



## *Plains-wanderers are of outstanding global significance.*

They have no close relatives anywhere in the world and are the sole member of an ancient avian family, the Pedionomidae. In a study examining evolutionary distinctness combined with extinction risk, Plains-wanderers were ranked number one in the world-out of 9,983 bird species.

There are estimated to be between 250 and 1,000 Plains-wanderers left in the wild, and 95 per cent of native grasslands that Plains-wanderers formerly occupied have been lost to cultivation and urban development.

### *Description*

Plains-wanderers are small grassland birds standing to about 12 cm tall.

The male and female have yellow legs and bills. They may look very similar to quail, but they are not related. The female Plains-wanderer is slightly larger than the male and has a rufous patch on her breast and a black and white collar. After laying eggs, the female leaves the incubation and chick raising to the male. She stays in the general vicinity.

They eat a diverse range of seeds and insects. The birds are sedentary, provided the structure of their native grasslands are not greatly altered; however significant changes in grassland structure are common and birds can disperse to at least 40 km away. One record shows a male flew 124 km from Victoria to the New South Wales Riverina in 2017.

### *Breeding biology*

Plains-wanderers can breed in their first year. Males and females have produced fertile eggs when just three months old in captivity. They lay a clutch of two to five eggs in spring and may breed a second time following summer rains if conditions are good.

Males can raise one to five chicks, but they mostly raise three to four chicks. Females sometimes pair again with another mate. They build their nests at the base of grass tussocks in a hollow or 'scrape', with the opening facing east, perhaps to catch the morning sun and block the strong afternoon sun from the west.

### *Distribution*

Plains-wanderers were once widespread throughout the grasslands of eastern Australia; however due to habitat loss, they are now restricted to a few isolated remnants, mostly in Victoria and New South Wales. They have been found in South Australia and Queensland.

**Plains-wanderer**

**A critically  
endangered  
Australian icon.**



Male and female Plains-wanderers.  
Photo courtesy David Baker-Gabb



## Habitat

Plains-wanderers depend on sparse native grasslands with open bare ground patches, herbs and grasses.

Most of the habitat should be less than 15cm in height with grass tussocks spaced 10-20cm apart. The flowering stem on a grass tussock can be up to 30cm, but not the bulk of the vegetation. Plains-wanderers need to be able to stand on tip toes and look over the grass to detect any ground predator when it is 50-100m away. Sparse native grasslands favoured by Plains-wanderers occur on hard red-brown soils. The highest quality sites often have a lichen crusts on the soil surface and species of wallaby grass, spear grass, saltbush, daisy and pea.

Plains-wanderers like large open grassland areas. They avoid areas with trees or large shrubs, which appears to be a defence mechanism to protect themselves from birds of prey, such as the Brown Falcon, that often perch in these trees.

## Threats

The main threat to Plains-wanderers is the continued habitat loss due to cultivation throughout Victorian grasslands and eastern New South Wales Riverina grasslands. The grasslands that do remain also have to be managed to have a preferred habitat structure as Plains-wanderers disappear from severely overgrazed, burnt or overgrown paddocks.

## What's being done?

Trust for Nature and the Northern Plains Conservation Management Network have been working with farmers on the Patho Plains to raise awareness of Plains-wanderers and grassland conservation. On farms where suitable habitat has been identified, in partnership with the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, songmeters are being set up to record any calls that the birds may make to confirm their presence. The NPCMN also offers 'fencing to soil type' to landowners with Plains-wanderer habitat to help them improve native grassland management on their properties.

The NPCMN works with communities, government agencies and non-government organisations within the regional landscape to protect, enhance and promote grassland and woodland ecosystems. This is done through recognising and supporting a workable balance between biodiversity conservation and sustainable farming.

The NPCMN focal ecological communities are the nationally critically endangered Natural Grasslands of the Murray Valley Plains and the nationally endangered Buloke Woodland of the Riverina and Murray-Darling Depression Bioregions.

*The Patho Plains in Northern Victoria is one the key sites where Plains-wanderers are found. It is critical that as much native grassland on private land is protected as possible to ensure the survival of the species.*

## What can you do?

Farmers from the Northern Plains Conservation Management Network have offered the following suggestions to help protect and restore Plains-wanderer habitat on your farm:

- *farm to the seasons*
- *put stock in three weeks after up to 50 mm of autumn rain.*
- *remove stock from red soil in late winter/early spring (condition dependant), this allows plants to set seed in early spring*
- *retain vegetation cover in the paddock for summer. It takes twice as much rainfall to get cover back on a paddock that has been overgrazed*
- *graze early in a wet year to keep spring growth of native grasses down*
- *fence to soil type - red soils will be bared out before grey soils if not fenced and grazed separately*
- *protect your land with a conservation covenant, giving Plains-wanderers a place to live forever.*

Trust for Nature has also been working with partners from the National Recovery Team including Zoos Victoria to establish a captive-breeding population that can be released back onto privately protected land.

## Conservation covenants

Conservation covenants are voluntary agreements on property titles that enable private landowners to protect nature forever, even after the property changes hands. They are a way to leave a legacy for future generations and are one of the most important contributions a landowner can make to protect nature.

The Plains for Wanderers Project currently offers incentive money to landowners for covenanting suitable Plains-wanderer habitat.

It's important to note that Grassland properties that are covenanted will still need to be grazed from time to time.

Across Victoria, more than 1,400 landowners are protecting threatened woodlands, wetlands and grasslands with conservation covenants.

This project is supported by the North Central Catchment Management Authority, through funding from the Australian Government's National Landcare Program.

**If you think you have suitable habitat or would like to know more about what you can do to provide habitat for Plains-wanderers contact Trust for Nature on (03) 8631 5888.**