

SUBMISSION TO INDEPENDENT BIODIVERSITY LEGISLATION REVIEW PANEL

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SCOPE:

This submission relates to the overarching issue “To what extent is the current objective of improving the status of biodiversity by safeguarding ecosystems, species and genetic diversity being met”, and suggests some factors that changes to legislation should take into account to achieve that objective.

In particular, this submission deals with possible unforeseen consequences on small native birds of types of land clearing.

The threat: Noisy Miners

1. Small Australian native birds are decreasing in numbers, particularly birds of temperate south-eastern Australian forests and woodlands. Such is the concern that the Fifth Australian Ornithological Conference held in December 2009 at Armidale, NSW, was devoted solely to the theme of declining woodland birds. A scientific committee set up to examine causes, decided that the main threat to small woodland birds was the spread of *Manorina* honeyeaters from woodland edges. Their report states: “we conclude that interspecific competition with *Manorina* honeyeaters is one of the most important and widespread processes threatening woodland birds in eastern Australia. In regions where this threatening process is prevalent, the greatest conservation gains for woodland birds may therefore be achieved by focussing on reducing habitat suitability for aggressive *Manorina* honeyeaters.”¹
This threat to the continuing existence of small native birds is not just a threat to one or two species, unfortunately it is a general threat to all native birds that are smaller than the *Manorina* honeyeaters.

2. This submission specifically looks at the need to ensure that any change in land clearing practices does not increase habitat suitability for the commonest *Manorina* species, the *Manorina melanocephala*, commonly called the Noisy Miner.
3. Noisy Miners are a threat to small birds because Noisy Miners take over an area of bushland, chase all small birds from the area, and even prevent them passing through the area. The Noisy Miners form permanent colonies for communal breeding, and will join together to attack anything that they consider a threat – this includes birds of all types and sizes, as well as foxes, snakes, and in the breeding season, even harmless creatures like kangaroos that venture too near a nest. While animals and larger birds can cope with these attacks, birds smaller than Noisy Miners are driven permanently out of the area. This behaviour of Noisy Miners, and the harm it does to other bird species has been well documented.^{2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8}
4. Noisy Miners are increasing in numbers and forming more and more colonies.⁹

Why Noisy Miner numbers are increasing

1. Noisy Miners are increasing in both abundance and distribution because human activity is creating the sort of habitat that they like. In undisturbed bushland, Noisy Miners occur mainly in open dry eucalypt woodland with a grassy ground cover.¹⁰
2. Eucalypts are essential for Noisy Miners as a food source of lerps, which occur only on eucalypt leaves. However they also require that the understory be fairly open, so that they can see and mob any animal or bird that they consider a threat. They rarely form colonies in a habitat that contains an extensive shrub layer of sub-dominant trees such as feathery leaved wattle in which small birds can hide.^{9, 11, 12, 13, 14.}
3. A common desire by humans who build in the Australian bush is to “clean up” the bush by removing much of the shrubby understorey to create a more open, park like appearance. Sometimes this is considered an essential step to protect against bush fire or if the land is to be used for grazing. Whatever the reason that this clearing of understorey is carried

out; the result is an environment that is ideal for Noisy Miners – open eucalypt woodland.

Increasingly, Noisy Miners are moving into this “Noisy Miner Heaven”.

The detrimental effect of removing understorey is not reversible

1. So far, there is no evidence that it is possible to remove a Noisy Miner colony once it is established. When Noisy Miners are translocated from their colony, they do not join other colonies, but rather will attempt to rejoin their home colonies, even flying up to 18 kilometres to do so.¹⁵
2. My personal experience is that 18 years after a section of my property was removed from grazing, and 10 years after planting of understorey and a feathery leaved wattle (*Acacia decurrens*) was undertaken, the Noisy Miner colony is undiminished. However, the fence line that separates the previously grazed land from the never grazed land still marks the clear boundary of the Noisy Miner colony. Noisy Miners still stick to their side of the fence, small native birds live happily on their side, and neither ventures across the boundary.

Recommendations

I recommend that when the Panel is considering changes to the Acts governing the management of native vegetation, threatened species and wildlife in NSW, that consideration be given to the fact that the removal of understorey leads to the formation of Noisy Miner colonies and is a threat to the continued existence of small native birds in New South Wales.

Small birds in NSW are subject to many pressures in addition to challenges from Noisy Miners, and serious concern for their long term future has been expressed by many scientists.¹ I hope that any changes made by your panel will reduce these pressures rather than increase them.

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