



Annual Report 2013-2014



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What is Connecting Country?

Connecting Country (Mount Alexander Region) Inc is a community-based not-for-profit organisation that operates at a landscape scale to increase, enhance and restore biodiversity across the Mount Alexander Shire and surrounds in Central Victoria. The organisation is led by the community and works together with a wide range of other groups, organisations and government agencies.



Paddocks being revegetated with indigenous trees and shrubs, Walmer

Who is Connecting Country?

Committee of Management

The Connecting Country Committee of Management meets monthly. The committee helps Connecting Country pursue its goals; make key decisions about planning, resources and strategic direction of the organisation; and to recruit and support staff. Committee members also have legislated duties which they implement in accordance with the Connecting Country Constitution, and its status as a registered not-for-profit organization, a registered charity and as an incorporated body. The committee members also contribute many, many hours of their time to the organisation outside of meetings.

Office Bearers of the Committee of Management 2013-14

President:	Brendan Sydes
Vice President:	Marie Jones
Treasurer:	April Merrick
Secretary:	Lynne Josephs

Other Committee of Management Members:

Maurie Dynon, Malcolm Fyffe (co-opted to secretary role in April 2014), Paul Hampton, Ann-Marie Monda, Saide Gray and Malcolm Trainor (the latter two were co-opted onto committee in July 2014 following resignations of Lynne and Maurie for family reasons).

Expert Advisory Group

Connecting Country is able to draw on the knowledge and experience of its Expert Advisory Group. Individual group members provided advice and support as needed through the year.

The members of the Expert Advisory Group are (alphabetically):

Andrew Bennett: Landscape Ecology, survey design
Ben Carr: Organisation structure, habitat corridors
Beth Mellick: Philanthropy, grant writing, direction
Chris Tzaros: Woodland Bird Ecology, Conservation
Damien Cook: Wetland Ecology, Habitat Restoration
Deirdre Slattery: Environmental Education

Elaine Bayes: Ecology, Conservation, Education
Felicity Faris: Organisation structure, threatened taxa
Ian Higgins: Botany, Habitat Restoration
Karen Alexander: not-for-profit, community input
Peter Johnson: Woodland Fauna, Stewardship
Paul Righetti: Agriculture

There are many other people who also contribute considerable time, energy and expertise to Connecting Country who are not amongst this formal group. We would like to acknowledge and thank them for their on-going contributions as well, and they are just as valuable to the success of the organization as those people listed above. You know who you all are – THANK YOU!



Connecting Country Staff and Committee of Management meet to discuss Connecting Country's strategic plan in May 2014.
From left: Max, Krista, Paul, Ann-Marie, April and Marina, Ben Carr (facilitator), Marie, Bonnie, Tanya, Brendan, Chris, Jarrod, Naomi.

Staff

Connecting Country has a dedicated team of staff whose contributions all extend well above and beyond what they are paid to do.

Alex Schipperen: Connecting Landscapes Crew Leader

Bonnie Humphreys: Project Officer, botany specialist

Bronwyn Silver: Website Manager, Publicity

Bruce Dolphin: Book Keeper

Chris Timewell: Director, Biodiversity monitoring

Dianna Manser: Connecting Landscapes works crew

Janet Barker: Community Engagement, education

Jarrod Coote: Connecting Landscapes Project Coordinator

Kim Peric: Connecting Landscapes works crew

Krista Patterson-Majoor: Strategic planning, funding

Matthew Stahl: Connecting Landscapes works crew

Matt Sundblom: Connecting Landscapes works crew

Max Schlachter: Landcare Facilitator

Naomi Raftery: Administrative Assistant

Tanya Loos: Woodland Birds, biodiversity monitoring

Other contractors and short-term employees have also assisted on occasions, and we thank them for their important contribution (including, but not restricted to, Andrew Kuhlmann, Juliet Walsh, Ian Bentley, Doug Baker, Claire Collie, Richie Powney, Jonno Ward, Victor Frendo, Nathan Johnson and Bryan McMullan).

Volunteers, Members and Other Supporters

Connecting Country would like to thank and acknowledge the many other persons and groups who have contributed over the past 12 months or so. We apologise for any that have inadvertently been missed. Listed in no particularly order:

- Attendees and contributors at the Landcare Link-up events.
- Steering group for the Landcare Facilitator program (Maurie Dynon, Paul Hampton, Christine Kilmartin, Jan Hall, Marie Jones, Jennifer Pryce, Ian Grenda, Mount Alexander Shire council reps).
- Group supporting the Woodland Birds Brochure development (Geoff Park, Chris Tzaros, Damian Kelly, Greg & Jeanette Licence, Nigel Harland, Deb Worland, Ern Perkins, Brendan Sydes).
- Woodland Bird Steering Group (Geoff Park, Chris Tzaros, Deanna Marshall, Nigel Harland, Beth Mellick, Nick Layne, James O'Connor, Kylie Stafford). Geoff and Chris also had a pivotal role in the development of our 10-year Woodland Bird Action plan.
- Education and Engagement steering group (Deirdre Slattery, Marie Jones, Daryl Colless, Beth Mellick, Juliet Walsh, Kylie Stafford, Geoff Park)
- Local Landcare groups and 'Friends of' groups, and facilitators of the Upper Loddon Landcare Network, Upper Campaspe Landcare Network and the Loddon Plain Landcare Network.
- Other groups operating in the local area, such as Trust for Nature, Friends of the Box Ironbark Forests, Castlemaine Field Naturalists Club and Birdlife Australia.
- Cara Byrt, for amazing technical skills in the development and refinement of the databases for nest-boxes and woodland birds.
- Supportive philanthropic organisations, particularly the Norman Wettenhall Foundation.
- Attendees and volunteers at our talks, excursions and other community events; with particular thanks to volunteer Deirdre Slattery, and to the guest presenters (who often volunteered their time) and to landholders whose properties the events were held upon.
- Mount Alexander Shire; particularly Amy McDonald and Kylie Stafford.
- Government agencies that have provided support for our projects, including the North Central CMA, Parks Victoria, Victorian Department of the Environment of Primary Industries, Australian Department of Environment, Sustainability, Populations and Communities.
- Students undertaking internships, projects or otherwise gaining experience with Connecting Country (particularly Lauren Cogo, Juliet Walsh, Shelley Quinn, Kerrie Jennings).
- Landholders and other land-managers involved in on-ground works projects.
- Landholders involved in the monitoring program (e.g. having nest boxes on their property, and/or allowing bird and vegetation surveys). Many people also volunteered their assistance with our surveys, including Lauren Cogo, Mel Marshall, Nathan Gregory, Jennifer Pryce, Kim Peric, John Murray, Juliet Walsh, Phil Hopley and representatives of the Maldon Urban Landcare group.
- Contributors to our community planting days.
- Those who have made donations to Connecting Country, or have contributed in other ways.
- And, very importantly, all of our members, who provide support for everything that we do – either directly or indirectly. It is greatly appreciated

Director's Report

Chris Timewell

Every year, I become more appreciative of the great privilege that it is to work for Connecting Country. The organisation is filled with dedicated people, enthusiastically working towards landscape restoration in a variety of ways. On those few occasions when I feel like I'm just treading water, a scan back through past Annual Reports reminds me what's being consistently achieved, and how we're making long-term changes to the local landscape through community-driven actions. The content of the 2014 Annual Report is no different. Thank you to everyone who has contributed to its production and content, particularly Naomi Raftery. Four of my personal highlights from the past year are:



- **Long-term monitoring:** It was wonderful for me to get back to my grounding in ecology by undertaking the nest box checks in Autumn 2014 and bird surveys in Winter and Spring 2013 – and particularly meeting so many landholders with a great knowledge and passion for the animals living wild on their properties. New Connecting Country ecologist Tanya Loos has now taken over this monitoring role, in addition to her role as Woodland Birds Project Coordinator. However, I'll still be taking a keen interest and contributing where I can.
- **Works Crew:** We thought we'd been lucky with our inaugural Works Crew, which finished their program in late 2013. However, lightning has struck twice, and the second work crew has been just as capable and enthusiastic. Feedback from landholders has been overwhelmingly positive. Much of the credit is due to the leadership and guidance of Alex and Jarrod. Driving around the region, it is now difficult to travel in any direction for more than 5 minutes without seeing at least one property that has received support from Connecting Country for an on-ground restoration project.
- **10-year Woodland Bird Action Plan:** Prior to the completion of three major programs in mid-2013, the Connecting Country committee commissioned the development of a Woodland Bird Action Plan for the Mount Alexander Region, which could then be used as a basis for applying for future funding. The final result was ambitious and daunting, but the initial signs are very promising. We have subsequently obtained our first implementation grant; university researchers have offered to extend the analysis of priority habitats even further; and we are in the process of becoming an Affiliated Organisation of Birdlife Australia. The targeted 'feathered five' bird species now have a brighter future in the region.
- **Steering Groups and other volunteer support:** We now have three formal steering groups established to assist the education workshop program, the Landcare Facilitator and the Woodland Birds program respectively – each of which is comprised of local community members regularly donating their time and expertise to improve, direct and support our programs. The staff have all found this to be very useful, and keeps us all on track – but also gets us thinking about challenges and opportunities in new ways. These steering groups are in addition to the Connecting Country committee, plus the range of other ways in which volunteers support our activities. We tracked our total volunteer hours over a twelve month period, and to our joy and surprise it significantly exceeded 2000 hours – which is equivalent to more than \$65,000 of effort! Thank you so much! It makes a huge difference to the extent and quality of programs that Connecting Country implements.

There are so many other items I could have listed here as well – the dynamic Landcare support program, the educational workshops, the imminent launch of the new website, the bird identification brochure, the development of databases for biodiversity information collection and collation, the collaborations with other organisations and agencies, and the development of a new organisational strategic plan to name a few.

The staff, committee and other supporters are all so very talented, dedicated, hard-working and engaged with Connecting Country and its goals, it makes my role almost easy. I look forward to the year ahead, and hope to see you at one of our events in the near future.

Volunteer's Report

Naomi Raftery

Writing for the second time about volunteers is an opportunity for reflection about how and why so many people in our community volunteer their time to see Connecting Country continue to roll out great programs with gains for biodiversity and improvement of the productive natural environment. Put simply, Connecting Country wouldn't function without this volunteered contribution. I consider it's my extraordinary good-luck and inspiration to work with and support these people and groups in their efforts. What follows is an introduction to just a few of these wonderful people and their volunteer work with Connecting Country.

On-Ground Work – Barkers Creek Landcare and Wildlife Group

The Harcourt Natural Features Bushland Reserve Vegetation Management project, is part of Connecting Country's broader Yellow Box Woodland project. The reserve sits on the edge on Barkers Creek, adjacent to Harcourt and covers an area of approximately 33.5 hectares (84 acres). The reserve is well-treed with high quality bushland across much of the site. The lower lying



areas have high densities of exotic plant species and with permission from Parks Victoria the Barkers Creek Landcare and Wildlife Group has been working in accordance with their management plan developed by Connecting Country to control weeds, pest animals and some do some supplementary planting.

This cheery group of adults and children have approximately 4-5 working bees a year which are held at various locations in the reserve and work towards the group's wider aim to protect, enhance and revitalise the land and wildlife habitat. The partnership between Connecting Country and the Barkers Creek Landcare and Wildlife Group is a great example of how groups can benefit from our programs and Connecting Country is able to support a dedicated group of volunteers.

Education and Community Engagement – By Deirdre Slattery



I've spent my whole working life in education, so when the Connecting Country Program was being developed at around the time I was retiring from full time work at La Trobe University it seemed like the obvious thing to put in a plug for community education to be an important aspect of the program.

Why? Ever since I worked in the National Parks Service between 1988 and 1993, I've been struck by how exciting people find it when their eyes are opened to some aspect of the natural world. And how brilliant many scientists are at showing their own passion and knowledge to other people. It's a formula I wanted to see in Connecting

Country, and so far, it has been most rewarding to see that happening here in Castlemaine, and to know that I've helped a bit in making it happen. At first I helped organise the program. That took quite a lot of time, but now that Connecting Country has its own staff skilled in community education, I've enjoyed an advisory role.

Database Development – By Cara Byrt



My name is Cara Byrt. I have been volunteering for Connecting Country for nearly two years. My background is in engineering and agricultural consulting. I live with my partner on a bush block in Junortoun near Bendigo, and we find great enjoyment in watching the orchids come up each year, and the wallabies and echidnas passing through.

The work I've been doing involves writing databases, which is an area of personal interest for me. Databases are a great way to organise large amounts of data. I have written three database systems for Connecting Country. The first was the PhotoPoint Database, a system for organising and displaying sequences of photos. The next project I undertook was the Nest Box Database which allows events related to nest boxes to be recorded, such as sightings of Brush-tailed Phascogales and Sugar Gliders and for this information to be reported back to landholders.

The project I'm currently working on is a Bird Survey Database. This contains the data for the winter and spring bird monitoring program that has been running since 2010. The system is able to analyse and graph data to help users gain a picture of how many different bird species are using, for example, areas undergoing restoration as compared to intact natural areas; and to track changes at a standard set of transects from year to year. The database has been set up to calculate reporting rates, which can be graphed for each bird species, and will be useful for the new Habitat for Bush Birds project.

It has been such a pleasure for me to work with the people at Connecting Country, to learn about the various monitoring programs, and to have a chance to contribute.

Monitoring – By Lauren Cogo

Lauren Cogo is a third year Bachelor of Outdoor Recreation student with a Major in Natural Resources Education at La Trobe University in Bendigo. Lauren volunteered to help with monitoring nest boxes and nest box data entry this year. This is her account of this experience.

The Nest Box Monitoring Program by Connecting Country allowed me to use my passion for naturalist studies while engaging the community in the protection of Brush-tailed Phascogales and Sugar Gliders on their Box Ironbark properties. This was done by monitoring the nest boxes throughout Mount Alexander Shire and analysing the trends in their population compared to the previous years in the study. The practical component of the program enabled me to connect and educate the local land owners while Chris facilitated my learning through theoretical knowledge. The experience has been very rewarding as I have gained skills in practical conservation monitoring and worked within a community to better the habitat of the threatened species.



Mount Alexander Region Landcare

Max Schlachter

Landcare groups in the Mount Alexander Region continued to undertake a wide variety of projects in the 2013-14 year including on-ground works, education seminars, workshops, social events and school activities. In my three days a week I can only participate in a small portion of everything that Landcare members do so I have tried to focus on activities that have a broad benefit to groups, as well as helping out on individual projects where I can.

The 2013-14 year included the first 'Landcare Camp Out on The Mount' event at the Leanganook camp ground on Mount Alexander. The Camp Out aims to engage new people with Landcare through participating in a meaningful, yet pretty enjoyable Landcare activity – killing pine trees on Mount Alexander. The Camp Out attracted a good turnout of 60 volunteers who enthusiastically took to the pines, managing to cut down over 450 trees in 2 hours. It's on again on the 4th October 2014 and we're hoping to have another great day.



Participants at the 2013 Landcare Camp Out on The Mount.

Two 'Landcare Link-ups' were held which brought together Landcare members from across the Mount Alexander Shire. The Link-ups have proved to be valuable events with plenty of discussion and positive involvement from participants around Landcare issues.

Keeping groups up to date with funding opportunities and events that are relevant to our region has continued to be an important part of the facilitator role. The Landcare E-news goes out to over 100 people including members from each group in our region.

This year also included the first 'Landcare in The Library' display in the Castlemaine library. The library is a busy place so it was great to be able to put up a map showing the locations of all the groups in the Shire as well as photographs and information about Landcare. It included a display of books and free weed guides which disappeared like hotcakes.

The 2014-15 year will see the continuation of events including the Landcare Link-ups, Landcare in the Library and Camp Out. I will also be producing a new Mount Alexander Region Landcare brochure.

I continue to receive excellent support from the Landcare Facilitator Steering Group which is made up of Landcare members from around the Shire. The steering group meets once a month to provide critical feedback on what I am doing and bring issues to my attention. A big thank you to everyone in the group!



Joint Muckleford & Newstead Landcare field day on roadside vegetation.



Discussing what it means to be a Landcare member at a Landcare Link-up in Chewton.

Connecting Landscapes Program

Jarrood Coote

Connecting Landscapes Across the Mount Alexander Region is a five year program funded by the Australian Government. The program is designed to increase habitat connectivity between large public land forests by planting and restoring native vegetation on private land between them. There are eight habitat connectivity zones across the Mount Alexander Shire. They are around parts of the Sutton Grange, Harcourt, Muckleford, Guildford, Franklinford, Sandon, Elphinstone and Taradale areas.

The program supports the ongoing, long-term monitoring program measuring native vegetation, birds and arboreal mammals (see page 22 of this annual report). The program also funds the popular Connecting Country education workshops and events run throughout the year (see page 20 of this annual report).

In this our third year (2013-14), this program has provided grants and on-ground works assistance, by way of a work crew, to twenty-two fantastic landholders in 5 of the 8 the connectivity zones. It has been a highly successful year, with a greater area of revegetation occurring than we had aimed to achieve. Over this year, the program has completed;

- 234 ha of remnant vegetation protection/enhancement works
- 155 ha of new native revegetation works
- 390 ha of rabbit and weed control, and
- over 17 km of new protective fencing.

These activities have taken place at Taradale, Elphinstone, North Harcourt, Walmer, Muckleford and Newstead.

The Work Crew has tackled blackberry, gorse, hawthorn, willow and pine trees. Rabbits were treated by fumigation to protect the new plantings from browsing and to help the bush regenerate naturally. Most of our revegetation was established via direct seeding, i.e. the sowing of native tree and shrub seed directly into the ground with a towed behind trailer. More sensitive areas were planted with tubestock. Some additional, trickier, more specialised species are typically planted by tubestock as well.

The next step for the program is to consolidate and expand these works by engaging new landholders. We are particularly keen to hear from landholders in the Sandon, Elphinstone, Taradale, Muckleford, Walmer and Harcourt areas who might be interested in receiving support to undertake an on-ground works project on parts or all of their property. If you are interested, or know someone who is, you can contact me at the Connecting Country office or by email at jarrod@connectingcountry.org.au



Aboriginal scar tree in Sutton Grange remnant vegetation



Direct seeding machine on site

Connecting Landscapes Works Crew

Alex Schipperen

Connecting Country employs its own Works Crew as part of the Connecting Landscapes program. The Crew is able to assist land holders with the on-ground works specified in the land holder's management plan.

Our inaugural Works Crew finished up in November 2013 after almost 9 months of strenuous but rewarding work all over the Mt Alexander Shire. Planting season was a great success with over 12,000 seedlings put in the ground and many hectares of woody weeds cleared. Some properties only needed a little touch-up, while others had almost a complete make-over.

A big 'Thank You' to Jules, Jack, Teresa and Daniele for their commitment and passion for restoring our bush. Well done to you all!



2014 Works Crew Lto R with team leader Alex, Dianna, Kim, Matt and Matt

Our current Works Crew commenced in January 2014. Matt (x2), Kim and Dianna started in the middle of summer, and what a summer it was! During the first weeks we collected and processed indigenous seed, which added a new interesting skill to our ever-extending skill set. Quite a few kilos ended up in our seed storage. This will be used for our direct seeding projects and tube stock growing. Great finds were substantial crops of Drooping Sheoak, Bushy Needlewood and even some seed of a prickly herbaceous plant called Blue Devil. A visit to the Creswick Seedbank and Newstead Natives were great for understanding the bigger picture, but also a cool relief during those hot days.

Crew Member's fencing skills have been truly tested this year with many kilometres of creek and bush protected from livestock grazing. Old farm fences endangering wildlife were removed where possible.

The Crew completed accredited training courses, allowing them to do the work safely and according to best practice standards. On-ground works undertaken so far are seed collecting, fencing, tube-stock planting, woody weed removal, rabbit fumigation, direct seeding, herbicide spraying, fox and rabbit baiting, camera trapping, photopoint monitoring and even a few days of scat collecting! Quite a mix as you can see.

We are looking forward to another year full of adventures, beautiful properties and happy landholders.



Connecting Country 2014 Works Crew in Action: Clockwise from top left Matt, Matt, Dianna and Kim.

Habitat for Bush Birds

Tanya Loos

In early 2014, Connecting Country's was informed that its application to undertake a two-year habitat restoration project was successful as part of round three of the Victorian Government's Communities for Nature grants program. We've called this project 'Habitat for Bush Birds; helping the feathered five'. The 'feathered five' are each charismatic ground-foraging woodland birds known to occur in the local area; Diamond Firetail, Jacky Winter, Hooded Robin, Brown Treecreeper and Painted Button-quail. All five are part of the 'Victorian Temperate Woodland Bird Community', which is listed as threatened on the Victorian *Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988*.

As described at the 2013 AGM, Connecting Country recently developed a detailed 10-year Woodland Birds Action Plan for the Mount Alexander region with the assistance of external experts. Using a comprehensive process, the action plan was designed to be cost-effective, achievable and worthwhile. The Habitat for Bush Birds project is the first stage in implementing this broader action plan.



A male Hooded Robin, one of the feathered five. Photo by Geoff Park.

Connecting Country has employed me to coordinate the Habitat for Bush Birds project. I commenced my role in May 2014.

A Specialist Advisory Group has been established to guide the delivery of the project and the 10-year Woodland Birds Action Plan, with representatives from the local community, as well as Trust for Nature, Norman Wettenhall Foundation, Castlemaine Field Naturalists Club, BirdLife Australia and the North Central Catchment Management Authority.

On-ground works

The two year Habitat for Bush Birds project aims to increase the extent and condition of woodland bird habitat in eleven identified priority zones across the region through an approach using on-ground works on private land such as weed control, rabbit control, supplementary planting, environmental fencing and grazing regime management. Landholder visits have commenced, and I'm gratified to see that one or more of the feathered five bird species are being observed at nearly all properties within the eleven zones. The zones were selected as core habitat for these five focal species, so any on-ground works in these areas should have good outcomes for the health of these species. A number of site management plans are in development. There may be still some capacity for new landholders to receive support for a project to be undertaken on their property. Call or email me at tanya@connectingcountry.org.au to find out more!

Community engagement and monitoring



Presenter Geoff Park lines up the participants at the Intermediate Birdwatching Skills Workshop.

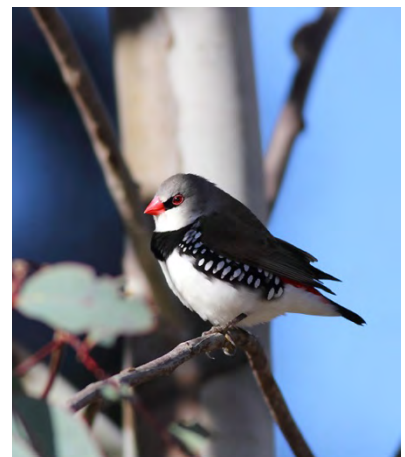
Photo by Janet Barker

One of the project objectives is to increase community awareness of the feathered five (and of woodland birds in general) through training workshops and bird outings. In August, two workshops were held in the Castlemaine Botanic Gardens: Birdwatching for Beginners and Intermediate Birdwatching Skills. Both workshops were over-subscribed. Birds are a very popular topic, and one of the great outcomes of the Birdwatching for Beginners is that we had a number of participants who had never been to an environmental workshop before.

A Birdwatcher's Monitoring Kit is in preparation, and this will form the basis of a citizen science program that allows people of all skill levels to get involved in bird monitoring.

Strengthening partnerships with other organisations

We are working closely with BirdLife Australia and Melbourne University to increase our knowledge and understanding of our local birds and their ecology. As mentioned in the Monitoring section of this report, we are in the process of becoming an affiliated organisation of BirdLife. We are working with Melbourne University on a project that helps us determine how best to prioritise our project planning and on-ground works for the best outcomes for threatened bush birds.



Diamond Firetail.

Photo by Geoff Park.

On ground works progress visits

Bonnie Humphries

For the past year I have been revisiting on ground works projects that Connecting Country has supported from the previous 4 years. This has been done to touch base with landholders and see how they have been progressing. It has been a great opportunity to share knowledge and advice, help with the identification of tricky native plants and weeds, as well as learn how we can improve the support Connecting Country currently provides. A total of 37 visits were conducted over the 12 months.

This part of my work has been very rewarding, being able to see how people have tackled their various land management challenges, and also grown with their landscapes. The projects are mostly on track, with a positive response from landholders overall.

Emerging trends, which have impacted (mostly temporarily) on the success of the on ground works include:

- In many cases, the budget allocation to treat weeds has not accurately reflected the amount need to do the job comprehensively. Future projects may need more extensive contributions from Connecting Country and the landholder.
- The proposed timelines within the management plans have sometimes been overly ambitious. Weather has played a big part in time delays, most commonly with planting and fence building. Contractor labour has also been difficult for some landholders to source at the particular times needed. Plant availability for revegetation activities has also been an issue, with some projects forgetting to order local provenance plants in advance.
- There have also been varying degrees of success with the photopoint monitoring. It is evident that some people need more support around this aspect of their projects, while others have been diligently taking these photos, above and beyond the requirements of the project. We believe that it can be very inspiring to the landholders and others to have a photographic record the positive changes occurring on a property over time, and we will continue to promote this within the management plans and stewardship agreements.

Some positive actions from landholders undertaking an on ground works project include;

- Planting more trees than are stated within the management plans, or even where plans do not allocate any budget for this.
- Landholders being more focused on the management of the natural resources on their property as a result of their project with Connecting Country, and subsequently seeking further information from other sources or taking part in various education and information opportunities (including Connecting Country's education program). The management plans contain comprehensive summaries of the threats and values for each property, and how they can be managed, but there is always more information out there to learn about.
- High levels of enthusiasm from landholders who can now start to see the changes in their properties.
- Landholders often comment on the value of the follow up visits with extra plant identification being useful. They also comment on being re-enthused about their projects, and find the confirmation that they are doing well and are on track valuable.

I would like to thank everyone who has taken time out of their busy schedules to show me around their property. It has been great to be involved in this aspect of Connecting Country and I am looking forward to continuing the progress visits over the next year.



Kangaroo and Rabbit proof guards, Campbells Creek.



Correa reflexa now protected from rabbit browsing due to the exclusion fence, Newstead



Understory plants planted to supplement Eucalypt canopy and increase habitat quality, Newstead.

Education and Engagement

Janet Barker

"... fabulous presenters, learned from other participants, met like-minded people..."

Quote from Evaluation, 6 April 2014

The first half of 2014 saw the launch of the 2014 education program, with a Welcome to Country by Dja Dja Warrung Clans member Rebecca Phillips and presentation by Ian Lunt; "Natural regeneration in Central Victoria – the biggest positive change for conservation in south-east Australia". Held at the Newstead Community Centre, the program launch attracted over 130 people and was followed by a BBQ for Connecting Country members and supporters.

The 2014 Education program has taken a different path to previous years, with sessions specifically targeted at property holders across the region. Mount Alexander Shire, Trust for Nature and Land For Wildlife all assisted us to identify and approach potential participants. The sessions were field based and focussed on providing information, practical skills and follow-up resources to assist participants to *"Improve Biodiversity on Your Property"*. Each session was limited to 25 participants for greatest benefit (and least impact on the property being visited!).

The sessions looked at issues from both the property-level and landscape scale:

SESSION	2 MARCH LAUNCH	6 APRIL 'THE BIG PICTURE'	4 MAY 'BIODIVERSITY IN THE Paddock'	1 JUNE 'FENCE ME IN'
DESCRIPTION	Evening talk "Natural regeneration in central Victoria: the biggest positive change for conservation in south-east Australia". Followed by BBQ.	Understanding property in context of landuse history (social, political), landform, vegetation (EVCs) and wider landscape	Identifying what biodiversity is and how it works at a practical level, at a property and landscape scale. A "Biodiversity blitz"	Tips and techniques for exclusion fencing; designs, placement, monitoring results. Covenants and Trusts.
LOCATION	Newstead	Welshmans Reef	Baringhup	Castlemaine
PRESENTERS	Ian Lunt	Deirdre Slattery Ian Higgins Brian and Robin Rebbechi	Jim Radford Chris Timewell Bonnie Humphries Cassia Read Karl Just Jacqui and Lachlan Brown	Peter Morison Jan Hall
CC COMMITTEE		Paul Hampton	Malcolm Fyffe	Marie Jones
REGISTRATIONS		38	35	37
PARTICIPANTS		24 managing 1225 hectares (3028 acres)	22 managing 675 hectares (1667acres)	26 managing 1363 hectares (3369 acres)

A total of 72 participants and 14 presenters were involved in the workshop program. Including the launch, the program involved over 200 people.

A volunteer education Steering Group was formed to guide the Education program for 2014 – members are: Daryl Colless, Marie Jones, Tanya Loos, Beth Mellick, Geoff Park, Max Schlachter, Deirdre Slattery, Kylie Stafford, Chris Timewell, Juliet Walsh. The group provide advice, ideas, critique, contacts and support. Many thanks to them all for their work in the past year.



Cassia Read talks mosses and fungi identification.

Other engagement activities for 2013/14

- Work begun on updating the Connecting Country website, to improve access to information and resources, in-line with the education program sessions and Connecting Country's management plans, and a general makeover to make the site more active, visually engaging
- Establishing e-farmer mapping accounts for workshop participants to work with various overlays for their own property, based on aerial and EVC mapping, to continue in later 2014

Participants have commented about their experience of the education program this year that:

"... made me think about how my property would have looked prior to farming and where to from now on ..."

"... look forward to future sessions – feel like my eyes are being opened in practical and applicable ways..."

We look forward to continuing the successful format of the workshops sessions next year, encouraging more landholders from across the region to participate and supporting them in their restoration efforts.



Participants explore their place in the big picture.

Biodiversity Monitoring

Chris Timewell and Tanya Loos

Long term biodiversity monitoring is an essential part of what we do at Connecting Country. Surveying birds, mammals and their habitats over a long time period helps us answer questions about the success of our on-ground works, and also provides significant datasets to the study of ecology in Australia.

Connecting Country has just reached its fifth year of biodiversity monitoring for woodland birds, and for mammals in our nest box program. This is an exciting achievement and congratulations are in order to the many staff and landholders, past and present, who have contributed. For all of our on-ground works projects, we have continued to monitor the improvements in biodiversity on their property by mapping vegetation extent and quality, recording plant lists and implementing photo-points before and after the projects have occurred. In the second half of 2013, we also commenced a trial experiment on the effects of sheep and kangaroo grazing on understorey plants in a Sutton Grange grassy woodland, which we hope will continue for 3-4 years. We are also preparing for the launch of a citizen science bird monitoring program, with a particular focus on the 'feathered five' within 11 priority zones (Brown Treecreeper, Hooded Robin, Diamond Firetail, Jacky Winter, Painted Button-quail).

Below is a summary of the main survey programs and their findings. A full picture may not emerge for another 10, 20 or 50 years' time – but we're on our way!

Nest Boxes

Connecting Country staff, with volunteer assistants, checked over 300 boxes at more than 100 locations during April and May 2014. The majority of these boxes are located in private land, and many thanks for the landholders for their continuing involvement.

These landholders are annually provided with the results for their boxes, and a summary of all of the findings will be publicised on the CC website. A preliminary analysis of the results suggest that there has not been a significant change in the overall abundance of either the Brush-tailed Phascogale (also known as the Tuan) or the Sugar Glider in the two years since they were last checked.

More than half of the boxes were found to have either gliders present or their nests, and less than 10% had Tuans. While an increase in Tuan abundance would have been exciting, it's still encouraging that their numbers do not appear to be declining. Thankfully the numbers of boxes infested by feral bees was low.

It is intended that all of the nest boxes that were not checked during 2014, will be checked during autumn 2015. For many, this will be the first time they have been formally checked since they were installed.



A cosy phascogale nest with sheep's wool lining and a cockatoo wing roof.

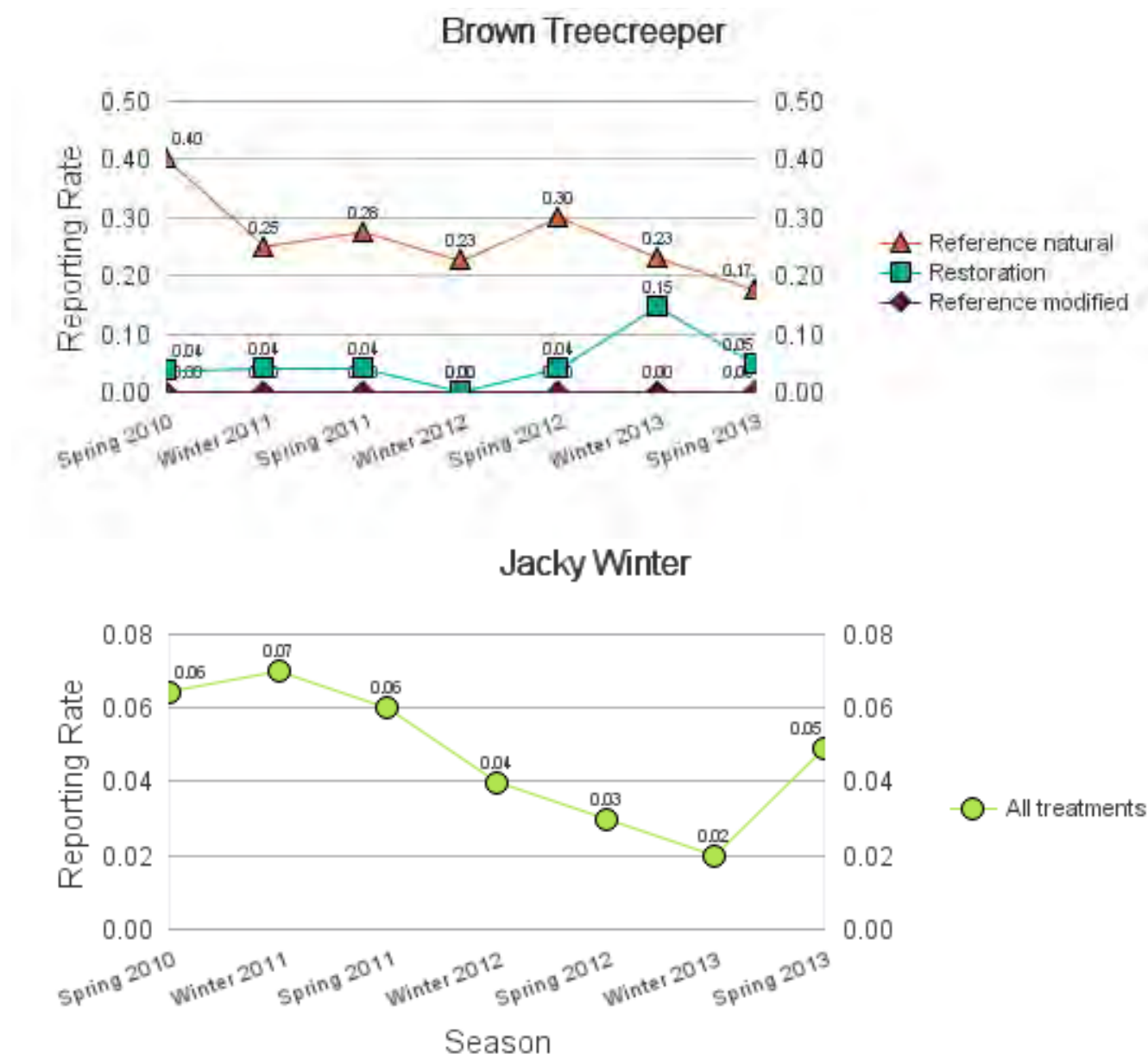


A home for ants

Birds and their Habitat

During every Winter and Spring going back to Spring 2010, Connecting Country has been monitoring birds at 50 locations across the region in public and private land. Sites are variously located within areas of 'intact' woodland, areas undergoing some form of habitat restoration (e.g. revegetation) and also woodlands that have been modified from their pre-European condition (e.g. lightly treed agricultural paddocks). A comprehensive analysis of results thus far was recently provided on the Connecting Country website. Landholders are annually provided with the findings from their particular properties.

Over 100 species were recorded during the 2013 surveys, with very few observations of introduced birds. Highlights included the first survey sightings of Banded Lapwing and a nesting record of a Black Kite. Examples of the data we are starting to accumulate are provided below for two of the 'feathered five' species.



Connecting Country is also in the process of becoming an Affiliated Organisation of Birdlife Australia. We have met with staff from BirdLife who were very impressed with the data we have collected over the past four years; a data-sharing agreement is soon to be in place.

Financial Report

Chris Timewell and Bruce Dolphin

This summary provides an overview of the income and expenditure of Connecting Country for the 2013-2014 financial year. The full audited financial statements are published separately.

General

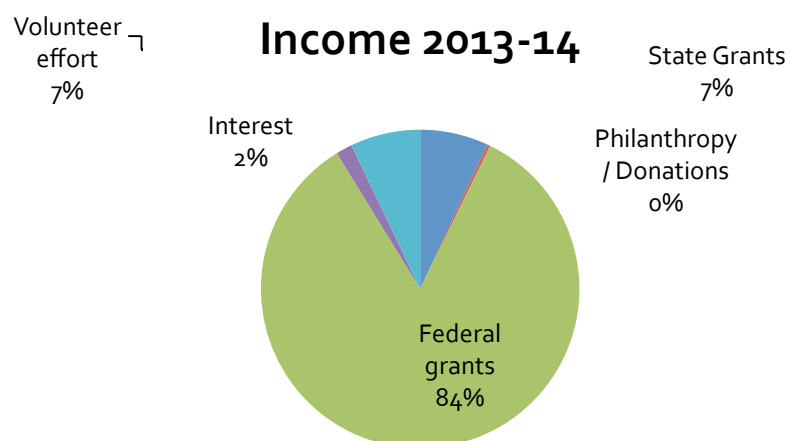
As for each of the past few financial years, Connecting Country made improvements to its book-keeping and accounting procedures. We implemented recommendations from the previous year's independent audit and also adopted the National Standard Chart of Accounts. A range of checks and cross-checks are now well-established, and the committee continues to scrutinise financial reports and summaries on a monthly frequency. A comprehensive budget was in place before the start of the year.

Overall, Connecting Country is considered to be in a relatively healthy financial position. Our assets currently exceed our liabilities, giving the organisation a reasonable buffer against future funding uncertainties. However, wherever possible and appropriate, excess funds are deployed by the organisation to achieve its landscape restoration goals.

Revenue 2013-14

Connecting Country's externally generated revenue (i.e. income) for the 2013-14 financial year was primarily from the federal government for the implementation of the Connecting Landscapes program. From March 2014, a significant grant was obtained through the State Communities for Nature program to implement a 2 year woodland birds program. Support was also received from the state government for the continuation of the Landcare Facilitator program.

Connecting Country diligently documented contributions from volunteers throughout the year as part of its standard accounting practice. Assuming that volunteer contributions have a nominal value of \$30 per hour, the value of volunteer contributions exceeded \$65,000 or over 2000 hours!



Some funding was also received from donations and philanthropic sources, and well as interest from term deposits, which has been (and will continue to be) used for specific organisation projects and activities (e.g. future planning, bird habitat identification brochures, equipment and website upgrades, volunteer support).

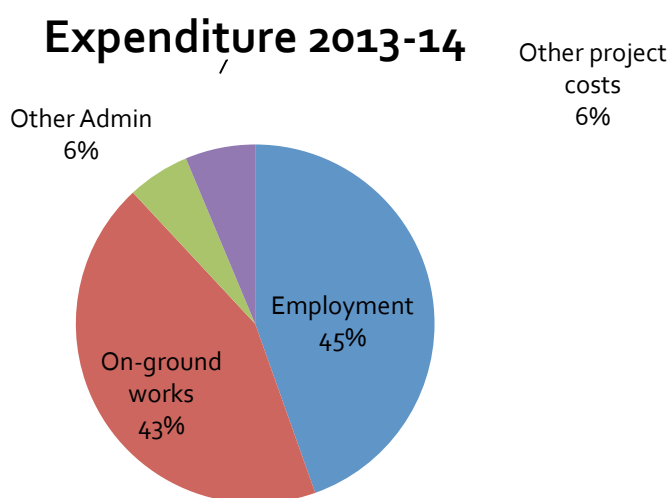
Expenditure 2013-14

In accordance with the predictions from the budget, a relatively small financial loss was made by Connecting Country during the 2013-14 financial year. This was partially as a result of the appropriate expenditure of funds received towards the end of the previous financial year (2012-13). It also represented investments by Connecting Country in important strategic planning and in seeking additional funding for new projects.

Approximately 45% of the expenditure for the year was used to directly support landholders, land managers to undertake on-ground works activities to improve the health of the local environment. These activities were in accordance with project guidelines, and included weed and rabbit control, revegetation, fencing and stock grazing regime change. This does not include the salaries for the works crew and other staff in implementing these on-ground works projects.

The proportion of annual expenditure for wages and superannuation rose slightly compared to the 2012-13 financial year. This was largely expected due to the longer timeframe of engagement for the Works Crew, and also increases in wages to match CPI, plus some additional employment of part-time and casual staff for new projects.

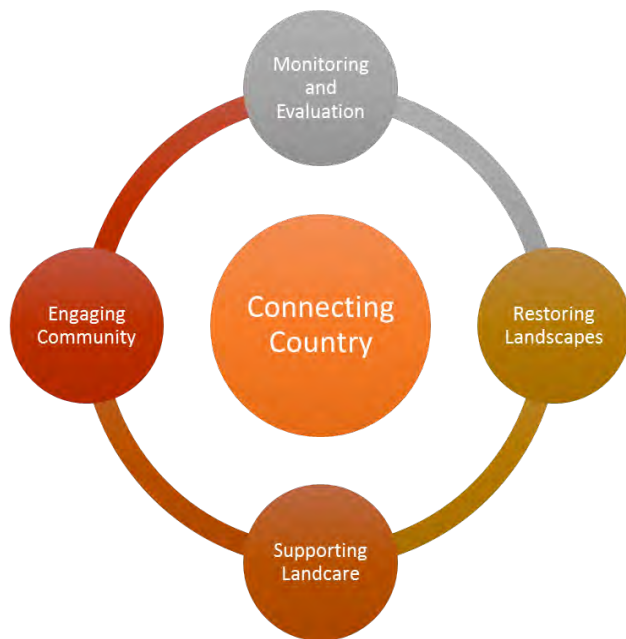
'Other project expenses' includes the costs associated with education events, biodiversity monitoring, vehicle maintenance and other activities that do not directly result in on-ground works being undertaken – but contribute indirectly.



Strategic planning

Krista Patterson-Majoor

In its earliest years, Connecting Country developed its *Biodiversity Blueprint* to document the health of the local landscape and to guide the activities of Connecting Country in its formative years. Since this time, Connecting Country has grown rapidly as an organisation. There is more knowledge about the environmental threats and opportunities in the local area. New issues have also arisen that were not considered in the original Blueprint. As such, there was an identified need to reconsider the role of Connecting Country, and therefore a Strategic Plan has been developed that aims to set the direction for the organisation over the next 10 years.



Connecting Country's four main activities

The plan outlines our vision and mission, and the objectives and strategies for our four main activities. It will be utilised by the committee and staff in a variety of ways, including in the development of projects and application for grants. It will also be a public document that describes and promotes what Connecting Country does, and how we plan to continue into the future.

Woodland Bird Action Plan

In 2013, Connecting Country developed a comprehensive and cost-effective Woodland Bird Action Plan (2013-2023). The Action Plan aims to address the decline of the Victorian Temperate Woodland Bird Community within the Mount Alexander Region through the restoration of 7000ha of habitat across 11 priority zones. It is ambitious. But with the support of the local community, Landcare and other supporters, we believe it is achievable and worthwhile.

Five charismatic ground-foraging species from this woodland bird community – dubbed 'the feathered five' - have been chosen for the Action Plan: Brown Treecreeper, Diamond Firetail, Hooded Robin, Painted Button-quail and Jacky Winter. By addressing the decline of these species through habitat restoration and associated activities, most other local woodland bird species will also benefit. The success of the program will be determined by monitoring the frequency with which the feathered five are recorded within the priority zones over time. We have received some initial funding to commence implementing part of the Action Plan (see report on page 22), and have submitted a number of other grant applications. These are tough times to be seeking funding for conservation works. However we are confident and very keen to see it succeed.

Connecting Country Strategic Plan 2014-2024

VISION	For the people of the Mount Alexander Region to be proud of the beautiful, productive, healthy and diverse landscapes, habitats, forests, waterways, flora and fauna that we have supported and created in our region.			
MISSION	We connect country by drawing on the wealth of knowledge and experience in our community. We nourish and sustain the region of Mount Alexander by showcasing innovative possibilities of ecological land management.			
FOCUS ACTIVITY GOALS	ENGAGING COMMUNITY	SUPPORTING LANDCARE	RESTORING LANDSCAPES	MONITORING AND EVALUATION
	The Mount Alexander Region community appreciate and understand the local landscape.	The Landcare groups of the Mount Alexander Region are healthy, with many active members and clear plans for the future of their local area.	The remnant vegetation across the Mount Alexander region is better protected and managed, connectivity between remnant habitat areas is increased, and native species are flourishing.	Landscape restoration outcomes continuously improved through a commitment to long term monitoring and evaluation of our activities.
	<p style="text-align: center;">ORGANISATIONAL FOUNDATIONS</p> <p>That Connecting Country is a sustainable, well-managed, and adaptable organisation and is recognised as a leader in the management of community not-for-profit environmental organisations.</p>			

Our Achievements

With the support of the Norman Wettenhall Foundation and the Friends of the Box Ironbark Forests, Connecting Country was initiated in 2007 by local people and groups that were determined to have a community-based organisation address issues associated with declines in landscape health. They had a vision to connect people and landscapes to achieve a sustainable and healthy environment. Since then, Connecting Country has met these expectations through its support for landholder and Landcare groups to undertake on-ground conservation works; by coordinating community education and other awareness-raising activities relating to landscape restoration; and by implementing a rigorous monitoring and evaluation program. We are proud of our achievements in the past seven years. The following table summarises the raw 'output' numbers. More important – but not able to be captured in such a succinct form – is the myriad good-news stories that have arisen from all aspects of Connecting Country's activities over these years.

	2008- 2009	2009- 2010	2010- 2011	2011- 2012	2012- 2013	2013- 2014	TOTAL
Organisational							
Projects operational (no.)		1	1	4	5	5	8
Staff (no.)	1	3	4	6	15	15	20
On Ground Works							
site management plans (no.)		22	19	20	87	21	148
Revegetation (ha.)		60	292	396	391	150	1139
Pest plant control (ha.)		974	146	800	2878	330	4798
Pest Animal control (ha.)		974	146	675	2407	330	4202
Total habitat enhanced (ha.)		974	1569	1800	3199	330	7872
Community Engagement							
Education events (no.)		18	27	31	23	12	111
Participants (no.)		270	395	1149	472	322	2608
Brochures / Information Sheets (no.)		1	2		4	1	8
Blog Posts (no.)	17	86	39	178	154	138	612
Blog subscribers (no.)			130	270	330	357	357
Community plans (no.)		3	3	4	8	1	19
Landcare groups supported (no.)	30	30	30	30	30	30	30
Monitoring							
Nest boxes (no. boxes)		339	360	430	430	430	430
Nest boxes (no. checked)			270	300	0	330	900
Woodland birds (no. of surveys)			60	200	200	200	660
Habitat (no. surveys)		22	49	120	92	60	343

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Cover Picture: *Clearing, Leanganook – Ben Laycock*