Counter-mapping Species Precarity Data through Drawing

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Abstract
Drawing has a particular creative capacity to hold and communicate complex ideas, through the visual and the performative. The gestural acts of marking coalesce with information and research as well as speculations, provocations, propositions, and ideas that are cultural and political.

In my work I explore how drawing, as a practice of investigation and learning is a mode for commentary and dissemination on Big Data and species extinction that differs from the didactic nature of technoscientific research reporting. Mapping Extinction is a collection of drawings that use different bodies of data to counter-map species loss across global contexts: The impacts of the Australian bushfires in 2019-2020 on native biodiversity loss and the ongoing impacts of land clearing and development in the United Kingdom, on native wildlife. My experimental approach critically extracts Big Data statistics on extinction and counter-maps the vulnerability of species lesser known by the public to accentuate the plight of 'minor figures' of British and Australian native wildlife, including insects, reptiles, molluscs and small mammals. Mapping Extinction examinations multispecies civics and the cultural politics of extinction.

Keywords
Counter-mapping; drawing; extinction; Big Data

Introduction

Drawing communicates beyond words. Intermingling gesture, speculation, and embodiment, drawing is also a powerful visual and performative practice of investigation. The inscriptive mark materialises thought and inquiry in ways that are both intimate and expansive. Drawing can hold contradiction, nuance, and speculation in suspension, and this affordance matters deeply when working at the intersection of art and ecology, particularly in relation to the growing crisis of extinction.

My drawing research is concerned with counter-mapping (Knight, 2019; Longley et al., 2022) and serves as an experimental means of rethinking and reframing dominant narratives that emerge from mainstream western culture. With respect to extinction, my inefficient mapping practice (Knight, 2023b) supports ethically driven translations of databanks on species precarity, deliberately surfacing the contextual impacts of extinction due to colonisation and capitalism. Where technoscientific models typically neutralise extinction through population figures, rates of decline, or predictive algorithms, my drawing-based investigation *Mapping Extinction* 2020-2024 instead works through gesture and composition, through the provisional and the affective to pull out the threads of connection between the rapacious, invasive and extractive actions of western colonisers and the decline/disappearance of species. Drawing-based research enables a mode of engagement that is simultaneously analytical and speculative, capable of carrying not only the weight of numbers but also the cultural, political, and emotional textures that are often erased.

Mapping Extinction has two iterations: *Mapping Extinction I* and *Mapping Extinction II*. The two bodies of work assemble information from multiple ecological contexts, and collectively they experiment with the capacities of drawing to reveal the invisible politics of data. *Mapping Extinction I* (Images 1, 2, 3) maps the devastating biodiversity losses wrought by the Australian bushfires of 2019–2020, and *Mapping Extinction II* (Images 4, 5, 6) traces the slower but equally destructive effects of land clearing and urban expansion in Leicestershire, in the United Kingdom. The two bodies of work destabilise data neutrality and counter-map extinction in a way that refuses its reduction to metrics alone (Ingold 2011; Corner 1999).

Through counter-mapping, my attention is deliberately drawn to species such as birds, bats, and reptiles, which rarely occupy the spotlight of extinction. These 'minor figures' lack the charismatic megafauna status of polar bears, gorillas, or koalas, yet their loss is no less catastrophic. To foreground these overlooked beings, I experiment with visual gestures that evoke fragility, disappearance, and quiet resilience, proposing that drawing can create openings for different forms of recognition and relationality. Here, the act of drawing is not simply descriptive but civic, participating in what Isabelle Stengers (2005) calls a cosmopolitical negotiation that acknowledges the entangled agencies of humans and more-than-human others.

By situating drawing within extinction studies, I expand the scope of what counts as ecological knowledge. Drawing is not only a means of seeing differently but also a way of speculating on the political, cultural, and ethical implications of species loss. It creates a visual and conceptual space where data, gesture, and imagination coalesce, enabling new forms of engagement with the precarious conditions of multispecies life in the Anthropocene.

Extinction Discourses, Hierarchies, and the Problem of Data

Industrialisation radically reconfigured the conditions of life on Earth, generating profound anthropogenic transformations across ecological, social, and cultural domains. The geologic spike, caused by the Industrial Revolution and marking the beginning of what is now widely referred to as the Anthropocene (Crutzen & Stoemer, 2021) delivered extraordinary benefits to the nations of the western, or minority world, but the extractive logics drove violent reorganisation of environments (Moore, 2015; Whyte, 2018) and caused irreversible damage due to the colonisation of lands and people. Extractive industrialisation not only altered local ecologies but also initiated processes of planetary-scale collapse. Vast areas of land and water were converted for monocultures and fossil fuel infrastructure, resulting in cascading effects on biodiversity and climate. These transformations set into motion what many scientists now identify as the sixth mass extinction event (Ceballos et al., 2015). Unlike earlier extinction events triggered by nonhuman forces, this contemporary mass extinction is entangled with human activity, driven by systems of production and consumption. Yet discourses of extinction can be ambivalent: articulated both as distant, catastrophic endpoints and as intimately linked to human histories and practices: framed as a terminal disappearance located in the remote past (the dinosaurs) or in a speculative future (the end of nature). Extinction, however, is a process embedded in present-day human actions and infrastructures (Tsing et al., 2017), an ecological crisis made by human hands.

Drawing offered a meaningful process for thinking about the geographical, colonial, and capitalist dynamics of extinction and how these reside in the seeming neutrality of statistical data. *Mapping Extinction* counter-mapped two databanks - The Red List, and the wildlife tracker records developed by Leicestershire and Rutland Wildlife Trust. The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species is a database of species ranked according to their degrees of risk, producing a taxonomy of endangerment that can inform conservation priorities (IUCN, 2022). While such rankings are essential for resource allocation, they also risk reducing life to a numerical economy of risk. In this context, data have become the dominant language through which extinction is rendered legible.

The data create warning alerts of decline that are emblematic rather than scientific because extinction data is not distributed evenly across species. Some creatures are elevated to symbolic status, becoming icons of

environmental concern, while others vanish unnoticed. The koala, for instance, garners widespread attention as a charismatic Australian species whose vulnerability is mobilised in campaigns and policy debates. As an example, media coverage of the Australian bushfires of 2019–2020, which provides one context for this work, often emphasised the plight of koalas, yet many species perished in silence: incinerated in leaf litter, unable to escape the speed of the flames, losing both roosts and food sources. Similarly, in the United Kingdom, conservation debates frequently revolve around hedgehogs and red squirrels, while less visible species, such as soil invertebrates, amphibians, and moths, remain largely out of public consciousness (MacDonald & Weber, 2015). Many lesser-known species, despite constituting the majority of threatened life, rarely feature in popular narratives of extinction. The hierarchies of visibility within conservation reflect broader cultural biases shaped by affect, aesthetics, and media. The strategic deployment of numbers to the wider public through signage at zoos, reserves, and via nature-focused media is often limited to charismatic species, as they elicit greater public sympathy (Schuster, 2023). The question, then, is not only who is endangered, but also who is perceived as endangered. Popularity and ranking shape the distribution of empathy, funding, and political will.

Numbers, then, carry both knowledge and loss, presence and disappearance. Second, as mentioned above, numbers privilege those species that already enjoy symbolic and cultural weight. The animals that appear in conservation campaigns are affectively potent, while others are sidelined, their disappearance registering little public grief. A numeric reading of extinction, therefore, can risk a false sense of objectivity. There is no doubt that data are important; however, they can overlook the complex entanglements of the political, cultural, and affective dimensions of ecological collapse. Numbers do not capture the situated experience of species loss, such as the disappearance of pollinators from a garden, or the gradual thinning of reptile populations in a local creek. These experiences are difficult to measure, but they are critical to understanding extinction as lived reality (van Dooren, 2014).

Furthermore, extinction discourses often reinforce anthropocentric hierarchies. By privileging species that resemble us in form, behaviour, or symbolic resonance, conservation politics risks reproducing a cosmopolitics that excludes rather than includes. Rewilding projects in the United Kingdom, for example, tend to celebrate the return of wolves, beavers, or large mammals (Busby, 2023). While these are indeed important interventions, they leave unaddressed the precarity of the cinnabar moth, Leisler's bat, or the shrill carder bee; tiny creatures whose roles in ecosystems are, nevertheless, absolutely vital.

Therefore, reliance on numbers alone poses several problems. Deborah Bird Rose (2011) raises the issue of emblematic translation through the 'partiality' of statistical reporting: partial, because the numbers associatively envelop the numbers of the already missing, or what will soon be gone. For artists, researchers, and activists, the challenge lies in responding to extinction without reproducing the reductive logic of data. How might species loss be represented in ways that neither sensationalise charismatic animals nor erase the quiet disappearance of others? How might the complexity of extinction be upheld without reducing it to a spectacle of numbers? These questions underpin *Mapping Extinction*, where drawing becomes a counter-mapping device, creating visual and conceptual space for the beings that fall outside the spotlight of extinction discourse.

Inefficiently Mapping the 'Minor Figures' of Extinction Data

I developed inefficient mapping in response to my frustration with the incapacity of qualitative methodologies to support posthuman studies interested in the lively animacies of the world. The approach relies on the tension of using exacting protocols to produce speculative experiments. Initially, I used gestural drawing to create the inefficient tracings, or 'chaosgraphs' (Knight 2021, pp. 43-60) of lively agency in phenomena. I continue to centralise drawing practice in my mapping works, although I now also create inefficient mappings with other media and practices. The mapping methodology is also explored more broadly by others (Grant, 2025; Hjorth & Goggin, 2024; Trafí-Prats & de Freitas, 2025; Zarabadi, 2022). Mapping has historically

been a tool of power: a means of ordering, categorising, and controlling territories and their inhabitants. Scientific maps of extinction often replicate this legacy, presenting data in efficient, streamlined formats designed for clarity and legibility. Yet such efficiency can erase complexity, rendering extinction as a smooth curve of decline or a stark percentage of loss. Against this backdrop, inefficient mapping offers a way of working that resists reduction and opens to the partial, the messy, and the more-than-human. Inefficient mapping acknowledges that extinction is not a singular event but a distributed process unfolding across landscapes, timescales, and species relations. To map extinction from an other-than-human perspective requires attention to the entanglements that shape civic life: the intermingling of humans, animals, plants, soils, and atmospheres. Inefficient mapping, through drawing, traces these interdependencies not as neat diagrams but as gestural fields, where lines overlap, collide, and fade.

I consistently emphasise that my practice of mapping is indebted to the work of First Nations women counter-mappers (Knight, 2023a; Tuck & Yang, 2012) and posthumanist scholars and artists who foreground relationality across species and materialities. Mapping is never neutral but always implicated in histories of dispossession and erasure. Just as Karin Bolender's (2014) explorations of multispecies entanglements through performance art model how artistic practices can attend to the voices and agencies of nonhumans in ways science alone cannot, inefficient mapping of extinction similarly refuses the smooth narratives of extinction, opting instead to render the unformed excesses that spill out and surround the data.

The inefficient mapping in *Mapping Extinction* contains layered marks over mock natural history studies. The lack of contextual detail evokes the incompleteness of our knowledge about species decline. Gaps in the image become spaces of silence, mirroring the absences left by disappearing species. Rather than providing definitive accounts, the works foreground uncertainty, asking viewers to dwell in the discomfort of undefined answers to the solutions of extinction. This inefficiency is generative, disrupting the expectation that extinction can be fully measured or represented, and instead insists on the irreducibility of more-than-human worlds. By foregrounding inefficiency, *Mapping Extinction* resists the linearity of scientific graphs and the rhetoric of progress or decline. Rather, the drawings create room for hesitation, for cosmopolitical pause, where the voices of nonhumans might be imagined and attended to.

Counter-mapping is a speculative practice that produces rather than merely represents territory. While state and scientific maps work to stabilise knowledge, counter-mapping unsettles it, opening new possibilities for thinking and relating. In this sense, my drawings are not visualisations of extinction statistics but interventions in the politics of visibility. The works propose that minor extinction figures are no less deserving of cultural recognition than charismatic megafauna. The silence surrounding the loss of minor figures is, in itself, a political act of erasure. *Mapping Extinction* brings these minor figures into focus, reorienting attention from the major narratives to the small, the overlooked, and the barely seen. The drawings seek to recalibrate and redistribute the hierarchies of species concern, aligning with Donna Haraway's (2020) call to 'make kin' with multispecies worlds, insisting that solidarity cannot be reserved for a few. This includes kin whose disappearance destabilises pollination systems, or that filter and sustain waterways, or whose microhabitats are erased by development, or whose populations dwindle unnoticed in fragmented landscapes. To draw them is to acknowledge their existence as civic participants in multispecies worlds, and to resist their reduction to biological residue. In highlighting minor figures, my work asks: what might extinction look like if we centred the less visible, the uncharismatic, the easily overlooked? Would our sense of urgency shift if we recognised the disappearance of a moth as equally significant to that of a panda? To counter-map extinction is to imagine new hierarchies of care, where value is not conferred by recognisability but by ecological entanglement.

In this project, my experimental drawing-based mapping served as a vital medium for speculative reorientations, countering normative extinction data discourses. Through slow, attentive rendering contrasted with the frantic marks

of inefficient, gestural mapping, I see how the works contest minority and invisibility. Foregrounding minor figures enabled the drawings to interrupt the economies of attention and tragedy associated with the charismatic: not to deny the absolute catastrophe of their disappearance, but to broadcast the devastating global impacts of the disappearance of our insects, birds, and other pollinators. Drawing becomes a way of staging the hierarchy, spotlight and silence dualisms. Drawing allowed me to attend to the minute, the fragile, the partial and the precariousness of beings that escape statistical and cultural capture. Drawing is a practice of physical and symbolic gesture in which the usual hierarchies of value are suspended, making room for new forms of recognition. Counter-mapping thus enacts a politics of visibility, not by amplifying the spectacular but by refusing disappearance as inevitability.

Drawing as an Expanded Speculative Practice

Drawing, and art more broadly, is a speculative practice offering refusal to remain within the strictures of objectivity and empirical verification. Where technoscientific research seeks reproducibility and clarity, art thrives on ambiguity, contradiction, and speculation. Art, and particularly drawing practice, creates an experimental space where knowledge, belief, imagination, and affect converge. This is not a rejection of science but an acknowledgment that scientific accounts of extinction are insufficient on their own; they require complementary practices that can convey the cultural and political resonances of loss (Latour, 2004). For example, artist Patricia Piccinini's hyperreal sculptures blend human and animal elements, confronting audiences with creatures that are at once alluring and unsettling. By refusing the comfort of cuteness, Piccinini challenges viewers to confront their biases and expand the boundaries of empathy (Lorek-Jezińska, 2022). My own intentions resonate with this ethos, as I strive to create speculative intimacies with creatures that do not conform to dominant conservation aesthetics. Contemporary artists grapple with key ideas and how our current age might be interpreted in distant futures, how ancient knowledge intersects, and how to envision what lies ahead. Art generates speculative relationships rather than empirical facts, provoking alternative ways of perceiving these durational relationships. In my own work, drawing operates as a speculative medium precisely because of its provisionality. Lines can be tentative or assertive, erased or layered, allowing forms to emerge and disappear in ways that mirror the precariousness of species survival. The act of drawing does not simply represent extinction but stages it, embodying disappearance, fragility, or protest through the materiality of mark-making, echoing Erin Manning's (2013) gesture as a thought-in-motion that carries both conceptual and affective weight. In that respect, art practice creates spaces for publics to engage differently with extinction. Unlike scientific reports, which can often contain overwhelming or difficult-to-interpret statistics, or media accounts that are selective and sensationalise disaster, art can invite slower, more intimate encounters. Lucienne Rickard's durational project, *Extinction Studies*, exemplifies this: her painstaking erasure of animal portraits over time stages disappearance as a visible, embodied process, provoking viewers to reflect on their complicity and grief (Jobe, 2023). The drawings in *Mapping Extinction* are small-scale compared to Rickard's large drawings, and their tonal qualities are much paler; however, in different ways, they also invite audiences to engage in encounters that detail the complexity of extinction and prompt affective connection with nonhuman vulnerability. Art foregrounds relationality, although not through rose-coloured lenses. Audiences are faced with the reality of their possible complicity in the situation, and the works can also prompt actions of solidarity. Through speculative gestures, art can generate moments where viewers are moved to imagine different futures of coexistence, and thus, drawing becomes not only a record of extinction but an act of resistance against forgetting, and a refusal of disappearance.

The speculative capacity of art is vital to rethinking extinction in the Anthropocene. By re-inscribing the affective, cultural, and political dimensions of species loss, art enables us to grieve, to imagine otherwise, and to engage in transversal cosmopolitical action. Drawing, in its fragility and openness, becomes both a practice of investigation and a mode of civic speculation, opening new actions for solidarity against extinction.

Documenting Loss and Staging Cosmopolitical Civic Encounters

My drawn, inefficient mappings helped me to think experimentally about extinction. The long duration of the project, from 2020 to 2024, shaped my speculative ideas about extinction as a record of loss but also a civic loss. I have used inefficient mapping to experiment with ideas about nonhuman civics and citizenship for a decade (Knight, 2016), so as *Mapping Extinction* progressed, I refined my thinking about who counts as a citizen and how citizenship is enacted across species boundaries. And further, to think of extinction solely as the erasure of species risks casting nonhuman life as passive victims of anthropogenic change. Such framings overlook the possibility that animals and other critters might themselves be political actors, engaging in the cosmopolitical arena of beings with whom we share worlds. By shifting focus from "who is" a citizen to "how is" a citizen, the drawings could explore possibilities for the multiple ways beings inhabit and shape shared political and civic ecologies. Duly, *Mapping Extinction* has become a cartography that is less about territory than about relation, and less about geographic control than about listening into the space.

My practice is drawn to this speculative proposition — that extinction, rather than a silent vanishing, might also be understood as a form of political protest, a withdrawal from untenable conditions of existence. This idea emerges from engagements with theorists of the more-than-human. Haraway (2016) suggests that multispecies entanglements are never innocent but demand situated forms of accountability. Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing (2015), writing about precarious livelihoods in the ruins of capitalism, suggests that multispecies survival is always collaborative and always negotiated in fragile assemblages. These thinkers invite a consideration of animals not as inert casualties but as civic agents whose disappearance signals a political impasse. Multispecies civics expands the notion of citizenship beyond the human. In political theory, citizenship is typically grounded in legal recognition, rights, and responsibilities. Yet in ecological contexts, it becomes possible to think of citizenship as distributed across species, enacted in behaviours that shape collective survival. In this experimental framing, extinction is not only a loss but a communicative act that challenges the conditions imposed upon species by industrial agriculture, habitat destruction, or climate change.

My speculative drawings in *Mapping Extinction* became a means of staging cosmopolitical encounters between each species and human audiences. The species' fragility, incompleteness and erased details evoked both disappearance and defiance, and the combination of figure studies and their overlayered gestural movement markings offered a communication line for thinking with critters as political beings and not simply objects of conservation. The drawings are an artistic reframing that unsettled anthropocentric civics, proposing instead a more expansive cosmopolitical citizenry in which the minor is recognised as a participant in shared ecological worlds. In this sense, counter-mapping extinction through drawing enabled me to document loss and also reimagine civics as enacted across species boundaries, considering what responsibilities follow when the withdrawal of one species signals the unlivability of our collective world. This is not to anthropomorphise extinction, but rather to imagine and recognise a form of wild politics as assertions of agency within oppressive ecologies.

If extinction can be read as protest, then it also compels us to rethink the frameworks of citizenship and civics that shape how beings are recognised within shared worlds. Conventional notions of citizenship remain resolutely anthropocentric, grounded in legal status, national belonging, and political participation. Yet in the Anthropocene, where human actions determine the fates of countless other beings, such frameworks prove inadequate. A speculative reimagining of citizenship, one that is attentive to the more-than-human, becomes essential. Furthermore, if citizenship is not a question of formal rights but of relational responsibilities and shared vulnerabilities, then to ask, 'Who is a citizen?' is less useful than asking '*how is* a citizen?' and how agency might emerge across species, how solidarities are enacted, and how disappearance itself might articulate a civic position. Rosi Braidotti (2016) argues that posthuman ethics demands an expansion of the political community beyond the human, foregrounding interdependence and affective ties. In this

context, the minor figure withdrawing into its fragile shell, or persisting at the margins of a scorched landscape, may be understood as enacting forms of speculative citizenship: modes of being that confront human indifference and challenge our sense of political belonging. Such gestures are not metaphors but material enactments of survival, refusal, and protest.

Artistic practice, and particularly drawing, plays a vital role in articulating these speculative possibilities. Drawing, in its capacity to both preserve and imagine, creates a visual language for this imaginative more-than-human citizenship. Through my inefficient, counter-mapping, extinction shifted from a closed narrative of loss to an open speculative civic experimentation. By placing minor figures of biodiversity at the centre of the visual frame, the long durational project performed and marked drawn gestures toward uncertain but hopeful cosmopolitical futures.

Ultimately, rethinking extinction through the lens of speculative citizenship does not resolve the crisis of biodiversity loss. It did, however, unsettle my assumptions and challenged me to recognise the agency of small beings disappearing around me. This political provocation called me to reimagine the terms of coexistence. Drawing held space for this speculation as a crucial mode of thinking-with extinction, to generate new ways of attending, grieving, and imagining solidarity across species.

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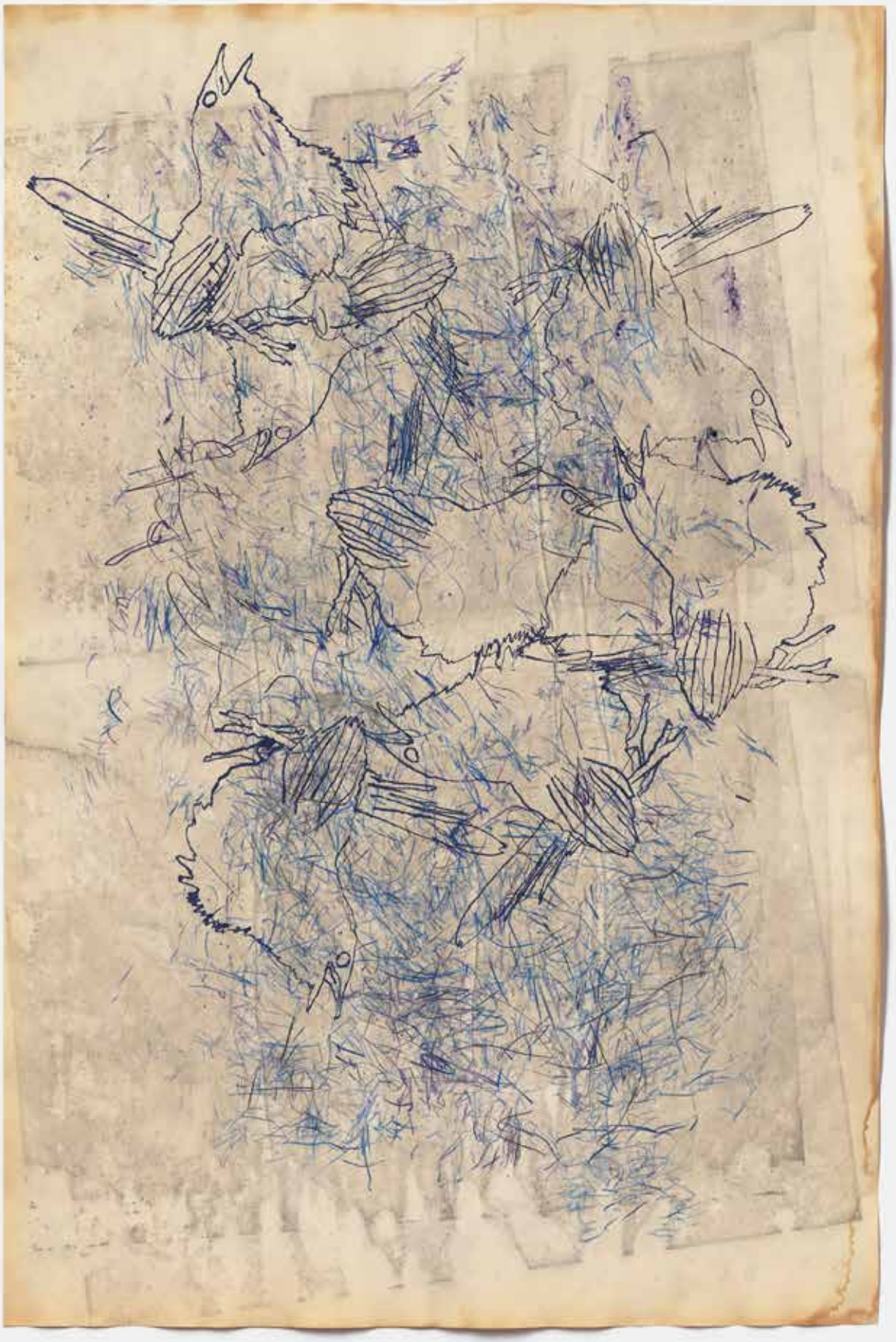
1. Linda Knight. *Mapping Extinction I - Rufous scrub bird, Glossy black cockatoo, Gum leaf grasshopper, Botany Bay diamond weevil, Long-footed potoroo*
2020 – 2022
Pencil on paper
Each work, 61.5 x 90 cm

2. Linda Knight. *Mapping Extinction I - Rufous scrub bird*
2021
Pencil and ink on paper
50.4 x 76 cm



3. Linda Knight. *Mapping Extinction I - Rufus scrub bird*
2021
Pencil on paper
77 X 57 cm

4. Linda Knight. *Mapping Extinction II*
2023-2024
Forty drawings, pencil on Saunders, encased in Acrylic.
304 x 194 cm

5. Linda Knight. *Mapping Extinction II (detail)*
Common Shrew / Sorex Araneus

6. Linda Knight. *Mapping Extinction II (detail)*
White-clawed Crayfish / Austropotamobius Pallipes