

VICTORIAN

LANDCARE

SPRING 2025 ISSUE 90

& CATCHMENT MANAGEMENT



FEATURES

Frog chorus sounds as schools jump into action

Treat serrated tussock before it seeds

Partners tackle pests in Victoria's southwest





Victorian Landcare and Catchment Management

SPRING 2025 Issue 90

Cover photograph

The third generation of the Deveson family, Lilijah Deveson (from left) and Olivia Prezioso give treats to the Boer cross goats that help manage weeds at Moondarra Blueberries.

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We acknowledge and respect Victorian Traditional Owners as the original custodians of Victoria's land and waters, their unique ability to care for Country and deep spiritual connection to it.

We honour Elders past and present whose knowledge and wisdom has ensured the continuation of culture and traditional practices.

We are committed to genuinely partnering with Victorian Traditional Owners and Victoria's Aboriginal community to progress their aspirations.

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From the Minister

Thanks to all who continue to support each other during another year that has provided significant challenges.

Following a long and damaging bushfire season, many regional communities are dealing with a prolonged period of drought. We are continuing to listen to farmers and communities doing it tough and have backed that up with a \$144 million support package and dedicated Drought Response Taskforce.

Of course, business as usual has continued as well. We have been busy with efforts to support the tireless work of volunteer groups in making a difference in our parks, waterways and reserves. In recent months we have announced grant funding for hundreds of incredible projects co-ordinated through Landcare, Junior Landcare, Landcare for Country and Coastcare.

In August we celebrated National Landcare Week, an important time to reflect on past successes while building momentum for projects and initiatives still to come. The hectares of restored coastlines and parks, and kilometres of revegetated waterways only happen with the hard work of volunteers and certainly Landcare Week was a great opportunity to celebrate that work and dedication.

Our recent State Budget will continue to support volunteers through the Victorian Government Landcare program, funding 10 statewide Regional Landcare Co-ordinators and 80 part-time Landcare facilitators. These efforts empower locals to take action for their environment and ensure all Victorians can continue to enjoy the best of our great outdoors for generations to come.

This magazine issue is full of stories about grassroots energy and inspiring wins for sustainability across Victoria. It is a testament to how local action and collaboration can ripple out into real change – from goats munching weeds to kids building frog homes.

Moondarra Blueberries showcases sustainability with renewable energy, compostable packaging and goats for weeding. A two-year trial at Waratah Bay highlights the benefits of multispecies pastures, outperforming conventional mixes in yield and cost, and we hear about restoring Gariwerd after the fires with the help of Landmate crews: minimum-security prisoners who help remove weeds and restore fire-affected land.

Several milestone celebrations are acknowledged, including 20 years of the Cactus Warriors, 30 years of Goulburn Murray Landcare Network and Goulburn Valley Tree Group turning 40!

Speaking of milestones, next year Landcare in Victoria will celebrate 40 years. This incredible journey began on 25 November 1986, right here in Victoria with the formation of the Winjallock Landcare Group near St Arnaud. Landcare is now a global movement, with Landcare groups and projects in more than 20 countries, including the United States, Iceland, the United Kingdom, Germany, Kenya, South Africa, the Philippines, New Zealand, Nigeria and Sri Lanka.

In celebrating 40 years of Landcare in Victoria, we invite readers to submit stories for the next issue that highlight Landcare's achievements, partnerships and lessons learned, demonstrating the enduring impact of community-driven conservation across the state.

Hopefully you can make it to the 2025 National Landcare Conference at the Gold Coast from 21–24 September, with an exciting program aligned to the theme 'Landcare: Nature, Agriculture, Land and People Positive'. Don't forget to visit the Victorian Government exhibitor stall where we will showcase investment and achievements in community collaboration to protect and enhance the environment. I also encourage change makers to register for the NextGen Landcare Summit at the conference, sponsored by the Victorian Government, which is an opportunity for 18 to 35 year olds to connect, inspire and be part of the next generation of environmental leaders.

Thank you to everyone involved in these projects for promoting sustainable land management, enhancing our environmental health and for sharing your stories. We proudly support volunteers who tirelessly work to keep our unique environment healthy, allowing Victorians to continue enjoying the beauty and offerings of our great outdoors.



Steve Dimopoulos

Steve Dimopoulos MP
Member for Oakleigh
Minister for Environment
Minister for Tourism, Sport
and Major Events
Minister for Outdoor Recreation



**20 | NATIONAL
25 | LANDCARE**
CONFERENCE
AWARDS

**Landcare: Nature, Agriculture,
Land and People Positive**

**Sunday 21 to Wednesday 24
September, 2025**

**Gold Coast Convention
and Exhibition Centre**

nationallandcareconference.org.au



Cactus Warriors celebrate 20 years of action

By Leeanne Mead

At the turn of the 21st Century, concern was growing about the increasing number of cactus infestations around the district of Maldon, particularly wheel cactus (*Opuntia robusta*).

Not only were these plants spreading across private agricultural land, but they were also invading the Maldon Historic Reserve, treasured for its abundant natural and cultural heritage assets.

Local property owners, Landcare groups and Parks Victoria staff got talking and formed a sub-committee, consisting of Ian Grenda, Barrie McKnight, the late Wendy French and Noel Muller. In mid-2005 this committee successfully won a Victorian Government grant of \$30,000, which was the impetus to establish the Tarrangower Cactus Control Group and “wage war on wheel cactus”.

Initial goals and objectives

The key objectives of the new group were to raise awareness of this species and the threats it posed, and to work out the most effective way to destroy it.

Community awareness activities focused on engaging with local

landowners and giving them a helping hand to start treating their infestations. The group also partnered with Parks Victoria to help treat the many infestations within the spectacular Maldon Historic Reserve.

A native of Mexico, wheel cactus was declared a noxious weed in Victoria in 1963 and is listed as a weed of national significance. It can regenerate from pieces of the fleshy round lobe and its dark magenta fruit contain hundreds of seeds which are long lived – surviving for up to 20 years – and spread by birds, animals and water.

Volunteers experimented with how best to kill the plant, testing different techniques, including burning, digging, injecting and spraying. They found direct injection of herbicides, such as glyphosate and daconate, into the lobes proved most effective on mature plants.

Variety of actions

The group’s first community field day was held in October 2005 and became a monthly event for many years. Field days held on private properties or within the Maldon Historic Reserve were widely advertised and everyone in the community was welcomed. This attracted many urban volunteers as well as landowners, who formed a large team of cactus warriors to help attack infestations.

Providing free incentives to encourage landowners to control their wheel cactus has been a constant focus. Many grants have been secured for injecting and digging equipment, herbicide and the disposal of dug plants. Our volunteers have taken part in a variety of awareness and educational activities, such as information brochures, print, television and digital media releases, community events, information stalls, workshops, t-shirts,

Below: Direct injecting herbicide into the lobes of a mature wheel cactus plant near Maldon.

“

We must frequently remind each other of the millions of wheel cactus plants we have destroyed during the past 20 years and imagine what our wonderful natural landscapes would look like if we hadn’t.”





Left: Tarrangower Cactus Control Group volunteers ready for a community field day in 2013. Many hundreds of community members have been involved over the years.



Right: Cactus warriors Cheryl Kane (from left), Steve Templeton and Bridie O'Rielly operate an information stall at the Maldon-Barrington Agricultural Show.

windcheaters, mugs and pens. Fundraising activities have also contributed to supplying equipment for our volunteers, such as a tailor-made trailer, barbecue and tables.

Gaining and sharing knowledge

Networking with other environmental volunteer groups has always been important and members have taken part in many workshops and conferences, both within Victoria and interstate.

Funding has been secured from many different grant sources. Major projects completed during the past 10 years include distribution mapping of wheel cactus within Victoria, producing farm fence signs and shire-specific weed control brochures, introducing the biological control insect, cochineal (*Dactylopius opuntiae*), and creating individual, long-term management plans for private property owners.

Our dedicated volunteers have hosted many different work crews such as drought-relief and green army, secondary and tertiary student field days, and scout projects, all increasing awareness of environmental weeds amongst our neighbours and younger generations.

Successes and rewards

The Cactus Warriors are very proud of the enormous amount of work achieved by hundreds of volunteers over the past 20 years. We believe participating in community events on a regular basis over many years

has led to an extremely high level of awareness and knowledge about wheel cactus within our local community. We 'guesstimate' 70 per cent of local landowners now regularly control their wheel cactus plants, which is a never-ending chore due to the enormous seedbank and continuous re-infestation from non-compliant and absentee property owners.

The Maldon Historic Reserve now has significantly less wheel cactus, contributing to the preservation of our regional native flora and fauna. Plus, our volunteers have been recognised for their exceptional efforts by being awarded the Landcare Community Group Award at the 2017 Victorian Landcare Awards and the national Froggatt Award in 2019.

Lessons learnt

After about 13 years of regular community field days on private properties we felt our efforts were becoming counterproductive. Some landowners expected our team of volunteers to return to treat their infestations, and we were often asked to provide extra free herbicide. We decided to reduce the frequency of field days.

We also concluded that some landowners will never take advice from community volunteers, and we needed to conserve our energy by being more selective with the incentives we offer, so we have redirected our energies towards education and advocating to government agencies for greater engagement and compliance.

New priorities

Despite 20 years of relentless work, there are no fewer wheel cactus infestations around Maldon and, sadly, they have spread further in all directions. Our group now concentrates on organising smaller events, working bees and encouraging neighbouring landowners to work together. We invite new landowners to contact us for help and are happy to run a field day on their property to provide knowledge and motivation. We continue to encourage volunteers and landowners to participate by providing free loans of equipment and servicing broken injecting kits. We also continue to work with Parks Victoria in the Maldon Historic Reserve.

However, to remain sane, we must frequently remind each other of the millions of wheel cactus plants we have destroyed during the past 20 years and imagine what our wonderful natural landscapes would look like if we hadn't. Our tenacious Cactus Warrior volunteers will celebrate 20 years of dedicated work later this year!

Funding bodies have included Mount Alexander Shire Council, Victorian Government Landcare Program, Australian Government and the Wettenhall Environment Trust.

Leeanne Mead is President of Tarrangower Cactus Control Group. For more information, email info@cactuswarriors.org



A frog chorus sounds across Victoria as schools jump into action

By Eleanor Slade

Whether it's their unique features, interesting sounds or the astonishing transformation they make from tadpoles, frogs are a popular way for children of all ages to learn about biology and ecology.

So it was no surprise that six of the 103 Victorian Government Junior Landcare and Biodiversity Grants awarded to schools in 2024 were for supporting frog habitats.

A lack of suitable habitat is a real threat to frogs right across Australia.

Frogs are a valuable part of ecosystems, as both predator and prey species, and habitat restoration supports populations and helps connect frog communities across the landscape.

At least 38 species have been recorded in Victoria, with the Baw Baw frog (*Philoria frosti*) and spotted tree frog (*Litoria spenceri*) among the most critically endangered, and the growling grass frog (*Litoria raniformis*) and Bibron's toadlet (*Pseudophryne bibronii*) on the list of threatened species.

What follows are brief outlines of the six frog-based projects that were funded by the 2024 Victorian Junior Landcare and Biodiversity Grants.

A place for frogs to play and stay

Students at Emmaus Catholic Primary School, at Sydenham, are building their very own 'Frog Oasis', containing both a frog pond and a frog hotel. As the students plan and construct the frog oasis, they're also learning about the ecosystem they are creating. They are hands-on every step of the way, from weeding and clearing the current area to planning, building the pond and planting native flora.

Fairfield Primary School is transforming a bare and degraded section of the school yard into 'A Fabulous Frog Bog', a new frog habitat and outdoor learning space.

The Fairfield frog bog will provide a specialised habitat and refuge area to support several different frog species. Creating a wetland ecosystem also will foster varied microbial communities in the soil and water. The project starts with classroom research and

planning, followed by outdoor frog habitat observation and monitoring to enhance biodiversity education and provide experiential learning opportunities.

Orchard Park Primary School, at Officer, is taking frog habitats to the next level, with a 'Pollinators Paradise and Froggy Fairyland'. The school neighbourhood is newly developed, and students have discovered through observation and monitoring that it doesn't have a strong community of pollinators.

An area of 45 square metres has been allocated for an indigenous garden to increase biodiversity on the school grounds. The student-led project is creating a habitat to provide food, shelter and breeding areas for native pollinators, plants and animals. This also includes vital water sources, irrigation and a pond to attract native frogs.

Orchard Park Primary School STEM teacher Nicholas Pattison



Left: Orchard Park Primary School students Adriana (from left), Blake and Lukas, plan the plantings for the pond.

Middle: Wurruk Primary School student Tate Richards spreads mulch between greater brown sedge (*Carex brunnea*) plants around the Wurruk Frog Bog.

Right: Wurruk Primary School students Hamish Thomas (from left), Phayton Corbett, Sophie Tocknell and Zia Pagatpat check to see what's in the Wurruk Frog Bog.

said students have been measuring how much sunlight, wind and rain the area receives to ensure the pond and frogs flourish.

"They worked with a local nursery to select the most appropriate plants to attract and create a habitat for the frogs," he said.

Kinder adds stepping stones to learning

Tarralla Kindergarten, at Ringwood East, is adding a 'Frog Bog' and habitat stepping stones into their outdoor learning space and playground, nestled among well-established native trees, not far from Gracedale Park and Tarralla Creek.

Hands-on activities are giving the three and four-year-olds lots of opportunities to learn about biodiversity and lifecycles. With help from their families, they are building the frog bog, planting the surrounding stepping stones, and transforming a planter box into a butterfly cafe.

Wooragee Primary School, northeast of Beechworth, is upgrading its 'Frog Bog' which was originally created back in

2012. By restoring this valuable ecological feature, the school plans to rejuvenate the existing site, revive the frog bog, and provide an educational and hands-on experience for the students.

Students at Wurruk Primary School, west of Sale, have built a 'Wurruk Frog Bog' in an unused 7 metre x 5 metre area of the school, incorporating native plants, and natural and recycled materials.

As an extension of STEM learning beyond the classroom, it allows students to safely make observations and appreciate those creatures who make the habitat their home.

And it's no surprise the school opted for a project to benefit frogs – the school emblem is a stylised bright green frog!

Wurruk Primary School STEAM teacher Sarah Collins said the grant of \$4475 allowed the whole school to go on an excursion to Healesville Sanctuary to learn about its breeding program for the tiny critically endangered southern corroboree frog.

“Students were so excited to see new life in the (frog) bog, eagerly observing the changes as they progress through their lifecycle.”



A southern corroboree frog (*Pseudophryne corroboree*).
Photo: Rachel Mort/iNaturalist

"All students participated in designing, preparing and planting a frog bog within our school which has increased biodiversity and encourage local species of frogs to thrive," she said.

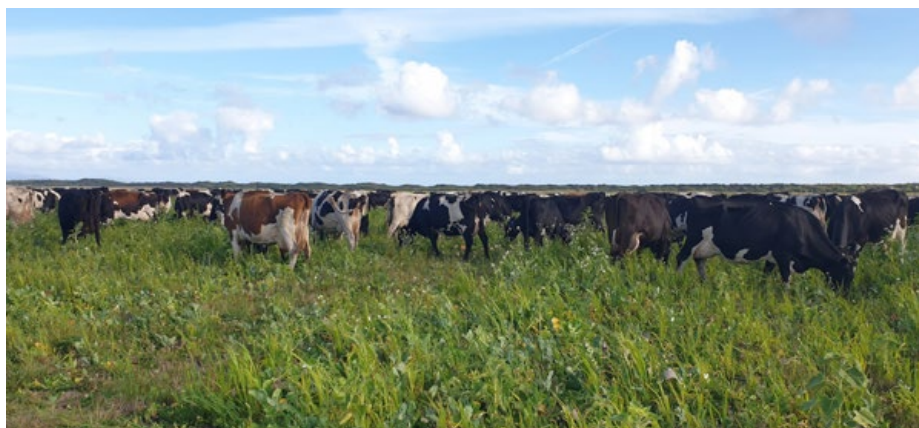
"Students were so excited to see new life in the bog, eagerly observing the changes as they progress through their lifecycle."

The Victorian Government through the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action, funds the Victorian Junior Landcare and Biodiversity Grants, which are administered by Landcare Australia. Since 2018, \$3.65 million of Victorian Government funding has been provided for these grants.

Eleanor Slade is Communications and PR Manager for Landcare Australia. For more information email eleanor.slade@landcareaustralia.com.au

Demonstration trial highlights multiple benefits of multispecies pastures

By Jillian Staton and Cassie Wright



Above: The Tracys' herd of milkers graze happily in the summer multispecies pasture at Waratah Bay.

Right: The two-year demonstration trial compared a conventional mix of ryegrass and clover, with a multispecies mix of millet, forage rape, tillage radish, chicory, vetch, clover, buckwheat, sunflower and linseed in summer.

Multispecies pastures may hold the key to building more profitable and climate resilient farm businesses.

A two-year trial on a commercial dairy farm at Waratah Bay in South Gippsland found numerous benefits from multispecies pastures compared to conventionally farmed pasture mixes of ryegrass and clover, and millet and forage rape.

Importantly, the cost per tonne of dry matter from the multispecies pasture in the Farmers Digging Deeper project, was half that of the conventional pasture.

The results were a pleasant surprise for Stuart Tracy, who milks 600 Friesian and crossbred cows with his wife Jacqui, their son Angus and his wife Ruby.

"It's blown me away," he said.

"I would not have fathomed we'd see the regenerative outyield the conventional ... it justifies our move to a regenerative approach for our farm."

Stuart's interest was piqued by a 2019 South Gippsland Landcare Network (SGLN) project, Enhancing Soil Biology, which he joined to learn more about the science

underpinning regenerative grazing management.

With support from SGLN and soil microbiologist Dr Mary Cole, Stuart and 29 other farmers tested, monitored and evaluated three different soil treatments on their properties.

The treatments were aeration with a Yeoman's plough, aeration plus seaweed, and aeration plus mycorrhizal fungi.

"We did our trial plots and I noticed a difference in that ... so it made me want to get more involved," he said.

Interest piqued

Stuart was keen to see whether a more regenerative approach to farming in such a high rainfall environment, with average annual rainfall of 1000 millimetres, could be economically viable and allow them to reduce spending on expensive chemical fertilisers.

The 6 hectare demonstration site was established in May 2022 as part of the Farmers Digging Deeper project.

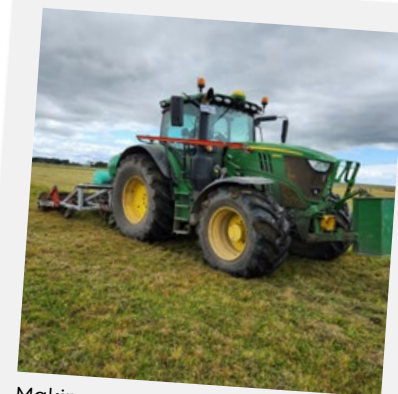
The aim was to measure the quality, quantity, production costs and soil health impacts of multispecies pastures and regenerative grazing management.

One side of the paddock was sown with a conventional mix of ryegrass and clover in summer and millet and forage rape in winter, which was fertilised with diammonium phosphate (DAP) and urea.

The other side was sown to a multispecies mix of millet, forage rape, tillage radish, chicory, vetch, clover, buckwheat, sunflower and linseed in summer, followed by millet, forage rape, tillage radish, chicory, vetch, clover, ryegrass and oats in winter.

It was fertilised with humates, fish and kelp emulsion, molasses and biocast from worms, and mulched, with the aim of feeding soil microbes.

A comprehensive monitoring program measured all inputs and outputs associated with sowing, maintaining and grazing both sides of the paddock.



Making a pass over the pasture with a Yeoman's plough to aerate the soil.

“

It's blown me away. I would not have fathomed we'd see the regenerative outyield the conventional ... it justifies our move to a regenerative approach for our farm.

”

Above: Angus Tracy (far right) and his father Stuart Tracy (second from right) join other farmers at a field day with multispecies cropping advocate Grant Sims.

A double benefit

Before the trial, Stuart expected the cost of producing the multispecies pasture to be lower than the conventional pasture but thought the conventional pasture would outyield it.

Much to his surprise, the multispecies pasture outperformed the conventional pasture on nearly every indicator, including dry matter, metabolisable energy (ME), protein, non-fibre carbohydrates (NFC) and calcium.

Better still, the cost of producing a tonne of multispecies pasture dry matter was half that of producing a tonne of conventional dry matter.

“Even if we don't outyield we're ahead,” Stuart said.

“But to do both is outstanding – it's a double benefit.”

Agronomist Jade Killoran said the demonstration trial showed the multispecies pasture was healthier and more resilient than the conventionally managed species.

It hosted large numbers of beneficial insects and birds, resisted pest attack, and stood up better to hot and dry conditions.

“Another exciting finding was the improvement in the soil,” Jade said.

“The multispecies pasture had been sown on the ‘sub-optimal’ half of the paddock where the soils were heavier and poor draining. At the end of the trial, the soil was far more aerated and had much higher levels of soil biology – including twice as many earthworms – than the conventional plot.”

This was good news for the Tracys, who had noticed their pastures seemed to be losing vigour and required frequent oversowing. They were also concerned about increasing levels of fungal diseases such as perennial ryegrass toxicosis, also known as ryegrass staggers, impacting the health of their herd.

Next steps

The trial results have given the Tracy family the confidence to accelerate adoption of regenerative practices more broadly across the farm business.

Multispecies pastures are being expanded as they transition from annual to perennial pastures.

Stuart said they would continue refining their techniques to reduce

phosphorus, potash and urea use, and have started making their own biofertilisers.

SGLN has developed an extensive library of resources to help farmers interested in regenerative agriculture which can be accessed at www.sgln.net.au

The Farmers Digging Deeper – Regional Soil Health project ran from 2022 to 2024 and was funded through the Australian Government's National Landcare Program. It was facilitated by the Western Port Catchment Landcare Network and involved SGLN, Bass Coast Landcare Network, Latrobe Catchment Landcare Network, Melbourne Water and Mornington Peninsula Shire Council.

Jillian Staton is chair of the South Gippsland Landcare Network and a member of the Tarwin Lower Landcare Group. Cassie Wright is SGLN Projects and Education Co-ordinator. For more information, email cassie@sgln.net.au

“

In my experience, landowners want to know about the birds on their land, and some join me on the surveys, contributing their bird knowledge as well. It's a situation where everyone wins.

”



A flame robin (*Petroica phoenicea*) perches on grape vines at a Birds on Farms property at Wellington, in Gippsland. The species prefers eucalypt forests and woodlands where they feed on small insects and spiders.

Birds on Farms: For the love of birds

By Shannon Creaney



Avid birder Phil Murdoch has been restoring land at Colignan, south of Mildura, since 2001. You can read about his work at www.malleeconservation.com.au

Australia's temperate woodlands are among the nation's most threatened ecosystems. Once widespread, these biodiverse landscapes have been heavily impacted by land clearing, habitat degradation and fragmentation. Today, more than 80 per cent of Australia's temperate woodlands have been cleared.

This has had a disastrous impact on woodland bird populations. About 195 Australian bird species depend on temperate woodlands, and 51 of these are now listed as threatened or in significant decline under the Temperate Woodland Bird Conservation Action Plan.

With 75 per cent of the remaining woodlands occurring on private property, it is essential that land managers and conservationists work together to create healthy, productive agricultural landscapes that protect our valuable woodland habitat.

BirdLife Australia's Birds on Farms program works with landholders across the country to increase the extent, condition and connectivity of woodland habitat on private

properties. The two Victorian projects form the largest component, with a statewide monitoring program and a dedicated habitat restoration project in the Yarra to Yea region, north of Melbourne.

Surveys measure success

The monitoring program connects rural landholders with experienced and passionate birders to monitor bird populations on private land throughout Victoria.

Surveys are conducted four times a year using the "2 hectare, 20 minute" method, recording all birds seen or heard during that time. The results provide information on the health and distribution of woodland bird

populations on private land and the success of habitat restoration projects.

The project was launched in 2017 with financial support from a private philanthropist who is passionate about birds and habitat restoration. It has grown to include more than 220 rural properties across Victoria and 648 monitoring sites.

Since then, volunteers have carried out more than 10,000 surveys, recording almost 80,000 individual birds across 207 species – including 35 of the 51 declining woodland bird species identified by BirdLife. These dedicated volunteers have contributed more than 3300 hours to monitoring efforts, providing vital data to help protect our woodland birds and their habitats.

Former ranger-in-charge of Hattah-Kulkyne National Park Phil Murdoch and his wife, Fiona, an ecologist, began rehabilitating their 490 hectare conservation property, Raakajlim, south of Mildura, in 2001.

After Phil retired five years ago, the Murdochs became involved with Birds on Farms, taking part in surveys and facilitating activities aimed at building awareness and appreciation of threatened plants and animals in the Mallee.

As well as planting trees and shrubs, they are restoring grassland and have begun creating a wetland 5 kilometres from the Murray River as a refuge for birds, butterflies and insects.

"One of our first goals was to have malleefowl come back onto the property," Phil said.

"In the past year we've been regularly seeing tracks, so we're pretty hopeful."

Plans add to habitat restoration

In 2022, Birds on Farms expanded to include a habitat restoration project in the Yarra to Yea region. Many landholders are passionate about birds and nature and are looking for ways to increase native vegetation on their properties.

To help these landholders, we develop property-specific habitat restoration plans aimed at supporting healthy woodland habitat on productive agricultural properties. The plans include detailed project outlines, lists of required materials and project budgets. They are provided free of charge and can support funding applications for on-ground implementation.

Over the past 2 1/2 years, the team has worked with 23 landholders on habitat restoration plans that include actions such as protecting existing woodland, revegetation and dam restoration. Six plans have been partially implemented, resulting in the creation of 29.2 hectares of valuable woodland habitat.

To further help landholders in shaping healthy bird habitat on their properties, we have produced a new resource: the Bird-Friendly Farms guide. This guide, developed in collaboration with Northern Tablelands Local Land Services, draws on our experience with Birds on Farms.

Developing a connection

Birds and their woodland habitats are not the only beneficiaries of Birds on Farms. Participants often say how personally rewarding it is to be part of the program.

Pomonal landholder John King said it encouraged people to "form a real, natural connection with the land of which you are the current custodian".

Experienced birder and artist Jane Rusden, of Campbell's Creek, said she also found the program gratifying.

"As a volunteer bird surveyor, I get to meet conservation-minded landowners (and) witness how they choose to provide valuable habitat for birds, which also benefits many other native species," she said.

"In my experience, landowners want to know about the birds on their land, and some join me on the surveys, contributing their bird knowledge as well. It's a situation where everyone wins – including the birds!"

To learn more, get involved, or download the Bird-Friendly Farms guide, go to www.birdlife.org.au/programs/birds-on-farms

This project is made possible through generous donations from a private philanthropist with a keen interest in woodland bird conservation, along with The Ross Trust and Equity Trustees.

Shannon Creaney is Monitoring Co-ordinator of Victorian Birds on Farms at BirdLife Australia. For more information, email birdsonfarms@birdlife.org.au



Revegetation around a farm dam at Dixons Creek, in the Yarra Valley, which has been designed to create a healthy habitat for native birds and other creatures.

Marking 30 years of community action in the Goulburn Murray

By Sandra Godwin

Salinity and rising water tables across northern Victoria were the bane of farmers, communities and governments in the 1980s and 1990s.

These and other significant environmental problems, such as erosion, weeds and rabbits, were among the catalysts for establishing Landcare and drainage groups in the irrigation zones of the Goulburn Broken and North Central catchments.

This year Goulburn Murray Landcare Network (GMLN) marks three decades of supporting those groups across an area covering 3000 square kilometres around Shepparton.

GMLN chair John Laing said there were originally 68 groups in the region, which is known for its dairy and fruit and vegetable production.

"It was easy to mobilise local communities, because we were all faced with the same dilemma," he said.

"We all had a common issue, so getting us all involved was certainly a lot easier, and there was a lot of support from government departments at the time."

Government support included providing farm advisers and ethnic liaison officers, in recognition of the multicultural nature of agriculture in the area, which is home to farming families from diverse backgrounds and heavily relies on seasonal workers from overseas.

Green Corps and Work for the Dole teams also undertook training and work experience while helping with

monitoring, restoration and revegetation programs.

John said being able to offer on-ground help from those teams was a huge incentive for farmers to get involved, whether it was putting a groundwater test well on their property or planting trees.

Adapting to change

Today, GMLN employs three part-time staff, including two Landcare facilitators funded by the Government's Victorian Landcare Facilitator Program. It supports 22 active Landcare groups, reflecting both the changing face of agriculture and the evolving needs of the community.

Farms have increased in size, replaced workers with machinery, adopted more efficient irrigation systems and there has been a decline in food manufacturing.

"There's one corporation up to the north of us, and they gobbled up 60 of the local farms," John said.

"We've lost a lot of our small farms and with that, the people that contributed to the Country Fire Association, the Country Women's Association, Landcare and everything else that happens in our region."

The shift from traditional information sharing to digital platforms has also changed how the network connects with its community.

And while email newsletters and social media allow GMLN to share information about the importance of natural resource management with many more people, John said

it was a challenge to get cut through and engage the community.

Even so, the network continues to have an impact, encouraging the exchange of ideas and experiences between Landcare groups, providing a regional employment service for community groups, and influencing regional planning, policy development and decision making.

Environmental education remains a cornerstone of its work. GMLN reaches more than 2000 students and community members each year through biodiversity education and discovery programs, and more than 840 participants with its week-long Floodplain Ecology Course, annual farm forums, soil health and regenerative grazing workshops, and other projects.

John, who has been GMLN president for 10 years and a volunteer for 30 years, takes a hands-on role in many of these activities, bringing along "Mini Beasts" – spiders and insects he collects from the 1.6ha home block at Old Toolamba that he and wife Rhonda have spent decades turning into a bush haven for native plants, animals and invertebrates.

Connecting communities

As GMLN prepares to mark its 30th anniversary, there is a strong sense of pride in past achievements, and recognition of the opportunity the milestone offers to reflect, refocus and inspire renewed community action for the decades ahead.

A volunteer-run organisation, the network is not just about the land: it's also about people, connection

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It was easy to mobilise local communities, because we were all faced with the same dilemma.

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and thriving communities. In 2023–2024 alone, volunteers racked up 5891 hours – equal to \$245,949 of in-kind contributions – protecting and enhancing the environment.

And while some of the original issues may have taken a back seat in recent times, John said there was still a lot to be done.

Fortunately, many retired farmers, who had moved into towns or rural lifestyle blocks, were now actively sharing their knowledge and experience in newer urban Landcare groups which were attracting the next generation of members.

"It's changed a little bit," John said.

"But the focus is still on bringing people together to solve problems."

GMLN receives funding from Victorian Government Landcare Grants, Australian Government and the Goulburn Broken CMA.

John Laing is president of Goulburn Murray Landcare Network and a member of Dhurringile and District Landcare Group. For more information email info@gmln.com.au or go to www.gmln.com.au

Left: Students from Colbinabbin Primary School and Kinder visit the bush kinder site to celebrate World Turtle Day as part of Goulburn Murray Landcare Network's Biodiversity Education Aquatic Discovery program.

Below: Goulburn Murray Landcare Network president John Laing takes a hands-on role in biodiversity education and discovery programs, bringing along "Mini Beasts" – a selection of native spiders, such as this social huntsman spider (*Delena cancerides*), and insects he collects from bushland at his home.



Former Goulburn Valley Tree Group volunteers Yvonne Harper (from left), Betty Harvey, Rhonda Vincitorio, Yvonne Russell, Roger Clements, Nancy Bloodworth, Tom Dumaresq, Lorraine Pratt, Marg Foord and Inez Raleigh.

Goulburn Valley Tree Group recognises 40 years of greening the region

By Sandra Godwin

As Parks Victoria planning officer Bruce Wehner drives around the Goulburn Valley, he can see the difference more than 40 years of work by the Goulburn Valley Tree Group (GVTG) has made to the landscape.

"You drive past plantations that we were involved in establishing along the roadsides and on properties ... and it's a great feeling to see these trees now, as fully grown, mature trees," he said.

"And you think, gee, I was around when we first started talking about that project and there you can see the end result. It's a real legacy for the group."

Bruce took on the role of secretary in 1985, as part of his job as a forester with the then-Forest Commission, not long after he arrived in Shepparton, and stayed on as secretary when it became a voluntary position.

Led by inaugural president, the late Geoff Witten, the GVTG started with a clear goal: to reverse rural tree decline by encouraging landholders to plant trees, growing trees for them and undertaking revegetation projects that might otherwise never happen.

Initially, the group of volunteers focused on providing trees to local farmers to address salinity concerns in the irrigation region.

"We were trying to raise trees that would be appropriate for irrigation farms," Bruce said.

"A lot of them were Australian but not local to the area."

Volunteers transform the landscape

Staples included river red gum (*Eucalyptus camaldulensis*), casuarinas, callistemons and salt-tolerant prickly paperbark (*Melaleuca styphelioides*).

Continued on page 14

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It's one way of feeling that you can make a difference. We're not putting the trees in the ground, but we're giving people the opportunity to do that at a very affordable price.

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Top: Volunteers prick out seedlings germinated in polystyrene boxes to be transferred into their own individual plastic tubes at the Goulburn Valley Tree Group nursery in Tatura.

Bottom: Seedlings are sun hardened at the Goulburn Valley Tree Group nursery in Tatura before being offered for sale.

"It's been a huge success," Deb said.

"We have a group of our loyal customers that come in every year and plant new trees, but we've had lots of people come in that didn't know we existed."

The group held an informal celebration of the 40-year milestone and officially opened public sales for the year at the nursery in March.

Present and past members of the group reminisced over morning tea, and former president Tom Dumaesq, who stepped down in 2022 after 33 years as president, and original member Yvonne Russell cut a cake to mark the occasion.

GVTG activities are mostly self-funded from plant sales.

Bruce Wehner is secretary of Goulburn Valley Tree Group and Deb Lynch manages the native plant nursery. For more information email goulburnvalleytreegroup@gmail.com or call 0400 059 765.

From page 13

As the climate changed and salinity became less of a focus, the group diversified its offerings, introducing more local and dryland species such as grey box (*E macrocarpa*), white box (*E albens*), yellow box (*E melliodora*), wattles and even rare local hakea (*Hakea tephrosperma*).

Major projects included co-ordinating the revegetation of 26 hectares of cleared land at the former Tatura Sewerage Farm on Dhurringile Rd, Tatura, where about 15,000 trees were planted between 1988 and 1992.

GVTG established a native tree nursery at Tatura in 1994 where members raise about 60,000 trees each year for sale during autumn.

The trees are grown from seed – much of it sourced from the Euroa Arboretum – and volunteers from the local Country Women's Association, school and church groups help members with the laborious task of pricking out. This involves separating the tiny seedlings by hand and transferring them to their own individual plastic tubes.

A record 75,000 trees were pricked out in 1991 and by 2003, the group had raised its one millionth tree. Estimates vary, but it's thought the tally is now between 1.5 million and 2 million.

Over the years, volunteers have contributed tens of thousands of hours to the group's efforts.

Today, the group produces about 20,000 trees, shrubs and grasses each year, with customers including not just farmers but also Landcare groups, residential property owners and hobby farmers looking to create windbreaks and woodlots.

"There was some massive tree planting going on back in the 1980s and early 1990s and now a lot of the local farms have probably got a pretty good coverage of trees," Bruce said.

Planting for the future

Deb Lynch joined GVTG after retiring and about three years ago took over as nursery manager from Nancy Bloodworth, who had been with the group for 18 years.

"It's so rewarding," Deb said.

"And it's one way of feeling that you can make a difference. We're not putting the trees in the ground, but we're giving people the opportunity to do that at a very affordable price."

Deb also has worked with Goulburn Murray Landcare Network Landcare facilitator Dan Walker, whose role is funded by the Victorian Government's Victorian Landcare Facilitator Program, to lift the group's profile by hosting an annual Big Backyard Biodiversity Day. The day offers presentations and displays by a local wildlife carer – along with the chance to interact with possums, reptiles, spiders and insects – and experts in biodiversity and sustainability.

Treat tussock before it seeds

By Ivan Carter

A serious threat across Victoria, serrated tussock (*Nassella trichotoma*) infests more than 250,000 hectares of land, causing widespread damage to both agricultural productivity and native grassland ecosystems.

Early spring is the ideal time for landholders to survey their properties and begin treatment efforts before the tussock starts setting seed for the next generation of plants.

Why now is the right time

Victorian Serrated Tussock Working Party (VSTWP) Chairperson Lance Jennison said many areas of the state experience a dry autumn and minimal pasture growth during winter, making serrated tussock more visible in paddocks now than at other times of the year.

Newly germinated seedlings will appear bright green and upright, gradually turning pale with exposure to frost. The bleached yellow or white foliage stands out against overgrazed pastures making the plants easier to identify.

"The lack of pasture cover and the change in tussock colour during winter offers landowners a window of opportunity," Lance said.

"Early identification is critical for effective control."

A resilient and invasive weed

Serrated tussock is a long-lived perennial grass capable of surviving under tough conditions, including poor soils, fire, drought and frost.

Its high fibre content makes it virtually indigestible to livestock, reducing pasture productivity, and dense infestations pose a potential serious fire hazard.

Adding to the challenge, the weed spreads easily through wind, water, animals and machinery, and its seeds can remain viable in the soil for up to seven years.

A weed of national significance, a single mature serrated tussock plant can produce tens of thousands of seeds that may disperse up to 20 kilometres from the parent plant.

This makes controlling serrated tussock before it flowers and seeds in late spring essential to prevent further spread.

Landowners are strongly encouraged to assess and treat infestations now – before flowerheads develop their distinctive purple hue and begin releasing seeds in late spring and early summer.

Treatment options for every property

Lance said the good news was the availability of effective treatment options.

"Early and consistent control efforts are the key to reducing its impact," he said.

Depending on the size of the infestation, treatment methods may include:

- Manual removal using hoes or spades for smaller outbreaks
- Spot spraying with registered herbicides
- Ongoing monitoring to identify and manage seedlings as they emerge.

The VSTWP offers a range of resources to help landowners tackle this noxious weed. These include informative videos, treatment guides and case studies which are available online at www.serratedtussock.com or can be mailed out on request, as well as tailored advice for specific properties.

"We urge landholders to take advantage of winter conditions to inspect their properties," Lance said.

"By taking action now, you can significantly reduce the long-term costs and labour required to manage serrated tussock."

The VSTWP receives annual grants from the Victorian Government – Agriculture Victoria to assist with education and extension programs.

Ivan Carter is Community Engagement Officer of the Victorian Serrated Tussock Working Party. For more information email info@serratedtussock.com

Below: Landholders attend a field day at Diggers Rest in April 2022 to discuss identification and management strategies for serrated tussock.



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By taking action now, you can significantly reduce the long-term costs and labour required to manage serrated tussock.

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Small farm, big impact: Building sustainability from the ground up

By Kate Prezioso

For more than 40 years, the Deveson family has run Moondarra Blueberries, a certified organic farm in Gippsland, with sustainability front and centre. During the past decade, they've stepped up efforts to reduce their environmental impact and build long-term resilience.

From introducing beekeeping and solar energy to compostable packaging and low impact weed control, the family continues to innovate.

Landcare has played a significant role in that journey. In the farm's early years, Mountain Rivers Landcare Group (MRLG) provided native tube stock to revegetate gullies and helped secure funding to fence and protect waterways – a partnership that helped shape the family's land stewardship values and approach.

Beekeeping and biodiversity

The Devesons initially began using beehives to improve blueberry pollination, but found it also boosted biodiversity, with native plants pollinated by the bees providing food and shelter for increasing numbers of native insects, such as native bees, butterflies, moths and hoverflies.

Farm manager Joel Deveson said introducing bees brought with it a steep learning curve.

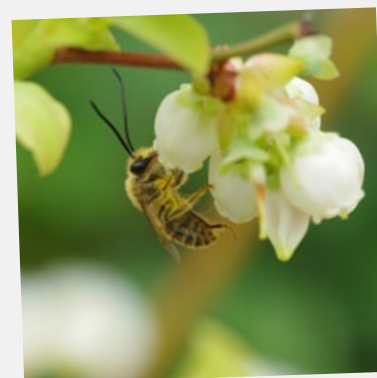
"Initially, we underestimated how much management bees need," he said.

"It's not as simple as placing a hive and walking away."

Maintaining healthy hives requires seasonal planning, pest control and providing chemical-free forage in shelter belts and flowering plants. The family also raises their own queen bees to breed stronger hives suited to Gippsland's cooler climate.

At a recent Landcare field day, the community was given the chance to learn about the farm and Joel's beekeeping practices firsthand.

MRLG secretary David Lowe said Joel's father, Mal, a foundation member of MRLG, had a wealth of environmental knowledge.



A honeybee pollinates a blueberry flower in spring.

"At our meetings, Mal is always offering fascinating insights into the local area, trees and sustainable farming, so when he suggested we visit his property to have a look at their pollination program, this was an obvious choice," he said.

Caroline Hammond, Landcare Facilitator at Latrobe Catchment Landcare Network, whose role is funded by the Victorian Government's Victorian Landcare Facilitator Program, is a fellow beekeeper and long-time customer of Moondarra Blueberries.

Caroline said it had been "a real pleasure" to see the Devesons share their know-how so generously.

"It's always wonderful to see our Landcare groups sharing their knowledge and experience with others and this field day did not disappoint," she said.

Left: Farm manager Joel Deveson shares his knowledge about blueberries and pollination during the field day.

Right: Installing a solar and battery array has reduced the cost of electricity and cut carbon dioxide emissions, as well as giving the Devesons a more secure and reliable electricity supply.





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**Sustainability
is a work in
progress.
There's no
finish line.**

”

The third generation of the Deveson family, Lilijah Deveson (from left) and Olivia Prezioso give the Boer cross goats some treats.

Energy resilience on the farm

Energy use was another area the family aimed to improve. With rising electricity prices for refrigeration and irrigation driving up the cost of production, they installed a solar and battery array – a major investment that has already paid dividends.

“We now generate the majority of our power onsite,” Mal said.

“Our battery system gives us backup capacity and greater control, especially during grid outages.”

Since it was commissioned in August 2023, the system has cut more than 58 tonnes of carbon dioxide emissions, demonstrating that even small farms can make a meaningful contribution to climate solutions.

The family has transitioned from a diesel ride-on mower to an electric model for cutting grass between rows, and is exploring the potential of autonomous electric tractors or mowers to better manage grass and weeds.

Government grants have helped fund energy-efficient upgrades to irrigation pumps and compressors, improving reliability and reducing costs.

Reducing plastic with purpose

As organic growers, using petroleum-based plastic fruit packaging never sat comfortably with the Devesons, but for years, alternatives remained out of reach for a small farm.

In 2019, they partnered with a New Zealand company to develop a fully home compostable punnet, sealed with a compostable cellulose film. It meets Australian Standard AS 5810-2010 and breaks down within 26 weeks without producing toxic residues.

Although the new packaging adds about 50 cents to the cost of each unit, wholesale partners and customers have backed the move.

Before the switch, the farm used almost two tonnes of plastic each season – a figure that starkly underscored the need for change.

By reducing plastic use, the family has not only aligned the packaging with their values but also significantly reduced their environmental footprint.

Sustainable weed and pest control

Managing weeds and pests has always been a challenge. Over the years, the family has trialled a range of solutions – including guinea pigs, ducks, guinea fowl and steam weeding in the blueberry paddocks, and goats elsewhere on the 65 hectare farm.

Guinea pigs proved too small to make a meaningful difference; guinea fowl and ducks showed great promise in controlling grasshoppers and snails, but were ultimately lost to foxes.

Boer cross goats have proven particularly effective on blackberries, woody weeds, invasive grasses and sloped terrain.

Their browsing encourages natural groundcover to regenerate without compacting the soil, although careful fencing and rotational grazing are essential.

The family's agroforestry efforts are also a core part of their land and weed management strategy. The on-farm plantation serves multiple purposes: supplying mulch for blueberry rows, producing timber for future farm use, and contributing to long-term land conservation.

Within the blueberry rows, a diesel and water-powered thermal weeder offers chemical-free weed control.

Lessons learned

One of the biggest lessons for Moondarra Blueberries is that no single solution works in isolation. True sustainability requires a whole-of-farm approach; energy, biodiversity, soil health, packaging and waste are all interconnected.

Mistakes have offered valuable insights, and the family continues to learn by testing.

“Sustainability is a work in progress,” Joel said.

“There's no finish line.”

By sharing both their successes and their setbacks, the Devesons hope to inspire others to continue pushing forward – one project, one idea and one innovation at a time.

Kate Prezioso is business manager of Moondarra Blueberries. For more information, go to www.moonblue.com.au



Partners tackle pests in Victoria's southwest

By Danielle Nipe

Rabbits aren't just a pest for farmers. They have a destructive impact on the environment and biodiversity, destabilising soil, disrupting natural vegetation and competing with native animals for food and habitat. They're also a nuisance in urban areas, damaging gardens, lawns and sports grounds.

But thanks to a major partnership established by Warrnambool Coastcare Landcare Network (WCLN) and the efforts of dozens of landowners, rabbit numbers – especially in the Illowa area – have been curtailed by a multi-part baiting program that took place earlier this year.

The co-ordinated baiting program, using both Pindone and calicivirus treated carrots, followed a series of workshops across the state's southwest, between October 2024 and April 2025. Each focused on management of a specific pest species: blackberry, rabbits, gorse and foxes.

The workshops were conducted as part of Agriculture Victoria's Partnerships Against Pests program – Developing Partnerships Against Pests project, which brought

together 15 community-based organisations and government agencies to work collaboratively on an education program.

The aim of the program was to improve community knowledge of best-practice integrated pest management techniques, and emphasise the need for co-ordinated community action for long-lasting results.

The workshops attracted 145 attendees, including landholders and managers, agency and NGO staff and pest control contractors, who heard from pest plant and animal experts, local agency representatives and local friends group volunteers.

In-field demonstrations, such as rabbit warren ripping, baiting and the mechanical control of blackberry and gorse infestations, provided an

opportunity for attendees to learn tips and techniques from local service providers.

Workshop prompts action

The most encouraging outcome of the program to date has stemmed from the rabbit control workshop held at Illowa, northwest of Warrnambool, in November.

In the weeks after the event, Illowa Rabbit Action Group members Ross Dawson and David Handscombe were contacted by numerous Illowa residents interested in controlling rabbits on their properties.

The action group had previously controlled rabbits at the local cemetery in 2018, but community involvement waned during the pandemic and rabbit populations in the area surged.

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Using multiple channels to promote events allowed us to reach a broader cross-section of the community... Successful community-led pest control efforts start small and spread gradually amongst landholders.

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Left: Most rabbit workshop attendees put their hand up when asked, “Who has a rabbit problem?”

Middle: Victorian Rabbit Action Network mentor Tim Bloomfield (from left) and Bligh Vegetation Management’s Tim Bligh demonstrate how to rip a rabbit warren.

Right: Drones were used to map the location of gorse infestations.

Thanks to the knowledge and commitment of Ross, David and local contractor, Rob Millard, 26 residents began a baiting program around Illowa in February.

They laid 940 kilograms of carrots treated with Pindone over three days. A second round of baiting involving an additional 43 properties and 210 kilograms of treated carrots took place in March.

This is a terrific example of what can be achieved at a community level, when knowledge of best practice and motivated community members come together. Much credit goes to Ross, David and the Illowa landholders for their dedication to controlling the rabbits together in their community.

What we learned

Lessons for the project team which planned and ran the events included:

- Using multiple channels to promote events allowed us to reach a broader cross-section of the community. Methods included local newspaper and radio coverage, direct email, social media posts and flyer drops.
- Including local government staff, agency staff and community volunteers in these events led to productive conversations and plans for co-ordinated pest control amongst landholders. Attendees reported feeling more capable of tackling pest issues after attending the events and having made useful connections for pest plant/animal control.
- Successful community-led pest control efforts start small and spread gradually amongst landholders. Momentum often hinged on the efforts of a few highly organised and motivated individuals – as demonstrated by the Illowa Rabbit control effort – to see results.

A pest control resource to provide ongoing access to best-practice pest control information and updates on local community control efforts will be housed at www.wcln.org.au

WCLN received funding under the Partnerships Against Pests program from Agriculture Victoria.

Danielle Nipe is a Landcare Facilitator for Warrnambool Coastcare Landcare Network. Her position is funded by the Victorian Government Landcare Facilitator Program. For more information email facilitator2@wcln.org.au



Left: Tim Bligh (right) explains mechanical methods of controlling gorse.

More than manure: Monitoring dung beetles in Victoria's Port Phillip and Western Port catchments

By Sue Finley

They're among our smallest and most underrated workers, but the Dung Beetle Monitoring Project aims to lift the lid on the vital role these insects play in soil health.

Spanning the Port Phillip and Western Port catchments and involving multiple Landcare networks, the project is a collaborative effort to harness the power of dung beetles to bolster soil health, enhance water infiltration and reduce polluting runoff all year round.

Dung beetles are beneficial because they dig tunnels into the soil, removing animal manure from the surface to line their tunnels or store as balls to lay their eggs in. This sequesters nitrogen and phosphorus, making it available to plants and preventing it from washing into dams, waterways and marine environments.

They are also known to help fight parasites, prevent flies and biting midges from breeding, and can reduce the spread of disease.

What hasn't been known is how many dung beetle species are present, their numbers and when they're active.

These are questions that several projects have attempted to answer during the past decade

by strategically introducing and monitoring dung beetle species.

Searching for answers

The work began with Port Phillip and Westernport CMA (now part of Melbourne Water) Sustainable Agriculture Facilitator Karen Thomas and Cannibal Creek Landcare Group members managing dung beetle nursery beds and releasing beetles in 2015.

Then in 2020 the Yarra Valley Equestrian Landcare Group conducted a dung beetle monitoring project to raise awareness of their role in soil management and benefits for horse keeping.

Building on this foundation, South Gippsland, East Gippsland and Bass Coast Landcare networks expanded the project in 2022–23, with a focus on identifying active dung beetle species and their seasonal patterns.

Latrobe Catchment and Maffra and Districts Landcare networks joined the effort the following year, investigating the presence of dung beetles across paddocks in their regions.

The success of these initiatives paved the way for further expansion last year.

Educating landholders

The primary goal of the latest project is to train landholders to trap and monitor dung beetles on their properties over a 12-month period.

Training includes workshops led by expert Dr Russ Barrow, of Ecolnsects, who provides insights into dung beetle ecology.

Participants receive identification booklets, information about monitoring and equipment options, and mentoring by Cannibal Creek Landcare Group member and dung beetle enthusiast Greg Collins. A WhatsApp discussion group facilitates real-time project updates and provides help with identification.

Greg said his fascination with dung beetles stemmed from learning "in the 1960s or 70s" about the CSIRO's importation of dung beetles.

After hearing a lecture by South Australian soil health and dung beetle expert Dr Bernard Doube

Five things to know about dung beetles

- The CSIRO began importing dung beetles from Africa and Europe in the 1960s
- They were originally intended to reduce populations of bush flies and buffalo flies breeding in cattle manure and tormenting people and livestock, especially in northern Australia
- Native dung beetles are unable to cope with the type and quantity of manure produced by cows and sheep
- To date more than 50 species of dung beetle have been introduced, 43 released into the field and 23 species have become established
- Research by Meat & Livestock Australia published in 2008 found the winter-active deep tunnelling dung beetle, *Bubas bison*, increased pasture production by 30 per cent for three or more years, resulted in higher earthworm populations, improved soil permeability, and increased levels of nitrate, available phosphate, sulphur, carbon and organic matter in the subsoil.



Geotrupes spiniger dung beetles – also known as the blue bomber for its colourful underside – have been introduced to Victoria, Tasmania and parts of NSW.

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The fact that they can change the environment in the manure to get rid of flies and cattle parasites; that's the thing that drew me to it ... But there's also benefits for the farm that I'm on, in removing manure and taking water down into the soil.



Dung beetle researcher and breeder Dr Russ Barrow, of Ecolnsects, has never been afraid to get his hands dirty.



Above: Dung beetle researcher and breeder Dr Russ Barrow, of Ecolnsects, shares his knowledge during a workshop at Tonimbuk Hall in October 2024.

in 2013, he began identifying dung beetles on his hobby farm at Tynong North, in west Gippsland.

Greg attended numerous workshops and became involved in projects to identify, breed and introduce dung beetles to landholders in the area.

"The fact that they can change the environment in the manure to get rid of flies and cattle parasites; that's the thing that drew me to it," he said.

"But there's also benefits for the farm that I'm on, in removing manure and taking water down into the soil. One of the main problems is people use cattle or horse drenches, and that could kill all the dung beetles on their property."

Greg bred his first batch of *Geotrupes spiniger* dung beetles – also known as the blue bomber for its colourful underside – in 2021, and has watched the population gradually grow and spread.

As well as *G spiniger*, he said common introduced species in the area include *Onthophagus taurus*, *Bubas bison* and *Aphodius fimetarius*, while native species such as *O granulatus* and *O australis* are also found.

By establishing numerous monitoring sites, the project aims to map the distribution of dung beetle species and identify those that need encouragement through breeding, purchasing or swapping.

Overcoming challenges

Despite the project's promising start, several challenges have emerged. One significant hurdle

is the variability in dung beetle activity due to weather conditions. For instance, a dry period in March led to reduced beetle activity, resulting in zero records across the board instead of anticipated low counts.

Another difficulty is ensuring monitoring data remains consistent. Variations in methodology, timing and environmental factors can lead to discrepancies in results. To address this, the project emphasises standardised training and provides mentoring and support with identification through WhatsApp chat.

The project has achieved notable successes despite these challenges. Releases are strategically planned to enhance the ecological balance and promote sustainable farming practices.

In May, 1600 dung beetles were successfully released at multiple sites across the project area, including Cape Schanck, Dromana, Garfield, Tynong North, Balnarring and the Yarra Valley.

The collaborative nature of the project has also fostered a sense of community among landholders. Through shared resources, knowledge exchange and collective action, participants have developed a deeper understanding of their paddocks and the role of dung beetles in soil health.

The establishment of a monitoring database, managed by Western Port Landcare Sustainable Farming Discussion Group facilitator Peter Ronalds, ensures data

is systematically collected and analysed, providing valuable insights for future initiatives.

Next steps

As the project progresses into its next phase, the focus will shift towards scaling up efforts and refining methodologies.

Karen and Greg will continue leading demonstration days to give landholders hands-on experience in identifying and releasing dung beetles.

By engaging more landholders and incorporating extra monitoring sites, we will expand the project's reach. And by broadening the scope, we aim to create a comprehensive map of dung beetle distribution across the region that will inform future conservation and land management strategies.

More than Manure is supported by Melbourne Water through funding from a 2024 Victorian Government Landcare Grant in partnership with Western Port Catchment Landcare Network, Mornington Peninsula Equine and Yarra Valley Equestrian Landcare groups.

Sue Finley is Landcare Facilitator, for Western Port Catchment Landcare Network. Her position is funded by the Victorian Government Landcare Facilitator Program. For more information email facilitator@wpcln.org.au

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There is a strong interest in preserving farm dams (and) growing enthusiasm for enhancing these dams to support biodiversity and improve overall ecosystem health.

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Above: Landcare facilitators from across the Corangamite region undertake training with ecologists from Australian National University's Sustainable Farms initiative in February.

Testing the waters to enhance southwest farm dams

By Kristen Lees

Farm dams don't just supply water for livestock and irrigation, they also have an important role to play in supporting biodiversity.

But not just any old dam will do the trick, as a group of 15 farmers and landowners in southwest Victoria will learn from taking part in a new pilot project, Testing the Waters – Resilient Farm Dams in a Changing Climate.

The project aims to help make their farms and dams more resilient in the face of increasing variability under climate change by improving water security and quality, while also reducing emissions and protecting our important biodiversity.

Over the next three years, Corangamite CMA project officers, and Landcare facilitators from the region (funded by the Victorian Government Landcare Facilitator Program), will support landholders through the program to enhance their farm dams and take steps to develop a water stewardship plan.

In partnership with Landcare, Corangamite CMA will be building water stewardship through workshops, field days, water quality testing, small scale incentives, one-on-one site visits, aerial maps and property planning.

The pilot follows reports from Landcare networks in the

Corangamite CMA area of increasing landholder interest in better managing dams.

While water security is often the driver for these enquiries, our Landcare partners recognise the multiple benefits of enhancing a farm dam and the value of landholder water stewardship plans.

“Within the Lismore area there is a strong interest in preserving farm dams, particularly for agricultural purposes and drought resilience,” said Lismore Land Protection Group facilitator Sarah McMaster, whose role is funded by the Victorian Government Landcare Facilitator Program.

“At the same time, there's growing enthusiasm for enhancing these dams to support biodiversity and improve overall ecosystem health.”

Ecologists from Australian National University's (ANU) Sustainable Farms initiative hosted a field day attended by 40 people at Colac to launch the project in February.

Landcare facilitators and Corangamite CMA staff, who have been trained by the ANU team, will be visiting properties and compiling

aerial imagery, vegetation maps and contour maps to highlight areas prone to inundation, along with natural and built water assets.

Using this information, the water stewardship plans will guide on ground actions such as revegetation, water quality testing, nutrient management and fencing. Participants are eligible for a \$2000 grant to help implement these works.

This year's cohort of 15 landholders will be followed by another 15 next year.

Testing the Waters – Resilient Farm Dams in a Changing Climate has been funded by the Victorian Government through the Our Catchments, Our Communities program, which supports integrated catchment management across Victoria.

Kristen Lees is a project officer for Corangamite CMA. For more information email kristen.lees@ccma.vic.gov.au or register your interest in taking part next year at ccma.vic.gov.au/projects/testing-the-waters

Championing Victoria's environmental volunteers

By Jessica Gerger

Across Victoria, thousands of dedicated volunteers put in the hard slog to protect, restore and celebrate our precious natural places. From weeding and planting to citizen science, advocacy and education, these passionate people (legends!) are the heart of the environmental volunteer movement.

The Victorian Environment Friends Network (VEFN) exists to support them.

VEFN is a volunteer-run peak body representing the many environmental volunteer groups across Victoria – from Friends Of groups and Indigenous nurseries to schools, litter action groups, Landcarers and urban bushland champions – those caring for coasts, wetlands, rivers and remnant woodlands. These groups vary in size, location and focus, but all share a deep commitment to the natural world.

Our vision is simple but powerful: A flourishing and biodiverse environment, supported by all the friends and resources it needs.

To achieve this, VEFN works to connect, inspire, engage and empower individuals, groups and networks to become effective protectors and advocates for nature. We do this by sharing knowledge, building capacity and encouraging collaboration

across the environmental volunteer sector.

With the generous support of the Victorian Government, through the Department of Environment, Energy and Climate Action (DEECA), we recently launched a new website that celebrates and showcases the amazing work of our member groups.

One of the standout features of the new VEFN website is the member profile pages. These are individual spaces where each group can share their mission and purpose, news, photos, videos, upcoming activities and contact details. It's a dynamic and evolving directory that makes it easier than ever to find and connect with environmental volunteer groups across the state. For groups without their own website, their profile acts as an easily updatable mini website.

Whether you're a new volunteer, a seasoned environmentalist, a land manager or a curious local, the collection of profiles is a one-stop shop for discovering and supporting grassroots environmental action in your area.

VEFN represents more than 170 member groups and 16,000-plus environmental volunteers, and we're keen to see that number grow. The more connected we are, the stronger our collective voice

becomes – whether we're advocating for better support, sharing resources, or simply learning from each other's successes and challenges.

Membership is free for the first year, so if you're part of a group that's caring for the environment in Victoria, we'd love to welcome you to the network! Joining gives you access to a growing community of like-minded groups, a stronger platform to share your story, and a seat at the table when it comes to shaping the future of environmental volunteering.

At a time when our natural environment is under increasing pressure, community-driven action has never been more important. VEFN exists to back up that action with passion, purpose and the strength of many voices working together.

The new VEFN website was built using Victorian Government Landcare Program funding from DEECA. VEFN also receives support from Melbourne Water and VicReturn.

Jessica Gerger is deputy convenor of the Victorian Environment Friends Network. For more information go to www.vefn.org.au or email info@vefn.org.au

Below: A collaboration by Frankston Council, Down's Community Farm and Friends of Seaford-Edithvale Wetlands brought renowned Melbourne street artist Jimmy Dvate to paint an eco-mural on a shed at Down's Community Farm, Seaford, in January 2024. It features local birdlife, including two migratory species that contribute to the site's Ramsar wetland listing.



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At a time when our natural environment is under increasing pressure, community-driven action has never been more important.”



All hands on deck to restore Gariwerd after the fires

By Sandra Godwin

Fire has been a feature of the Australian landscape for millions of years – so long that many of our native plants have evolved ways of withstanding or even taking advantage of periodic burning.

But the fires that swept through the 168,000 hectare Grampians National Park (Gariwerd) in recent summers were both more intense and extensive than usual.

Lightning strikes ignited fires that burned more than 6500 hectares along the eastern flank of the park in February 2024 and another 135,000 hectares – more than 70 per cent of the park area – in the summer of 2024–25.

The blazes destroyed homes and livestock on adjacent farms, as well as impacting native plants, animals, aquatic species and invertebrates, leaving swathes of the park's landscape "like the surface of the moon".

The heat was so intense that even fire-stimulated native species struggled to regenerate in some areas, with significant losses of key flora such as cypress pines (*Callitris spp*) and yellow box (*Eucalyptus melliodora*).

"In a lot of cases, we're not seeing the recruitment of native species within their distribution ranges," Parks Victoria pest plant project officer Sarah said.

"We're seeing stimulation of the grass trees (*Xanthorrhoea spp*) and other plants that you expect to see post-fire and then there's other parts of the park that look like the surface of the moon. There's just nothing there."

Disaster recovery efforts began immediately after areas were deemed safe, with Forest Fire Management (FFM) and Parks Victoria personnel clearing tracks. They also brought in emergency food supplies and temporary shelters for small animals that had been left homeless and vulnerable to starvation and predation from foxes and cats, which quickly moved into the newly exposed landscape.

"Foxes were there overnight," Sarah said.

Tackling weeds and restoring habitat

Under Sarah's direction, Landmate crews are also making a difference on the ground. Their focus is on woody weed removal – especially sallow wattle (*Acacia longifolia*) and the invasive kunzea (*Kunzea leptospermoides*), which is an emerging threat to biodiversity and fire management.

The Landmate program is a partnership between Corrections Victoria and the Victorian Government's Landcare Program, which has invested more than \$5.7 million in it since 2006.

The program combines environmental management with rehabilitation for prisoners nearing release and provides free or low-cost, skilled labour for restoration work.

Sarah said Landmate crews had covered more than 400 hectares of the park in the past two years, treating blackberries (*Rubus fruticosus*) and periwinkle



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The fires were incredibly hot. In a lot of cases, we're not seeing the recruitment of native species within their distribution ranges ... We're seeing stimulation of the grass trees and other plants that you expect to see post-fire and then there's other parts of the park that look like the surface of the moon. There's just nothing there.

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Left: A water bombing helicopter returns to Stawell after a day fighting fires in the Grampians National Park (Gariwerd) in December 2024. Photo: Will Hudson

Middle: Parks Victoria and Forest Fire Management staff clear debris from paths in Grampians National Park (Gariwerd).

Right: Green shoots show early signs of recovery from grass trees (*Xanthorrhoea* spp). Photo: Mark Norman

(*Vinca major*), and cutting sallow wattle below the lowest growth node to kill it.

A native of New South Wales but a weed in Victoria, sallow wattle is a prolific seed producer and especially problematic in fire-affected landscapes.

"Ants take the seed down into the ant nest, so it's insulated against fire," Sarah said.

"Once we have good rains after fires, it stimulates the seed growth; it comes back as a monoculture, crowding out everything else and changing the biology of the soil. Once it establishes, it becomes the only thing in the landscape."

The kunzea weed, meanwhile, is a more recent and less understood invader.

Sarah said it looked like a tea tree and smelled like a tea tree, but had a different canopy and distinctive flowers, and did not respond well to herbicides.

"It's an imposter that grows to about 3 metres high and crowds out to become huge hedges," she said.

Parks Victoria is working with Northern Grampians Shire, Landcare groups, Project Platypus, VicRoads, DEECA, FFM and the CFA to remove kunzea from the landscape and research the best treatment options.

"Halls Gap Landcare has been leading kunzea removal around the township," Sarah said.

"We really only work on our tenure, and then on the other side of the fence, we've been in partnership with Landcare, high fiving them over the fence."

Rehabilitation and skills development

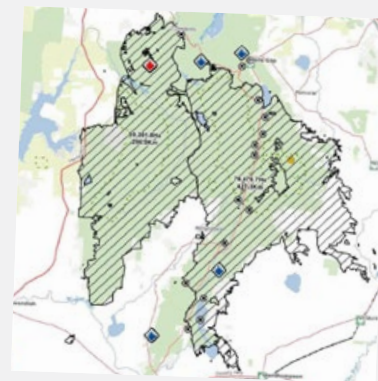
For the prisoners who take part, the Landmate program offers a unique opportunity to develop practical skills through meaningful work, build confidence, and contribute positively to society before reintegrating with the community.

"It gave me a sense of purpose," said one participant, who cannot be named.

"Being part of Landmate helped me feel useful again. I could see the difference I was making in the community."

Another said learning how to work in a team, follow instructions and use tools had been a confidence booster.

Sarah said the Landmate program had broader social benefits, giving the prisoners, who are mostly men nearing the end of their sentence, experience at working with female leaders, learning how to do weed assessments, and to value the



More than 70 per cent of the 168,000 hectare Grampians National Park (Gariwerd) burned during the summer 2024-25 fires.

environment and cultural heritage.

"They talk to their families about the work that they're doing," she said.

"So there's this real benefit of building a value around conservation with their families as well, that benefits everybody going forward."

Corrections Victoria Landmate and Agriculture Manager Andrew Marx said the Landmate program had been operating in Victoria for more than 25 years, evolving to include support for disaster recovery – from floods as well as fires – facility maintenance, environmental grants and public land projects.

Community partnerships include Landcare groups and networks, catchment management authorities, water authorities and local government.

Continued on page 26

From page 25

Andrew said eight crews operated from prisons across the state, including Hopkins and Beechworth correctional centres, Langi Kal Kal Prison, and the Tarrengower women's prison.

"They need to meet certain criteria to be approved for Landmate," he said.

"The program is multi-faceted in its benefits to the environment and community, while also allowing participants the opportunity to learn employable skills and assist in their transition back into the community."

The program's success is reflected in its outcomes. Since 2016, Landmate crews have contributed more than 30,300 days of environmental work across Victoria, planted more than 237,000 trees and installed more than 320 kilometres of fences. They have also cleared more than 660 hectares of woody weeds since 2020.

In the Grampians, the focus is now shifting towards revegetation, with plans for large-scale planting projects to follow the weed removal work.

Movement in a burned landscape

The 2024-25 summer fires in Grampians (Gariwerd) National Park resulted in the closure of many popular visitor sites including campgrounds, picnic areas, roads and walking tracks.

Facilities are gradually being reopened and visitors are urged to drive slowly and carefully through the area to avoid hitting animals attracted to feed on fresh plant growth along the roadside.

Hikers and bushwalkers are also asked to take care not to stray from established tracks in burn scars to allow regenerating plants to re-establish soil integrity.

"It's important not to break the surface of that soil by walking through it, because that is its ability in the future, to be able to hold moisture," Parks Victoria pest plant project officer Sarah said.

"By trampling through these spaces, we could create desert tracks where nothing will grow again."

Some of this work has been completed under the project, **Healing Gariwerd (the Grampians National Park) Through Bushland Restoration**, as part of the DEECA funded BushBank public land restoration grants program, and the Protecting Biodiversity Sallow Wattle Project.

To learn more about how the Landmate program could help with your Landcare group or network project, email andrew.marx@justice.vic.gov.au or go to www.landmate.vic.gov.au

Partnerships key to growing volunteer network and impact

By Sarah Vella

Landcare Victoria has an ambitious new target: to double participation in community Landcare across the state over the next three years.

Outlined in the 2025–2027 Strategic Plan, this vision reinforces our commitment to supporting our growing network of volunteers and building stronger partnerships between government and community.

As the peak body for Landcare in Victoria, our focus is on enabling and advocating for the thousands of people who care for land, water and biodiversity.

Our strategy is built around three core goals:

1. Strengthening support for Victorian Landcarers – We're investing in improved resources, governance and support to help local groups thrive.
2. Doing more with others – By working more closely with partners, we can amplify the impact of community-led environmental efforts.
3. Making the case for community-led action – We're promoting the value of local knowledge and grassroots leadership in delivering real environmental outcomes.

The plan responds to what Landcarers across Victoria have told us they need: better co-ordination, stronger advocacy and more support for volunteers.

It sets out a path to strengthen our system, grow our movement and build a future where community-led action is central to caring for the environment.

If you believe in the power of this work and like what you see, please consider backing us. Volunteer with your local Landcare group, join the Landcare Victoria Members Council, or make a donation to support practical, community-driven solutions to the environmental challenges we all face.

Sarah Vella is Communications and Engagement Co-ordinator for Landcare Victoria.

For more information go to www.landcarevictoria.org.au

Sharing hundreds of stories showcasing the spirit of Landcare in Victoria

By Yvonne Ryczkowski

The Victorian Government, through the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action (DEECA), funds the Victorian Landcare Program which directly supports hundreds of Landcare and environmental groups and networks across the state.

It also helps deliver on the Environmental Volunteering Plan and tell the stories of these groups by co-ordinating and publishing *Victorian Landcare and Catchment Management* magazine, which is distributed in partnership with Landcare Victoria.

This edition marks the 90th issue of the magazine. It now has more than 22,000 readers – many of them online – and others who share their print copy of the magazine with family, friends and colleagues.

The inaugural edition of the magazine was published in 1996, marking the beginning of a publication dedicated to the spirit of Landcare. The editorial team united two earlier publications: *Trunkline* (a Victoria Farmers Federation newsletter focused on farm trees) and the salinity journal *Salt Force News*.

The magazine includes profiles, case studies, research updates, news, achievements and personal stories from Landcarers across the state.

It shares both their challenges and success stories, and raises awareness about the benefits of environmental volunteering, Landcare and natural resource management among Victorian farmers, landholders, the Landcare community and the broader public.

To that end, the magazine has canvassed a wide array of topics throughout its 90 editions. They include soil health, pest and weed management, new and emerging industries, salinity, junior Landcare, biodiversity conservation, climate change, sustainable agriculture, biolinks and natural disaster recovery.

The magazine library and online index hosted on the Victorian Landcare Gateway are valuable resources for finding stories. You can access PDFs of all back issues since 1996, or download the index and search by author, title and subject at www.landcarevic.org.au/landcare-magazine/

Yvonne Ryczkowski is a Team Leader in Community Programs for DEECA.



1,734
Topics

1,679
Stories



954
Story contributors



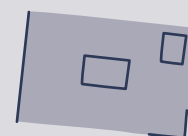
630
Ghost written stories



315
Landcare and environmental groups and networks referenced



9,207
Number of index entries



8,299
print readers



13,508
online readers



Left: Heather Mitchell (left), Terry Simpson (Winjallock Landcare Group) and Joan Kirner (right) unveil a plaque in 1996 to mark the 10th anniversary of Landcare and the launch of the inaugural Landcare group at Winjallock.

Right: The launch of the Winjallock Landcare Group on 25 November 1986 kicked off the Landcare movement.

Next issue

Contributions are sought for Issue 91 of the magazine to be published in 2026, when we celebrate 40 years of Landcare in Victoria.

This incredible Landcare journey began on 25 November 1986, with the formation of the Winjallock Landcare Group near St Arnaud.

The initiative was launched by Joan Kirner, then-Minister for Conservation, Forests and Lands, and Heather Mitchell, then-President of the Victorian Farmers Federation. It marked the beginning of a community-driven movement, with sustained Victorian Government support, dedicated to natural resource management and land restoration.

Since then, Landcare has fostered sustainable land management practices and expanded from

production agriculture to include stewardship of both public and private land. Landcare groups are also active in bush, coastal, urban and peri-urban areas.

We want to share your stories that celebrate and showcase Landcare achievements through community efforts, volunteer contributions, connections, partnerships, perseverance and learning from challenges over the past 40 years.

The magazine fills up very quickly so please get in touch well before the contribution deadline.

Contributions should be submitted by Sunday 29 March 2026 to landcare.magazine@deeca.vic.gov.au

We know many readers like to read their copy of the magazine at the kitchen table, and that these copies are often shared with family, friends and neighbours.

As we celebrate these remarkable stories of sustainability and collaboration, we also encourage you to consider making the switch to an online subscription of the magazine.

Reading online helps us reduce paper, printing and postage to be more sustainable. If you're ready to make the change, please email Landcare Victoria Inc at info@landcarevictoria.org.au

Victorian Landcare and Catchment Management magazine is published by the Victorian Government's Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action and distributed in partnership with Landcare Victoria Incorporated. The magazine aims to raise awareness of Landcare and natural resource management among Victorian farmers, landholders, the Victorian Landcare community and the wider community.

Mailing list enquiries and to receive your online copy via email alert

Contact Landcare Victoria Incorporated

Phone: 9034 1940

Email: info@landcarevictoria.org.au

Read the magazine online

To access Victorian Landcare and Catchment Management magazine online as web pages since the Spring 2016 issue (#67) go to www.landcarevic.org.au/landcare-magazine

Back issues of the magazine since the Spring 1996 issue (#1) can be accessed online as PDFs.



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