VICTORIAN

LANDCARE

& CATCHMENT MANAGEMENT

SPRING 2024 Issue 88

REVEGETATION AND RESTORATION FEATURE

The Urban Bushland Initiative

Bushfire recovery in East Gippsland

Revegetating a farm at Wooragee

Victorian Landcare Program

VICTORIA State Government

Victorian Landcare and Catchment Management

SPRING 2024 Issue 88

Volunteers Chris and Helen Vaughan germinating lilies and other plants in our nursery at Benalla in 2021.

The young, enthusiastic and dedicated committee of UBI at their first planting day.

A koala at Arthurs Seat in 2021.

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Cover photograph
A captive bred male regent honeyeater in a rural garden at Greta West in 2020 where it was raising a chick with a wild female. Photograph by Jordan Lewis.

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Acknowledgment
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 partner, and meaningfully engage, with Victoria's Traditional Owners and Aboriginal communities to support the protection of Country, the maintenance of spiritual and cultural practices and their broader aspirations in the 21st century and beyond.

From the Minister

Victoria's native vegetation is critical for the health of the Victorian environment, as it supports healthy soils and habitat for wildlife, protects water quality and mitigates the impacts of climate change by absorbing carbon dioxide.

For this reason, the tireless work done by Landcare and environmental volunteer groups, networks and landholders to restore and revegetate Victoria's landscapes is crucial. These groups have collectively delivered revegetation projects across 872 hectares of land, with support from the 2022 Victorian Landcare Grants.

This edition features some of the many valuable results achieved by these revegetation projects. There are inspiring stories on landscape-scale revegetation projects that have been operating for several decades, as well as individual landholders working to restore and revegetate their rural properties. The principles of these projects are similar, in that all these projects require planning, research, testing, hard work and resilience.

The Kyabram Urban Landcare Group is leading a community-led restoration effort of the Ern Miles Reserve. Since 2001, this group has transformed the former weed-infested drainage basin into native bushland with wildlife habitat, attracting the local community to use and enjoy the site. Local primary school students participated in some of the first planting days at the reserve, with many of these young people returning to help volunteer at the site as they moved through high school.

In Melbourne, young people are helping local communities take ownership of their local green spaces. The Urban Bushland Initiative is an urban restoration and revegetation project that focuses on revegetating the varied and little-known empty spaces throughout Melbourne. This group is run by young people, and more than 70 per cent of the volunteers who attend their planting days are under 35 years old.

The three biolink projects that are featured are working to improve landscape connectivity in different parts of the state. These projects focus on reconnecting areas of remnant vegetation and creating new corridors of revegetation on both public and private land. The projects are run by the Mornington Peninsula Landcare Network (MPLN), Bass Coast Landcare Network, and Project Hindmarsh in the Wimmera.

The MPLN's Greens Bush to Arthurs Seat Biolink aims to improve catchment health and support threatened species like powerful owls and swamp skinks. This biolink connects the Main Creek Biolink to the Southwest Mornington Peninsula Biolink, and 40 private properties have signed formal landholder agreements to be involved.

Biolink plans were developed for these two areas as part of the Linking the Mornington Peninsula Landscape project, a flagship project of MPLN that has developed 11 biolink plans across the Mornington Peninsula.

Effective partnerships with the Mornington Peninsula Shire Council, Melbourne Water, Parks Victoria, local groups and community members have helped the project achieve greater connectivity in the landscape.

For urban residents, volunteers can support rural revegetation projects by getting involved in the TreeProject, which has more than 30 years of experience in growing indigenous plants. The TreeProject relies on urban volunteers to propagate and care for seedlings in their backyards until they are ready to be planted in rural areas by landholders and landcare groups. Even balcony space is big enough to help join in.

I'd also like to thank all the environmental volunteers, groups, networks, and landholders for the massive amount of planting work you do to help revegetate Victoria and restore our landscapes. Your contributions are both significant and highly valued.

I look forward to continuing my visits to Landcare groups across the state, and meeting more of the wonderful volunteers and groups who work to support the Victorian environment.

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

The beauty of the flowering wattles in late winter and early spring is something to behold.

Zebra finches enjoy new food, shelter, and nesting opportunities in the reserve.

Native vegetation in the Ern Miles Reserve in 2021, which was established through direct seeding in 2011.

Kyabram's Ern Miles Reserve – a 20-year

In 2001 the Shire of Campaspe handed the management of Kyabram town's South Boundary Road Drainage Basin to the Kyabram Urban Landcare Group (KULG). It is now the Ern Miles Reserve, named after one of KULG's hardworking and visionary members.

Kyabram is an Aboriginal word meaning thick forest, but there was little evidence of that when the project began. The reserve was former farmland that was used for cropping and cattle grazing. The only remnant vegetation on the entire 28-hectare site was eight mature and two dead grey box trees (*Eucalyptus microcarpa*). Our vision was to revegetate the degraded, weed-infested site back to native bushland, creating habitat to support diminishing wildlife and areas for the public to enjoy.

KULG began the huge revegetation task in 2002 by deep ripping the areas to be planted. Grade five and six students from Haslem Street Primary School (who are now at Kyabram P-12 College) planted over 200 tubestock with indigenous species of eucalypts, acacias, sennas and dodoneas under the existing grey box to begin the growth of understorey.

Local school children plant year after year

Since that first planting, students from Dawes Road Primary School, St. Augustine's College and Kyabram P-12 College were involved in further revegetation projects at the site, right up to 2018.

We also enjoyed working with planting teams from Dhurringile Prison, Goulburn Murray Landcare Network (GMLN), Kyabram Girl Guides and Boy Scouts, Rural Finance employees, and an unemployed Kyabram youth team. KULG members and other community volunteers worked alongside these groups planning, advising, supervising, and catering for the planting events.

We deep ripped sites a few days before planting and achieved a good survival rate of tubestock. Almost 100 per cent survived a very wet planting in 2010. In drier conditions watering the seedlings was critical. Following a winter or a spring plant, regular watering of the plants continued right through to the beginning of the following autumn, but especially through summer.

Two direct seeding events undertaken by a contractor who used local provenance seed from Goulburn Broken Indigenous Seedbank at Dookie were successful. We didn't rip the soil beforehand, but even with a very dry year in 2006 (it was the height of the millennium drought) we still had a good strike of seedlings. The direct seeding event in 2011 followed some wet months. A dense covering of hogweed and other weeds were burnt off before and an excellent strike of endemic shrubs resulted – mainly wattle species and hopbush *(Dodonea viscosa)*.

Kyabram Urban Landcare group and Kyabram Fauna Park members planting eucalypts for koalas in 2018.

Despite the hard work and the many challenges, the project has been a resounding success.

revegetation project

By Neville Hunter

The project has received funding from Campaspe Shire, a 2019 Victorian Landcare Grant, along with contributions from Goulburn Broken CMA, GMLN, and Kyabram Fauna Park.

Challenges and failures

Flood, drought, frost and weeds have created challenges and sometimes failures. Watering young plants, especially during the drought, proved difficult. The work was constant and put a huge load on our members, who are mostly well into retirement.

One planting took place on the morning of a heavy mid-winter frost. For time efficiency purposes we placed the tubestock out in position the evening before. All the seedlings died. Flood events in 2010/11 and in 2022 killed young plants so some areas required replanting. When plants died before they set seed it meant there was no regeneration.

Removing weeds such as caltrop, Paterson's curse, Bathurst burr and other thistles were a continual issue. Rabbits, foxes and hares also caused some damage and required control.

Beauty and delight

The success of our project can be seen in the delight of the many locals who now visit the reserve. The beauty of the flowering wattles in late winter and early spring is something to behold. There are twelve endemic species present in the reserve including Australia's floral emblem, golden wattle *(Acacia pycnantha)*, as well as silver wattle *(A. dealbata)*, hakea wattle *(A. hakeoides)* and gold-dust wattle *(A. acinacea.)*

Native wildlife has returned, with kangaroos and the occasional wallaby gracing the reserve. Kyabram Fauna Park funded the planting of 300-koala food eucalypts in 2018. River red gum *(Eucalyptus camaldulensis)*, manna gum *(E. viminalis)* and yellow box *(E. melliodora)* are now well established.

Birdlife is a real highlight. We have kept a record of birds at the reserve since 2001 when we recorded 36 species as regular visitors. This has now increased to a total of 132 different species sighted. Undoubtedly the revegetation was responsible for the return of at least 40 bird species. Painted buttonquail, rufous and golden whistler, superb fairy wren, grey fantail and several thornbill species would never be observed if it weren't for our revegetation project.

Despite the hard work and the many challenges, the project has been a resounding success. We established thousands of indigenous plants in our reserve, improving the biodiversity of our environment. The sense of community the project has created is of enormous value.

Revegetation in the Ern Miles Reserve at Kyabram. The site is surrounded by housing and agriculture. The plots on the left show orchard style clusters instead of rows to promote faster growth.

Neville Hunter is Secretary of the KULG. For more information email dan@gmln.com.au

Our annual surveys show numbers of grey-crowned babblers have steadily improved, often moving into and nesting in four-year-old revegetation established by RHP.

Volunteers Chris and Helen Vaughan germinating lilies and other plants in our nursery at Benalla in 2021.

The Regent Honeyeater Project – 25 years of revegetating

The regent honeyeater is the icon of the temperate woodland bird community that has been drastically declining around Lurg, Glenrowan, and Benalla in northeast Victoria – as well as throughout its entire range in southeastern Australia – for decades.

The Regent Honeyeater Project (RHP) was established in the early 1990s to address this decline by focusing on landscape scale connectivity, fencing, enhancing remnant habitat and planting new corridors.

Local Benalla volunteer Charlie Corser next to a four-year-old-white box planted by RHP in Winton Wetlands Reserve.

The project prioritises fragmentation caused by clearing, initially working in box/ironbark forests, and more recently including grey box woodlands and the Winton Wetlands Reserve.

Mollyulah/Tatong Tree and Land Protection Group supported the RHP when it first began and before it became a stand-alone association with a volunteer committee of management. Ray Thomas was our enthusiastic coordinator of the RHP for more than 20 years. Timely funding from the Wettenhall Environment Trust and later corporate sponsorship from Exetel enabled RHP to continue through some lean times.

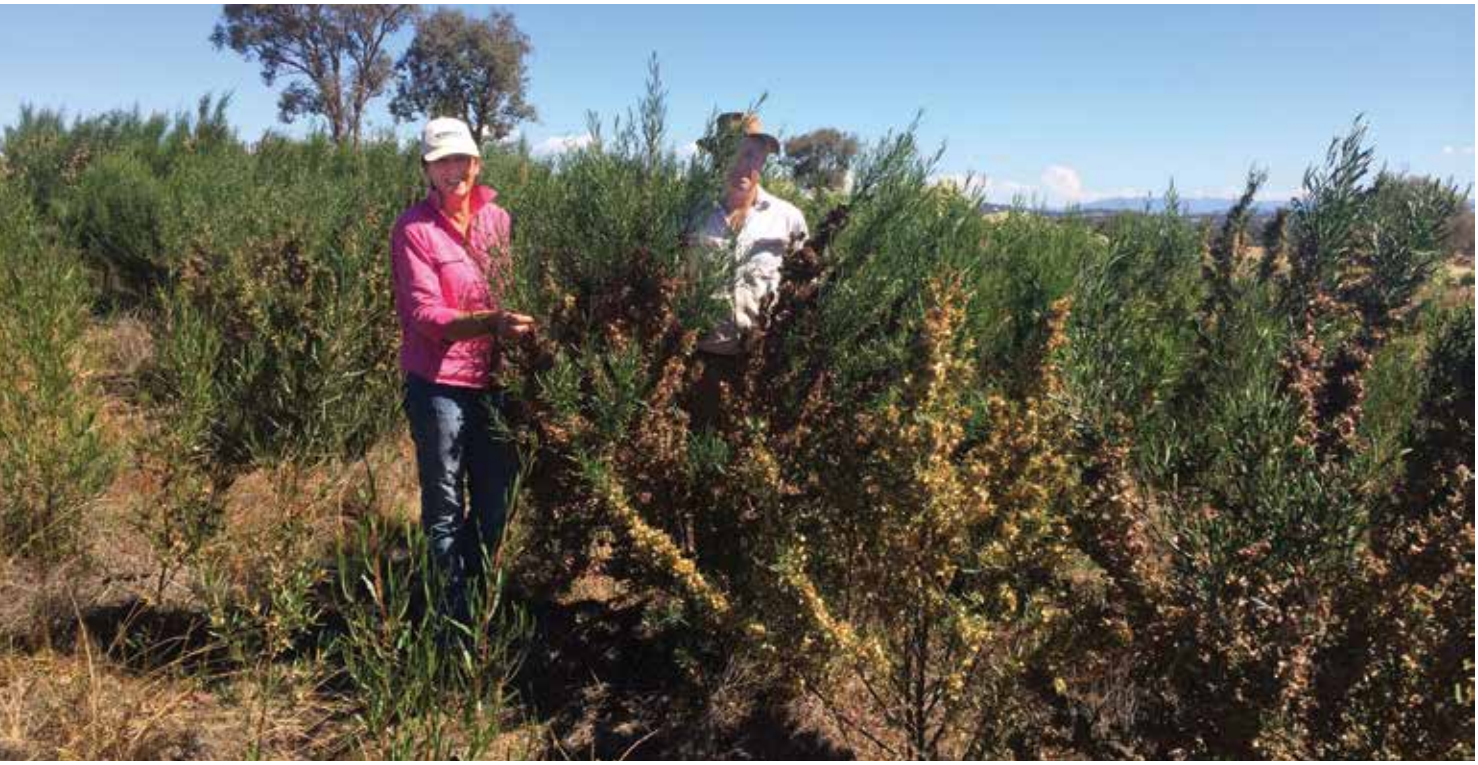
In 2007 RHP achieved tax deductibility status under the Register of Environmental Organisations, and in 2022 we were granted charitable status through the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission.

RHP has always worked with landholders and volunteers of all ages. School students and volunteers are involved in our plant nursery where up to 40,000 trees and shrubs are grown each year – helping us to control the costs of revegetation work. Recently more than 10,000 lilies and herbaceous plants from hundreds of local provenances have been grown at the nursery and planted out.

In its 25 years of operating RHP has completed more than 2460 hectares of restoration and revegetation, grown nearly 740,000 plants and planted them in more than 660 sites, erected more than 300 kilometres of fencing and constructed a 4.5 hectare seed orchard. Along the way we have engaged with 41,000 volunteers.

Increase in numbers of grey-crowned babblers

Over the past five years RHP has become a provider of revegetation services to various organisations including Birdlife Australia, Goulburn Broken CMA, Trust for Nature, and Winton Assets (solar farm), to name a few. While initially this move was challenging and required much effort to become compliant with numerous policy and procedure requirements it has afforded more long-term financial security.



Anne and Tony Mort in two-year-old hop bushes growing in the seed orchard on their property at Winton.

temperate woodlands

By Andie Guerin

Sadly, numbers of regent honeyeaters continue to decline everywhere and are now rarely seen. The last recorded sighting in our area at Greta West was in 2020, but our annual surveys show numbers of grey-crowned babblers have steadily improved, often moving into and nesting in four-year-old revegetation established by RHP.

Regular inspection of over 400 nest boxes confirms that territories used by squirrel gliders and brush-tailed phascogales has also increased.

Thinning mass germinations after bushfire

In 2009 we obtained a permit to thin a section of box/ironbark trees at Greta West that had mass germinated after the 1952 bushfires in the region. The trees were then 57 years old and in densities of more than 1000 per hectare. Nothing else was growing at the site. The trees were only about five centimetres in diameter and didn't flower or produce nectar.

The permit allowed for removal of 70 per cent of the trees. A control site was established and transects recorded. Regular monitoring has shown an increase in tree growth in the thinned areas, as well as more ground layer plants and orchids.

This tree removal exercise demonstrated that we should have thinned 90 per cent of the trees, and not evenly spaced, but in clumps. Landholders should be cautious with local vegetation removal restrictions, as well as being aware that thinning too quickly can lead to greater storm damage due to the time it takes for the trees to develop stronger root systems.

Tree planting densities and ecological thinning

Our current tree planting density is about 50 trees per hectare, with a maximum of 30 eucalypts per hectare, often clumped in groups of three or four. More trees are then planted if needed. We plant indigenous species but with a bias towards high nectar producing trees and a percentage of climate matched genetics from areas in western Victoria, north of the Murray River and well into NSW.

The near future will see us planting new trees at new sites and removing many trees from earlier plantings, so that each tree can function and have the space and moisture to become a resource for insects, birds, and animals.

Ecological thinning is hard work, especially when eucalypt trees want to re-sprout, which can require chemical control.

At our Demonstration Thinning Site we have been testing a range of densities and methods including ring barking.

At a recent event a group of local landholders committed to revegetation, shared stories about their ancestors ring barking trees. It sounds like a backwards step, but if we want trees to express their true potential there is no point in planting them too densely, or not managing the numbers from mass germination events. For two hundred years we will be leaving them locked in a struggle for survival when the species that need them are facing extinction now.

As Kermit the frog said, 'It's not easy being green.'

Andie Guerin is RHP Coordinator. For more information email andie@regenthoneyeater.org.au or go to www.regenthoneyeater.org.au

Growing a biolink from Greens Bush to Arthurs Seat – one agreement at a time

By Chantal Morton

The Mornington Peninsula Landcare Network (MPLN) is making good progress on its biolink from Mornington Peninsula National Park at Greens Bush to Arthurs Seat State Park.

These two large, core areas of remnant vegetation are being reconnected by a biolink that will improve catchment health and address the lack of landscape connectivity on the peninsula. The biolink will be formed across private property by revegetation and weeding and fencing of remnants. It will benefit numerous threatened fauna, including the powerful owl and swamp skink.

The project got underway in 2017 when MPLN received funding from the Victorian Government's Our Catchments, Our Communities initiative to implement the biolink plans for Main Creek Catchment Landcare Group and Southwest Mornington Peninsula Landcare Group. These plans were developed through the Linking the Mornington Peninsula Landscape project.

Further grants from Our Catchments, Our Communities and several Victorian Landcare Grants along with a partnership with the (then) Port Phillip and Westernport CMA's Work for Victoria Crew has seen the expansion of the biolink project. Eight land management plans have been developed for farms in the project area and many of the works identified in the plans are being implemented.

Formal landholder agreements

MPLN works directly with landholders along the proposed biolink route. Forty private properties have signed formal landholder agreements, becoming involved in the project in varying capacities. Adding to the benefit of the biolink, many properties are contiguous.

Revegetation has been undertaken on over 24 hectares across 15 properties, in partnership with local schools, tertiary institutions, Scouts and Girl Guides Australia and the wider community. A total of 830 volunteers have contributed to the planting of 27,500 indigenous plants so far. Local provenance tube stock is carefully selected when the plantings are on bare land that is unlikely to naturally regenerate on its own.

Removing weed infestations on more than 58 hectares of remnant vegetation across 23 private properties helped restore these valuable areas to better support native wildlife. Eligible landholders are encouraged to apply for Melbourne Water funding to control weeds along three high priority reaches of Drum Drum Alloc Creek, Splitters Creek, and Main Creek. This has led to kilometres of improved stream frontage and allowed biolink funds to be directed outside the riparian buffer.

Weeding control activities have been complemented by the Mornington Peninsula Shire's annual roadside weed program. A Parks Victoria Good Neighbour Grant also enabled focused weed control in Mornington Peninsula National Park at Greens Bush.

Another highlight of the project has been installing nest boxes on properties with an absence of hollow bearing trees. A concerted effort with fox control has reduced predation pressure on many of the indigenous animals in the area.

Another highlight of the project has been installing nest boxes on properties with an absence of hollow bearing trees.

Conservation and Land Management students from Holmesglen TAFE learning about the biolink during a planting at Main Ridge in 2022.

Enhancing a farm dam with indigenous aquatic species to convert it to valuable habitat and help sequester carbon emissions along the biolink route at Boneo in 2021.

It has been important to record the project as the biolink progresses. We use drone footage or photo point monitoring at our sites before and after planting works.

It has been important to record the project as the biolink progresses. We use drone footage or photo point monitoring at our sites before and after planting works. Gate signage on participating properties helps to highlight the project at street level and identify funding partners.

Field days, workshops and community plantings

Engaging the community with field days and workshops has helped to educate and empower landowners to best manage their land to support wildlife. Workshops on native plant identification, sensitive weed control techniques, whole farm approaches to revegetation for biodiversity, climate resilience and productivity, and native bees as pollinators have been enthusiastically received.

Planting days and events have been a great way of involving the community. Hundreds of volunteers attend our National Tree Day plantings. In 2022 we ran a successful NAIDOC Week planting where we partnered with an Aboriginal organisation, Our Songlines, to carbon offset their Survival Day march held earlier in the year. The planting began with a Welcome to Country and smoking ceremony and ended with a hard-earned lunch provided by Indigenous owned Cooee Café.

The success of this project is largely due to strong partnerships with key stakeholders, including Melbourne Water, Mornington Peninsula Shire, Parks Victoria, Birdlife Australia, Holmesglen TAFE, Advance College, Balcombe Grammar, Padua Secondary College, Flinders Christian Community College and Scouts Australia. In addition, the enthusiasm and generosity of community members keen to get involved and make a positive contribution to environmental values cannot be overstated.

Nina Sharpe, representing Grow Corp Foundation at Main Ridge says the foundation is thrilled to be just one small link in the chain of the biolink.

"We were initially drawn to be part of the biolink as we saw a clear alignment with our overall goal to ensure private land gives back to the community and ultimately to nature, and to regenerate and improve biodiversity. MPLN have been a fantastic partner for us to work with. The support in planning, implementing and ongoing maintenance has been generous and supportive and will continue in our ongoing pursuit to regenerate. Planting days are an experience that brings people together around these goals. There we witness a beautiful sense of community, openness and connection," Nina said.

Adrienne Smith, also from Main Ridge, appreciated being assisted with weed control after joining the project.

"As an older couple, we had reached the stage where our blackberries were overwhelming. We joined the biolink and two experts came out. While taking great care of precious indigenous flora, they sprayed the canes which then died slowly in place. Today we have natural regeneration where once there were blackberries. A great outcome," Adrienne said.

The future focus of the project is to secure and expand the biolink. As the project continues to grow we will achieve even greater connectivity in the landscape to provide viable linkages for indigenous flora and fauna, promote overall catchment health and responsible land stewardship now, and for future generations.

Chantal Morton is Landcare Facilitator with MPLN. Her position is funded through the Government's Victorian Landcare Facilitator Program. For more information email facilitator@mplandcare.org.au

Welcome to Country and smoking ceremony marked our NAIDOC Week planting event with Our Songlines at Main Ridge.

Partnership plantings a winner for Bairnsdale Urban Landcarers

By Maxine Semple

Just over 10 years ago Bairnsdale Urban Landcare Group (BULG) started celebrating National Tree Day with Bairnsdale Scout Group by planting local indigenous trees, shrubs and grasses along both banks of the Mitchell River in Bairnsdale.

Members of Bairnsdale Scout Group planted 500 grasses and graminoids along the banks of the Mitchell River Bairnsdale on National Tree Day, 2022.

The July 2022 event saw 45 members of the two groups plant 500 grasses and graminoids in the ever-expanding site on the north bank of the Mitchell River. Some plants were added to the border of the popular walking track, with the majority mass-planted with the aim of out competing the introduced grasses prevalent along the river. The Scouts and Landcare members planted, watered, guarded and mulched the plants before enjoying a tasty morning tea together.

The involvement of the Scouts on National Tree Day has been a wonderful contribution to the ongoing planting undertaken by BULG over the past 20 years. During this time the riverside has been transformed from weed-filled paddocks to an urban bushland that is now self-seeding and has seen the return of myriad wildlife. The riverside walking track is a popular venue for walkers and the weekly Park Run.

As well as planting trees BULG is planting a seed in the minds of those we work with. The young participants learn that planting a tree is easy, fun, important to the biodiversity of the region, and never more necessary than today.

BULG also provided guidance to a 2022 National Tree Day project run by Bairnsdale Secondary School Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) students. Using their 2021 Victorian Junior Landcare and Biodiversity Grant, the students invited children from East Gippsland Special School to participate in planting the wetlands adjacent to the secondary school grounds.

The planning and organisation of the event provided opportunities for the VCAL students to demonstrate leadership and organisational skills in a supported environment.

Climate change is a cause of anxiety among young people. By participating in events such as National Tree Day young people feel empowered and that they can make a difference, which is essential to their health and wellbeing.

In January 2023, BULG's National Tree Day events received the East Gippsland Australia Day 2023 Community Event of the Year Award sponsored by the East Gippsland Shire Council. A few days later the event was also awarded the Bairnsdale Australia Day 2023 Community Event of the Year Award sponsored by the Bairnsdale Classic Car Club. A double celebration for Landcare and the environment.

National Tree Day is just one day each year, but it is a great opportunity for school students and Scouts to learn about the natural environment, gain experience in planning and managing events while forging broader community relationships. What could be better?

Maxine Semple is Secretary of Bairnsdale Urban Landcare Group Inc. For more information email bairnsdaleurbanlandcaregroup@gmail.com

Scouts and Landcare group members gathered for a group photograph after a tasty morning tea to celebrate the planting effort.

Restoring Fish Creek

By Robin Stevens

The Fish Creek Landcare Group (FCLG) has been running the Fish Creek Catchment Project since 2018. The project aims to protect Fish Creek by increasing biodiversity – particularly bird life – reducing weed invasion, preventing further erosion and eventually delivering a clean, healthy waterway in South Gippsland.

The project grew out of the Fish Creek Catchment Project Plan that was developed and funded by the South Gippsland Landcare Network. The plan is consistent with the West Gippsland Regional Catchment Strategy. It identified the first steps, which included a thorough mapping exercise of the catchment to identify gaps in riparian areas. The West Gippsland CMA and local landowners had already done extensive willow removal, fencing and planting.

The Fish Creek Catchment Project focused on remediating the gaps, along the entire length of Fish Creek from its headwaters to drains, which lead to the Tarwin River and eventually Andersons Inlet.

In October 2019, a well-attended public meeting was held to inform the community about the proposed project. All landowners along the upper reaches and tributaries of Fish Creek were contacted and requested to express their interest in being part of a funding application. Those interested submitted plans of how they would spend their funds (if successful), and an indication of their willingness to co-fund. All interested non-members were encouraged to join FCLG. The plans submitted included fencing, weed control, revegetation and pest management.

FCLG received a 2020 Victorian Landcare Grant that enabled a priority group of nine landowners to be funded. This funding saw over seven kilometres of fencing erected, 11,900 tube stock planted and guarded with 6100 tree guards, and 22 litres of weed control spray purchased and used.

All the projects were completed in the required time frame, with landowner contributions for the bigger projects.

Funding from a Victorian Landcare Grant in November 2022 allowed us to encourage landowners on the tributaries of Fish Creek to put in an expression of interest in completing works. Five landowners were involved in this phase completing 2.5 kilometres of fencing, planting 6600 tube stock, installing 3250 tree guards and utilising 65 litres of weed control spray. The larger scale projects were also completed with landowner contribution.

The area from the creek headwaters to the township is now fully fenced and revegetated. Some areas of tributaries are still unfenced but are under consideration for works. Phase two of the project has just started. We are looking to use Victorian Landcare Grants funding on landowner projects downstream from Fish Creek township towards the drains and finally the Tarwin River.

More than 30 people attended a Fish Creek Landcare Group walk through a property adjoining the Hoddle Range, led by Gary Wallis in September 2023.

The project has faced a number of challenges including difficulties in engaging contractors and obtaining tubestock. There were delays due to COVID-19 restrictions and some apathy and non-compliance among the landowners involved. The extremely wet winter in 2022 caused issues with access to several sites for fencing and planting. We've also had to manage the impact of browsing from deer, wallabies and rabbits.

In June 2021 we began monitoring the project sites with monthly water testing at five sites along Fish Creek and tributaries. We monitor pH, temperature, salinity, turbidity and phosphorus. All the data collected will be reviewed annually and used to monitor the ongoing health of Fish Creek.

This data will be critical for further funding opportunities. We hope to demonstrate that with targeted care of this waterway, we can improve its water quality and health, improve biodiversity, and increase our local platypus population.

Robin Stevens is President of Fish Creek Landcare Group. For more information email robinstevens256@gmail.com

> *We hope to demonstrate that with targeted care of this waterway, we can improve its water quality and health, improve biodiversity, and increase our local platypus population.*

Revegetating and restoring a farm property at Wooragee

By Dr Pieter Mourik

I have been involved in restoring a rundown property at Wooragee in northeast Victoria since 2011. I bought the property having recently retired as a specialist obstetrician and gynaecologist in Wodonga and wanted to get involved in regenerating the bush.

I have been involved in restoring a rundown property at Wooragee in northeast Victoria since 2011. I bought the property having recently retired as a specialist obstetrician and gynaecologist in Wodonga and wanted to get involved in regenerating the bush.

I grew up on a small farm at Wantirna and had helped to repair a friend's property in Eskdale, so I was ready for a challenge.

I have been a long-term member of Wooragee Landcare Group and have been so impressed with the extent of knowledge and experience the group has to offer. They have several projects each year involving revegetation projects.

My long-term aim for the property at Wooragee is to establish a 900-metre tree corridor for the resident koalas to travel between two forested areas on either side of the property.

Back in 2011 the land was choked with weeds, including vast areas of blackberry, Paterson's curse, St John's wort, thistles, and capeweed. More than 150 years of water erosion had created large gullies with huge holes up to three metres deep.

Treating severely eroded gullies

My first task was tackling the 900-metre gully that had high velocity water flow after heavy rain. The gully had a catchment area of about 50 hectares and severe erosion down to bedrock. It was steep sided with a wide base and covered with dense thickets of blackberry. There was no way I could divert the water flow away from the gully.

My long-term aim for the property at Wooragee is to establish a 900-metre tree corridor for the resident koalas to travel between two forested areas on either side of the property.

Dr Pieter Mourik with an Aboriginal ring tree at Wooragee.

Established grasses and shrubs looking south along a restored gully at Wooragee.

Looking north along the restored gully.

Treating and destroying the 3-metre-high blackberry thickets with a combination of different herbicides exposed the extent of the erosion damage. Large holes were filled with loose rocks, 50 to 500 millimetres in diameter, and compacted with topsoil from another area of the farm. The gully was then planted with quick growing native grasses including (*Lomandra longifolia*) that has dense root systems that penetrate the soil.

I then grew several hundred local black wattle (*Acacia mearnsii*) from seed and planted these at the edges of the water flow, along with manuka (*Leptospermum scoparium*). These plants are known to hold the topsoil together in areas of water flow. I also planted over 200 stringy bark and yellow box (*Eucalyptus macrorhyncha* and *Eucalyptus melliodora*) on the edges of the gully.

One section of the gully had a 50-metre steep downhill area, which required a rock chute. This was constructed from 350 to 500-millimetre granite rock, placed over a large sheet of geomesh fabric. The rocks were compacted individually and gradually the sediment filled the spaces, allowing native grasses to grow. This took only one year for the native and sown grasses to take hold.

Eroded areas require individual management

Since the gully has been stabilised we have had the wettest winter for many years, but no erosion has developed.

My advice to others who have severe erosion problems on their farms is that individual management is required. If possible, it is advisable to divert the water flow away from the affected area to allow it to stabilise. An earth berm can be made easily to divert water flow.

Aim to avoid fast flowing water in gullies by placing bales of hay, branches or large rocks in the stream. This turns a narrow channel into a wide flat area for sheet flow of the water.

All dirt roads and tracks on sloping land need attention after a rain event. Cutting runoff culverts will stop water running down the road. Avoid driving along the same part of the road as the wheel ruts will allow water to flow. Dirt roads should have adequate culverts – often twice the diameter you would consider sufficient.

After the last few years of excessive rain events around most of Australia, it is timely to consider erosion prevention and control.

Dr Pieter Mourik AM is a member of the Wooragee Landcare Group. For more information go to www.woorageelandcare.org.au

> ***Since the gully has been stabilised we have had the wettest winter for many years, but no erosion has developed.***

FUNCi member John Hermans standing at the rainforest restoration site before and after the revegetation project. A superb lyrebird is now nesting in this area.

Grit and determination underpins bushfire recovery efforts in East Gippsland

By Lisa Wilson

The catastrophic Black Summer bushfires that started on 21 November 2019 and continued throughout the 2019-20 summer were exceptional in size and impact. Over one million hectares, or 56 per cent, of East Gippsland was burnt.

There were runs of fire with extremely high heat intensity, burning along ridges and through gullies, resulting in significant loss of tree canopy, understorey, and ground cover.

Part of the Victorian Government's response to the impact of the fires was to provide Biodiversity Bushfire Recovery Grants to groups and individuals to support bushfire recovery activities. The projects funded by these grants also contribute to the targets in Protecting Victoria's Environment – Biodiversity 2037, the Victorian Government's plan to stop the decline of our native plants and animals and improve our natural environment.

In this article are two stories, both recipients of Biodiversity Bushfire Recovery Grants, both suffering loss from the fires, both showing grit and determination to recover what was there before the fires, both tackling challenges and both with signs of hope.

FUNCi targets habitat to support threatened species

Friends of the Upper Nicholson Catchment Incorporated (FUNCi) are an energetic and resilient group of environmental volunteers working in the area between Clifton Creek and Sarsfield. After the 2019-20 Black Summer bushfires much of the landscape in this area was left devoid of vegetation, having suffered medium to high canopy damage with only a 500-metre stretch of riparian zone left intact.

The damage from the bushfires to sections of the Nicholson River's riparian zone and woodland, known to support species under threat including the powerful owl, greater gliders, and yellow belly gliders, was serious.

FUNCi's Biodiversity Bushfire Recovery Grant project was designed to assist the process of post fire recovery through targeted revegetation and habitat improvement, and by providing connectivity to the 500-metre stretch of unburnt, intact riparian zone along the Nicholson River.

The project involved erecting areas of exclusion fencing to enable ongoing natural regeneration of vegetation together with planting of native seedlings. The mix included ground cover, understorey, and canopy species to assist in the recovery of habitat for both ground dwelling and arboreal species.

The largest exclusion area saw a one kilometre fence built around a warm temperate rainforest gully. More than 3000 seedlings were planted, and it is now a thriving and biodiverse habitat. The gully has become a nesting site for a superb lyrebird that took up residence close to the river where it is protected from predation of foxes and feral cats.

Smaller exclusion plots on surrounding properties are helping members to learn about the levels of natural regeneration, when browsing from pests such as deer is minimised.

The project wasn't without its challenges. Member fatigue followed the fires, and just when energy levels increased COVID-19 restrictions affected working bees. Planting efforts were also hampered as was the construction of the rainforest gully fence.

Sourcing contractors was difficult. By the time fencing contractors were secured for the exclusion plots, some areas had become inaccessible and needed alternate solutions.

Access to the correct indigenous tube stock from local nurseries was also an issue with some members growing their own tube stock from seed for the project. Drought and then high rainfall posed further challenges. The rain promoted natural regeneration but made access to some areas difficult and impacted the timing of revegetation efforts.

The group showed remarkable determination and resilience, finding ways to overcome these difficulties. The project has been a success with severely fire-impacted areas revegetated and now providing habitat for ground dwelling and arboreal animals and recreating wildlife corridors that were burnt.

According to FUNCi Secretary Liz Brown the project has also helped the volunteers to recover as a community.

"To witness the early signs of recovery after such large-scale devastation, to hear the noise of the bush once again, and to witness the return of critters both large and small, has supported our members in their own recovery process. To have a lyrebird nest in the fenced off area is icing on the cake," Liz said.

A positive sign – koala scat found within the sanctuary after fencing was restored.

Return of koalas helps heal the heartache at Buchan

East Gippsland resident Henry Sonogan's property is in the hills near the Buchan township, where the Snowy River meets the Buchan River. The bushfires hit this area and Henry's property hard. Only one shed remained in the aftermath.

In 2003 Henry had fenced off a section of his property for conservation under the Bush Tender biodiversity management program. The 35-hectare area became a sanctuary for many species of birds – both ground and tree dwelling, lots of other wildlife and even koalas who were often spotted in the abundant eucalypts.

All the sanctuary's fencing and riparian and remnant vegetation was destroyed and needed replacing after the fires. Henry received a Biodiversity Bushfire Recovery Grant to replace the burnt fencing to protect the sanctuary from cattle and pest animals, allowing the biodiversity to recover and create safe habitat for wildlife. Henry couldn't wait to see the animals return, particularly the koalas.

Construction of the 1.4-kilometre fence was also hampered by COVID-19. Materials were difficult to obtain and took longer than expected to source and deliver to the site. Heavy rain also hindered the work.

The fence was constructed with the help of Blaze Aid volunteers that included people from Melbourne and even overseas visitors who had heard about the fires and were keen to help in the recovery. Henry drilled in the fireproof concrete fence posts and the Blaze Aid volunteers affixed the wire, including the electric fence. Once underway the work was completed in record time.

The first species to flourish was black wattle – a resilient, post-fire pioneer species. With the extra rainfall, the wattle has flourished and is now covering much of the sanctuary, outgrowing other native species. Several options for controlling it are being trialled.

Although Henry feels quite overwhelmed with the difficult task of controlling the wattle, he is excited about the prospect of koalas returning.

"On a positive note, I have heard koalas in the area and was extremely excited to find a scat very close to my shed. I am very much looking forward to seeing the koalas in the sanctuary. I thought it would take much longer for them to inhabit the area, particularly with all the wattles. It sure is a positive sign, and I am pleased after so much heartache," Henry said.

Henry Sonogan at the edge of the sanctuary on his Buchan property.

Lisa Wilson is Communications and Engagement Officer with East Gippsland CMA. For more information go to www.egcma.com.au

> ***On a positive note, I have heard koalas in the area and was extremely excited to find a scat very close to my shed.***

In the end it's always about the people. The people you meet, the people you help, and the people you work with.

An eastern rosella makes use of a nest box in revegetation near Dimboola established by Project Hindmarsh 16 years ago.

Project Hindmarsh – 25 years of landscape restoration

Project Hindmarsh, the Big Desert to Little Desert Biolink, is an initiative of the Hindmarsh Landcare Network (HLN). It began last century with the grand vision to reconnect the two desert regions in Victoria's west with a series of revegetated links across a fragmented landscape.

Since its first planting weekend back in 1998, Project Hindmarsh has become a tremendous success story. The project has brought volunteers from the city and country together to plant corridors and protect and restore remnant vegetation. Over the last 25 years Project Hindmarsh has planted more than two million trees, shrubs, herbs and grasses, protected and restored over 1000 hectares of roadsides, remnant vegetation and degraded farmland, and involved thousands of volunteers in Landcare activities.

Reflecting on past achievements has raised some important questions for the HLN to consider. Has 25 years of Project Hindmarsh been instrumental in rebuilding functioning ecological systems and connectivity? Has it provided a broad community sense of ownership of nature and helped restore Country? Or are we just planting trees and feeling good about ourselves?

Cultural heritage surveys guide plantings

Interrogating these fundamental questions has driven HLN to change its approach to building biolinks. While the project continues to be underpinned by sound ecological principles it is now viewed more holistically. There is acknowledgement of the importance of broad community participation and Traditional Owner on-Country culture and connection.

Project Hindmarsh has undertaken Aboriginal Cultural Heritage surveys of its planting sites since 2017. HLN has engaged the Barengi Gadjun Land Council (BGLC) to undertake the surveys, and over the years has identified significant artefact scatters, scar trees, middens and fire pits at many of our planting sites. BGLC makes recommendations for site preparation and planting that Project Hindmarsh strictly adheres to, to ensure plantings are respectful and culturally safe.

Bringing city and country communities together has been a central theme of Project Hindmarsh. The dedication of volunteers has been a key part of the project's success. The volunteer landscape is changing. People are more aware of the urgency around addressing biodiversity decline. HLN identified the need to broaden community involvement for Project Hindmarsh – and its vision of reconnecting the Big Desert to Little Desert – to remain relevant.

Previously based at Little Desert Lodge in Nhill, the annual planting base has been moved around different Wimmera towns so that each planting weekend became a major community event, involving partnerships with local groups and businesses. This has given regional communities a greater sense of involvement and ownership of Project Hindmarsh.

Karen refugee community a mainstay

Project Hindmarsh has also worked closely with the Karen refugee community in Nhill. The community's passion for planting, willingness to be involved in Landcare, and sharing their culture and their journey has been inspirational. The planting weekends

A group of volunteers from Victoria's Karen community planting at Dimboola in 2017.

By Jonathan Starks

Karen community leader Kaw Doh Htoo enjoying a planting weekend at Dinyarrak.

have featured some delicious Karen curry dinners catered for by community members.

Kaw Doh Htoo spent nine years in a refugee camp before arriving in Australia. Now a Karen community leader, Kaw Doh became involved with Landcare to learn more about the local environment and wildlife.

"I wanted to know how plants are very important for wildlife; I was interested to participate with the plant community," Kaw Doh said.

Over the last few years HLN has hosted a series of ecological workshops, exploring topics such as fungi of the Little Desert, woodland birds and bird monitoring, plant identification, and seed collection. These workshops have been well received and are in high demand. The HLN has also organised community education events such as biodiversity walk and talks, school holiday nature walks, presentations at Landcare and ecological forums, as well as writing regular articles for state and national newsletters.

To understand whether the years of planting has made any difference to biodiversity, the HLN began monitoring revegetation sites, using birds as indicators of biodiversity. The monitoring has shown that bird diversity starts to increase significantly in revegetation from around six years old, and that by 12 years old, sites are showing a high degree of ecological function. This reflects the growth and development of the trees and shrubs planted, the accumulation of leaf litter and the development of a tree canopy.

Threatened birds return

It is very satisfying to see a diverse range of bird species use our planting sites, including a number of listed threatened species. Watching quail scratching around under wattles, goannas scaling trees, wallabies seeking refuge amongst the shrubs and echidnas digging in the soil makes Project Hindmarsh worthwhile.

Project Hindmarsh has sought new and innovative ways to restore the landscape. Worms and wildflowers were the theme for the 2023 planting weekend at Rainbow on the southern edge of the Mallee. This involved replanting the brilliant array of wildflowers along the Rainbow Rise, whose spectrum of colour is said to have given the town of Rainbow its name. Worm castings were used to fertilise and condition the soil around each plant, helping to kick-start the soil biology that is vital for any revegetation success.

Since its inception, the driving force behind Project Hindmarsh has been the passion and dedication of its volunteers, partners, and supporters. Their vision to reconnect the Big Desert and Little Desert regions of Victoria's Wimmera has steadily gained momentum, plant by plant.

Jonathan Starks' Landcare Facilitator role is funded by the Government's Victorian Landcare Facilitator Program. For more information email jstarks@hindmarsh.vic.gov.au

The Urban Bushland Initiative – greening Melbourne's empty urban spaces

By Alex Paporakis

January 2020: On a hazy Saturday morning in Melbourne I awoke to the bitter, burnt taste of bushfire smoke. It was a struggle to breathe. It was an even bigger struggle to accept the new norm – 18 million hectares burnt, the deaths of three billion native animals, charred woodlands and rainforests, and the human trauma and suffering that followed.

News of global naturalisation efforts, such as plans to revegetate 30,000 hectares of woodland in the United Kingdom and Ethiopia's commitment to plant four billion trees, provided a fleeting sense of hope and inspiration. I called my optimistic friend, Lukas Steele, and pitched the idea of planting one million trees throughout Melbourne.

An email to the mayor of Moonee Valley City Council (MVCC), Samantha Byrne, led to a meeting and an introduction to the MVCC conservation team. Millicent Burke, the head of the team laid it all out to me: planting a million trees is helpful, but playing a part in local conservation is of even greater help. I readily agreed. Such was my want to affect change however that I expressed little desire in joining an existing conservation group, and instead formed my own – putting together a committee and becoming an incorporated association with Consumer Affairs Victoria.

Incorporating not only legitimised the organisation but allowed us to apply for government funding.

Taking these first few steps was at first daunting, and two years of COVID-19 restrictions almost killed momentum. But by the end of 2021 The Urban Bushland Initiative Incorporated (UBI) had a fantastic committee and a memorandum of understanding with MVCC for two planting days in 2022.

Our first project, 300 low growing shrubs at Sterling Drive Reserve in Keilor East, was a roaring success thanks to Millicent's tireless efforts. She guided us through plant selection and planning processes. Site preparation focused on weed removal, pre-drilling of holes for planting, and mulching. MVCC's budget for contractors handles future maintenance of the site.

Focus on unused urban spaces

UBI was founded on a refusal to accept the status quo of biodiversity loss, climate change and the severance of our connection to the bush. We focus on revegetating the varied and little-known empty spaces throughout Melbourne.

UBI works with local councils, Parks Victoria, DEECA (formerly DELWP), Friends groups, and any other public or private organisations that wants to get involved. We plan and run planting days where the focus is on the community, working to foster the idea that local conservation is inseparable from local communities. It is an essential component of community health and wellbeing.

Site selection is mostly guided by local government and conservation groups, with occasional scouring through Google maps to see what's been missed.

We focus on revegetating the varied and little-known empty spaces throughout Melbourne.

Alex Paporakis (at right) with Millicent Burke, Conservation Officer with Moonee Valley City Council at UBI's first planting day at Sterling Drive Reserve, Keilor East in May 2022.

The young, enthusiastic and dedicated committee of UBI at their first planting day.

> *We give priority to the local – local people taking ownership of their local green spaces.*

The potential for wildlife habitat at a smaller scale can often be overlooked by planners. Each of our projects is unique – there is no one size fits all approach.

One of the keys to UBI's success is acknowledging our limitations. We are less focused on long-term site management, which is better handled by local Friends groups and government agencies. Our niche is the ability to attract volunteers, pester private and public bodies to allow us to revegetate overlooked sites, and source funding from a variety of public and private sources.

Prioritising locals

We give priority to the local – local people taking ownership of their local green spaces. We learnt the importance of this in 2022, after residents expressed dissatisfaction that contractors and consultants had transformed a degraded park in Avondale Heights into a woodland reserve without input from the community.

In the same year UBI had a planned revegetation project at Thompson Reserve, Avondale Heights, adjacent to the new woodland reserve. We decided to focus on the community, diverting some of our funding for the planting day toward food trucks, coffee vans, live music, and other local entertainment.

Despite it being a drizzly Saturday in the middle of winter more than 150 residents turned up. We had 3000 trees, shrubs and wildflowers, planted, guarded, and watered in only 45 minutes. The conversations and connections forged between locals that day are priceless, and there have been few dissatisfied residents. These are the people who will take on the responsibility for that patch of urban bush into the future.

Changing attitudes

By engaging with the community we are seeing attitudes begin to change. People are less worried about a gum tree obscuring their view when it means the return of a once locally extinct honeyeater. A discussion about indigenous plants leads people to notice and acknowledge a bias towards exotic species. Suddenly, the sunburnt colours of native vegetation begin to be appreciated. The insects that visit are fascinating, and the local birds are no longer noisy fruit thieves, but welcome backyard companions.

A desire to protect the local environment takes hold and people fill the role of community land stewards. Caring about the environment is not just for greenies, but for everyone – right across the political spectrum.

We have now hosted and co-hosted four planting events at different sites across three local government areas, involving more than 200 volunteers. More planting days are planned and we are also involved in urban hollow-building projects.

First-time planters brave the cold at a planting day at Thompson Reserve in Avondale Heights. More than 70 per cent of our volunteers are under 35.

What started as a phone call about planting one million trees continues to transform and develop. Maybe one day we'll even plant our one-millionth tree – but it won't be just me, my friends and family – it will be a collective effort from a legion of newly impassioned Melburnians.

Alex Paporakis is president of the UBI. For more information email urbanbushland@gmail.com or search for The Urban Bushland Initiative on Facebook or Instagram.

An aerial view of a TreeProject revegetation project at Yarra Ranges in 2022.

TreeProject – from backyard seedlings to rural revegetation

By Susi Millton

In 1989 two friends, Maggie McLeod and Belinda Gross, had a wild idea – they pledged to plant one million Australian native trees. They wanted to protect the environment, prevent the decimation of old growth forests and reduce soil erosion of river systems.

Such a vast undertaking could not be done alone, so a call out was made to friends, neighbours and strangers. From this, TreeProject was born. The first public planting event, held at Yarra Bend Park in 1989 was a massive success.

According to Maggie, it was soon clear the idea was a winner.

"We knew we were on to something with identifying trees as a solution when over 700 people came, and 5000 plants were in the ground before lunch time," Maggie said.

The idea evolved when they realised that buying native seedlings was expensive. They decided to develop a system where volunteers could be taught to grow native seedlings from seed in their backyard. After five or six months, these healthy, thriving seedlings were then taken out to landholders, forests, and communities to be planted by landholders or other groups of volunteers.

Maggie and Belinda's goal of one million seedlings was met within 15 years, thanks to the support and commitment of a host of volunteers.

TreeProject is now a fully formed, non-profit, volunteer-based organisation leading the way in sustainable revegetation throughout Victoria by providing low-cost indigenous seedlings to landholders and Landcare groups.

TreeProject's vision is to plant more indigenous plants to restore Victoria's soil, waterways and climate. Native vegetation helps to prevent soil erosion, which can create heavy layers of sediment that stop streams and rivers from flowing freely. Native vegetation provides shade and shelter for farm animals and habitat for native animals, which increases biodiversity. Native vegetation can have a positive impact on climate change by sequestering carbon in the soil.

Many of the seedlings grown by TreeProject have been directed to bushfire-affected areas and to support the koala population, wildlife corridors and shelterbelts.

TreeProject also has a community education role – increasing the engagement of both urban and rural communities in environmental restoration.

A yearly cycle of growing and planting

The TreeProject calendar is broken up into three stages. Every summer, volunteer growers pick up a kit of soil, seed, forestry tubes and sand to take home. Each kit will propagate 336 healthy indigenous seedlings for revegetation and restoration projects. The growers nurture the seedlings for up to six months.

In winter and early spring, the seedlings are collected by landholders and/or the Landcare groups that ordered the seedlings, for planting out by landholders or other groups of volunteers. This can involve community groups and corporate volunteers.

A TreeProject planting day at Yarra Junction in 2022.

> *Despite the hard work and the many challenges, the project has been a resounding success.*

At the end of the planting season all the forestry tubes are taken back to our depot in Kensington to be washed, sterilised and filled again. Recycling our tubes ensures we keep as much plastic out of landfill as possible.

While we wait for the next order of plants to come in from landholders, more seed is collected and ordered, soil kits are packed, and new growers are trained to start the cycle again.

A simple system for Landcare groups to order their plants

TreeProject partners with many different Landcare groups across Victoria and works closely to leverage their expertise in land management, species selection and local provenance.

Individual landholders with small orders of less than 100 seedlings (who are members of a Landcare group) can submit requests to their local Landcare group who can then collate these into a larger group order to TreeProject. Landholders may also order a minimum of 500 seedlings directly through our website.

TreeProject relies heavily on the volunteer community. Many of our members are long-term volunteers, some with more than 20 years' experience in tree growing, horticulture or land management. Others are residents of metropolitan Melbourne who are passionate about environmental restoration and want to contribute to rural Victoria.

We have many members who are educators who have set up growing kits in schools to teach children about nurturing native plants. Some of these children have grown up to become the next generation of TreeProject volunteers themselves.

More trees and growers into the future

The future for TreeProject will see us continue to improve our operational efficiency and increase the number of seedlings we can grow. We are excited about furthering our relationships with Landcare and environmental groups, sponsors, corporate volunteers, and other volunteers. We are also keen to further develop educational tools and support for the community to assist in propagating healthy indigenous seedlings for revegetation and restoration projects.

TreeProject has now sown more than two million seedlings. Our reach has expanded to include growing communities in Bendigo and Geelong, and we have plans to launch another group in the Ovens region. Our past two seasons have been our biggest yet. In 2023 we grew 140,000 indigenous seedlings, representing 189 different species, propagated by 361 growers.

In 2021 Maggie McLeod was awarded an Order of Australia Medal for her services to conservation and the environment. TreeProject will continue to honour Maggie's vision and dedication. Now in our 34th year TreeProject has evolved into a community of like-minded landholders, growers and volunteers all striving towards the same goal: to revegetate Victoria – one tree at a time.

Susi Millton is Manager of TreeProject. For more information and to order seedlings go to www.treeproject.org.au

Enthusiastic volunteers planting for TreeProject at Hoddles Creek in 2022.

Planting with benefits – the Bass Coast Biolinks Project

By Sarah Vella

Farmers in Victoria's southeast are seeing a wide range of benefits – and not just environmental – in an ambitious project created to reverse the loss of native vegetation and, potentially, a number of local flora and fauna species.

Dave Bateman (left) talks wildlife corridors with Ryanston landholder Paul Speirs.

Six years ago the Bass Coast Shire had less than 15 per cent native vegetation coverage and more than 150 local flora and fauna species were classified as under threat or endangered. The alarming statistics spurred the local council into action, and by 2018 it had developed the Bass Coast Biodiversity Biolinks Plan in partnership with Bass Coast Landcare Network (BCLN).

Linking remnants for improved biodiversity

The biolinks project provides landscape connectivity by linking remnant patches of indigenous vegetation with wildlife corridors. This promotes biodiversity by encouraging the movement of wildlife and increasing genetic diversity in breeding populations. The project also has positive agricultural outcomes for the farmers who partner with BCLN.

Already BCLN has engaged more than 100 farmers to plant more than one million trees, with 55 farmers signing up in the past year after seeing the project's success.

According to Paul Speirs, a BCLN Board member and Ryanston farmer who has been revegetating his property with wildlife corridors for almost 35 years, there are many good reasons to get involved in the biolinks project.

"If you are using the term sustainable agriculture, this is the very basis of it. It's right for the landscape, it's right for protecting vital assets on your farm, the water and the soil and it's right for all the other animals which used to inhabit these areas which didn't have a chance because there was no habitat left.

"As an animal welfare issue, it's worthwhile doing revegetation because it looks after the animals on both sides of the fence – your stock and the wildlife. Steep slopes are often not good pasture and can be dangerous for cattle, so through creating biolinks all our creek lines and steep slopes have been revegetated and now I have more grass than my cattle can eat – they are very happy cattle," Paul said.

Already BCLN has engaged more than 100 farmers to plant more than one million trees, with 55 farmers signing up in the past year after seeing the project's success.

BCLN Executive General Manager and Landcare Facilitator Dave Bateman, and Bass Coast Shire Council's Coordinator for Land and Catchment Diana Whittington, among some of the trees planted as part of the Bass Coast Biolinks Project in 2022 at Woolamai.

A drone image showing the flourishing biolinks on Paul Speirs' Ryanston property in 2022.

Multiple benefits for farmers

According to Bass Coast Shire Council's Coordinator for Land and Catchment, Diana Whittington, 2022 was a bumper year for the project.

"We wanted to plant about 85,000 plants and ended up planting about 320,000. It was an unexpected outcome, but the network was so successful at getting landholders on board, they were able to increase their number of plantings. Farmers see what other farmers are doing and see the benefits of shade and shelter and getting the biodiversity back in the landscape and they want to get involved," Diana said.

BCLN executive general manager Dave Bateman believes farmers derive multiple benefits by increasing vegetation coverage and broadening species diversity on their properties. These include:

- Increased shade and shelter for livestock;
- Enhanced paddock design due to fencing off creeks and gullies which improves animal welfare;
- Improved waterway resilience to flood risk and climate variability;
- Reduced sediment run off entering waterways;
- Increased erosion control;
- Improved living and working conditions on farm.

Due to the sheer size of the plantings and quick growth of indigenous plants in the region, native vegetation coverage is increasing by around three per cent a year. The project is on target to increase the native vegetation coverage in Bass Coast to at least 30 per cent.

Dave Bateman said its ongoing success is due to farmer support and the host of volunteers taking part in planting days.

"Because the project enables revegetation across a widespread area and different properties in a planned way, the majority of the plantings in the biolinks project are completed by volunteers including Landcare members, school students and corporate groups," Dave said.

"BCLN organised the biggest planting in our history as part of this program in 2018 with 200 school students planting 20,000 plants in a session. It was a remarkable achievement."

To support volunteers and maximise on-ground works, BCLN has leveraged funding from Bass Coast Shire Council to engage additional partners including Greening Australia, DEECA, West Gippsland CMA, Melbourne Water and the Federal Government's 20 Million Trees Program.

Sarah Vella is the Communications and Engagement Coordinator for Landcare Victoria Inc. and a contributor to the Landcare Farming Innovations in Agriculture Series. For more information on the Bass Coast Biolinks Program email info@basscoastlandcare.org.au

Due to the sheer size of the plantings and quick growth of indigenous plants in the region, native vegetation coverage is increasing by around three per cent a year.

More than 70 per cent of our koala habitat is located on private property.

A koala at Arthurs Seat in 2021.

Dirk Jansen receiving the 2022 Mornington Peninsula Shire Citizen of the Year award for his work in establishing Mornington Peninsula Koala Conservation.

Community commits to koala conservation

Seven years ago, when I moved to Rosebud on the Mornington Peninsula, I was surprised and excited to see koalas not far from where I live. Seeing koalas in the wild is always a thrill and I started to wonder about the local koala population here. I contacted the local authorities and some community groups for information. There had been a few small-scale studies of the koalas but not much was known about the overall health of the population.

I started a Facebook group to find out what knowledge and history was held by the community and received an overwhelming response from all areas of the Mornington Peninsula. People were very concerned about local koalas and described how they used to see them regularly, but now they don't see them anymore. This feedback was consistent across all townships and in some areas people even suspected koalas had become locally extinct, which we now know is not the case.

Located so close to metropolitan Melbourne, the Mornington Peninsula is under a lot of pressure from development, tourism and human activity. This causes significant traffic volume, noise and the loss of tree canopy and indigenous vegetation.

Decline in koala numbers linked to loss of habitat

More than 70 per cent of our koala habitat is located on private property. Koala conservation is a community issue and needs a community effort. The number one reason for the decline in numbers of koalas on the Peninsula is the reduction in indigenous vegetation.

In 2019 I established the Mornington Peninsula Koala Conservation (MPKC) project and shortly after we joined the Mornington Peninsula Landcare Network.

A tree-planting site for koala habitat undertaken by MPKC at Merricks in 2022.

on the Mornington Peninsula

By Dirk Jansen

Our project works to establish vegetation corridors, linking fragmented areas of indigenous vegetation and increasing tree canopy across the Mornington Peninsula, mainly on private property, as well as raising awareness of local wildlife.

In its first three years MPKC has given away and planted more than 50,000 trees on eligible properties. A further 25,000 trees were planted during 2023.

We have received enormous support from local authorities – landholders who provide land for tree planting – and the wider community. Our tree planting days run from May through to October. Many hands make light work, and it is very satisfying to be part of a group of keen volunteers who plant five hundred trees in just two to three hours. It is also a lovely way to start the weekend and it curbs my eco-anxiety by knowing we are actively working to increase wildlife habitat.

MPKC has come a long way since our humble beginning on Facebook. Our group has now grown to approximately 300 members. Each $20 annual membership funds the planting of up to five trees.

Signage to reduce road kill

To reduce road kill of koalas, we worked with the Mornington Peninsula Shire Council and more recently Frankston City Council on a seasonal road signage campaign during the koala-breeding season. Koalas breed between spring and summer. They are much more active during this time with males travelling significant distances to find a mate. This is also peak tourist season when the roads are busiest.

Koala awareness road signs are installed around September and then remain in place until Easter the next year. The results have been encouraging. We have also received a lot of feedback that the signs are raising awareness in the broader community, and that many people were unaware that koalas are still living on the Mornington Peninsula.

MPKC encourages the whole community to get involved in protecting koalas. People can report koala sightings to us – the data is very important for research and protection. People should drive very carefully at dawn, dusk and during the night when wildlife are moving on our roads. Residents can choose to retain mature trees on their properties and think about the opportunities for revegetation with indigenous vegetation. People living locally can contact us for free trees. We are also very keen for people to follow us on social media, take part in planting events and sign up for membership.

Koala awareness road signs were first installed during koala breeding season on the Mornington Peninsula in 2021.

There are so many opportunities for volunteers to make a difference to our environment and provide shelter and food for koalas and other wildlife. As a community, we are stronger when we work together.

Dirk Jansen is President of MPKC. For more information go to www.mpkoalas.org.au

Regional snapshots

Seachangers and treechangers – encouraging new volunteers

When the 2020 COVID crisis hit and many Melburnians packed up and fled to Victoria's regions, there was little sense of what the future might hold. Would they be welcomed by the local community? Would they stay once lockdowns lifted? Would the great regional migration actually stick?

More than three years on and the answer to each of the above all appear to be: Yes. And as the seachangers and treechangers began integrating into their growing communities, it became clear that they could be harnessed for the greater good of the environment.

Sophie Small, Landcare Facilitator of the Bellarine Landcare Group (BLG), said the Bellarine Peninsula had experienced something of a post-pandemic population explosion and that many of the new arrivals had come to realise the mental health benefits of connecting with nature – something they'd missed during the metropolitan lockdowns.

And this, according to Sophie, is where Landcare can step in.

"All of a sudden, we have this groundswell of people wanting to engage with nature. They want to be outdoors, they want to connect with each other and the environment, and they want to contribute to their new community.

"So, we tried to come up with some new activities which we thought would appeal to the new people from Melbourne.

First, we held an art show, which was a great success."

The group soon found that many newcomers were keen to learn more about indigenous plants.

"We have this fantastic indigenous plant nursery, which is a partnership with Bellarine Secondary College. Together we propagate around 50,000 plants a year for local revegetation, and we have about 40 volunteers doing this with us. Promoting the nursery has really brought the newcomers to us," Sophie said.

One of the BLG's newer volunteers is Fern Smith, who arrived during the pandemic. Fern is now busy each Monday in the nursery's propagation room growing seedlings and feeling a sense of community connection.

"What I like about Landcare is you are part of a bigger program. You know that there's a lot of people out there planting local plants in the local area, and that really makes my heart sing. And knowing that I'm helping just a little bit in that process is great," Fern said.

BLG received $33,039 funding for two Project Grants through the 2023 Victorian Landcare Grants.

Sophie Small is the Landcare Facilitator for Bellarine Landcare Group. Her position is funded through the Government's Victorian Landcare Facilitator Program. For more information email sophie@bcn.org.au or go to bellarinelandcare.org.au

From left, Karla Ramseyer, Annette Appelbe, Fern Smith and Fiona Love with plants rescued from road works in a local reserve on the Bellarine Peninsula.

The next step in revitalising Forest Creek

Castlemaine Landcare Group (CLG) received a Victorian Landcare Grant in 2021 for a project to revitalise a section of Forest Creek. The Forest Creek Revitalisation Project was the next step in work undertaken in 2018 by Professor Ian Rutherfurd, from the University of Melbourne, who developed an options paper for the rejuvenation of the creek.

The Victorian Landcare Grant assisted the group with developing a scoping study with a concept design to rewild and rejuvenate 600 metres of the most urban section of Forest Creek, which flows through Castlemaine. The site is subject to stormwater runoff, litter, a dominance of common reed in the channel and other urban weeds.

Despite its urban nature the creek supports indigenous, heritage, social, recreational and natural values. The project aims to highlight and improve these values.

The Forest Creek Revitalisation Project is a partnership project between CLG and Djaara (Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation), Mount Alexander Shire Council, North Central CMA, DEECA, and Friends of Campbells Creek.

The Victorian Landcare Grant enabled the CLG's Forest Creek Revitalisation Project Implementation Group to engage a consultant to help develop publicity materials, undertake a mail-out to key stakeholders, organisations and local businesses and run an online survey. The group also held four information stalls to engage with the local community at the local Farmers' Market and at other locations to gather the views of residents and visitors.

There was strong endorsement for the plan to improve creek health and biodiversity, along with additional values such as improved accessibility and recognition of cultural heritage, both First Nations and post-settlement.

Our project partner, Djaara, convened a Kapa Gatjin group of Dja Dja Wurrung Elders and Traditional Owner representatives to provide input into the project, including the design phase. Kapa Gatjin (to know water) provides a Traditional Owner cultural perspective to water related matters and included undertaking an Aboriginal Waterway Assessment.

A concept image of a revitalised Forest Creek.

Support through the Victorian Landcare Grant has helped the Implementation Group to gain further project funds through a Victorian Government Integrated Water Management Grant.

According to project co-convenor Jon Leevers, on-ground works will commence once detailed designs are finalised and are due to start late spring, to early summer 2024, depending on the weather.

"When the project is complete it will provide aquatic and riparian habitats and a recreational area that the community can utilise and be proud of as an urban feature in the township," Jon said.

Kaye Swanton and Jon Leevers are the co-convenors of the Forest Creek Revitalisation Project Implementation Group. For more information email castlemainelandcaregroupinc@gmail.com

Revegetating a fire damaged landscape

Indigo Creek Landcare Group (ICLG) received a Victorian Landcare Grant in 2022 for extensive revegetation works to increase habitat and biodiversity in the Indigo Creek catchment in northeast Victoria.

The project aimed to build community capacity for Landcare projects by supporting the many landholders still recovering from the December 2015 fires that burnt around 7000 hectares of the local landscape. In addition to addressing the impacts of fire, the on-ground works aimed to remedy the impacts of historical land clearing resulting in the loss of older remnant trees and bushland and fragmentation of vegetation, as well as soil erosion, increased urbanisation and climate change.

Throughout winter of 2022, 12 ICLG members undertook revegetation projects on their properties, planting a total of 2270 plants. These landholders planted to achieve various objectives unique to their properties and their needs, specifically to increase biodiversity, address erosion and provide shelter for stock by planting out gullies, establishing shelter belts and linking vegetation corridors. ICLG also provided plants to Middle Indigo Primary School and Barnawartha Primary School.

Landholders took on the responsibility of completing their revegetation projects, including site preparation and planting. Some landholders utilised the assistance available through the Landmate program. A member of the Barnawartha school community organised an in-school working bee in September 2022, where students planted out part of the school grounds. More than 70 volunteers assisted with the on-ground works component of the project.

The group was challenged by a lack of available tubestock in the region, so the grant agreement was modified to include the supply and installation of 40 nest boxes to complement the revegetation efforts. It is hoped that these nest boxes will provide much change made needed habitat for turquoise parrots, sugar gliders, squirrel gliders and brush-tailed phascogales.

The group were also able to deliver three events as part of this project. Successful community events on building habitat and biodiversity through revegetation and climate-smart farm planning were well received.

The group also ran a school incursion on reptiles with Barnawartha Primary School and Middle Indigo Primary School.

Travis Edmondson and family, landholders from Barnawartha North, received more than 600 plants and corflute tree guards as part of the project. With help from the Landmate Program they planted out a large erosion gully with the view to increasing soil stability and reducing run off, improving water quality, building habitat by establishing a wildlife corridor, increasing biodiversity, providing shade and shelter for stock and providing food sources for pollinators.

"We have already seen some benefits of our revegetation project planted out in July 2022, with many of the plants now over 1.5 metres tall and a huge increase in the number of native insects around. We were also fortunate to receive five nest boxes which were installed in our remnant grassy woodlands near our revegetation site. We have already seen signs of activity in these nest boxes," Travis said.

The project was co-funded through the Bush for Birds Program. Delivered in partnership between the Northeast CMA and Trust for Nature, Bush for Birds supports landholders in north east Victoria to create and improve habitat for regent honeyeaters and swift parrots, two nationally endangered birds.

Richard Dalkin is North East CMA's Regional Landcare Coordinator. For more information email richard.dalkin@necma.vic.gov.au

Travis Edmondson and his family at the revegetated erosion gully on their property at Barnawartha North.

In brief

Making a mark at Werribee River Park

The Werribee River Association (WRA) has a long history of conservation activities, including their involvement at Werribee River Regional Park in Cocoroc, a 260-hectare site, located on the lower reaches of the Werribee River.

In 2021 the Victorian Government announced the More Trees for a Cooler Greener West initiative. Working with Parks Victoria, WRA secured 5000 trees from the initiative, to be planted at Werribee River Regional Park in 2022.

The plantings began when the trees were received in early spring of 2022. Starting near the carpark, plantings were held with WRA volunteers and community and corporate groups. Volunteers braved wet and windy conditions and hard compacted ground to get the first 1000 in the ground.

As the spring rain continued, conditions became difficult for entering the park, with the dirt road becoming untraversable for most vehicles, leaving the only reliable access to the site through the pedestrian bridge across the river from the Werribee Mansion. While this required a decent walk to the park, WRA's volunteers were not deterred and more planting days were held, with close to another 1000 being planted.

Volunteers battled floods and impassable roads to complete a major revegetation project at Werribee River Regional Park in 2022.

In October 2022 the Werribee River catchment was affected by multiple flooding events. Erosion threatened the pedestrian bridge and it was deemed unsafe. All scheduled planting days had to be cancelled, with more than half the trees still to get in the ground,

When WRA informed its very dedicated volunteers and members of the situation they rallied. The remaining 3000 trees were planted by volunteers carpooling to the site in 4-wheel drives and riding their bikes in from behind the Werribee Zoo.

In the past Werribee River Regional Park has been a hotspot for rubbish dumping and illegal off-road driving. Recreational use is slowly increasing since the pandemic, the road into the park is being upgraded and a new entrance planned. WRA hopes the revegetation works will help to raise awareness and protect the wildlife and biodiversity of the park.

Lisa Field is Community and Business Development Manager at the Werribee River Association. For more information go to www.werribeeriver.org.au

The *Victorian Landcare & 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.

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Next issue

Contributions are sought for the Summer 2025 issue, a feature on innovative farming. We are interested in how Landcare and environmental volunteer groups and networks, landholders and farmers are responding to current challenges, including climate change and the changing needs of their communities, by trialling and developing new methods and innovative farming systems.

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

Contributions to the Summer 2025 issue should be sent to the editor by Friday 1 November 2024.

Email: editorviclandcare@gmail.com