Southern Gulf NRM

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Smoke Signals Controlled Burning for Conservation

Large areas of smoke to the north of Mount Isa are a result of fire being dropped from a helicopter in efforts to protect the endangered Carpentarian Grasswren (*Amytornis Dorotheae*) that inhabit the highly flammable spinifex hummocks.

The controlled burns took place this last week and are part of the Biodiversity Bright Spots program delivered by Southern Gulf NRM. The burn program aims to conserve populations of these small and sprightly grasswrens on Calton Hills and Thorntonia stations. Southern Gulf NRM have worked closely with the landholders and technical experts from Fireland Consultancy to meticulously map and plan these burns so that they were ready to fire when the right conditions presented.

The aerial incendiaries dropped from the helicopter by the fire specialist are created by a specialized machine, the R3 Raindance. The machine combines a small capsule with a reactant to produce a fiery ball thrown down from the helicopter. The capsules remain lit for about 30 seconds allowing time to ignite targeted areas of old-growth spinifex.

The delivery of these small and fragmented burns across inaccessible and remote areas on the properties over the last six years have significantly improved the condition of this valuable habitat for the Carpentarian Grasswren and land condition. The fires have reduced the extent of high fuel loads and they have created a mosaic landscape to include patches of new growth spinifex grass amongst the old and flammable grass, creating fire breaks to stop the potential spread of wildfires that are a major threat to the Carpentaria Grasswrens.

Project Officer, Lyndy Skea, advises that 'managing high fuel loads across these remote areas is an important aspect of reducing the risks of wildfire spread. We want to avoid large wildfires like those that spread across the North West Queensland in 2011 and 2012, as they can have devastating effects on biodiversity and land condition'.

This project is delivered by Southern Gulf NRM, through funding from the Australian Government's National Landcare Program.

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Please find below some information on the Carpentarian Grasswren and some photos of burns.

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Carpentarian Grasswren – Fast Facts

- The Carpentarian Grasswren is largely confined to North West Queensland, in the region between Mount Isa and the Northern Territory border and is classified as an endangered species under Australian and Queensland environmental laws after numbers were severely affected by extensive, hot, dry-season wildfires that burnt through the region in 2011 and 2012.
- Long-unburnt spinifex clumps are a vital habitat component for the endangered Carpentarian Grasswren. Ironically, well-managed fire is the best tool to ensure that sufficient unburnt spinifex remains for the bird. A mosaic of burnt and unburnt areas significantly reduces the risk of hot wildfires destroying habitat over large areas.
- Southern Gulf NRM has been involved in a series of projects aimed at the conservation of these birds including, population surveys and monitoring, radio tracking and habitat mapping.
- For more information on current and past Carpentarian Grasswren conservation efforts, head to the Southern Gulf NRM website or contact our offices.

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Carpentarian Grasswren near spinifex grass.
Photo Credit: Martin Cachard

Fire Bombardier preparing the R3 Raindance Machine for flight.
Photo Credit: Southern Gulf NRM

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Spinifex on fire.
Photo Credit: Southern Gulf NRM

Smoke from controlled burns on Calton Hills station.
Photo Credit: Southern Gulf NRM

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