Outstanding Terrestrial Vertebrate Faunal Diversity in the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area, New South Wales

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We have compiled a comprehensive account of the native terrestrial fauna of the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area. A total of 432 species has been reliably recorded within the area since European settlement, including 68 mammal, 254 bird, 74 reptile and 36 frog species. At least five species are represented by more than one subspecies. There have been losses: one mammal species is now totally extinct and eight others appear to be extinct in the World Heritage Area. Seventy-three species are currently listed as threatened under NSW and Commonwealth legislation, including 28 mammal, 34 bird, 4 reptile and 7 frog species. It is still a rich and diverse fauna of international significance, but it is a fauna under threat, a situation made worse by the bushfires of 2019-20, which burnt a globally unprecedented proportion of Australia’s temperate forests, including 75% of the World Heritage Area. There is much to be done to support the recovery of the region’s biodiversity after the fires. This should include an increase in land management staff and resources and the establishment of a systematic, comprehensive, long-term biodiversity monitoring program as a basis for effective adaptive management practices in these uncertain times.

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KEYWORDS: birds, climate change, drought, fire, frogs, mammals, reptiles, threatened species.

INTRODUCTION

The Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area in the dramatic sandstone ranges west of Sydney covers over one million hectares or one third of the area of Belgium. It extends some 200 km south from the Hunter Valley to the Southern Tablelands and 35-100 km west from the Nepean River to the top of the Great Dividing Range (Figure 1). It is within the traditional lands of the Dakinjung, Darug, Dharawal, Gundgungurra, Wanaruah and Wiradjuri Aboriginal nations and encompasses eight conservation reserves: Blue Mountains, Gardens of Stone, Kanangra-Boyd, Nattai, Thirlmere Lakes and Yengo National Parks and Jenolan Karst Conservation Reserve (NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service 2009).

In 2000, the Greater Blue Mountains was granted World Heritage status in recognition of its outstanding natural values. Well known values include the rich native flora with around 1500 plant species (NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service 2009), the diversity of eucalypt tree species (the term ‘eucalypt’ refers to the closely related genera Eucalyptus, Angophora and Corymbia of the family Myrtaceae), with 98 species currently known in the area (Smith et al. 2018), and iconic plant species such as the critically endangered Wollemi Pine Wollemia nobilis, the Pink Flannel Flower Actinotus forsythii which appears after fires, and the more common Waratah Telopea speciosissima and Mountain Devil Lambertia formosa. The diversity of the extensive eucalypt forest and woodland communities is also renowned, though the diversity of more restricted vegetation communities, including rainforests, heaths and wetlands, is perhaps less appreciated.

The World Heritage listed values also include the fauna but the contribution that the fauna makes to the area’s biodiversity has generally received less
Figure 1. Map of Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area
attention than the flora. The fauna includes vertebrate and invertebrate species, both terrestrial and aquatic. Here, we document the native terrestrial vertebrate fauna of the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area to demonstrate its diversity and to show that there is still much to be learnt. A more detailed account of the fauna is provided in Smith et al. (2019).

STUDY AREA

The World Heritage Area is a predominantly natural area. Vast areas of wilderness, declared under the NSW Wilderness Act (1987), in Blue Mountains, Kanangra-Boyd, Nattai, Wollemi and Yengo National Parks, constitute almost two-thirds of the area.

Elevation ranges from near sea level along the Nepean and Colo Rivers in the east to over 1000 m along the Great Dividing Range in the west. The climate becomes progressively wetter and colder with increasing elevation. Lower elevations experience mild temperate conditions but in the north-east, on the fringes of the Hunter Valley, conditions are warm temperate. At higher elevations, the conditions become cool temperate. The highest elevations, in Kanangra-Boyd National Park, are subject to frequent fogs and frosts and occasional snowfalls, and the climate here is alpine (Smith et al. 2019).

Most of the World Heritage Area is within the Sydney Basin Bioregion and overlies Triassic sandstone rocks. Small shale remnants, basalt-capped mountains and patches of alluvium are scattered throughout the sandstone. The south-west of the World Heritage Area, in Jenolan Caves Karst Conservation Reserve and Kanangra-Boyd and south-western Blue Mountains National Parks, lies beyond the Sydney Basin Bioregion within the South Eastern Highlands Bioregion. Here, the underlying rocks are older and are part of the Lachlan Fold Belt. Over the eons, extensive folding and faulting has produced a mixture of sedimentary rocks such as sandstone, siltstone and limestone, and metamorphic rocks such as quartzite, slate and phylite, interspersed with intrusions of igneous rocks. Older rocks are also evident at the central western edge of the World Heritage Area in Gardens of Stone National Park. This park is at the junction of three bioregions – Sydney Basin, South Eastern Highlands and NSW South Western Slopes – and Triassic and Permian Sydney Basin rocks merge with sedimentary and metamorphic rocks of Devonian age (Smith et al. 2019, Washington and Wray 2015).

The Greater Blue Mountains region consists of uplifted plateaus, which dip gently from west to east. A series of faults and steep monoclines, known as the Lapstone Moncline, separates the ‘mountains’ from the Cumberland Plain to the east. The west of the area straddles the Great Dividing Range, which divides the catchments of east and west flowing streams. Over millennia, the streams have eroded and dissected the plateaus to form a maze of ridges incised by alluvial valleys with sandy floors, gorges, canyons, sandstone cliffs and outcrops, and steep talus slopes. The area’s distinctive ‘gardens of stone’ consist of rock turrets known as ‘pagodas’, together with cliffs, slot canyons and flat-topped mesas. In the south-west of the area, ancient bands of limestone derived from coral have weathered to form caves such as the spectacular Jenolan Caves. Across most of the World Heritage Area, the soils are sandstone based and are sandy, shallow, well-drained and infertile. Patches of moderate to high fertility soils are associated with occurrences of shale, volcanic rocks and alluvium. The soils on the Permian rocks of the deeper valleys and lower slopes below the cliffs are also relatively fertile (Smith et al. 2019, Washington and Wray 2015).

The World Heritage Area is within one of the most bushfire prone areas of Australia (Hammill and Tasker 2010). Its plants and animals have been subject to earlier Aboriginal burning practices, more recent European fire management and, over millions of years, recurring wildfires. Fire has been an important factor in the evolution of the local fauna. Across the area, differing combinations of fire frequency, intensity, season and extent, have contributed to the diversity of fauna habitats.

The varied elevations, climates, geologies, landforms, soils and fire histories have shaped the evolution of a mosaic of different types of eucalypt forest and woodland, interspersed with pockets of other habitats where eucalypts are absent or few, including rainforest, heath, swamp, open wetlands, watercourses, cliffs and other rock formations. These diverse habitats provide many opportunities for fauna.

METHODS

In order to determine which native terrestrial vertebrate fauna species have been recorded in the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area since European settlement we searched the following sources of information: writings of early explorers, travellers and guides; online wildlife databases including NSW BioNet Atlas, Atlas of Living Australia, eBird Australia, Online Zoological
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Collections of Australian Museums and National Flying-fox Monitoring Program; NSW National Parks and Wildlife fauna surveys; wildlife carer records; published and unpublished reports; bird and frog club newsletters; sub-fossil records from Jenolan Caves; and naturalists’ records including our own and others. A full list of sources is included in Smith et al. (2019). We viewed all records with caution. Records that could not be placed within the boundaries of the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area or where identifications were in doubt were not included. All records were collated in a checklist indicating in which of the eight constituent reserves of the World Heritage Area each species has been recorded. Where known, records for subspecies are indicated. For species with no recent (2000 or later) records in a known, records for subspecies are indicated. For birds, scientific names follow Birdlife Australia (2018) and common names follow Menkhorst et al. (2017). For frogs and reptiles, species nomenclature follows Cogger (2014).

RESULTS

We found a total of 432 native terrestrial vertebrate fauna species that have been reliably recorded within the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area since European settlement (Appendix 1). These include 68 mammal, 254 bird, 74 reptile and 36 frog species. Five species are represented by more than one subspecies: Striated Pardalote Pardalotus striatus, Australian Magpie Gymnorhina tibicen, Eastern Yellow Robin Eopsaltria australis, Silveryeye Zosterops lateralis and Eastern Banjo Frog Limnodynastes dumerili.

The 68 mammals include representatives of 21 families and all three evolutionary lines, monotremes, marsupials and placentals. Two of only three surviving species of monotremes – the Platypus Ornithorhynchus anatinus and Short-beaked Echidna Tachyglossus aculeatus – inhabit the World Heritage Area. The marsupials are represented by 29 species, including carnivorous quolls, insectivorous antechinus and dunnarts, omnivorous bandicoots, and herbivorous gliders, possums, wombats, koalas, kangaroos and wallabies. The placentals, which evolved in the northern hemisphere and are relatively recent arrivals to the Australian continent, are represented by a surprisingly high number of native species. The 37 native placentals in the area outnumber the marsupials and monotremes, and comprise nine rodents, 27 bats and the Dingo Canis lupus dingo.

The 254 birds number around one third of all Australian bird species (747 breeding residents or regular migrants: Menkhorst et al. 2017). Sixty-one bird families are represented in the area, with the honeyeater family (family Meliphagidae) the most numerous with 29 species. Parrots and cockatoos (families Psittaculidae and Cacatuidae) with 18 species are also prominent.

The 74 reptiles are likewise diverse and include one freshwater turtle (family Chelidae), 51 lizards including 5 dragon lizards (family Agamidae), 5 gekkos (families Carphodactylidae and Diplodactylidae), 3 snake-lizards (family Pygopodidae), 35 skinks (family Scincidae) and 3 goannas (family Varanidae), and 22 snakes including 1 python (family Boidiae), 2 tree snakes (family Pygopodidae), 16 front-fanged snakes (family Elapidae) and 3 blind snakes (family Typhlopidae). Wollemi National Park, with 67 reptile species, and Blue Mountains National Park, with 57 species, support particularly rich reptilian faunas.

The 36 frogs include 18 tree frogs (family Hylidae), 10 southern ground frogs (family Myobatrachidae) and 8 limnodynastid ground frogs (family Limnodynastidae). The frogs are most abundant and diverse at warmer lower elevations. Wollemi National Park boasts 30 frog species and Blue Mountains National Park 25 species, but only 12 species have been recorded in Jenolan Karst Conservation Reserve and 16 species in Kanangra-Boyd National Park. Five species – Fletcher’s Frog Lechriodus fletcheri, Sudell’s Frog Neobatrachus sudelli, Haswell’s Frog Paracrinia haswelli, Tyler’s Toadlet Litoria tyleri and Green and Golden Bellfrog Litoria aurea – have only been recorded once in the World Heritage Area.

Seventy-three terrestrial vertebrate fauna species in the World Heritage Area, including 28 mammal, 34 bird, 4 reptile and 7 frog species, are currently listed as threatened under the NSW Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016 and Commonwealth Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 (Appendix 1). Recently listed species include the Dusky Woodswallow Artamus cyanopterus (listed in 2016), Greater Glider Petauroides volans (2016) and White-throated Needletail Hirundapus caudacutus (2019). Twelve bird species are protected under international migratory bird agreements including the Bonn Convention, China-Australia Migratory Bird Agreement, Japan-Australia Migratory Bird Agreement and Republic of Korea-Australia Migratory Bird Agreement (Appendix 1).
The 432 native terrestrial vertebrate species recorded in the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area since European settlement are a rich and diverse fauna of international significance. The native fish and thousands of invertebrate species, many only poorly known, add to this remarkable faunal diversity.

There is still work to be done to achieve a complete description of the fauna. The identities of some species in the area need to be clarified. The Feathertail Glider Acrobates pygmaeus/frontalis (formal distinction of the two species not yet published; Van Dyck et al. 2013) and Mountain Brushtail Possum Trichosurus caninus/cunninghami (Lindenmayer et al. 2002) have each recently been divided into two separate species. In both cases, the two species cannot be readily distinguished unless examined in the hand. Both Feathertail Gliders and both Mountain Brushtail Possums may inhabit the World Heritage Area, but this has not yet been confirmed. We identified five species represented by more than one subspecies. There are likely to be more such species as information regarding subspecies was often lacking. For example, the Common Ringtail Possum Pseudocheirus peregrinus, which is a familiar local species, has not been identified to subspecies level in the available records. Two different subspecies may be present in the World Heritage Area. Sadly, the identity of the species of bettongs chased by local children in the early 1800s will probably never be known. Three different species were recorded historically in the vicinity of the World Heritage Area but records within the World Heritage Area are insufficient to identify which species were present and how many. All three species are now locally extinct.

The status of a number of species within the area requires further investigation. For example, the continued presence of the Brush-tailed Phascogale Phascogale tapoatafa in the World Heritage Area needs to be verified. This species was widespread in the past but the only recent confirmed records (2003 and an undated record) have come from what appears to be a small, isolated population at Jenolan Caves. An unconfirmed sighting there in late 2019 (A. Musser and J. Wilkinson pers. comm.) suggests that this population still survives. Other examples are three threatened cave-breeding microbats, the Eastern Bent-winged Bat Miniopterus orianae, Large-eared Pied Bat Chalinolobus diversi and Eastern Cave Bat Vespadelus roughtoni, which apparently breed in the World Heritage Area but their local maternity sites are yet to be located.

The number of bird species recorded far outnumbers the numbers of mammals, reptiles and frogs. The abundance of honeyeaters (29 species) mirrors the abundance of nectar-rich flowers. Winter-flowering banksias – Heath-leaved Banksia Banksia ericifolia, Hairpin Banksia B. spinulosa and B. cunninghamii, and Silver Banksia B. marginata – attract increased numbers of Yellow-faced Honeyeaters Caligavis chrysops, White-naped Honeyeaters Melithreptus lunatus and other honeyeaters into the area. In contrast to nectar, insects are scarce over the cold winter months and many insect-eating birds, including the Rufous Whistler Pachycephala rufiventris, Black-faced Monarch Monarcha melanopsis, Leaden Flycatcher Myiagra rubecula, Satin Flycatcher M. cyanoleuca and Rufous Fantail Rhipidura rufifrons, migrate to Queensland and New Guinea. Their absence means that fewer species of birds are present in winter but, because of the huge influx of honeyeaters, bird numbers are greatest in winter (Smith and Smith 2017).

Some characteristic birds of the World Heritage Area are ones associated with higher elevation colder climates. The Gang-gang Cockatoo Callocephalon fimbriatum, Flame Robin Petroica phoeicaea, Satin Flycatcher, Crescent Honeyeater Phylidonyris pyrrhopterus and Grey Currawong Strepera versicolor are ‘mountains’ birds rarely encountered in the adjacent coastal lowlands around Sydney. Worryingly, there are indications that these birds of colder climes may now be declining within the area as a consequence of climate change. Another characteristic bird is the cave-nesting Rockwarbler Origma solitaria, the only bird species endemic to mainland New South Wales. The Rockwarbler is essentially restricted to the Sydney Basin and is a moderately common breeding resident in the World Heritage Area, occurring in all eight reserves (Smith et al. 2019).

We could find no recent (this century) records for 25 species in the area (9 mammals, 8 birds, 3 reptiles and 5 frogs). Other species have been recorded recently but have suffered range contractions or population declines. The fauna includes 73 species currently listed as threatened under NSW and Commonwealth legislation. These include almost half of the mammals (28 species). One species, the White-footed Rabbit-rat Conilurus albipes, is now totally extinct, and eight other species – Eastern Quoll Dasyurus viverrinus, Southern Brown Bandicoot Isoodon obesulus, at least one bettong Bettongia species, Long-nosed Potoroo Potorous tridactylis, Broad-toothed Rat Mastocomas...
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...fascus, Plains Mouse *Pseudomys australis*, Smoky Mouse *P. fumeus* and Hastings River Mouse *P. oralis* – appear to be extinct in the World Heritage Area but still survive elsewhere in Australia. Apart from the Eastern Quoll, the only confirmed records of these nine species since European settlement are skeletal remains in owl pellets deposited in Nettle Cave in Jenolan Karst Conservation Reserve (Morris et al. 1997). Across Australia, small and medium-sized, ground-dwelling mammals have been the species most prone to extinction or severe decline since European settlement. In keeping with this general pattern, over half the native rodent species recorded in the World Heritage Area have become locally or totally extinct since European settlement.

The causes are poorly understood and it is not always appreciated that even in extensive uncleared tablelands forests like the World Heritage Area, the mammal fauna has suffered many losses. The iconic Greater Glider has declined more recently, especially at lower elevations. Its decline appears to be related to increasing temperatures (Smith and Smith 2018), and the unfolding impacts of rapid climate change are a matter of concern for all fauna.

Threatened birds include the critically endangered Regent Honeyeater *Anthochaera phrygia*, which sits on the brink of extinction, as well as the Gang-gang Cockatoo, Flame Robin *Petroica phoenica*, Scarlet Robin *P. multicolor* and Dusky Woodswallow, which were all considered moderately common as recently as the 1980s (Smith and Smith 1990). There are, however, also examples (though a lesser number) of bird species that have increased. Since the 1980s, the Sulphur-crested Cockatoo *Cacatua galerita*, Brown Cuckoo-Dove *Macropygia phasianella*, Bell Miner *Manorina melanophrys*, and even the threatened Sooty Owl *Tyto tenebricosa* and Powerful Owl *Ninox strenua*, have increased markedly in the area.

The threatened reptiles include the endangered Blue Mountains Swamp Skink *Eulamprus leuraensis*, Heath Monitor *Varanus rosenbergi*, Broad-headed Snake *Hoplocephalus bungaroides* and Stephens’s Banded Snake *H. stephensi*. The Blue Mountains Swamp Skink is found only in the World Heritage Area and adjacent lands.

A few frogs, such as the Common Eastern Froglet (*Crinia signifera*), Brown-striped Frog (*Limnodynastes peronii*) and Peron’s Tree Frog (*Litoria peronii*), have increased in the area since European settlement. Many others have declined and seven frogs in the World Heritage Area are threatened species. A major cause of frog declines in Australia and worldwide is an infectious chytrid skin fungus (NSW Scientific Committee 2003). This disease has spread since the 1970s and has particularly affected frogs in montane rainforests, where the cooler conditions best suit the fungus. This fungus is present in the World Heritage Area and the six species most closely associated with rainforest and wet sclerophyll forest – Tusked Frog *Adelophus brevis*, Fletcher’s Frog, Stuttering Frog *Mixophyes balbus*, Great Barred Frog *M. fasciolatus*, Giant Barred Frog *M. iteratus* and Red-eyed Tree Frog *Litoria chloris* – are all now rare in the area. Many frog species have suffered range contractions, especially at higher elevations.

Four species formerly known from Jenolan Karst Conservation Reserve, and five species known from Kanangra-Boyd National Park, have not been recorded in those reserves this century. Other species, such as the Brown Toadlet *Pseudophryne bibronii*, Green and Golden Bellfrog *Litoria aurea* and Green Tree Frog *L. caerulea*, have declined at lower elevations. The chytrid fungus is not the only threat to frogs.

A dearth of recent records for some species that are not yet recognised as threatened, such as the Dusky Antechinus *Antechinus swainsonii*, Rose Robin *Petroica rosea* and Pink-tongued Lizard *Cyclocomorphus gerrardi*, suggest that they too may be declining (Smith et al. 2019).

An extraordinarily high number of the fauna species are at or near the edge of their range in the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area: one third (20 species) of the mammals, a tenth (29 species not including vagrant species) of the birds, half (37 species) of the reptiles and almost three-quarters (25 species) of the frogs. A few species, such as the Southern Water Skink *Eulamprus tympanum* and Fletcher’s Frog, occur as isolated populations well away from other populations outside the World Heritage Area. Populations at the edge of a species’ range or isolated from other populations are likely to be genetically distinct and important for maintaining the genetic diversity of the species. Genetic diversity will be crucial as species face the increasing challenges of surviving and adapting to climate change.

The faunal diversity of the World Heritage Area is a result of a number of factors working together: the vast area of the World Heritage Area (over one million hectares); the extensive tracts of wilderness (two thirds of the area is declared wilderness); the diverse fauna habitats in close proximity which reflect varied elevations, microclimates, geologies, soils, topographies and fire histories; and the presence of remnant native vegetation in surrounding more fertile lands. Faunal diversity is also enhanced by the location of the World Heritage Area at the convergence of moist coastal areas to the east, dry western slopes, cold
southern tablelands and warm northern sub-tropics. Fauna from these different surrounding areas come together in the World Heritage Area and combined with wide-ranging species and a few local specialists, notably the Blue Mountains Swamp Skink, produce a rich fauna.

In October 2019 we published a book, Native Fauna of the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area (Smith et al. 2019), in which we concluded that there was much to celebrate in 2020 on the 20th anniversary of the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area listing on 29th November 2000. Since publication, bushfires over the 2019-20 spring and summer have burnt enormous swathes of forested country in south-eastern Australia. These were the largest fires recorded in temperate Australian forests since European settlement. They burnt 21% of Australia’s temperate forests, which is a globally unprecedented percentage burnt for any continental forest biome in a single fire season (Boer et al. 2020). The unusual scale of the fires has been attributed to extreme drought conditions and high temperatures drying out fire fuels to an extraordinary degree and also compromising the normal role of damp gullies and wetter vegetation types in impeding the spread of fire across the landscape (Nolan et al. 2020). The fires are an indication that the more flammable future predicted under climate change (Bradstock 2010, Clarke and Evans 2019) has arrived earlier than anticipated (Boer et al. 2020).

The Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area was one of the areas worst affected by the fires. About 75% of the area was burnt, based on the Google Earth Engine Burnt Area Map for 3 February 2020, taking account of unburnt areas within the fire boundary (Roff and Aravena 2020). However, fire intensity was variable, with 12% of the area severely burnt (vegetation canopy fully affected), 35% moderately burnt (canopy partially affected) and 28% lightly burnt (understorey burnt but canopy unburnt). There is still much to celebrate on this 20th anniversary of World Heritage listing, but the impacts of rapid, unabated climate change - drought, record high temperatures and consequent devastating fires - mean there is now also much to be done to support the recovery of the region’s biodiversity after the fires. This should include an increase in land management staff and resources and the establishment of a systematic, comprehensive, long-term biodiversity monitoring program as a basis for effective adaptive management practices in these uncertain times. All fauna species will be diminished in the area and valuable genetic diversity has been lost as a consequence of the unprecedented wildfires. Many species will be threatened locally, some of which may be locally extinct. Additional species may now also be threatened at state or national level. Unless there is community and political will to value and work to restore the biodiversity of the Greater Blue Mountains, the future of the area’s native terrestrial fauna is bleak and we will have failed both the fauna and future generations.

REFERENCES

NSW Scientific Committee (2003). Final Determination to list ‘Infection of frogs by amphibian chytrid causing the disease chytridiomycosis’ as a Key Threatening Process in Schedule 3 of the NSW Threatened...
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Sugar Glider (Petaurus breviceps)

Crimson Rosella (Platycercus elegans)
### Appendix 1. Checklist of the Native Fauna of the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area


Dates in the table are the last records for each reserve, rec = recent records (2000 or later), und = undated records, ext = probably extinct in WHA, < = before.


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<th>Scientific name</th>
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J. SMITH AND P. SMITH.
## BLUE MOUNTAINS TERRESTRIAL VERTEBRATE FAUNA

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### Supplementary Images

- **Bearded Dragon** (*Pogona barbata*): ![Bearded Dragon](image1)
- **Blue Mountains Tree Frog** (*Litoria citropa*): ![Blue Mountains Tree Frog](image2)