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New report on endangered bird threatened by rocket launching

The Nature Conservation Society of SA (NCCSSA) has released a new report showing that the endangered Southern Emu-wren on the Eyre Peninsula has likely vanished from one of the places it previously occurred and has suffered a reduction in range of some 20% since the last comprehensive survey.

The NCCSSA survey, funded by the Wettenhall Environment Trust, focused on revisiting sites that these tiny, timid birds had been previously found on the Eyre Peninsula, aiming to update knowledge which was 15 years old in some cases.

Pleasingly, one population of Emu-wrens survived a burn at one occupied site and birds were even found for the first time in a nearby patch of habitat.

But the apparent disappearance of these birds from another previously known site, coupled with a review of the bird's current range – known as “area of occupancy” - shows ongoing decline. Emu-wrens are also still absent from places burnt in the 2005 Wangary fire, demonstrating the long-lasting impact of bushfire on these birds.

“Our report confirms what government scientists said about this bird when its level of protection was increased under our national laws last year – all remaining Southern Emu-wren habitat is critical and must be preserved. That’s at an absolute minimum”, said NCCSSA President Associate Professor Patrick O’Connor.

The report release comes as the final stage of public consultation takes place on a plan to build an experimental, industrial rocket launching facility inside Whalers Way, a sensitive conservation area and important habitat for the Southern Emu-wren.

“If approved, a rocket launching facility would clear precious habitat and disturb this endangered species, and others, through increased human presence, noise and fire risk” said Associate Professor O’Connor.

“Claims that the impacts on these birds as well as other threatened species will be “offset” are unconvincing. The strategy to do so is yet to be developed and plans to ‘protect’ other areas of existing Emu-wren habitat under State law are little comfort, since Whalers Way is supposed to be ‘protected’ under that very same law right now. There is no getting away from the fact that this conservation area is being carved up for profit. Our state and national environmental laws should prevent this”, said Associate Professor O’Connor.

“For a space industry in South Australia to be successful, it needs to meet community expectation about environmental impact. It is unsafe to place this commercial launch site in one of the last remaining habitats of an endangered species” said Associate Professor O’Connor.

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