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ANNUAL REPORT 2015–16



ABOUT US

Connecting Country (Mount Alexander Region) Inc is an incorporated not-for-profit organisation that is led by the local community and works with a range of other groups, organisations and government agencies to increase, enhance and restore biodiversity and landscape health across the Mount Alexander Shire and surrounds in central Victoria. Since 2007 we have been working to achieve this, with many successes along the way. We are a registered Charity and have Deductible Gift Recipient status.

Our vision is 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 (from the 'Connecting Country Strategic Plan 2014-2024')

Connecting Country's operations are based on four key elements:

- **On ground works** to increase and enhance native vegetation and habitat through actions such as grazing change, protective fences, revegetation, and pest plant and animal control.
- **Community engagement** through education events, information sharing, an active website and volunteer involvement.
- The implementation of a long-term shire-wide annual **monitoring** program for birds, arboreal mammals, reptiles and frogs and vegetation.
- Providing support for our 31 local **Landcare** and Friends groups.

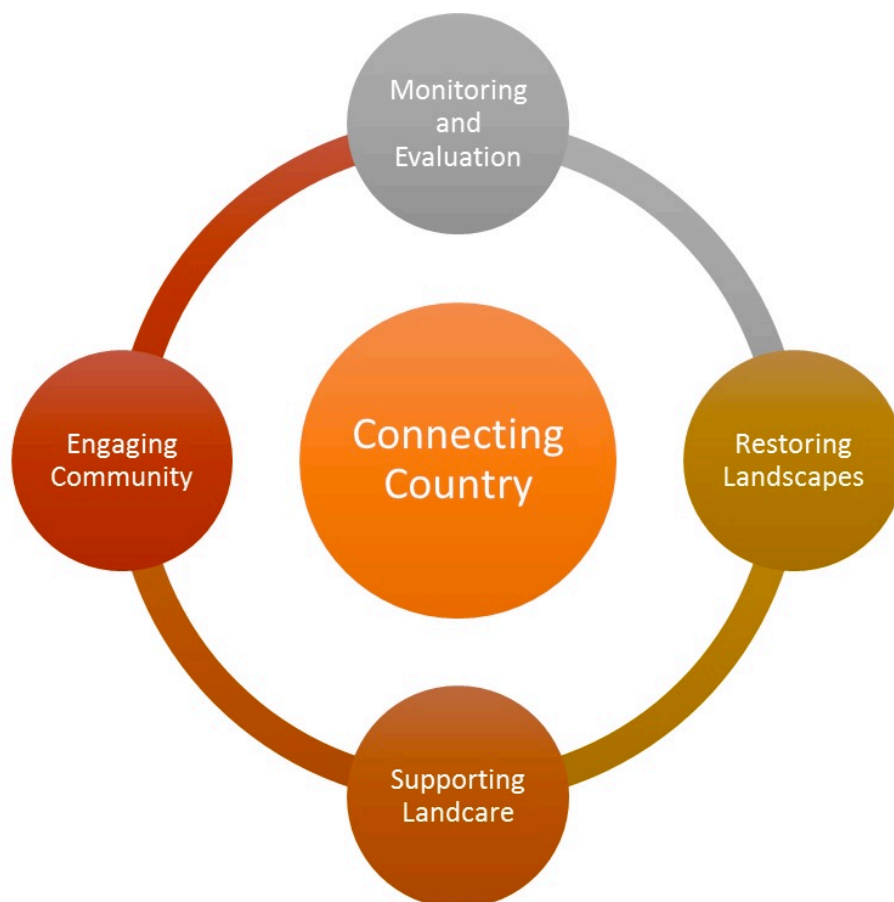


DIAGRAM DEPICTING THE FOUR AREAS OF FOCUS FOR CONNECTING COUNTRY

DIRECTORS' REPORT

In July 2016, the Committee of Management endorsed a staff structure change within Connecting Country in order to give the organisation the best opportunity to prepare for future opportunities. This involved splitting the single Director role into two separate co-director roles – with Chris to focus on administration, and Krista on project and staff management plus future direction planning. Naomi will assist Krista in her new expansive role. We're really excited by this change.

When considering the achievements of Connecting Country over the past year, the two themes that stood out most for us are (i) the diversity of ways we've worked towards landscape restoration, and (ii) the incredible good will and efforts of so many local people to make everything that we do as successful as possible. This annual report captures some of the most interesting stories and activities, but these are just the tip of the iceberg.

Chris's highlight for the year is the spike in Brush-tailed Phascogale numbers that was detected during our biennial nest box surveys in Autumn 2016 – which is testament to the local community's habitat stewardship role and improvement works. A close second was the Chat Warbler choir singing the world premiere of their original 'feathered five' song at our inaugural Woodland Birds festival.

Krista's highlight for the year was the gathering of 35 landholders during our 'Sticky Beak Tour' of four Connecting Country restoration projects. One participant shared that *"we now have a clear idea of what we want to do next and more confidence that the work can deliver the results we are looking for"*. It's also been fun engaging people in the work we do through different means; like our monthly Nature News articles in the Midland Express and our new Facebook Page.

Thanks for your ongoing interest and support in our efforts to protect and restore the landscapes of the Mount Alexander Shire and surrounds. It's a constant inspiration to us!

Krista Patterson-Majoor and Chris Timewell, 12 August 2016



STICKY BEAK TOUR PARTICIPANTS AT THE GUILDFORD WINERY.

OUR ACHIEVEMENTS

2015-2016 ACTIVITY



Organisational

- 12 projects
- 11 staff
- 2530 volunteer hours
- 1 committee of management
- ~5 presentations



On Ground Action

- 28 site management plans
- 283 hectares of remnant vegetation protected
- 121 hectares revegetated,
- 405 hectares of pest plant and animal control
- 405 hectares of habitat enhanced



Community Engagement

- 21 education and engagement events
- 847 participants
- 4 new brochures
- 161 posts recieved by 506 subscribers
- 2 education videos
- 448 facebook likes



Supporting Landcare

- 31 groups supported
- 3 green army teams
- 2 landcare link-up events
- 3 successful shire-wide grants

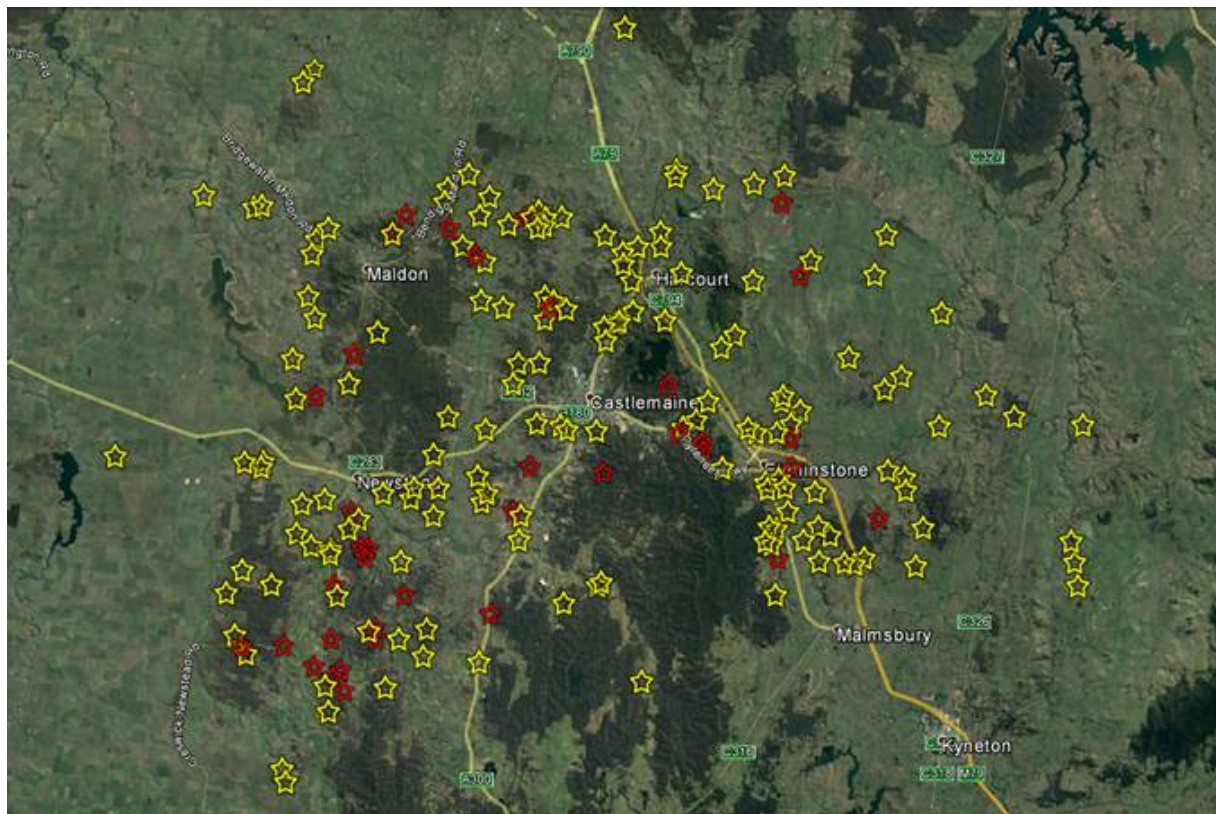


Monitoring Change

- 450 nest boxes monitored
- 200 woodland bird surveys
- 28 vegetation surveys
- 5 community bird walks surveys
- 10 group bird sites
- Reptile/frog monitoring roll-out

ACCUMULATIVE TOTALS:

Since inception, Connecting Country has developed **219 site management plans** protecting some 4132 hectares of remnant vegetation, revegetated an additional 1460 hectares, and undertaken pest plant and animal control across 5879 hectares. We have supported **152 engagement** and education events with **4535 participants**.



2015-2016 ON-GROUND PROJECTS HIGHLIGHTED IN RED, PREVIOUS YEARS IN YELLOW.

SUPPORTING LANDCARE

ASHA BANNON, MOUNT ALEXANDER REGION LANDCARE FACILITATOR

It's been a busy year for Landcare and Friends groups in the region! Since Max passed on the reins to me at the end of 2015, I've had the joy of getting to know and working with some of the many amazing people we have around here. It is so inspiring and heartening to see the huge differences groups are making to our landscape and community.



BARKERS CREEK LANDCARE AND WILDLIFE GROUP CELEBRATE THEIR 20 YEAR ANNIVERSARY.

As well as the hard work that groups have been doing at a local scale, we've had several projects which have been aimed at all groups in the Mount Alexander Region. Funding through the 20 Million Trees Program has created opportunities for four groups to begin planting 6300 plants. The Landcare Forum was a hugely successful event, attended by over fifty people.

The two Landcare Link-ups provided an opportunity for group representatives to share stories and experiences, and to learn from each other and guest speakers. Two Green Army teams have been working on numerous Landcare projects during the last year, with a third team just started.



LIAM AND RACHEL FROM THE GREEN ARMY TACKLING GORSE IN BARKERS CREEK.

Thanks to everyone who has been taking such good care of our beautiful land over the last year. Here's to a year ahead full of fun, hope, and success for Landcarers and Friends of the Mount Alexander region!

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

KRISTA PATTERSON-MAJOR

Connecting Country runs a dedicated education program each year that aims to provide information, practical skills and inspiration. We delivered the spring series of our 2015 program '**Working with Nature to Improve Your Property**', with 82 participants. The workshops covered popular topics such as "living with fire and wildlife", "biodiversity in the paddock", "conservation fencing", and "back from the brink" looking at weed control.

"My deepest appreciation to the CC team for a wonderful series of fabulous workshops. Thanks for all the logistics and a beautifully designed program."
2015 program participant.

In 2016 we decided to do things a little differently with a focus on raising the profile of woodland birds and growing our partnerships with fellow organisations.

Our inaugural **Feathered Five Festival** kicked off the year in March 2016 – a two day celebration of bird-watching, walks and talks. Another first-off was our '**sticky beak tour**' of on-ground work projects with 34 of our landholders.

In August, in partnership with the North Central Catchment Management Authority, we were very pleased to host a **farm field day** with 100 participants showcasing the possibilities for viable, sustainable and diverse farms.

In 2016 we've been more active in the press and on-line. We launched our monthly '**Nature News**' articles in the Midland Express, developed some exciting and informative on-line videos for our Vimeo Page and started an active Connecting Country Facebook Page. We have also been supporting other local groups and activities by promoting their efforts via our website.



LEFT: CHRIS TZAROS ADDRESSES A CROWD OF BUDDING BIRD-WATCHERS



RIGHT: ALICE STEELE AND JUDY LAYCOCK WORK WITH OUR FUTURE CARERS OF THE LAND



BOTTOM: THE CHAT WARBLERS DELIGHT US WITH THEIR FEATHERED FIVE SONG AT THE FEATHERED FIVE FESTIVAL.

MONITORING CHANGE

TANYA LOOS AND ASHA BANNON

Connecting Country now has ongoing monitoring programs running for birds, arboreal mammals, reptiles and frogs, revegetation (exclusion plots) and photopoints. Around 200 landholders are involved in these programs, and we thank you all for your enthusiasm and cooperation!



WOODLAND BIRDS

Spring and Winter bird surveys carried out in the past year assessed bird species and numbers at 50 intact, restoration and paddock sites. Significantly, our results have shown fertile gullies are drought refuges, with woodland birds occurring in greater numbers and with higher species diversity on these sites.

Photo: Bird surveys at "Quince Tree", one of our monitoring sites at Muckleford.



REPTILE AND FROG MONITORING

Our newest monitoring program this year is looking at reptile and frog species in the Mount Alexander region. 480 roof tiles are being laid out ready to be checked in late spring and early summer at ~ 40 properties. Stay tuned for more results next year!

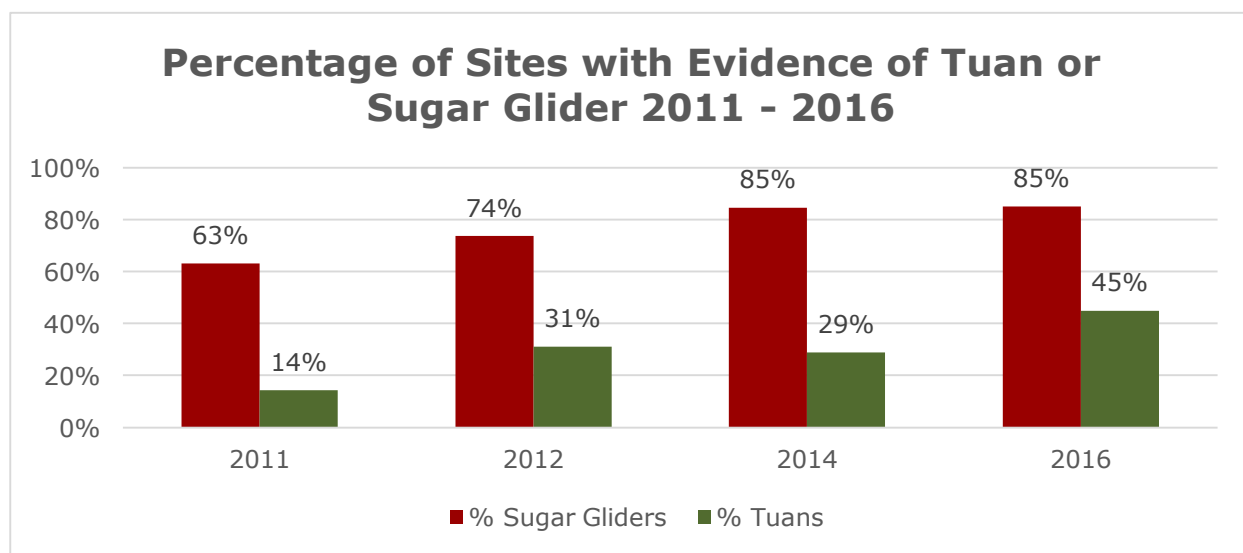
Photo: Roma, Hector and Isabelle helping to set up a monitoring tile in Sutton Grange.



NESTBOX MONITORING

The percentage of nest box sites with evidence of Brush-tailed Phascogales (aka Tuans) was 45%, the highest it's been since we started monitoring in 2011! This is very exciting to see. We think that the habitat restoration being undertaken by landholders and Landcare groups across the region is a major contributor to this increase. The nest boxes are on both public and private land, and within large and small patches of native woodland and forest habitat. In Autumn this year we visited 148 sites, with a total of 444 nest boxes checked.

Photo: Brush-tailed Phascogale tucked up in its nest.



ON-GROUND ACTION

JARROD COOTE AND BONNIE HUMPHREYS

This has been the 5th year of the Connecting Landscapes program, and we've completed 24 new on-ground works projects covering 250 ha. The projects are focusing on revegetation, remnant vegetation protection, pest animal control, weed control and, in special cases, exclusion fencing and nest box installation.

Our 2016 crew- Anna Pike, Rachel Campbell, Luke Archer and Scott Woodman - have been very busy implementing these projects and are well on their way to being professional fencers! The direct seeding has kept us very busy but not out of trouble with the early rain making it particularly difficult to drive around those paddocks and avoid getting bogged. As a result we had to put on our thinking caps and come up with a new solution-a buggy!

In June, we said goodbye to Alex Schipperen who has been with us as crew leader for four years. Alex has done everything from trained and mentored more than twelve new team members, built kilometres of fences for conservation protection, developed and implemented OH&S systems, educated landholders at our workshops, and made engaging land management videos. He has built excellent relationships with landholders and staff and ensured that our work on-ground is first rate. The good news is when one door closes another opens and we are thrilled that Fritz Hammersley has taken on the crew leader role.

We would also like to say a big thanks to the 2015 crew – we were thrilled to learn that they went on to employment with Parks Victoria and DEWLP. We take this as a sign that our works crew program is being the successful trainee program it was intended to be.

We are very impressed with the levels of commitment from everyone in the program, our wonderful landholders, plant nurseries and revegetation suppliers. We would like to take this opportunity to thank everyone who has been involved thus far. This includes people connecting us with local landholders through to the landholders allowing us to work with them on their properties.



**YOUNG PIPPA LENDS A HAND
AT ONE OF OUR
REVEGETATION SITES.**



BONNIE UNDERTAKING DIRECT SEEDING IN CHEWTON.



**ANNA AND LUKE WITH THE VICTORY ARCH MADE
FROM EMPTIED PLANTING TUBES**

LANDHOLDER STORIES

These stories were captured by work experience student **BRANDIE STRICKLAND** as part of the 'Sticky Beak Tour' in June 2016.

CHRIS JOHNSTON, GREEN GULLY



**CHRIS EXPLAINS HER PROJECT WITH PARTICIPANTS
AT THE STICKY BEAK TOUR PHOTO: GEOFF PARK**

Chris's property used to be grazed by cattle and was heavily cleared for firewood and other uses. Originally Chris worried that maybe there were more problems on the land than she could manage. However, given the history of the property over the past 10 years it "wasn't really that bad".

With the help of Connecting Country, Chris is trialing an exclusion plot to see what grows naturally without grazing by kangaroos, rabbits and other animals. She is also revegetating the cleared gully areas, however has found kangaroos and cockatoos to be an issue as they shred the tree guards. She has been lucky enough to replace most tree guards second hand and is trialing protecting

seedlings with smaller fenced areas using other gathered resources, like star pickets, at little to no cost.

Chris is passionate about restoring the land and hopes to one day see it returned to the traditional owners, the Dja Dja Wurrung, for better land management.

CULLEN GUNN, WALMER

Cullen is an engaging gentleman from Melbourne. He and his family enjoy their delightful 280acre property in Walmer as often as they can (though not as often as Cullen would like). The property was originally grazed heavily; a practice Cullen hasn't continued unless you count the many kangaroos.

It is Cullen's dream to make the property carbon neutral and very biodiverse. He has established several areas dedicated to farm forestry. And, in 2008, decided to try direct seeding to add some diversity around his forestry operation. Four rounds of direct seeding later – including the help of Connecting Country – what looked like a potential failure is now as "thick as hair" in parts. As a result, Cullen and his family has watched over 100 species of birds return to the property and sugar gliders inhabit his nest boxes.



**CULLEN GUNN AT HIS WALMER
PROPERTY PHOTO: BRANDIE
STRICKLAND**

FINANCIAL REPORT

CHRIS TIMEWELL (DIRECTOR – BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION)

This is a financial summary for Connecting Country (CC), covering the 12 month period from 1 July 2015 to the 30 June 2016.

CC's membership was 188 during the 2015-16 period. The membership included the renewal of 156 existing members and 32 new members. The joining fee and annual membership fee remained at \$0 and \$0 respectively. Many generous donations were received by CC from members and other supporters (with more than \$9000 received from 33 people and organizations – plus a \$20,000 contribution from the Ian Potter Foundation towards project implementation).

At the time of writing this report, the audit of CC's financial accounts and processes for 2015-16 is being undertaken by Goers and Maunder Public Accountants Pty Ltd. Financial reports are also reviewed by the CC Committee of Management on a monthly frequency. The financial figures below are considered to be accurate, but there remains a possibility that they could alter somewhat as a result of the findings of the audit.

Volunteer contributions to CC are recognized in the financial reports at \$30 per person per hour, for a total value of \$75,905 in 2015-16. Thank you!

The total income for 2015-16 was \$1,209,063 (including internal journals), which was \$109,014 less than budgeted. A large proportion of income was received from the Federal government to implement the 5-year 'Connecting Landscapes Across the Mount Alexander Region' program (~50%). Considerable income was also received from state government grants to implement Communities for Nature projects and to host the local Landcare Facilitator role. Five new grants of a small-to-medium size were also received during the year from government and philanthropic grants. These are in various stages of implementation. The remainder of the income was from project contributions, transactions, interest and savings. Funds that are not required in the short-to-medium term are held in term deposit accounts in order to generate additional interest.

Total expenditure for 2015-16 (including internal journals) was \$1,359,525, which was \$125,520 less than budgeted. A significant proportion (~70%) of funds spent were directly for on-ground works activities; including the construction of protective fences, control of pest plants and rabbits, revegetation, grazing change, Works Crew wages and training, the use of local contractors and the development of management plans and agreements. Other complementary spending was on supporting Landcare (7%), undertaking biodiversity monitoring (4%) and coordinating education events (4%). To increase cost-efficiency, all CC's funded programs make a contribution towards administration and other overhead costs (e.g. IT support, book-keeper, audit, stationery, utilities, vehicles, etc.), which comprises much of the remaining expenditure (13%).

Despite running at a deficit in 2015-16, CC is in a sound financial position. We have comprehensive internal checks and balances; a moderate-sized financial reserve and a reasonable revenue stream from approved grants for at least the next 12 months.

OUR PEOPLE

CHRIS TIMEWELL AND NAOMI RAFTERY

OUR COMMITTEE OF MANAGEMENT

The Connecting Country Committee of Management members regularly volunteer their skills, advice and energy to the organisation outside of their formal commitment to monthly meetings. The Committee of Management helps Connecting Country pursue its goals by making key decisions about planning, resources and strategic direction. The Committee also recruit and support staff. Committee members 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.

President: Brendan Sydes

Vice President: Deborah Wardle

Treasurer: April Merrick

Secretary: Marie Jones

Other committee members: Saide Gray, Malcolm Trainor, Jenni Thomas, Max Kay

Retired committee members: April Merrick, Paul Hampton

OUR STAFF

During 2015-16, Connecting Country has had a dedicated team of permanent and fixed-term staff whose contributions all extend well above and beyond their job descriptions.

Alex Schipperen

Jarrood Coote

Naomi Raftery

Anna Pike

Jason Burgoyne

Ned Brook

Asha Bannon

Krista Patterson-Majoor

Rachel Campbell

Bonnie Humphreys

Lauren Cogo

Scott Woodman

Bruce Dolphin

Luke Archer

Tanya Loos

Chris Timewell

Max Schlachter

Fritz Hammersley

Melanie Marshall

Other contractors and short-term employees have also assisted on occasions, and we thank them for their important contribution.



OUR TEAM OF DEDICATED STAFF WORK DAILY TO ENGAGE COMMUNITY, RESTORE LANDSCAPES AND PROTECT HABITAT FOR LOCAL NATIVE PLANT AND ANIMAL SPECIES.

OUR SUPPORTERS

Connecting Country would like to thank and acknowledge the many other persons and groups who have contributed over the past year or more. We apologize to any people that we have inadvertently missed

- **Landcare Facilitator Steering Group:** Christine Kilmartin, Melanie Marshall, Marie Jones, Maurie Dynon, Ian Grenda and Daryl Colless Kylie Stafford, Jennifer Pryce
- **Woodland Bird Advisory Group:** Geoff Park, Deanna Marshall, Nigel Harland, Beth Mellick, Nick Layne, James O'Connor, Greg Licence, Kylie Stafford, Cara Byrt, Brendan Sydes, Jane Rusden, Damian Kelly and Britt Gregory
- **Education and Engagement Steering Group:** Deirdre Slattery, Marie Jones, Daryl Colless, Beth Mellick, Juliet Walsh, Kylie Stafford, Max Schlachter, Geoff Park, Janet Baker
- **Expert Advisory Panel**, who provide advice and support as needed. Panel includes Andrew Bennett, Elaine Bayes, Ben Carr, Beth Mellick, Ian Higgins, Chris Tzaros, Karen Alexander, Damien Cook, Peter Johnson, Deirdre Slattery and Paul Righetti
- **Education program partners:** the Friends of the Box-Ironbark Forests, North Central Catchment Management Authority, Mount Alexander Shire Council, Castlemaine Festival of Open Gardens, Midland Express and the Norman Wettenhall Foundation for their involvement and contribution. We would also like to thank the presenters, attendees and volunteers at our talks, excursions and other community events, and in particular, the landholders whose properties our events were held upon.
- **Cara Byrt** for her development and on-going assistance with our wildlife databases
- **Geoff Park** for the use of his incredible photos for promoting the Woodland Birds Project.
- **Beth Mellick** from the Norman Wettenhall Foundation for her on-going support from funding advice to brochure design.
- Our **landholders** and other land-managers involved in on-ground works projects, monitoring programs and the **volunteers** who have assisted with surveys for birds, nest-box checks and reptile/frog monitoring. Too many people to mention here, but you know who you are. Thanks!
- **Jane Rusden** for her support for the Woodland Bird Project through her volunteer work with data entry and as volunteer co-ordinator.
- **Pia Lentini, Jess Lawton, Louise Nicholas** and **Brandie Strickland**, and for their internship, work placement and research projects with Connecting Country
- Our local **Landcare groups and 'Friends of' groups**, and also the facilitators of our neighboring networks; the Upper Loddon, Upper Campaspe and Loddon Plains Landcare Networks.
- The **Mount Alexander Shire** particularly Amy McDonald and Kylie Stafford.
- Other groups with complementary objectives operating in the local area: such as **Trust for Nature, Friends of the Box Ironbark Forests, Castlemaine Field Naturalists Club, Birdlife Australia, The Hub Foundation, Growing Abundance** and the **Mount Alexander Sustainability Group**
- **Government agencies** at the local, state and national levels that have provided support for our projects and activities
- **Eliza Tree** and **Bronwyn Silver** for the cover artwork for this annual report.
- 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.

OUR FUNDERS

Connecting Country has been fortunate to receive fantastic support from government agencies, philanthropic organisations, and the local community. We enjoy our partnerships with all of these organisations and thank all of our supporters for contributing towards the restoration of landscapes across the Mount Alexander Region. In particular, we would like to acknowledge:

The **Australian Government** for our 'Connecting Landscapes across the Mount Alexander Region' program.

The **Victorian Government** for our 'Habitat for Bush Birds' project through the Communities for Nature program.

The **State Government's Victorian Landcare Facilitator Program** for supporting our Mount Alexander Landcare Facilitator.

The **North Central Catchment Management Authority** and the **Victorian Landcare Grants Program** for the Mount Alexander Schools Landcare Day and Landcare Open Day.

The **Australian Government's Green Army Programme**, North Central Catchment Management Authority, Manpower Australia, and Landcare Australia for our 2015-16 Green Army teams.

The **Australian Government's National Landcare Program** for the Landcare project funding through the 20 Million Trees Program.

The **Mount Alexander Shire Council** through the Community Grants program for the Stipoid Grass Control program and Revegetation Guide.

The **Helen MacPherson Smith Trust** for our new 'Stewards for Woodland Birds' program.

The **Ian Potter Foundation** for the Reptile and Frog Monitoring Program.

