# Looking after the Alligator Rivers yellow chat

Project 6.2.3

*Surveying floodplain habitat. This area has been damaged by feral pigs. Photo: Robin Leppitt*

## What is the problem being tackled?

The Alligator Rivers yellow chat is small, bright yellow insect-eating bird. It lives on some of the big floodplains of the rivers around Kakadu National Park.

A few years ago, some scientists realised that they weren't seeing this bird much anymore and decided to see how many yellow chats they could find. They found fewer than they expected, and could only find them in a few really small areas.

Because of this the bird was listed as Endangered in 2006, which means that action needs to be taken soon to stop it going extinct. No one had ever really studied the bird or knew much about it, which makes it hard to help it.

We want to find out as much about the Alligator Rivers yellow chat as we can. We want to know how many there are, where they are, and what they eat. We also want to know a lot more about the problems they face.

The floodplains where the chats live are important to the Traditional Owners of this part of Kakadu. Traditional Owners are worried about how pigs, buffalo and weeds are affecting this country, and about how burning has changed. We think these things are problems for the chat too, but we do not know which is the biggest problem for the chats. We want to work this out so we can look after country better to make sure that the chats have enough habitat.

## *KEY MESSAGES*

- *The Alligator Rivers yellow chat is endangered.*
- *It lives on floodplains in and near Kakadu National Park.*
- *We don't know much about why it is so rare or the best ways to look after it.*
- *The floodplains where the bird lives are also important to Traditional Owners.*
- *This project is about learning more about the bird and the best ways to look after it and its habitat.*

*A male Alligator Rivers yellow chat. Males are a stronger yellow and have a dark spot on their breast. Photo: Keith Lightbody*

Threatened Species Recovery Hub
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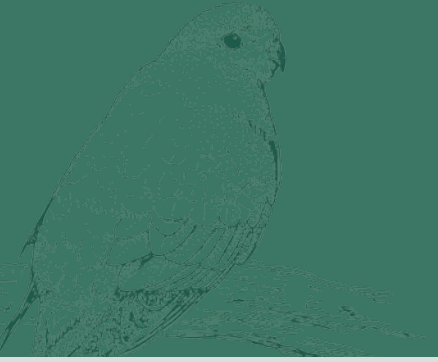


## Yellow chats in Australia

The yellow chats that live around Kakadu are a sub-species of yellow chat which lives in other parts of northern Australia. Most yellow chats live in dry inland regions, but still live near water.

Another small population of yellow chats lives near the coast close to Rockhampton in Queensland. People once thought it was extinct, but it was rediscovered and now people are working to save it.

One of the interesting questions for this research project is: How different are the separate populations of chats and how long have they been separated?

## How Traditional Owners are involved

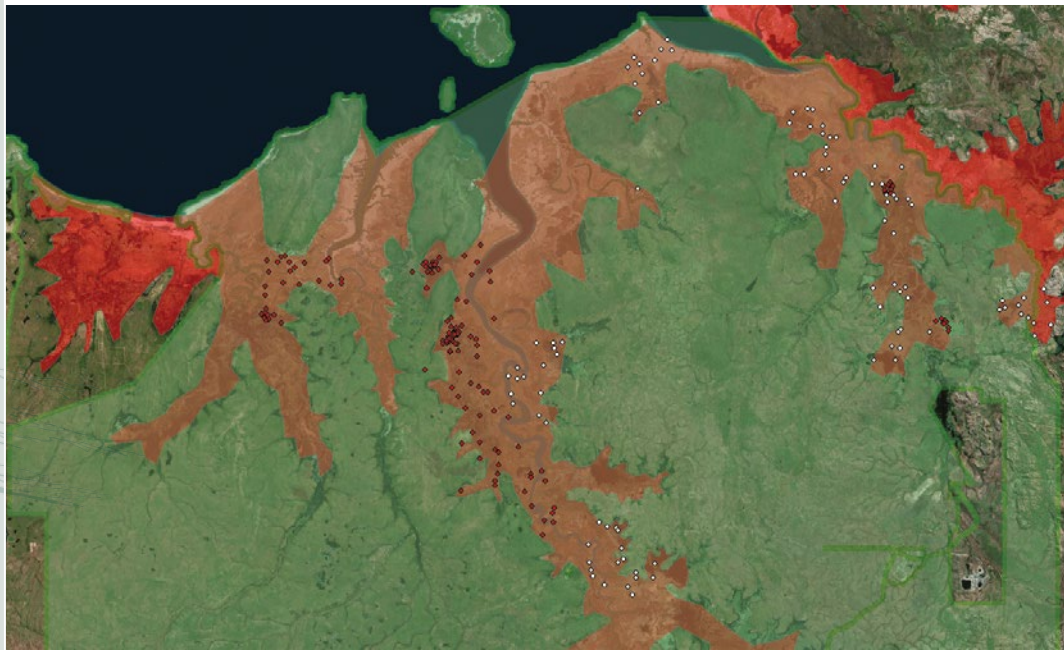
This project began with consultations with the Traditional Owners of the floodplains. The researchers obtained permission to work on their traditional lands as well as to hear about the changes that had taken place and what might be threatening the chats.

The Traditional Owners knew the bird and were concerned about the habitat changes that have taken place on their country. Changes in fire management, invasion of the wetlands by buffalo in the past and increasingly by feral pigs, and the spread of weeds like prickly mimosa and introduced grasses damage sacred places on the plain and make it hard to hunt for bush foods.

When possible, the Traditional Owners are a part of the research team and part of field work. They are passing on their understanding of how the floodplains should be managed and also helping to find out more about the chat. The research also creates employment opportunities for Traditional Owners, particularly for field work on country.

The involvement of the Traditional Owners means that the research team can think about what is happening on the Kakadu floodplains that is affecting traditional values, as well as the chats. With the involvement of Traditional Owners the research will help to find ways to keep this floodplain country healthy for future generations

*The red areas on this map are floodplains in Kakadu. The red and white dots indicate potential sampling sites on the West, South and East Alligator Rivers.*



## How the research is being done

We are surveying large areas of the floodplains which we think are good habitat for the yellow chat. We are looking in places where chats have been seen before and also new patches. We try to cover as much ground as possible while we can access sites in the late dry season. The rest of the year the areas are flooded or too wet and boggy to access safely.

Most of the work is on the South Alligator and East Alligator River floodplains in Kakadu. But we are also looking for the chats on the Adelaide and Mary River floodplains, including at Fogg Dam.

At every place we look we also check the vegetation, looking at what type of plants are there, what condition they are in and if there are any weeds. We also look for signs of pigs and buffalos and damage they have created.

When we find yellow chats, we also watch them to see how they use the habitat, the types of insects they are eating and what vegetation they need. Do they always stay on the same type of plant, or is the shape, size or how dense things are that is more important?

We caught some yellow chats using nets and have put bands on their legs, so we can recognise them if we see them again. This will help us to estimate how many chats there are.

We also took some feathers to look at their genes. This will tell us how long the Kakadu chats have been separated from other yellow chats.

*Some chats were caught with nets so that we can put bands on their legs. Photo: Robin Leppitt*

*Tiwi man and local Kapalga resident Roy Tipaloura helping researcher Robin Leppitt to find and access floodplain habitat areas. Photo: Robin Leppitt*

## Who is involved?

Robin Leppitt from Charles Darwin University is the main person doing the work. He is working closely with Traditional Owners within Kakadu National Park, as well as the Park staff. He is also working with the Park Rangers at Fogg Dam and some cattle station owners on the Mary River Floodplain. Robin also gets advice from other people at Charles Darwin University, including Stephen Garnett, John Woinarski, Peter Kyne and Luke Einoder.

## When is the research happening?

This project is going for four years from 2016 until 2020.



*A male Aligator Rivers yellow chat with leg bands. The bands allow the team to estimate population sizes during surveys. Photo: Keith Lightbody*

*A female Alligator Rivers yellow chat, which is paler than the male. Photo: Keith Lightbody*

## More information

If you want to talk about this project you can contact:

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Threatened Species Recovery Hub
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