Friends of Pallister's Reserve Inc.

Pallister's Reserve is a 254 ha wetland reserve on Masons Road, Orford, owned by Trust for Nature, & managed by the Friends of Pallister's Reserve Inc. Established January 1990

March 2026

TRUST FOR NATURE

Next Meeting: Sunday, March 22, 2026

10am: Working Bee *Noon: Lunch* *12:30pm: General meeting*

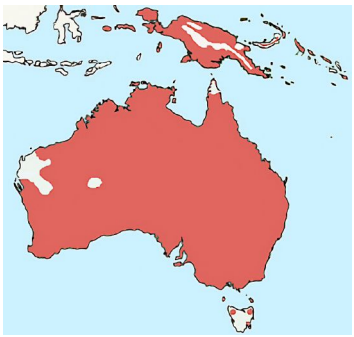
Willie's Return to Pallister's!

Photo: Clinton1550
(Wikipedia Public domain)

During his February bird count Peter Bolte observed a Willie Wagtail at Pallister's! Remarkably, for a bird seen almost throughout the entirety of continental Australia – and beyond – this was the first WW sighting at the Reserve in 13 years.

As the chart at right shows, prior to 2010 WWs were observed during almost every survey. However, during the course of just 3 years WW sightings became rarer. Before they vanished completely.

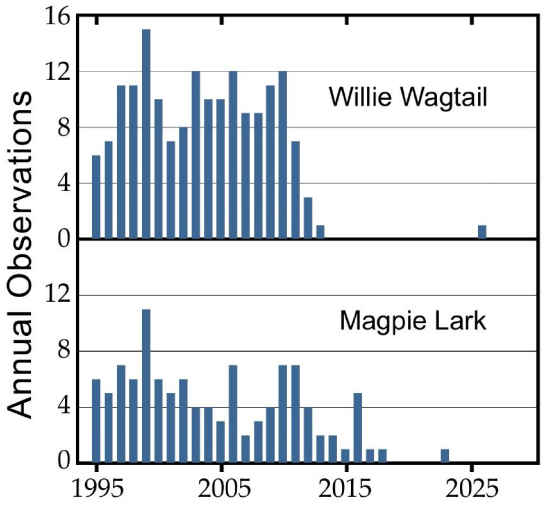
A comparison can be made with the Magpie Lark – aka Mudlark or Peewee – a species closely associated with WWs. Indeed, WW prefer to nest under Magpie Larks in the same tree. Pallister's records show that Magpie Lark sightings have also declined over the past decade, although not as decisively as WW.



Distribution of Willie Wagtail.. Three subspecies are recognised. (Source:Wikipedia)

Why did WWs withdraw from Pallister's? Surely not habitat destruction, since the core objective of the Friends is *preservation*. And although over the course of those absent years the Reserve has progressively dried – attributed mainly to nearby blue-gum plantations drawing down the water table – WWs are not specifically identified as a waterbird. In fact, WWs are clearly tolerant of their environment.

The Pallisters AGM, previously held in February, has this year been deferred pending the outcome of ongoing discussions regarding a structural re-alignment of the Friends with Trust for Nature.



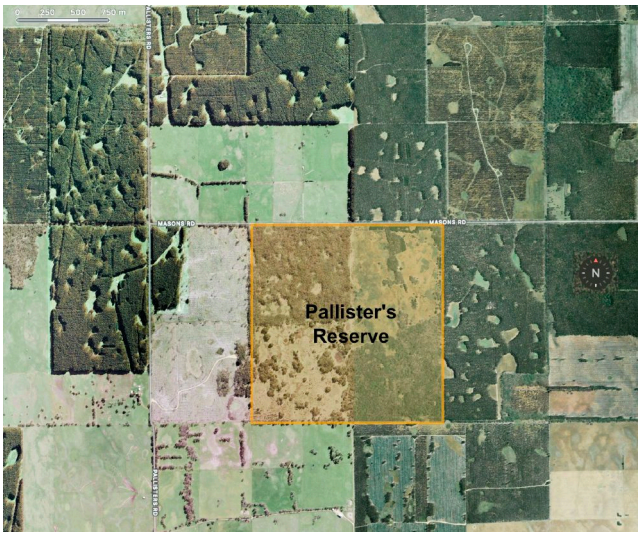
Sightings of species seen during bird surveys at Pallister's Reserve. The survey records – usually made monthly by Peter Bolte – are totalled for each year. .

Perhaps the plantations are responsible in another way: they form a low-value-habitat zone, a barrier that may deter species from populating the Pallisters region.

Elaborating: over the last 50 years insectivorous species such as WWs have globally suffered the largest population declines of any birds, a loss attributed to reduced insect populations. Virtually a "monoculture", blue-gum plantations have a restricted ecology unfavourable for insect – or any other – biodiversity. This hostility is elevated when plantations are aerially sprayed with insecticide.

All the same, as seen in the satellite image overleaf, Pallister's is not completely enclosed by blue-gums: cleared blocks – some formerly plantations – abut the Reserve on three sides and there exists a narrow wildlife corridor along the verges of Mason's Road, to the north. These areas may mitigate negative impacts of agro-forestry.

Pallisters Reserve lies in the traditional Country of the Gunditjmara and Eastern Maar peoples, who never ceded their sovereignty of the Land. We are indebted for their past and ongoing custodianship.



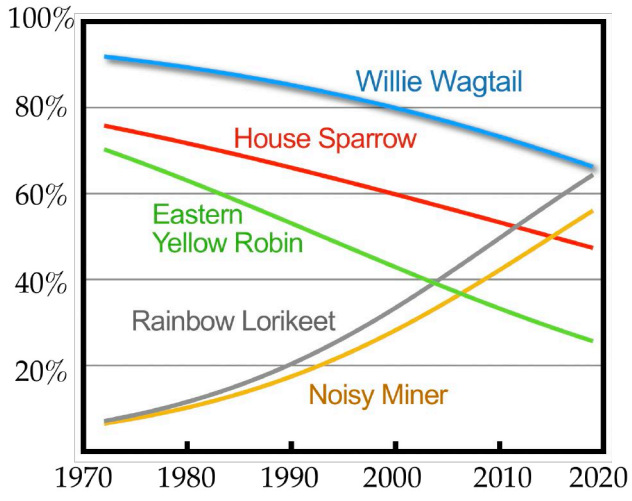
Satellite image of Pallister's Reserve and nearby blue-gum plantations. The block immediately to the west – left – of the Reserve was harvested of blue-gums in 2023.

WWs in Urban Environments

A research paper published in 2022 presented long-term analyses of changes in bird communities of the greater areas of four Australian cities: Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane, and Perth. Data for these statistical analyses was wholly derived from two large citizen-scientist repositories, one from Birdlife Australia and the other from the eBird project run by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology.

These repositories are a gold-mine for avian researchers. In the case of greater Melbourne, for example, the 137,093 survey lists filed for 1972-2019 include 340 separate bird species. For greater Sydney, the first lists go back to 1954. Of course, such lists must be meticulously audited, but the rewards for patient researchers cannot be matched by any other type of investigation.

Included with results for four other bird species, WW model calculations for greater Melbourne are displayed below. Over five decades the likelihood seeing WWs in a 25-species bird survey declined from 92% to 66%. The prevalence of WWs in greater Sydney has also dropped, from 86% in 1954 to 63% in 2019. On the other hand, WWs have become slightly more prevalent in Brisbane and Perth.



The calculated probabilities shown above are averaged over the entire greater Melbourne urban area. For our largest cities, the wealth of the citizen-scientist listings is so vast that neighbourhood-to-neighbourhood comparisons can be made: in some neighbourhoods WW prevalence is seen to be rising, but in most it is not.

As the researchers emphasize, however, these results do not necessarily mean that WW *numbers* are decreasing. Rather, the *relative prevalence* of WWs is smaller: *i.e.* other species have become more abundant so that the *proportion* of WW sightings is lower.

The long-term, species-rich attributes of citizen-scientist records provide forensic insights into the changing dynamics of interacting species. For example, many neighbourhoods have seen increases of combative birds such as noisy miners, rainbow lorikeets, and pied currawongs. These species usually drive declines in other species, especially smaller birds. The effects of changing urban landscapes can also be investigated.

For the greater Melbourne area, the researchers observed that the average length of citizen-scientist's lists decreased from about 30 species in 1972, to less than 20 in 2019, indicating a deterioration in avian biodiversity. Unexpectedly, most of Melbourne's introduced species – including the common blackbird, house sparrow, and Indian myna – suffered declines.

Due to the lack of available data, the potential of such analyses for rural areas of Australia is unfortunately not so rosy. Sorely needed are more master birders like Peter Bolte!

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March Working Bee Tasks

- Woolshed maintenance.
- Weeding: Amaryllis, thistle, coast wattle, …
- Reduce fuel load around storage sheds and locker.
- Review First-Aid kit
- Mowing …

"Willie Wagtail: skirmishes with larger birds, especially other black-and white species, *e.g.* Australian Magpie, Magpie Lark." – *Pizzey& Knight, Birds of Australia.* Photo: Chris Farrell.