

Connecting Country



ANNUAL REPORT
FOR 2017-18



Cover photo: Bonnie Humphreys and Asha Bannon lead a nature walk on Mount Alexander during the 2018 Camp Out on the Mount. Photo by Frances Howe.

Photo credits: Frances Howe, Bonnie Humphreys, Asha Bannon, Tanya Loos.
Photo of Jacky Winter by Geoff Park.

Connecting Country (Mount Alexander Region) Inc.

ABN 47 539 096 184 Inc. No A0053263V

Room 15, 233 Barker St, Castlemaine VIC 3450

PO Box 437 Castlemaine VIC 3450

Phone: +61 3 5472 1594

info@connectingcountry.org.au

www.connectingcountry.org.au

PRESIDENT'S REPORT

Growing and thriving in a time of change

The year has been one of challenges and change for Connecting Country, but also, I am happy to report, thriving and growth.

Our enthusiastic staff team are critical to our success, so one of our big challenges in the past year was the departure of key team members who had been with us over many years. Frances started with us early in the year as our new Director and has done a wonderful job in managing the day to day operation of the organisation, enabling us not only to continue with existing projects but also develop new opportunities.

It is very satisfying to travel around the Shire and observe Connecting Country signs on gates of properties with wonderful restoration projects – a great reminder of just how important committed landholders are to our success. Our workshops continue to draw big crowds, a testament to the appetite of landholders old and new in the area for information and inspiration on managing their land.

Also we observe increasing signs that our landscape is changing with the changing climate. It would be easy to become disheartened and defeatist in the face of these changes. However, I am pleased that Connecting Country (through our Landcare network role) has encouraged conversations and practical action, supporting our community to find ways to encourage robust and healthy landscapes as the climate changes.

Thanks to everyone in the Connecting Country network who contributes to our success – volunteers, landholders, local businesses, the staff team and my fellow Committee members.

BRENDAN SYDES

President



DIRECTOR'S REPORT

It was a great honour to take up the role of Director of Connecting Country in November 2017. After two years overseas, I flew home two days before starting a jet-lagged handover with esteemed past directors Chris Timewell and Krista Patterson-Majoer, who left two very big sets of shoes to fill.

The Connecting Country team has been incredibly welcoming. I hold them in the highest regard for their amazing skills, can-do attitude, endless patience, commitment and total willingness to go the extra mile for the benefit of our local environment and community.

This year, Connecting Country has adapted to become more agile, drawing on a patchwork of grants to achieve a lot with a little. This isn't always easy. We wouldn't exist without our generous supporters, and are constantly on the lookout for new opportunities to source funds and make our limited resources go further.

I am endlessly amazed by the rich pool of visionary, knowledgeable, committed and resourceful people within the Mount Alexander community. Connecting Country plays a vital role as a network and partner, bringing together people from Landcare and other community groups, indigenous groups, private landholders, individuals, contractors and multiple government agencies to collaborate constructively to care for local landscapes and build habitat. Thanks for being part of our story.

FRANCES HOWE

Director



FINANCE REPORT

This financial summary for Connecting Country covers the period from 1 July 2017 to 30 June 2018. Financial reports were reviewed monthly by Connecting Country's Committee of Management. An independent annual audit of our financial accounts and processes for 2017-18 was completed by Goers and Maunder Pty Ltd.

Total income for 2017-18 was \$618,357, which was \$104,992 more than budgeted. Income was received from the Victorian government, North Central Catchment Management Authority and several philanthropic organisations, and used to host our local Landcare Facilitator and implement a range of small-to-medium size projects. Existing funds that were not required in the short-term continued to be held in term deposit accounts to generate interest. During 2017-18 we earned \$12,305 from term deposit investments.

Volunteer contributions to Connecting Country were not included in financial reports. However, we recorded 1,577 volunteer hours valued at \$30 per hour, for a total value of \$47,310 in 2017-18. We also received generous cash donations from supporters totaling \$5,846.

Total expenditure for 2017-18 (including provisions for depreciation, annual leave and long service leave) was \$513,220, which was \$55,348 less than budgeted. A significant proportion of funds were spent on development of site management plans and implementation of on-ground actions, including weed and rabbit control, revegetation planting, construction of protective fences and grazing exclusion. Other spending was directed to supporting Landcare, biodiversity monitoring and community education events. Project funds remaining from 2017-18 will be used to support ongoing projects during 2018-19.

As of the end of June 2018 Connecting Country was in a sound financial position, with net assets of \$344,665. We have comprehensive internal checks and balances, a good-sized financial reserve and a reasonable revenue stream from approved grants for 2018-19. Many thanks to our bookkeeper Bruce, Connecting Country's committee, staff, donors, and others who assisted over the past year.

MAX KAY

Treasurer





'We are so fortunate to have Connecting Country, your newsletters give me so much involvement with our community but most of all JOY.'

- Gayle Gissing, Campbells Creek

'It's very gratifying to see Connecting Country paying attention to degraded landscapes and encouraging restoration in woodland landscapes that are largely eliminated. If we want these habitats in the future we must restore them almost from scratch. We need test sites, to trial restoration approaches and monitor speed of recovery. Greenhill, (a Connecting Country funded site) is a model for us all and hugely encouraging. It is an example of what can be done with informed and carefully targeted, funded works.'

- Dr David Cheal, Federation University and Redesdale resident

'The monitoring programs that Connecting Country are carrying out in their local region are valuable for several reasons. First, they are being undertaken in a careful way, such that the results obtained have the potential to provide meaningful new knowledge about the flora and fauna of the local area and changes through time. This is not always the case with community projects...Second, their programs have a strong community element, with opportunity for community members to engage, learn about nature and to see the outcomes.'

- Professor Andrew Bennett, Latrobe University

ABOUT CONNECTING COUNTRY

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.

Connecting Country is a community-operated organisation working across the Mount Alexander region, with a mission to connect people and landscapes in ways that support the management of a healthy, resilient and productive natural environment. Connecting Country works with a wide range of land users, providing support, skills and funds to local communities to restore landscapes.

Connecting Country's work is based on four action areas:

- restore landscapes through on-ground actions such as revegetation, grazing exclusion, and pest plant and animal control.
- engage community through education events, information sharing, an active website and volunteer involvement.
- monitor local birds, arboreal mammals, reptiles and frogs and vegetation.
- provide support for our 30 local Landcare and Friends groups.

Monitoring and engagement



Supporting Landcare

Restoring landscapes



SUPPORTING LANDCARE

Why join a Landcare group? For some, the answer may be obvious. We all benefit from a healthy environment. Many of us work hard on our own properties to make sure things are running smoothly and we are doing our bit. Of course, for Landcarers, 'doing your bit' extends beyond the conventional boundaries. Weeds don't care where the fenceline is, wildlife don't check the maps before moving through the landscape. So Landcarers turn their hand to crown land, roadsides, waterways, their neighbours' properties. It's about looking at the bigger picture and helping care for the land for its own value and for the gifts of joy and resources it will bring future generations. Of course, there's also the satisfaction that comes with getting your hands in the dirt, getting to know people in your community, sharing a cuppa (or several!), and giving the land you love the care it deserves.

Where does Connecting Country fit into this?

We support our network of around 30 groups in the Mount Alexander region by coordinating events and projects that empower Landcarers and encourage new people to become involved. In 2017-18, this included the 2018 Camp Out on the Mount, two online mapping workshops, four weed and native plant workshops, ten site visits with our botanist Bonnie, training in safe chemical use for Landcarers, a collection of ten Landcare stories, and two Landcare Link-ups. The February 2018 Landcare Link-up was a particular highlight, with around 40 representatives from local groups gathering to hear stories about each other's work.

Thank you to all of our local groups and all of the amazing volunteers who helped support and nourish Landcare in the Mount Alexander region this year.



ASHA BANNON

Mount Alexander Region
Landcare Facilitator



MONITORING

This year Connecting Country combined our separate monitoring and education programs under the new role of Monitoring and Engagement Coordinator.

Our 'Stewards for Woodland Birds' project (2015–2017) helped support and build capacity for Landcare groups and landholders using birds as a 'hook' to engage people. A bird workshop in Fryerstown brought together old and new residents, resulted in new members for Guildford and Upper Loddon Landcare, and led to creation of a new restoration project at the former Blue Duck Mine. We now support multiple community bird monitoring projects including the Muckleford Key Biodiversity Area monitoring group, Perkins legacy project, and a Communities Listening for Nature project (with Victorian National Parks Association).

July 2018 saw the launch of the very first BirdLife Castlemaine District branch! We congratulate bird survey volunteer Jane Rusden and the team for this historic achievement



Following the success of Stewards for Woodland Birds, Helen Macpherson Smith Trust funded an exciting new project, 'Habitat Health Check: empowering citizen scientists to monitor habitat health in Central Victoria'. From 2018 to 2020 this project will build on our long-term bird and nest box monitoring programs, and better support our volunteers. Thanks to everyone who supported our application. We are now poised to update to a new monitoring model that is community-driven – 2019 will be an exciting year.

In May 2018 Connecting Country completed a round of monitoring of 300 nest boxes, with generous help from Beth Mellick (Wettenhall Environment Trust), Jess Lawton (La Trobe University), Asha Bannon and many fabulous volunteers. This was our fourth check since the nest boxes were installed across the Mount Alexander region in 2010.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

We engage our members and the broader community via online and print communications, and through partnering with other organisations to present education events. Connecting Country's blog provided our 624 subscribers with nature stories, notice of upcoming events and updates on our work.

Our social media presence has grown, with nearly 800 Facebook followers and our most popular posts being seen by over 2,000 people. 'Nature News' was published monthly in the Midland Express newspaper, focusing on nature stories then Landcare stories compiled by intern Sarah Edwards.

Our popular 2018 Autumn Workshop series was launched in the Hub Plot in Castlemaine, and the subsequent four workshops successfully engaged many new friends, landholders and supporters. As a result of Andrew Silcocks' Birddata workshop in April 2018, bird survey volunteers are taking to the Birddata smartphone app like ducks to water!

The 'Caring for large old trees' workshop in partnership with Mount Alexander Shire Council was well received, and many participants went on to attend our two popular nest box workshops with Miles Geldard. We also presented on Australian Water Rats at Castlemaine Library and coordinated a field day for post-graduate students from Melbourne University.

The engagement program was generously supported by Helen Macpherson Smith Trust, Wettenhall Environment Trust and the North Central Catchment Management Authority.

TANYA LOOS

Monitoring and Engagement
Coordinator



RESTORING LANDSCAPES

We are fortunate to support a strong and growing network of landholders working enthusiastically to enhance habitat on their land. It is a real pleasure to assist them, the diverse range of people who come to Connecting Country for advice, information and to participate in our landscape restoration projects. Some are new to the area and have questions about how to get started with tackling weeds and controlling pest animals, or are curious about suitable plants species for improving habitat on their property. Others are more experienced and are interested in developing a new project or identifying a plant they haven't seen before. We appreciate their willingness to work the land for the benefit of plants, animals, waterways and people in the Mount Alexander region, and look forward to continuing to work together.

A highlight this year was the fantastic response we received to our 'Prickly Plants for Wildlife' project. The project focused on re-introducing key understorey species missing from the landscape, to support existing vegetation, and provide habitat for small birds and mammals. It was satisfying to see such an enthusiastic response from landholders!

Partnerships with two works crews ramped up this year and they did amazing work on two projects. The Dja Dja Wurrung crew fenced, prepared and planted sites, sprayed weeds and controlled rabbits for private land sites. In a first for Connecting Country, we partnered with Parks Victoria and a Landmate crew to deliver intensive weed control directly on public land.

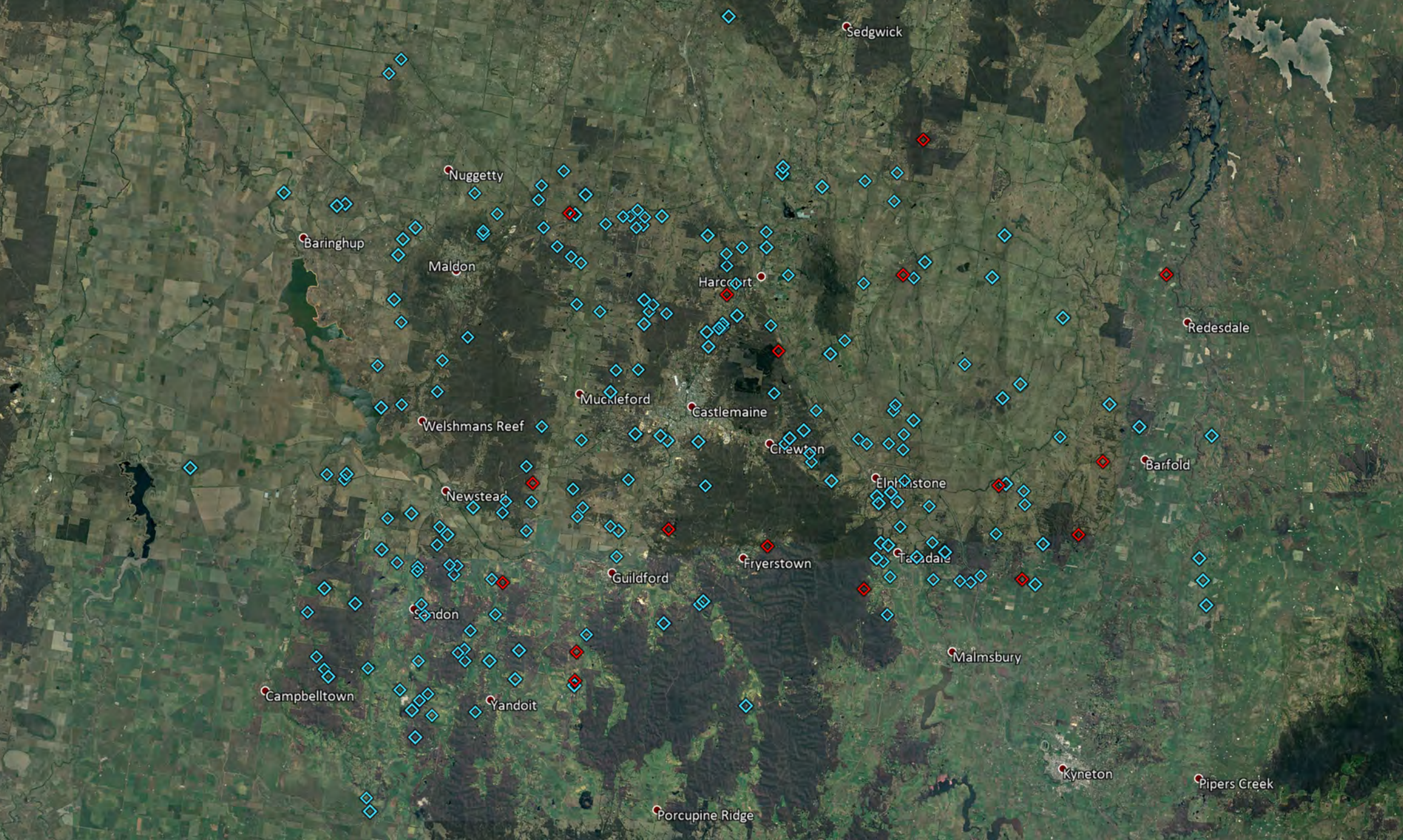
The success of the restoring landscapes projects this year is a credit to our hardworking botanist Bonnie Humphreys who coordinated the works and is currently on maternity leave.

	Prickly Plants for Wildlife	Box Ironbark East	Remnant Rescue	Total
Management plans	9	5	3	17
Hectares protected	64	61	64	189
Plants in the ground	2250	800	200	3250
Nestboxes installed	12	-	-	12
Days of crew assistance	-	59	40	99



JACQUI SLINGO


Project Officer





CONNECTING COUNTRY PROJECT SITES

-  Sites initiated in 2017-2018
-  Previous sites

10km 



2017-18 ACHIEVEMENTS

SUPPORTING LANDCARE



- Camp Out on the Mount
- 2 Landcare Link-Ups
- 2 online mapping workshops
- 4 weed & native plant ID workshops
- 10 site visits with our botanist
- Safe use of chemicals training
- Collection of 10 Landcare stories

RESTORING LANDSCAPES



- 3 projects
- 17 property management plans
- 12 nest boxes installed
- 3250 plants in the ground
- 67 ha of habitat enhanced through supplementary planting
- 99 days of works crew assistance
- Weekly site visits and advice

2017-18 ACHIEVEMENTS

MONITORING AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT



- 300 nestboxes checked
- Monthly bird walks
- Supported numerous community bird monitoring programs
- Supported launch of Birdlife Castlemaine
- 1,699 bird records sent to Birdlife Australia



- 624 subscribers to our blog
- Nearly 800 Facebook followers
- Monthly Nature News published in Midland Express
- 10 education events
- 200+ participants
- 1 new resource developed

OUR PEOPLE

Committee of management			
<i>Committee members volunteer their skills, advice and energy to help Connecting Country pursue its goals by making key decisions about planning, resources and strategic direction. Committee members ensure we meet our obligations under Connecting Country's Constitution and status as a registered not-for-profit organisation, registered charity and incorporated body.</i>			
President:	Brendan Sydes	General committee members:	Christine Brooke
Vice president:	Saide Gray		Malcolm Trainor
Treasurer:	Max Kay		Karoline Klein
Secretary:	Marie Jones		Deborah Wardle

Staff			
<i>Connecting Country's achievements are made possible by a dedicated team of staff who each contribute well above and beyond their job descriptions. Other contractors and interns have also contributed enormously to our work.</i>			
Co-director (to Oct 2017):	Chris Timewell	Project officer:	Bonnie Humphreys
Co-director (to Oct 2017):	Krista Patterson-Majoer	Mount Alexander Region Landcare Facilitator.	Asha Bannon
Director (from Oct 2017):	Frances Howe	Monitoring and engagement coordinator:	Tanya Loos
Office support:	Margaret Muir	Bookkeeper:	Bruce Dolphin
Interns:	Sarah Edwards, Karen Stuart	Contractors:	Karl Just, Dja Dja Wurrung Works Crew

Members	
<i>Members provide support for everything that we do, either directly or indirectly.</i>	
Members:	During 2017-18 Connecting Country had 199 registered members. Membership is free.

Volunteers, supporters, and partners	
<i>Connecting Country acknowledges and thanks the many people who generously contributed during 2017-18. We apologise to any people that we may have inadvertently missed. Your incredible contributions are greatly appreciated.</i>	
Landcare Steering Group:	Christine Kilmartin, Kylie Stafford, Marie Jones, Maurie Dynon, Ian Grenda, Daryl Colless, Margery Townrow
Monitoring and Engagement Steering Group:	Deirdre Slattery, Marie Jones, Beth Mellick, Kylie Stafford, Naomi Raftery, Geoff Park, Jane Rusden, Jennifer Pryce, Anne Perkins,
Expert advisory panel:	Andrew Bennett, Elaine Bayes, Beth Mellick, Ian Higgins, Chris Tzaros, Damien Cook, Peter Johnson, Andrew Silcocks, Geoff Nevill, Jess Lawton
Education program partners:	All the presenters, attendees and volunteers at our workshops and events Landholders who hosted events on their properties Mount Alexander Shire Council, Wettenhall Environment Trust
Midland Express	Hosting the monthly Nature News column
Wildlife database help:	Cara Byrt
Photographs:	Geoff Park and many others
Graphic design assistance:	Jane Satchell
Depot maintenance:	Richie Powney
Day to day advice and support:	Marie Jones and Max Kay
Local nurseries:	Especially Newstead Natives, for plant supply and donations
Landholders and land managers:	All the landholders involved in our on-ground works projects
Bird survey, nest box and reptile and frog monitoring volunteers:	Our monitoring programs would grind to a halt without your help! There are too many volunteers to mention here, but special mention must go to Murray Haby and Margaret Cromb for their bird survey efforts, and Beth Mellick and Jess Lawton for their help with the 2018 nest box monitoring.
BirdLife Australia:	Especially Chris Timewell, Kerry Herman and Jane Rusden
Landcare and Friends groups:	All our local Landcare and Friends groups, including Baringhup Landcare, Barkers Creek Landcare and Wildlife Group, Baynton Sidonia Landcare, Campaspe Valley Landcare, Castlemaine Landcare, Chewton Landcare, Elphinstone Land Management Association (ELMA), Friends of Campbells Creek Landcare, Friends of Kalimna Park, Friends of Kaweka Sanctuary, Friends of Taradale Nature Conservation Reserve, Friends of Vaughan Springs, Golden Point Landcare, Guildford & Upper Loddon Landcare, Harcourt Valley Landcare, Langley Landcare, Maldon Urban Landcare Group (MULGA), Malmsbury District Landcare, McKenzie's Hill Action and Landcare, Metcalfe Landcare, Muckleford Catchment Landcare, Newstead Landcare, North Harcourt Sedgwick Landcare, Nuggetty Land Protection Group, Post Office Hill Action Group, Sandy Creek Catchment Landcare, Sutton Grange Landcare, Taradale Landcare, Tarrangower Cactus Control Group, and Victoria Gully Group Facilitators of our neighbouring Landcare Networks
Fellow community groups:	Friends of the Box-Ironbark Forests, Castlemaine Field Naturalists Club, Trust for Nature, Birdlife Australia, Little Habitat Heroes, Mount Alexander Sustainability Group, Muckleford Forest Friends Group
Mount Alexander Shire Council:	Especially Kylie Stafford, Melanie Marshall, Jarrod Coote and our Mayor, Bronwyn Machin
Donors:	All those who made donations to Connecting Country, or contributed in other ways

FUNDING 2017-2018

Major funders	
<i>Connecting Country is fortunate to partner with and receive support from government agencies, philanthropic organisations and the local community. This enables our work to restore landscapes across the Mount Alexander Region and is much appreciated.</i>	
Victorian Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning	‘Caring for Key Biodiversity Areas in central Victoria’, ‘Box Ironbark East: woodland bird community habitat protection and enhancement’ and ‘Remnant rescue: restoration of additional woodland bird habitat’ projects Funding of two frog and reptile monitoring events
North Central Catchment Management Authority	The Victorian Landcare Facilitator Program for ‘Mount Alexander Landcare looking to the future’, ‘Upper Coliban River Restoration’, and ‘Prickly Plants for Wildlife’ projects
Helen MacPherson Smith Trust	‘Stewards for woodland birds’, and ‘Habitat health check: empowering citizen scientists to monitor habitat health in central Victoria’
Wettenhall Environment Trust	‘Healthy habitats of central Victoria’ project Assistance with the 2018 nest box check
Mount Alexander Shire Council	‘ACUP Training for Landcare’ project Support through a Memorandum of Understanding
Other key partners	
Parks Victoria	‘Box Ironbark East: woodland bird community habitat protection and enhancement’ and ‘Remnant rescue: restoration of additional woodland bird habitat’ projects
Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation	‘Box Ironbark East: woodland bird community habitat protection and enhancement’, ‘Remnant rescue: restoration of additional woodland bird habitat’, and ‘Caring for Key Biodiversity Areas in Central Victoria’ projects
Trust for Nature	‘Box Ironbark East: woodland bird community habitat protection and enhancement’ and ‘Remnant rescue: restoration of additional woodland bird habitat’ projects
Birdlife Australia	Affiliate organisation and datasharing partner



UPCOMING PROJECTS 2018-2019

Project name	Scope	Grant	Total grant	Timing
<i>Upcoming projects in 2018-2019 will see Connecting Country partner with and receive funding from multiple sources.</i>				
Prickly plants for wildlife	Reintroducing key prickly understorey plants to provide habitat for small birds and mammals	North Central CMA	\$99,700	December 2017 to December 2018
Victorian Landcare Facilitator Program	Funding for Mount Alexander Region Landcare Facilitator role and the Landcare network program	Victorian State Government	\$53,845	July 2018 to June 2019
Caring for Key Biodiversity Areas in central Victoria	Promoting internationally significant woodland bird habitat through landholder education, property plans, weed and rabbit control, revegetation and public signage	Community Action Grants (DELWP)	\$49,150	July 2017 to June 2019
Safe and skilled: training for Mt Alexander region Landcare groups	Governance, finance and first aid training for Landcare members	Community Skills Development Grants (DELWP)	\$19,860	May 2018 to April 2019
Landcare connections	Supporting Landcare groups to engage new volunteers and partners	Victorian Landcare Program	\$7,900	December 2018 to October 2019
Box Ironbark East: woodland bird community habitat protection and enhancement (Hubs)	Extending and enhancing key woodland bird habitat across private and public land in partnership with DELWP, Parks Victoria, Dja Dja Wurrung and Trust for Nature	Biodiversity Hubs Funding (DELWP)	\$300,000	June 2017 to December 2019
Habitat health check: empowering citizen scientists to monitor habitat health in central Victoria	Building on our long-term bird and nest box monitoring programs and better supporting our volunteers	Helen Macpherson Smith Trust	\$89,600	July 2018 to June 2020
Prickly plants for wildlife on small properties	Extension of the 'Prickly Plants for Wildlife' project, reintroducing key prickly understorey plants to provide habitat for small birds and mammals on small properties	North Central CMA	\$99,700	July 2018 to June 2020
Remnant rescue: restoring woodland bird habitat in central Victoria	Protecting and restoring priority woodland bird habitat across private and public land in partnership with DELWP, Parks Victoria, Dja Dja Wurrung and Trust for Nature	Biodiversity Response Planning (DELWP)	\$333,500	July 2018 to June 2021

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www.rememberthewild.org.au/connecting-country



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become a member, volunteer, donate, or subscribe to our e-news

www.connectingcountry.org.au



get in touch

info@connectingcountry.org.au