eating we heard a bird call which sounded very like a Scrub-bird, but was unclear because we were talking. A second call was also indistinct, and the bird never cooperated a third time despite 'call playback'.

It is fair to say that if there had been no existing controversy over the previous records, both ecologists would have accepted it as a Scrub-bird call. As it is they are only prepared to say it was 'probably' a Rufous Scrub-bird.

In summary, we believe there is a good argument to support a call for a cessation of logging until an independent audit/ecological assessment is undertaken, preferably in Spring, to clear up this matter one way or another. We have called on both Ministers Hodgkinson and Parker to do just that.



More wet sclerophyll forest with perfect habitat for Rufous Scrub-birds in a yet to be logged section of the compartment where the birds were previously recorded.

Compiled by John Edwards
Scientific Licence No. SL100126
18th April, 2012.

* * *