Wildfire prevention is needed to ensure this bird’s future. The small population of birds is now restricted to an area between Cloncurry and the Northern Territory Border. Only recently did the bird’s rarity become apparent.

The tiny Carpentarian Grasswren is found only in Australia’s Gulf country. This endearing bird lives in rocky areas and contains the stronghold of the Carpentarian Grasswren population. The Calton Hills Board has agreed to collaborate and contains the stronghold of the Carpentarian Grasswren population. The Calton Hills Board has agreed to collaborate on fire management on the property to protect both Grasswren habitat and pastoral production over the next 18 months and beyond.

The project has six elements

1. Engagement and partnership building
   Engagement and partnership building are well-advanced. Southern Gulf NRM’s consultant Gay Crowley and fulltime Environment and Heritage officer, Kayler Plant, have received enthusiastic responses from all stakeholders. Calton Hills’ participation is a boon to the project, and, as well as supporting fire management at planning and operational stages, they have undertaken to build a team to manage fires across the property.

2. Fire management planning
   A fire management plan for Calton Hills has been prepared by Mick Blackman and Jackie McLeod of Friendly Fire Ecological Consultants. This involves securing the perimeter of the property by burning fire breaks from the roads along the property boundary, followed by using aerial incendiaries to break up fuel loads. The patchy mosaic of old and new spinifex created will ensure substantial areas of Grasswren habitat are retained, even in the event of wildfire.

3. Fire management training and capacity building
   Gavin Fryar of Queensland Fire and Emergency Services has been advising us on training and capacity building to ensure that fire management is undertaken competently and that efforts can be sustained for many years to come. Southern Gulf is coordinating multiple relationships so as to provide three levels of training to a team of station managers, station hands and Indigenous rangers. Queensland Fire and Emergency Services provide introductory training, for example, while Friendly Fire Ecological Consultants will be providing on-ground mentoring. Training will include the basic competencies required to allow them to participate in fire management activities (such as OH&S, team building and permit requirements). We also hope to provide training in ecological and Indigenous fire management.

INTRODUCING:
Kayler Plant has been appointed to manage Southern Gulf NRM’s Critical Habitat projects. Kayler can be contacted on 07 4743 1888 or at enviro@southerngulf.com.au. Kayler has joined the team as the newly created Environment and Heritage Officer. She graduated from James Cook University with a Bachelor of Science majoring in Natural Resource Management. Prior to moving to Mount Isa, Kayler worked in the Oil and Gas Industry throughout Australia as an Environmental Scientist. Her role with Southern Gulf NRM focuses on sustaining the region’s natural and cultural environment. Thank you to Gay Crowley who continues to consult for and on behalf of Southern Gulf NRM.
4. Fire management
Planned burning operations on Calton Hills will commence in the 2017/18 wet season using the trained team of fire managers and will be supervised by Friendly Fire Ecological Consultants. The hot, dry conditions that have prevailed in the latter part of the 2016/17 wet season prevented an earlier start. However, similar conditions over the last three wet season have also retarded fuel accumulation. So, while a delay in active fire management was an unfortunate set-back, the consensus was that burning this wet season could have posed a greater wildfire risk to the Grasswrens than not burning at all. A component of this task is also mapping of fire scars which will also help to establish whether the project has successfully established the multi-aged spinifex mosaic essential for the Grasswren’s persistence.

5. Grasswren surveys and fire monitoring
Glencore’s support for the project has enabled Southern Gulf NRM to support BirdLife North Queensland’s (BNQ) annual Grasswren survey. A grant subsidised volunteer participation in surveys held recently, in June this year. It is anticipated that a further grant will be made for the 2018 survey. BNQ’s surveys provide an essential tool for assessing the success of our project. The objective of the survey was to fill in the knowledge gaps. This year’s survey included areas of suitable habitat in the eastern section of Calton Hills that have not previously been surveyed.

6. Legacy building
When the first part of this project is successful, it is intended that the fire management skills be extended to the wider region so as to also protect up to 20,000 km² of Grasswren habitat by linking Calton Hills and Boodjamulla NP with collaborative fire management projects. We will do this by developing an off-the-shelf offset product to attract investment from companies that are required to offset the environmental impacts of mining and other developments on Grasswren habitat.

Potentially the project’s demonstrated benefits to other species threatened by fire in the North-West Highlands, will attract a wider range of offset investments, and thus secure a long-term future for these species.

Images courtesy of the June 2017 survey by BirdLife Australia. Buckley River area within the Southern Gulf NRM region.
As a partner to the current Carpentarian Grasswren project, Southern Gulf NRM staff have had the immense pleasure of meeting a number of volunteers from the Northern Queensland branch of BirdLife Australia who have been focused on the region’s birds. Their knowledge and generosity in sharing that knowledge is essential to the Glencore funded project (see page 4).

For example those volunteers organised the recent survey for the endangered Carpentarian Grasswren, that commenced to the north of Mount Isa and birds were found. Each sighting helps fill the knowledge gaps of this threatened species and the time and motivation of the volunteers is priceless. Southern Gulf hopes to profile some of those key volunteers, in future publications; they were unavailable for this edition being as they are still progressing through the survey locations!

The objective of the extensive volunteer hours, to quote from their website:
“BirdLife Australia is committed to finding science-based solutions to the problems faced by our birds. Our campaigns are developed to complement the work of our on-ground programs but the issues are complex and the solutions will take time”

The Boodjamulla and Buckley River Key Biodiversity Areas (KBA) form part of a standardised international conservation initiative and are key habitat areas for the Carpentarian Grasswren. Efforts of the volunteers along with other interested stakeholders including Boodjamulla National Park and Southern Gulf NRM are key to safeguarding local threatened species which in turn contributes to global initiatives.

The full ‘Key Biodiversity Areas’ report for Australia can be found on their website <www.birdlife.org.au/campaigns/local-action-global-importance > and is highly recommended. Being as the Boodjamulla (Lawn Hill) area was identified in 2014 as one of the five most significant sites ‘in danger’ in Australia, the BirdLife Australia’s work closely links to the ‘critical habitats’ projects of Southern Gulf. Even better is the good news that in the latest reports of 2017 the status of Boodjamulla has been improved to now be removed from the ‘in danger’ list.

BirdLife Australia’s website describes the role of ‘Key Biodiversity Areas’;
“An assessment of the current status of Australia’s Key Biodiversity Areas (KBAs) paints a grim picture for threatened birds. In 2017, 19 KBAs have been declared as ‘in danger’ of losing the environmental values that make them important. These KBAs require urgent action to arrest their decline. Each of these KBAs in Danger provides habitat for species that could soon become extinct should the current threats persist. To highlight this, BirdLife Australia is turning its attention to five KBAs in urgent need of protection. The 2017 ‘KBAs in Danger’ report provides a snapshot of the health of five KBAs that require urgent intervention. This report outlines the most pressing threats, along with straightforward recommendations to ensure the critical habitats in these KBAs and the birds that depend on them are not lost forever. In 2014, BirdLife Australia produced a similar report which acted as a catalyst to improve the status of those sites and some of our most threatened birds. With your help, we were able to take two of these KBAs off the ‘in Danger’ list and the future of the species that depend on them looks a little brighter.”