



DEPARTMENT OF LAND RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

**Aerial Survey of Magpie Geese in the 'Top End', Northern Territory.**

**Moyle River floodplains to Murganella Creek floodplains.**

**31<sup>st</sup> March, 2014 to 4<sup>th</sup> April, 2014**

**and**

**13<sup>th</sup> May, 2014 to 19<sup>th</sup> May, 2014**

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August 2014

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A very high standard of observing was provided by Emma Jackson from the Parks and Wildlife Commission of the Northern Territory, Rachel Groom from the Department of Land Resource Management and Lindell Andrews from EcoKnowledge.

## **Abstract**

During the periods of 31<sup>st</sup> March to 4<sup>th</sup> April 2014 and 13<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> May 2014, an aerial survey of the floodplains/wetlands in the Moyle River floodplain to Murganella Creek floodplain area was conducted to determine the overall distribution and abundance of Magpie Geese in the 'Top End' of the Northern Territory. The total survey area of 16,729 km<sup>2</sup> was surveyed at a sampling intensity of 14.4%. Species counted were Magpie Goose, Magpie Goose nests, Brolga, and Jabiru. Counts for Magpie Goose and Magpie Goose nests are corrected for a combined perception and visibility bias based on correction factors derived from Bayliss & Yeomans (1990a & b).

The population estimate for Magpie Geese was 1,148,194 ± 130,108 at a precision of 11.3% within the survey area. The population estimate for Magpie Goose nests was 117,364 ± 15,755 at a precision of 13.4% within the survey area. These are considered to be minimum estimates due to the negative biases commonly associated with aerial surveys. The survey area covered all of the western 'Top End' of the Northern Territory which is considered to be the 'core' wet season nesting habitat representing 85 to 90% of the total Northern Territory population, giving an estimated 1.3 million Magpie Geese and 134,000 nests is taken to be the overall population estimate for 2014. The 2014 Magpie Goose population estimate represents a 50% decrease from the 2013 population estimate, and the high precision of the estimate gives a high degree of confidence in the estimate. The nest estimate of 134,000, while an order of magnitude greater than the 2013 estimate of 12,000 nests, still represents 'poor' nesting compared with the last 'good' nesting season of 2011.

## Introduction

The Magpie Goose, *Anseranas semipalmata*, was once widely distributed throughout Australia, with a breeding range extending from the tropical wetlands of Northern Australia to the temperate wetlands of the southern States. From the early 1900s until the early 2000s Magpie Goose populations outside the tropics declined precipitately, resulting in an almost exclusively tropical distribution. The factors leading to this decline are poorly understood but were most likely associated with the degradation of wetland habitats in the more developed southern regions.

From the early 2000s, the Australian Magpie Goose population has steadily expanded southwards, primarily along the eastern coastal area from the tropics into the temperate regions of eastern Australia (Delaney *et al.* 2009). This expansion back into their former range is attributed to the rehabilitation and recovery / of some wetland habitats in the southern temperate regions.

The coastal and sub-coastal floodplains of the Northern Territory support Australia's largest populations of Magpie Geese, with the wetlands of Kakadu National Park supporting a significant percentage of the total magpie goose population of the Northern Territory.

The NT Department of Land Resource Management, the Parks and Wildlife Commission of the Northern Territory and the Australian Department of Environment recognised the national significance of the Northern Territory's Magpie Goose populations, and the particular significance of the population(s) occurring within Kakadu National Park, and established (from 1983 to the early 2000's) a program to monitor the distribution and abundance of the populations on the major coastal and sub-coastal floodplains of the Top End of the Northern Territory (Bayliss & Yeomans 1990a, Saalfeld 1994, Saalfeld 1996).

During the period 1983 to 1993 the annual aerial survey of Magpie Geese on the Top End floodplains was conducted during the "Wet Season", so that additional data on nesting activity could be collected. Analysis of these data, while providing detailed information on instantaneous relative population distribution and abundance, was not of sufficient accuracy to develop a predictive model of Magpie Goose population distribution and abundance (Delaney *et al.* 2009). Between 1994 and 2001 surveys were undertaken during the "Dry Season" (see Bayliss & Yeomans 1990a for characterisation of "Dry Season" survey) however, as with the earlier "Wet Season" surveys, the results were not of sufficient accuracy to develop a predictive model of Magpie Goose population distribution and abundance. (Delaney *et al.* 2009).

Between 2000 and 2010 only two major aerial surveys of Magpie Geese populations in the Top End of the Northern Territory were undertaken, in 2000 and 2006. Both of these surveys covered the floodplain areas from the Moyle River in the west to Murganella in the east, including Kakadu National Park (Delaney *et al.* 2009).

In 2009, the "*Management Program for the Magpie Goose (Anseranas semipalmata) in the Northern Territory of Australia, 2009-2014*" was implemented by the Department of Natural Aerial Survey of Magpie Geese in the 'Top End', Northern Territory. August 2014

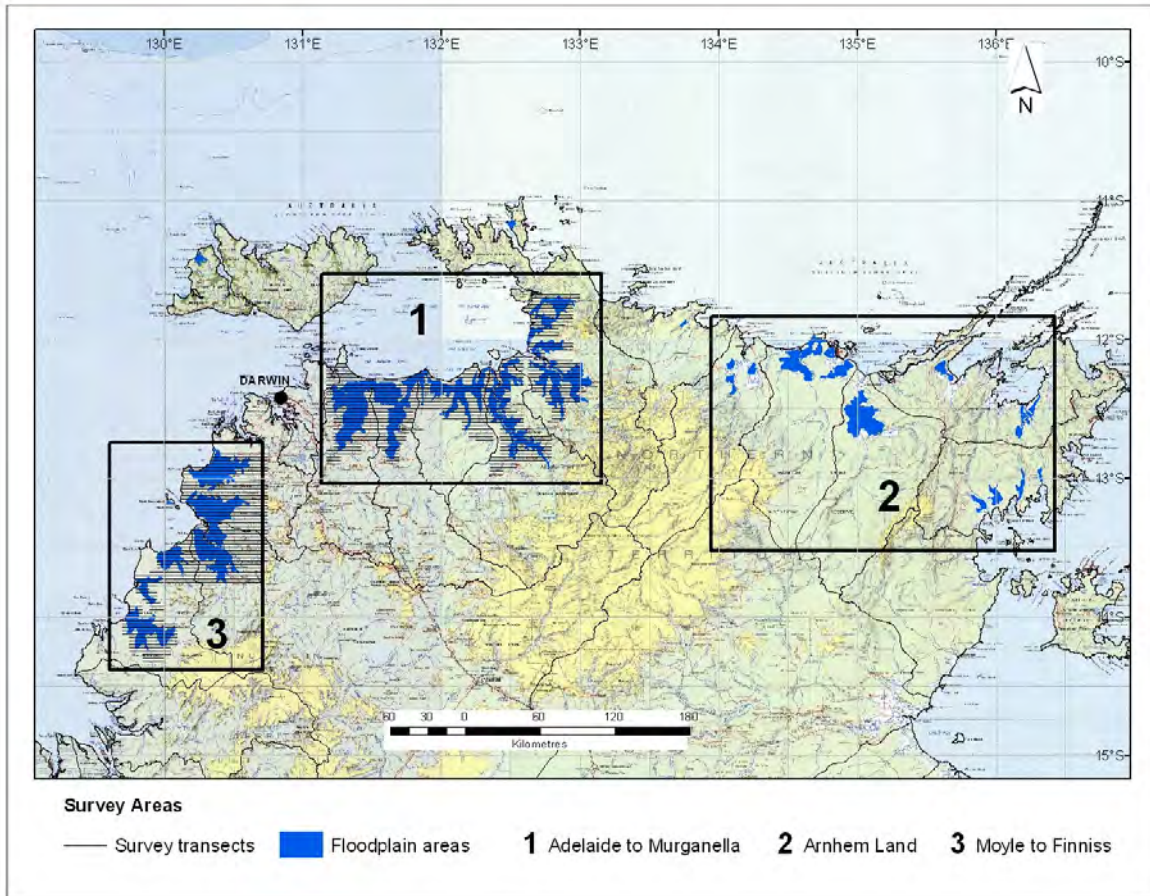
Resources, Environment, the Arts and Sport. This program has the aim to “Ensure the long-term conservation of the Magpie Goose and its habitats in the Northern Territory”. One of the actions within this program was to review and redesign the monitoring program for Magpie Geese surveys in 2010 and to implement a survey monitoring program in 2011.

Review and redesign of the Magpie Geese surveys has been completed and the outcome reported in the “*Biodiversity Monitoring Programs Reports - Monitoring program for Magpie Geese (Anseranas semipalmata) in the Northern Territory*” (Appendix 1). The review identified broad-scale aerial survey as the most effective method of obtaining precise population distribution and abundance information for Magpie Geese in the Top End of the Northern Territory. Whilst an aerial survey annually covering the entire range of the Magpie Goose would provide the maximal combination of precision and accuracy, resource limitations do not allow for this. In recognition of resource limitations, initially the range of the Magpie Goose in the Top End was broken into three major distributions (Figure 1) with each to be surveyed tri-annually. Following survey in 2011 and 2012, it was decided that survey areas 1 and 3 (Figure 1) would be surveyed biannually. Survey area 2 (Arnhem Land) represented a much smaller area of Magpie Goose nesting habitat and population than either areas 1 or 3, with Bayliss & Yeomans (1990a) estimating that approximately 15% of the Magpie Goose population occupied the Arnhem Land floodplains.

The revised monitoring program was implemented in 2011, with a survey of the Adelaide River floodplain to Murganella Creek floodplain area (Saalfeld, 2011). The Moyle River floodplain to Finniss River floodplain area was surveyed in 2012 (Saalfeld, 2012) and the Adelaide River floodplain to Murganella Creek floodplain area again in 2013 (Saalfeld, 2013). Overall population estimates from these surveys are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1: Details of population estimates from 2011 to 2013 aerial surveys.**

	Magpie Goose population (million)	Magpie Goose nests
2011	2.4 ± 0.4	283,000 ± 82,000
2012	2.9 ± 0.5	184,000 ± 36,000
2013	2.5 ± 0.4	13,000 ± 4,000



**Figure 1: Survey areas for Magpie Goose aerial surveys. Areas 1 and 3 are surveyed biannually.**

This report describes the results of the 2014 aerial survey of Magpie Geese in the Moyle River floodplain to Finnis River floodplain and the Adelaide River floodplain to Murganella Creek floodplain areas (both of areas 3 and 1). The decision to survey both of these areas in 2014, rather than the scheduled area of the Moyle River floodplain to Finnis River floodplain, was taken due to the extremely low numbers of Magpie Geese birds and nests sighted in that area. It was considered prudent to obtain current information for the Adelaide River floodplain to Murganella Creek floodplain area to determine if the observed low numbers in the Moyle River floodplain to Finnis River floodplain area applied across the total core “Wet Season” distribution, as the Adelaide River floodplain to Murganella floodplain area typically contains one half to two thirds of the total population of Magpie Geese in the Top End (Bayliss & Yeomans, 1990a).

## Methods

### *Survey Area and Design*

The Moyle River floodplains to Finnis River floodplains survey area (latitude 11<sup>0</sup>50'S to 14<sup>0</sup>20'S, longitude 129<sup>0</sup>40'E to 130<sup>0</sup>45'E) includes all major floodplains and wetland habitat within the region (Figure 2a) and was surveyed between 31 March, 2014 and 4 April, 2014. This area was divided into six major survey blocks. The southern half of the Moyle River floodplain block (block MOY, Fig. 2a) was not flown due to mechanical failure of the aircraft.

The Adelaide River floodplains to Murganella Creek floodplains survey area (latitude 11<sup>0</sup>40'S to 13<sup>0</sup>00'S, longitude 131<sup>0</sup>10E to 133<sup>0</sup>00E) includes all major floodplains and wetland habitat within that region (Fig. 2b) and was surveyed between 13 May, 2014 and 19 May, 2014. This area was divided into nine major survey blocks.

The survey was conducted using a Cessna 206 high-wing aircraft flown at a ground speed of 185 km/h (100 knots) and an altitude of 61 m (200 ft) above ground level. Altitude was maintained using a radar altimeter. Transect width on each side of the aircraft was demarcated by marker rods attached to the aircraft wing struts and calibrated (Marsh & Sinclair 1989a) to give a transect width of 200 m on each side of the aircraft at survey altitude.

Transect lines flown on the survey are shown in Figs 2a and 2b. All lines were aligned east-west to traverse perpendicularly the general north-south orientation of the major river systems, ridges and escarpments of the area. Transects were spaced at an interval of 1.5' of latitude (2.778 km) to give a survey intensity of 14.4% from the combined port and starboard transect width of 400 m. Navigation of transects was by Global Positioning System pre-programmed with all transect waypoints.

### *Counting Procedure*

Survey crew comprised a pilot/navigator, a starboard front seat observer (survey leader), a port mid seat observer and a starboard mid seat observer for the Moyle River floodplains to Finnis River floodplains area survey. A pilot/navigator, starboard front seat observer (survey leader) and port mid seat observer were used for the Adelaide River floodplains to Murganella Creek floodplains area survey. The pilot/navigator and observers could communicate via aircraft intercom, and the pilot/navigator indicated the start and finish of each transect by calling either 'start transect' or 'finish transect'.

Sightings were recorded as groups of individuals ranging from 1 to 10,000. Observers recorded their observations of Magpie Goose, Magpie Goose nests, Brolga (*Grus rubicundus*), and Jabiru (*Ephippiorhynchus asiaticus*) in a standard format using individual Hewlett Packard HP iPAQ RX5910 Palmtop Computers programmed as GPS data loggers. Data entry for each observer is as outlined in the DLRM *Magpie Goose Aerial Survey Standard Operating Procedure*.

For the Moyle River floodplains to Finniss River floodplains area survey, an alternate data logging system developed by EcoKnowledge was successfully trialled in conjunction with the standard logging procedure using the Hewlett Packard HP iPAQ RX5910 Palmtop Computers.

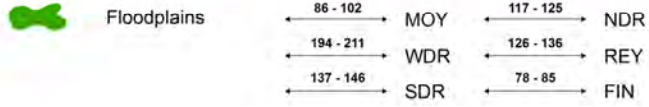
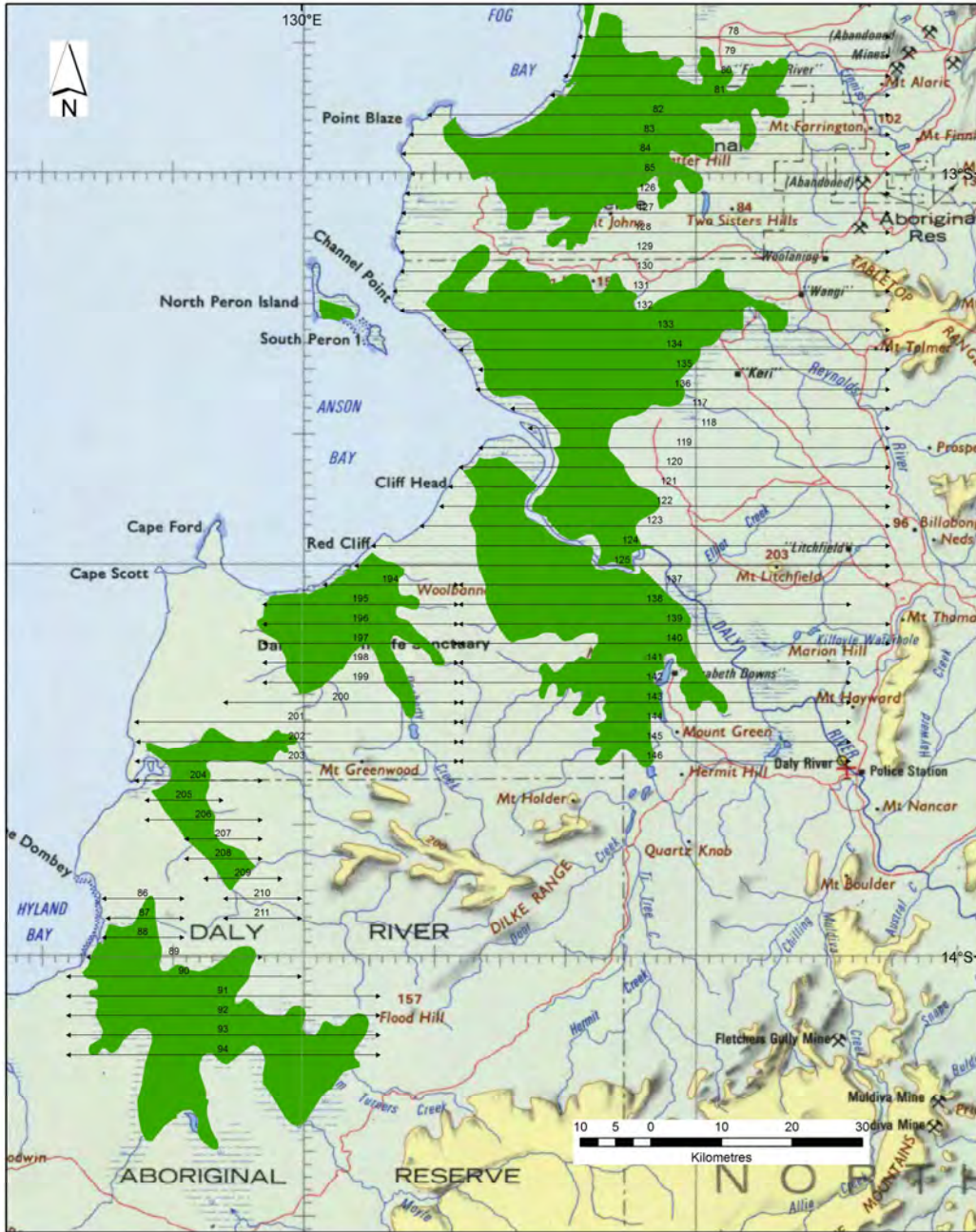
#### *Post Survey Data Editing*

Data was downloaded daily from each observer's Palmtop computer to a laptop computer. Data was immediately checked for gross errors (e.g. transects missed or errors reported by the observers), which were corrected, and the daily files from all observers merged. The resultant file was then appended to the survey master file for analysis. Data recorded using the EcoKnowledge logging system was processed in similar fashion.

#### *Analysis*

Because transects were variable in length/area, the Ratio Method (Jolly 1969, Caughley & Grigg 1981, Marsh and Sinclair 1989) was used to estimate density, population size and their associated standard errors for the survey area. Input data were the estimated numbers of each species for each observer. The resultant standard error was adjusted to incorporate the error associated with the appropriate estimates of mean group size following the method of Jolly & Watson (1979) and Marsh & Sinclair (1989). Estimates were corrected for perception and visibility bias using the wet season correction factors of Bayliss & Yeomans (1990a & b) - correction factors were 3.28 for Magpie Geese and 2.23 for Magpie Goose nests.





**Figure 2a: Survey blocks and survey transects flown in the Moyle River floodplain to Finnis River floodplain survey area**

Aerial Survey of Magpie Geese in the 'Top End', Northern Territory. August 2014

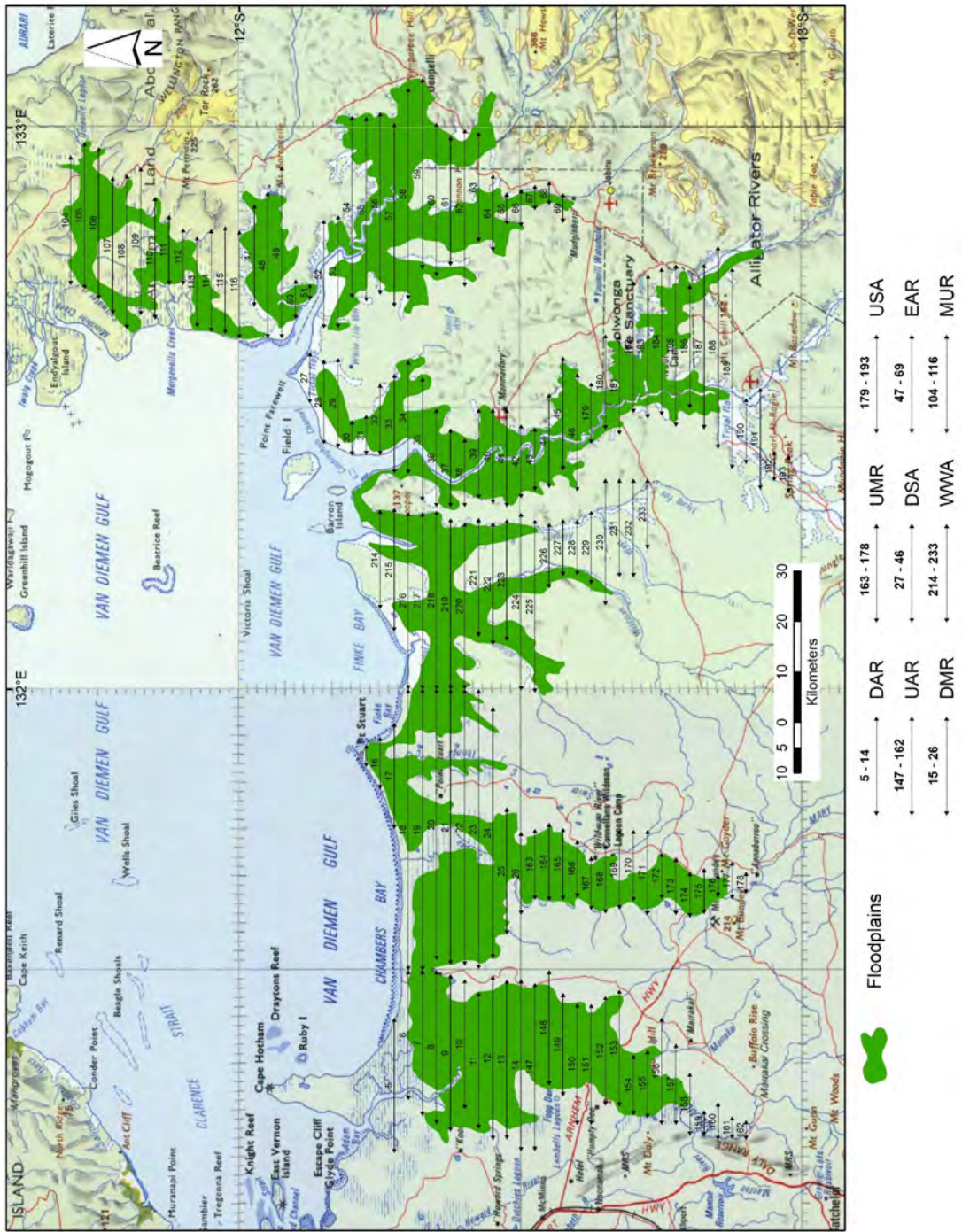


Figure 2b: Survey blocks and survey transects flown in the Adelaide River floodplain to Murganella Creek floodplain survey area.

Aerial Survey of Magpie Geese in the 'Top End', Northern Territory, August 2014

## Results

### *Minimum Population and Density Estimates*

The value of mean group size and associated coefficient of variation used in obtaining the population abundance and density for Magpie Goose and Magpie Goose nests are summarised in Table 2.

**Table 2: Details of mean group size and associated standard error used in the population estimates.**

Survey Area	Species	Mean Group Size	Standard Error
Moyle River floodplain to Finniss River floodplain	Magpie Goose	4.59	0.28
	Magpie Goose nests	1.79	0.07
Adelaide River floodplain to Murganella Creek floodplain	Magpie Goose	27.51	2.44
	Magpie Goose nests	9.24	0.78

The population estimates, density and precision figures for the survey area are presented in Tables 3a and 3b.

From Tables 3a and 3b it is apparent that the precision for population estimates within survey blocks is variable and in a number of cases quite high (greater than 20%, the level considered acceptable in providing a reasonable compromise between survey cost and ability to detect moderate to substantial change in population abundance). For the Magpie Goose population estimate for each of the survey areas the overall precision was 13.9% (Moyle River to Finniss River) and 14.3% (Adelaide River to Murganella Creek) respectively. For the Magpie Goose nest population estimate for each of the entire survey areas the overall precision was 13.7% and 18.3% respectively.

The overall (combined areas) Magpie Goose population estimate was  $1,148,194 \pm 130,108$ , which gave an overall density of  $68.6 \pm 7.8$  geese.km<sup>-2</sup> at a precision of 11.3%. For Magpie Goose nests the population estimate was  $117,364 \pm 15,755$ , which gave an overall density of  $7.0 \pm 0.9$  nests.km<sup>-2</sup> at a precision of 13.4%. For both the goose population estimate and the nest estimate the precision value was small, indicating that the overall population estimates are robust. With the recognised biases of aerial survey and the application of correction factors, these can be considered as reliable minimum population estimates.

### *Distribution of Magpie Goose and Magpie Goose nests*

Figures 3a & 3b and 4a & 4b show distribution maps for Magpie Geese and Magpie Goose nests within the survey areas. Figures 5a & 5b and 6a & 6b show kernel density distribution



maps for Magpie Geese and Magpie Goose nests within the survey areas.

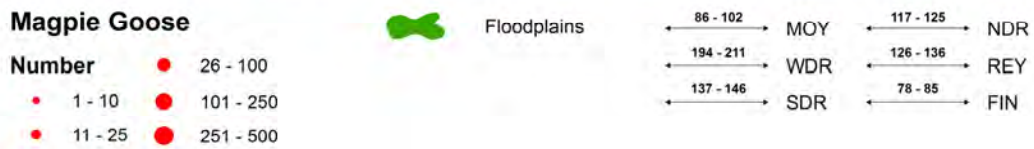
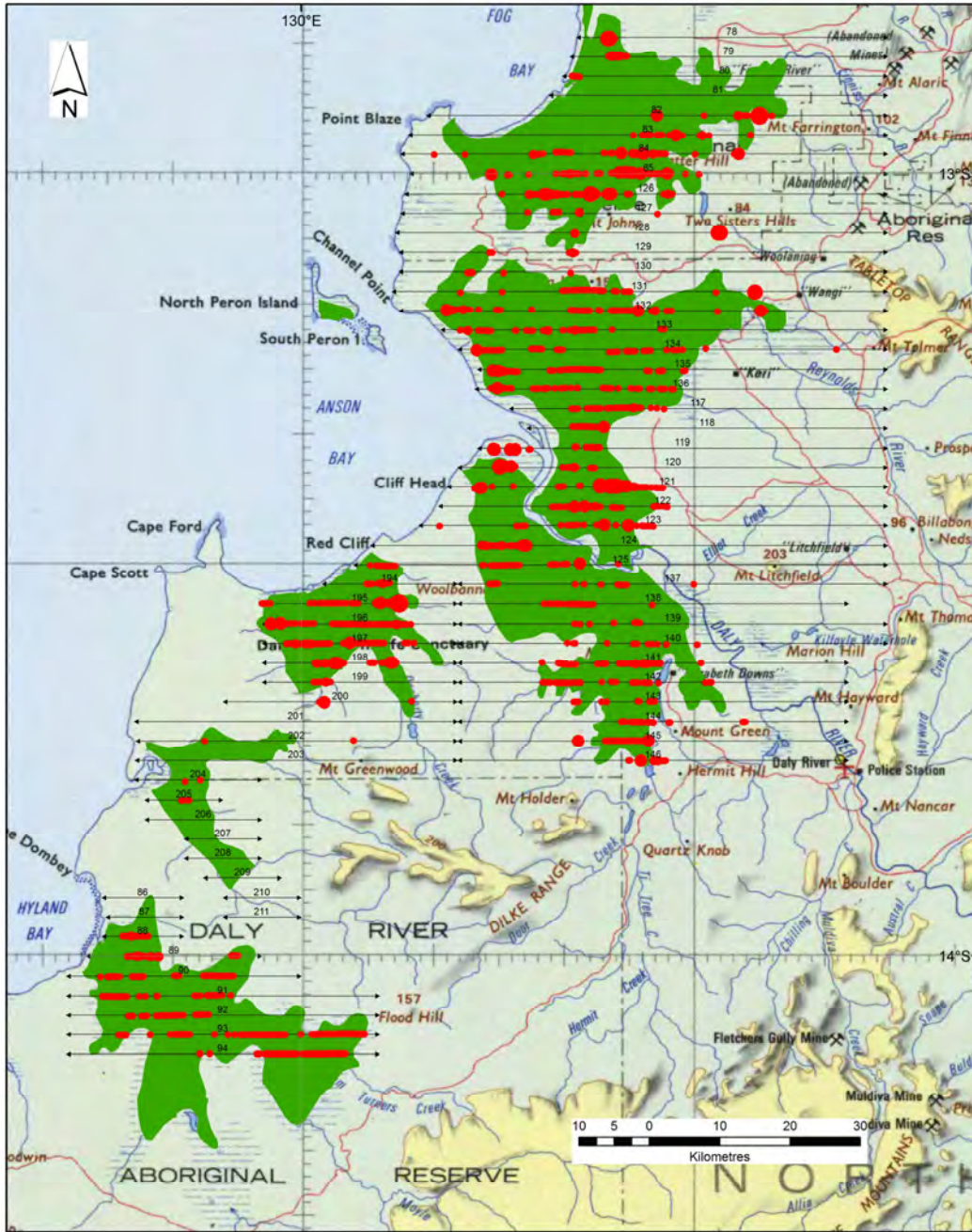
The distribution of Magpie Geese within the survey area is very patchy, with a number of areas of very high density surrounded by large areas of much lower density. There is a general pattern of Magpie Goose numbers being higher toward the downstream areas of each of the major river/floodplain systems.

**Table 3a: Estimated population, density (in brackets), and precision for Magpie Geese and Magpie Goose nests in the Moyle River floodplain to Finniss River floodplain survey area.** Values are  $\pm$  standard error (incorporating the errors resulting from sampling and in estimating mean group size).

Block (area in km <sup>2</sup> )	Magpie Goose	Magpie Goose nests
Moyle River (731)	75,747 $\pm$ 21,024 (103.7 $\pm$ 28.8) 27.8	11,497 $\pm$ 2,956 (15.7 $\pm$ 4.0) 25.7
Daly River west (1,164)	44,299 $\pm$ 19,334 (38.1 $\pm$ 16.6) 43.6	5,014 $\pm$ 2,004 (4.3 $\pm$ 1.7) 40.0
Daly River south (1,548)	35,732 $\pm$ 11,204 (23.1 $\pm$ 7.2) 34.1	4,793 $\pm$ 1,473 (3.1 $\pm$ 1.0) 30.7
Daly River north (1,536)	52,448 $\pm$ 14,266 (34.2 $\pm$ 9.3) 27.2	4,904 $\pm$ 1,622 (3.2 $\pm$ 1.1) 33.1
Reynolds River (1,974)	46,180 $\pm$ 15,443 (23.4 $\pm$ 7.8) 33.4	6,787 $\pm$ 2,185 (3.4 $\pm$ 1.1) 32.2
Finniss River (1,233)	22,776 $\pm$ 10,227 (18.5 $\pm$ 8.3) 44.9	2,549 $\pm$ 1,201 (2.1 $\pm$ 1.0) 47.1
Total survey area (8,186)	277,182 $\pm$ 38,574 (33.9 $\pm$ 4.7) 13.9	35,544 $\pm$ 4,876 (4.3 $\pm$ .6) 13.7

**Table 3b: Estimated population, density (in brackets), and precision for Magpie Geese and Magpie Goose nests in the Adelaide River floodplain to Murganella Creek floodplain survey area.** Values are  $\pm$  standard error (incorporating the errors resulting from sampling and in estimating mean group size).

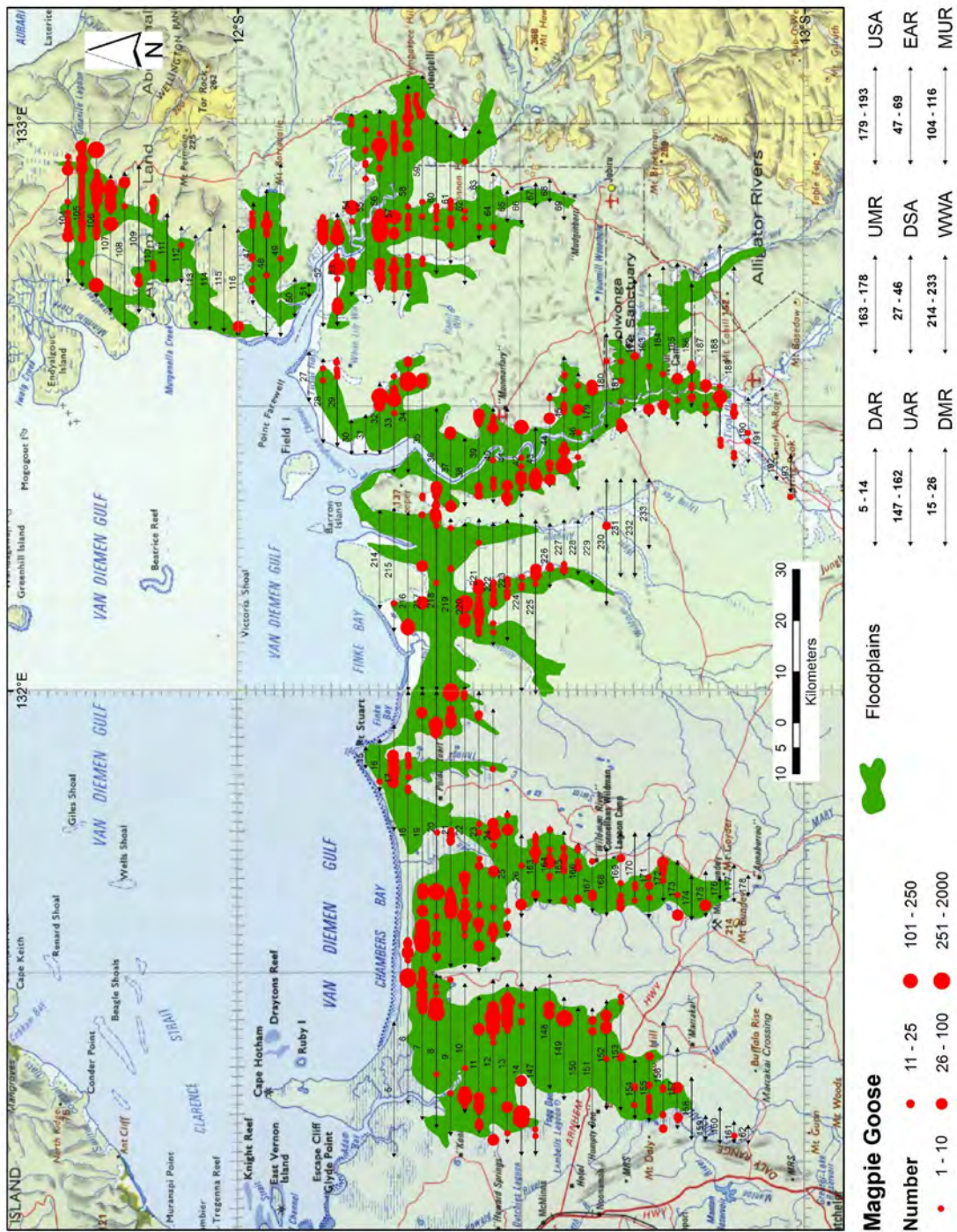
Block (area in km <sup>2</sup> )	Magpie Goose	Magpie Goose nests
Downstream Adelaide River (798)	92,117 $\pm$ 34,526 (115.5 $\pm$ 43.3) 37.5	10,013 $\pm$ 4,460 (12.6 $\pm$ 5.6) 44.5
Upstream Adelaide River (719)	31,960 $\pm$ 11,635 (44.5 $\pm$ 16.2) 36.4	1,574 $\pm$ 795 (2.2 $\pm$ 1.1) 50.5
Downstream Mary River (1,240)	140,995 $\pm$ 44,831 (113.7 $\pm$ 36.1) 31.8	5,722 $\pm$ 2,103 (4.6 $\pm$ 1.7) 36.7
Upstream Mary River (490)	57,651 $\pm$ 24,746 (117.6 $\pm$ 50.5) 42.9	1,574 $\pm$ 1,168 (3.2 $\pm$ 2.4) 74.2
Wildman/West Alligator River (1,205)	80,812 $\pm$ 38,584 (67.1 $\pm$ 32.0) 47.7	7,152 $\pm$ 3,427 (5.9 $\pm$ 2.8) 47.9
Downstream South Alligator River (915)	101,516 $\pm$ 31,126 (111.0 $\pm$ 34.0) 30.7	10,299 $\pm$ 4,318 (11.3 $\pm$ 4.7) 41.9
Upstream South Alligator River (950)	41,985 $\pm$ 14,064 (44.2 $\pm$ 14.8) 33.5	4,720 $\pm$ 1,870 (5.0 $\pm$ 2.0) 39.6
East Alligator River (1,404)	184,233 $\pm$ 65,076 (131.2 $\pm$ 46.3) 35.3	29,180 $\pm$ 11,488 (20.8 $\pm$ 8.2) 39.4
Murganella (822)	139,742 $\pm$ 67,827 (169.9 $\pm$ 85.2) 48.5	11,586 $\pm$ 5,680 (14.1 $\pm$ 6.9) 49.0
Total survey area (8,657)	871,012 $\pm$ 124,259 (102.0 $\pm$ 14.5) 14.3	81,820 $\pm$ 14,981 (9.6 $\pm$ 1.8) 18.3



**Figure 3a: Distribution of Magpie Goose sightings across the Moyle River floodplain to Finniss River floodplain survey area.**

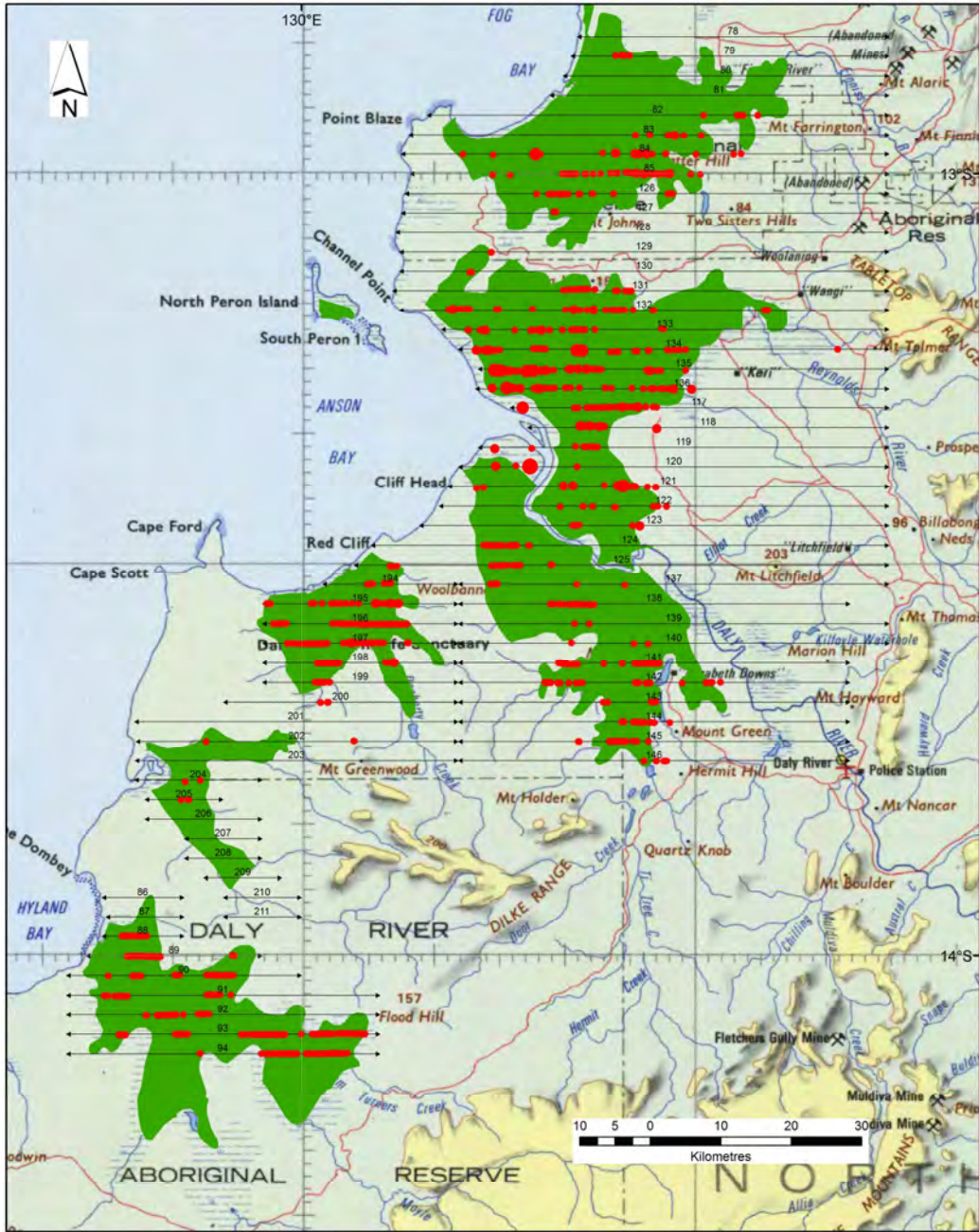
Aerial Survey of Magpie Geese in the 'Top End', Northern Territory. August 2014





**Figure 3b: Distribution of Magpie Goose sightings across the Adelaide River floodplain to Murganella Creek floodplain survey area.**

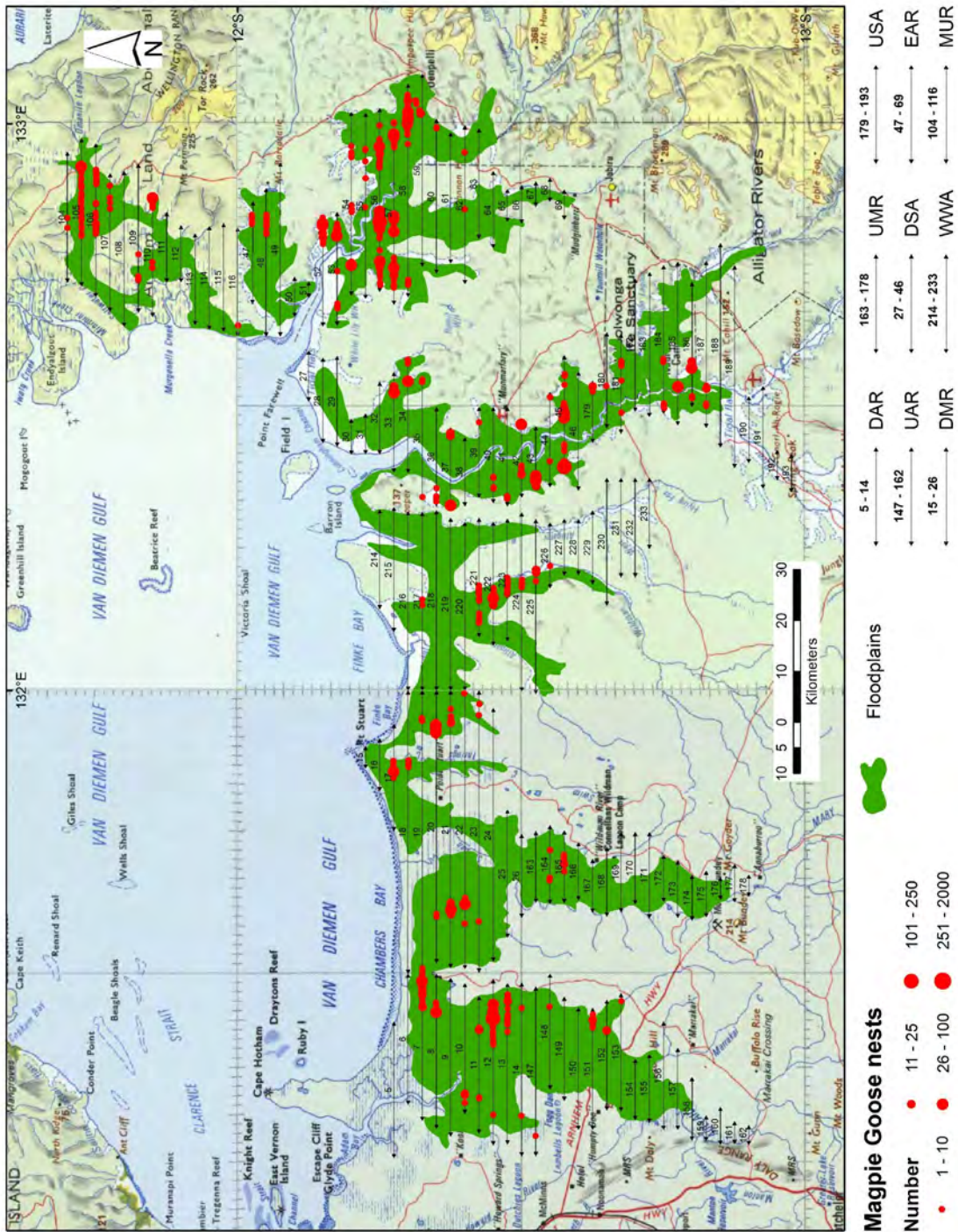
Aerial Survey of Magpie Geese in the 'Top End', Northern Territory, August 2014



**Figure 4a: Distribution of Magpie Goose nest sightings across the Moyle River floodplain to Finnis River floodplain survey area.**

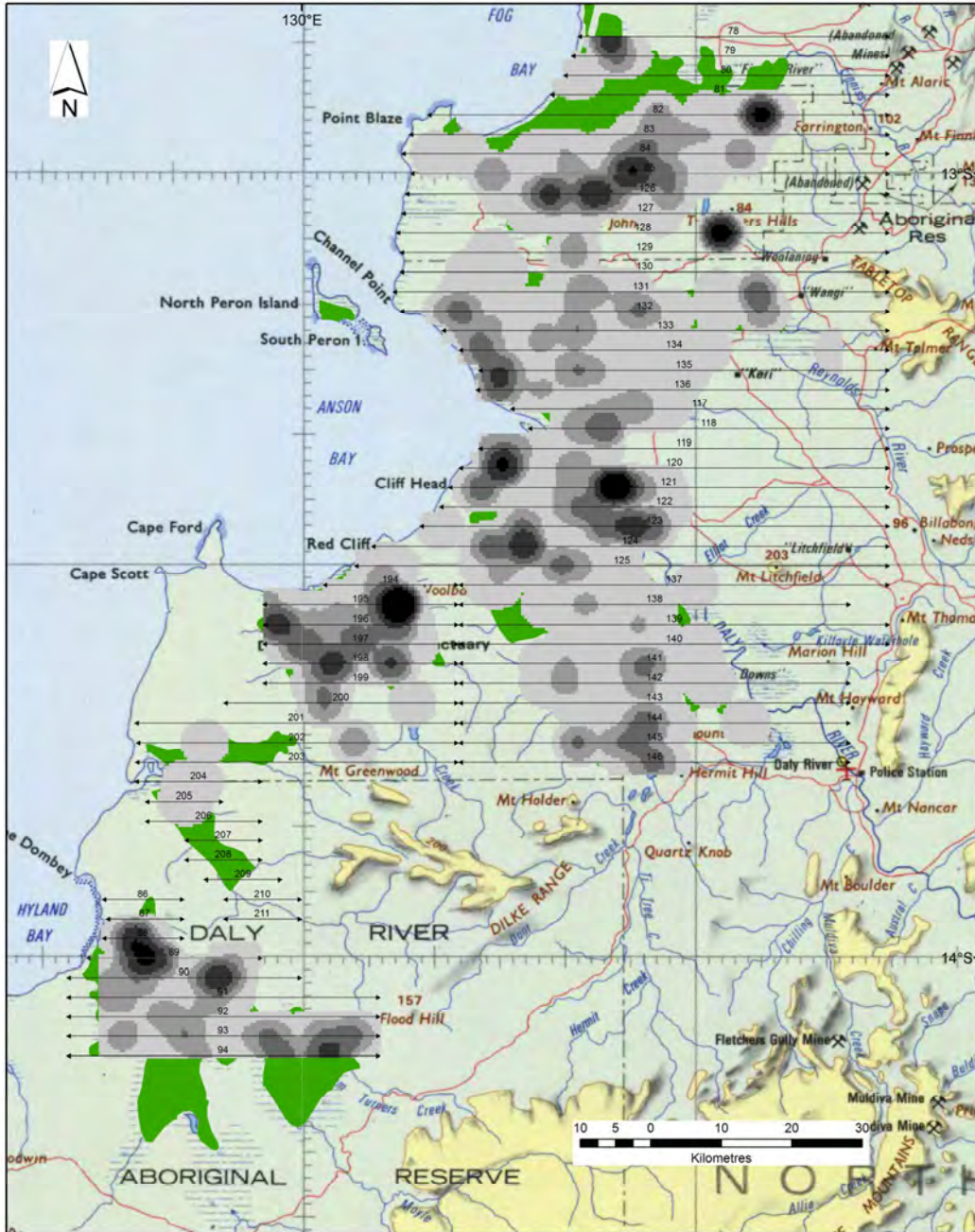
Aerial Survey of Magpie Geese in the 'Top End', Northern Territory. August 2014





**Figure 4b: Distribution of Magpie Goose nest sightings across the Adelaide River floodplain to Murganella Creek floodplain survey area.**

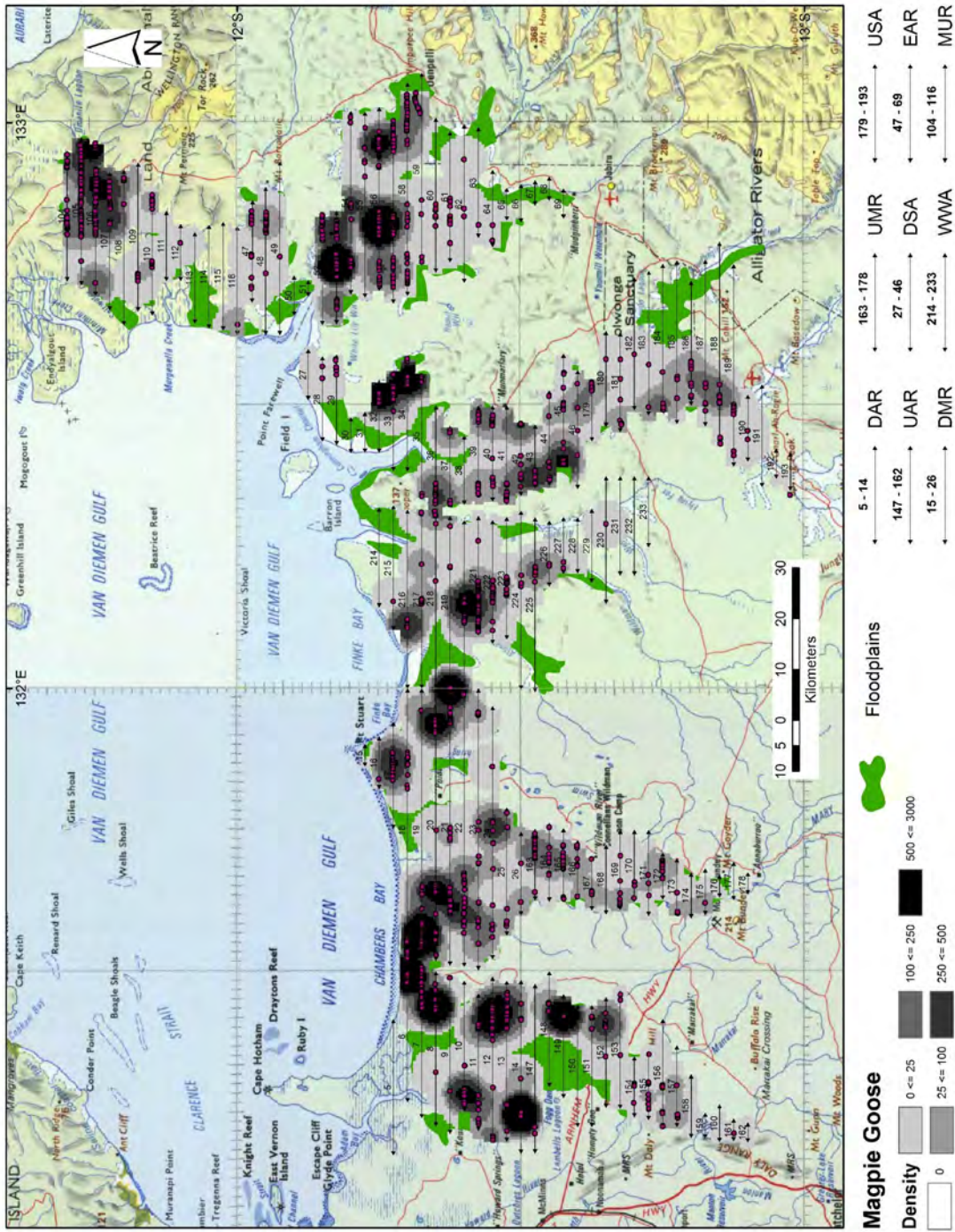
Aerial Survey of Magpie Geese in the 'Top End', Northern Territory, August 2014



**Figure 5a: Magpie Goose density across the Moyle River floodplain to Finnis River floodplain survey area (number per sq. km).**

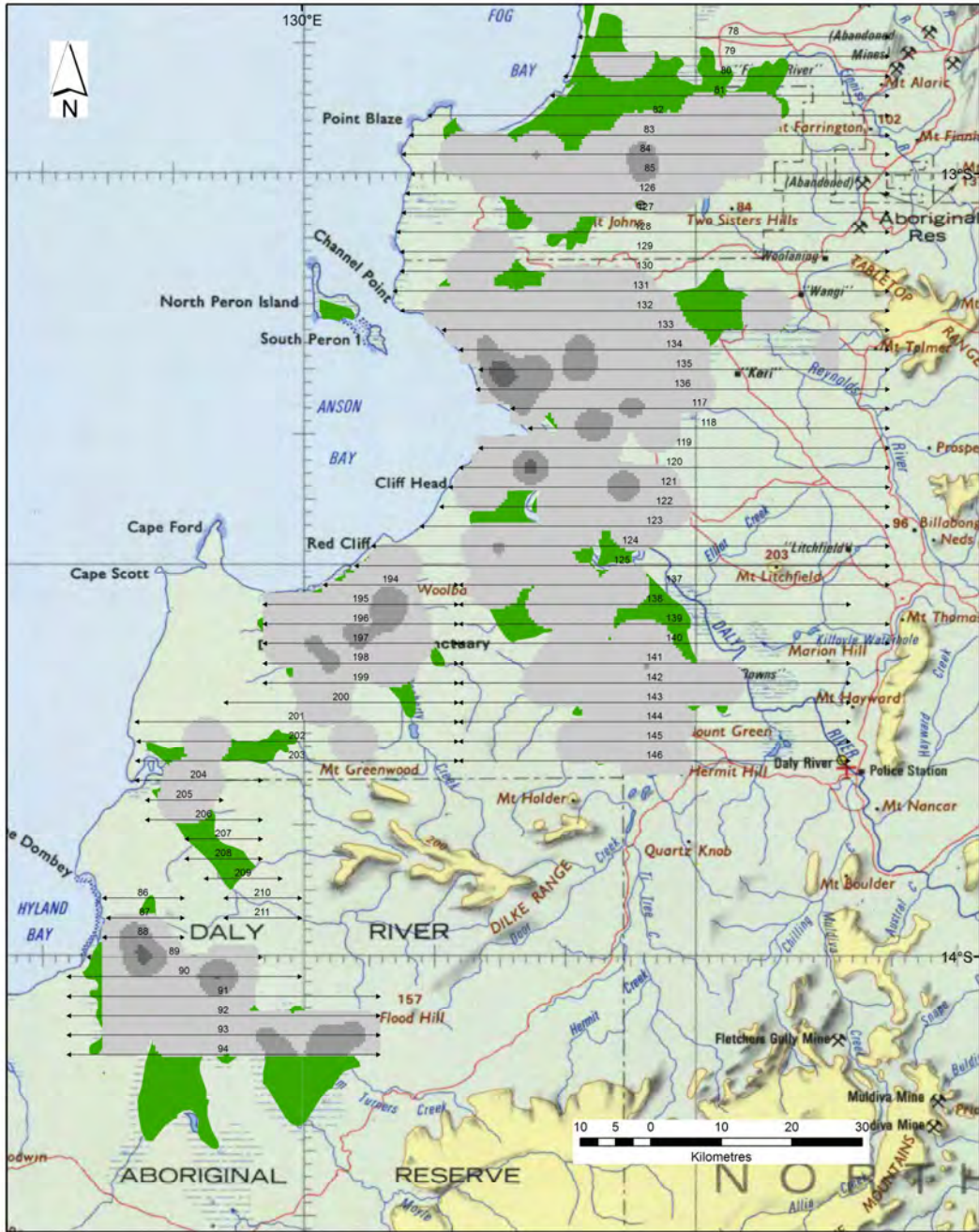
Aerial Survey of Magpie Geese in the 'Top End', Northern Territory. August 2014





**Figure 5b:** Magpie Goose density across the Adelaide River floodplain to Murganella Creek floodplain survey area (number per sp km).

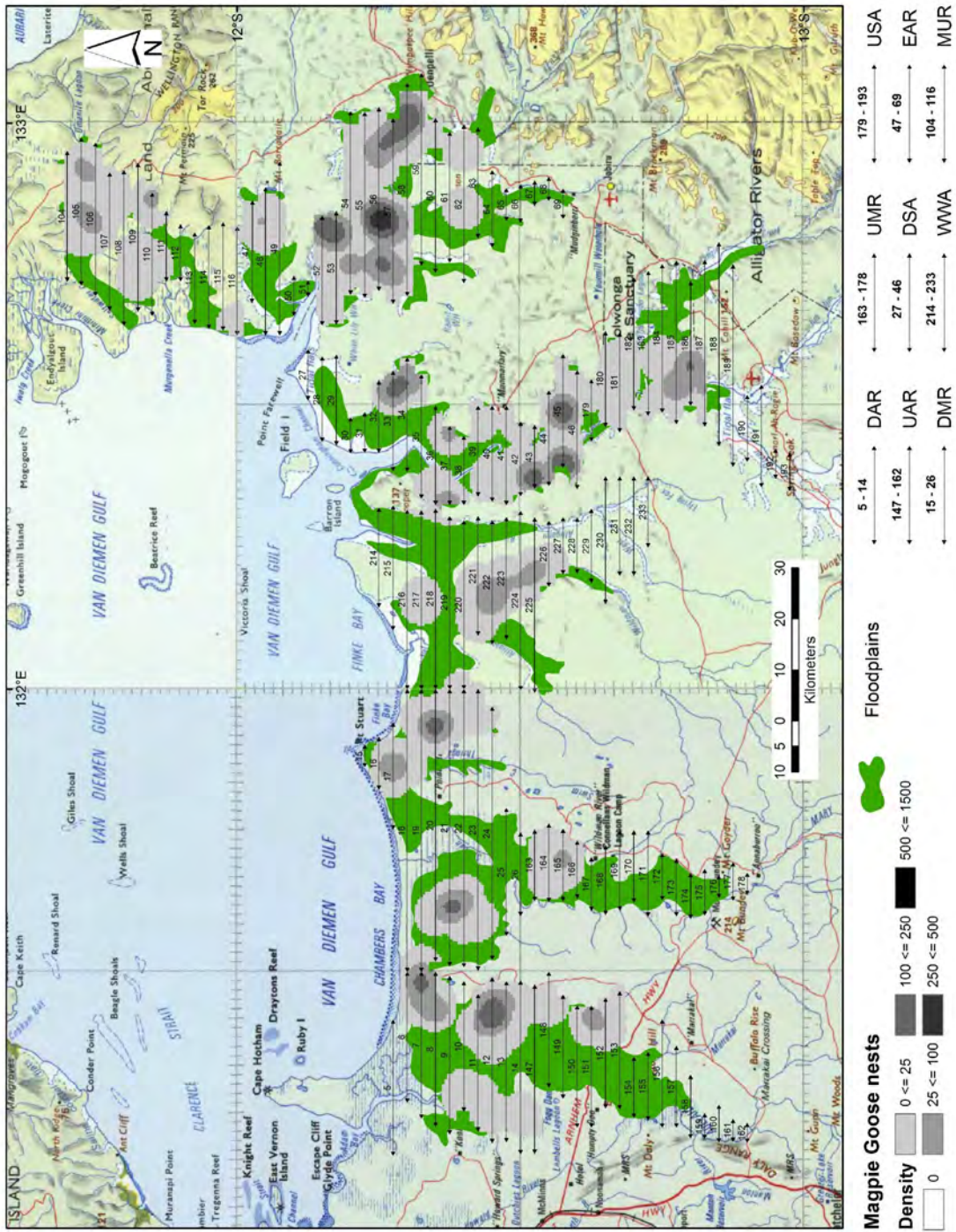
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**Figure 6a: Magpie Goose nest density across the Moyle River floodplain to Finniss River floodplain survey area (Nests per sq km.**

Aerial Survey of Magpie Geese in the 'Top End', Northern Territory, August 2014





**Figure 6b: Magpie Goose nest density across the Adelaide River floodplain to Murganella Creek floodplain survey area (Nests per sq km).**

Aerial Survey of Magpie Geese in the 'Top End', Northern Territory. August 2014

## Discussion

### *Correction Factors*

Population estimates are corrected for perception and visibility bias using the wet season correction factors of Bayliss & Yeomans (1990a, b). Use of these correction factors is considered to be the best approach in the absence of survey/observer specific corrections. Survey/observer specific corrections would require a replication of Bayliss & Yeomans (1990b) experiment for each survey, which is not considered to be a cost effective use of limited resources.

### *Population Size and Distribution*

The distribution of Magpie Geese within the survey area was patchy with a number of major areas of goose distribution clearly visible in Figures 5a and 5b. Very low densities of Magpie Geese were seen on the inland (upstream) reaches of the major floodplains within the survey area.

The population estimate for Magpie Geese of  $1.15 \pm 0.13$  million for the combined survey areas potentially represents between 85 to 90% of the total 'Top End' Magpie Goose population, based on earlier 'wet' season surveys (Bayliss & Yeomans 1990a) which covered the entire Top End distribution. Extrapolation based on those proportions gives an estimated 'Top End' population of between 1.28 and 1.35 million Magpie Geese.

The precision value of the overall Magpie Goose population abundance estimate was very low, 11.3%, which provides strong support for the robustness of the estimate and, subject to the appropriate correction factor being used, the accuracy of the estimate. This precision provides confidence that comparison of this with earlier surveys will give a good indication of population trend.

The estimate of nest abundance of  $117,000 \pm 16,000$  for the combined survey areas can similarly be extrapolated to a total nest abundance of 130,000 to 138,000 for the Top End. The estimate from the 2014 surveys was low compared to 2011 and 2012 (Saalfeld 2011, 2012), although higher than 2013 when nesting can be considered to have failed completely.

### *Population trends*

Magpie Goose population estimates from the last four years of surveys appear to indicate that the population was stable around the 2.6 million level for 2011 through 2013, and then suffered a substantial decline of about 50% in 2014 (Table 4).

**Table 4: Details of Top End Magpie Goose population and nest estimates from 2011 - 2014.**

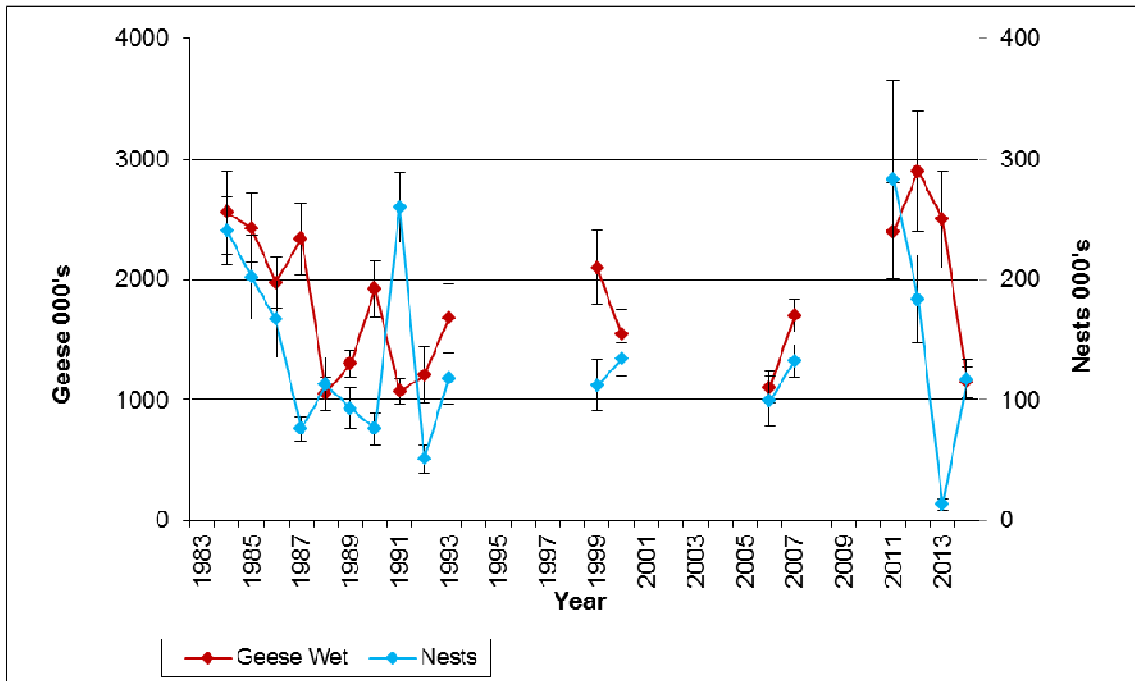
	Magpie Goose (million)	Magpie Goose nests
2011	2.4 ± 0.4	283,000 ± 82,000
2012	2.9 ± 0.5	184,000 ± 36,000
2013	2.5 ± 0.4	13,000 ± 4,000
2014	1.3 ± 0.1	134,000 ± 4,000

The decline in Magpie Goose abundance followed a failed nesting year and was coupled with a poor nesting season in 2014. The magnitude of the observed decline is interpreted as being due to a combination of events: no recruitment in 2013 following a failed nesting season,; natural and hunting mortality during the 2013 'dry season'; and dispersal of Magpie Geese out of the 'core' survey area during the 2013-2014 wet season due to unusual rainfall patterns. This interpretation is consistent with observed trends in the Magpie Goose population distribution and abundance over the last 30 years (Figure 6). In particular, there is a strong similarity to the substantial reduction of nesting in 1987 due to a cyclonic event, which was followed by a 50% population decline in 1988.

The contribution of each of the possible factors to the observed population decline is uncertain, although there was little evidence of large numbers of Magpie Geese occurring outside of the 'core' survey/nesting area during the course of the 2013-2014 wet season, as has been reported in previous years when the goose population has dispersed due to poor rainfall (Bayliss, 1989, Whitehead and Saalfeld, 2000).

Rainfall for the 2013-2014 wet season, while average to slightly above average in total (Bureau of Meteorology), was disjunct in pattern over the course of the Wet, with extended periods of little or no rain. Reduced nesting in the 2013-2014 wet season is attributed to a combination of lowered abundance and this disjunct rainfall pattern, which appears to have resulted in late nesting when it did occur.

From a management perspective, the substantial population decline, coupled with failed nesting the previous year and poor nesting in the current season, requires that consideration be given to management intervention to minimise the risk of continued population decline. This risk will become greater if there are further poor or failed nesting seasons in 2014/15 and subsequently. One management mechanism is to reduce human-induced mortality due to hunting, especially during periods while population levels and nesting success rates are relatively low (as described in the *Management Program for the Magpie Goose (Anseranas semipalmata) in the Northern Territory of Australia, 2009-2014*).



**Figure 6: Magpie Goose population and nests estimates for the period 1983 to 2014 derived from aerial survey data**



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