

POWERFUL OWL

overview of the project

The powerful owl is the largest owl in Australasia, with a wingspan of up to 1.4 metres. It nests in tree hollows which form when the tree is at least 150 years old. The species is listed as vulnerable across NSW, and its capacity to survive in urban environments depends on long-term protection of habitat areas managed by a variety of stakeholders. A Trust grant to BirdLife Australia has increased our understanding of this unique species and has mobilised community interest and action on these iconic birds.

Powerful owl chicks.



PHOTO COURTESY: KRISTEN HARDY

how the project was carried out

Previous research indicated 20–30 breeding pairs of owls were living in the Sydney Basin, with unknown breeding success. The project invited community stakeholders to gather data in a number of ways, from simply reporting ad hoc powerful owl sightings, to joining a citizen science volunteer program to monitor breeding pairs several times per year. The grantee held five volunteer training and analysis workshops, and a volunteer training kit guided participants through the required methodology, including recording sightings, tree species identification, prey, young and general owl behaviour.

As well involving the general public and schools, the project worked with 33 land managers from councils, NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service, the Royal Botanic Gardens and Domain Trust, and Centennial Parklands Trust. BirdLife Australia provided workshops and information kits for these stakeholders, who in turn provided advice and resources for improved management.

An online nest cam, up to date data log and presentations at several scientific conferences kept stakeholders up to date. BirdLife Australia produced a short, online documentary, maintained a social media presence and obtained media coverage in *Australian Geographic* and the *Daily Telegraph*.

outcomes now and in the future

Through its highly successful citizen science and volunteering approach, the project has identified and mapped 73 breeding sites, including measures of breeding success for the sites over three years. The project has measured the severity of current threatening processes and has provided advice on locations of nesting hollows to the Rural Fire Service and Office of Environment and Heritage, which have helped them manage prescribed burns accordingly. BirdLife Australia has responded to requests from community members to advise local councils of sites earmarked for development that are home to roosting birds, so that they can include this information in their decision making processes. Finally, all records gathered during the project have been included in the NSW Wildlife Atlas, which allows for better decision making affecting flora and fauna.

More than 2400 people attended the various events delivered by the project, including community talks, workshops and a schools program. Over 800 members of the general community contacted the project about powerful owl sightings, and a huge 333 volunteers assisted with collecting information on a regular basis.

benefits, challenges & lessons learned

The biggest challenge for the project was managing the unexpected level of community interest in this charismatic species. The grantee adapted their approach and secured additional funding from the BirdLife Australia Southern NSW Twitchathon to extend the project. "This allowed the project officer to spend another day a week on the project and ensured that he kept on top of the communications with all the stakeholders", said Holly Parsons, Birds in Backyards Program Manager for BirdLife Australia. "This funding also allowed us to capture an all-important extra breeding season's worth of data".

"Future projects that are likely to attract a lot of community interest, whether because of an iconic species or an event likely to galvanise the community, should carefully consider the time required to respond to all of the enquiries, including those that might go above and beyond the scope of the project. Be prepared to look for more funds, bring on other staff or even train volunteers to help ensure adequate capacity for any unexpected opportunities that might present themselves", Ms Parsons said.

BirdLife Australia has successfully mobilised a passionate community and discovered more than double previous estimates of this threatened species' breeding population in Sydney. The project is a great example of well-executed citizen science which has captured the hearts and minds of Sydney residents, land managers and the scientific community to improve on-ground conservation of this top order predator.