



ANNUAL REPORT 2016-17



PRESIDENT'S REPORT

BRENDAN SYDES, CONNECTING COUNTRY PRESIDENT

The 2016-2017 year has been another very successful one for Connecting Country.

As our five year Connecting Landscapes program comes to an end, we can look back with pride at how much has been achieved – a testament to both the value of long term investment in landscape restoration and our strong partnerships with local landholders. We especially acknowledge the work of project leader Jarrod Coote and other Connecting Country staff, and the work crews who joined us over the five years.

As you will read in this report, we have been working for a while now to diversify our programs. We have added many other projects to our Landcare network facilitation which are supported by both government and philanthropic funding. We are grateful to all of our funders for sharing in our vision supporting the Connecting Country community in getting so much done.

The year ahead promises to be one of excitement and activity. We will continue the momentum of existing projects and develop some new ideas. It will also be a time of transition as our co-directors, Chris Timewell and Krista Patterson-Majoer move on to new things. We congratulate them on their wonderful work with our organisation over many years.

Finally, thank you to my fellow members of the Committee of Management for so ably guiding the organisation through its continued development.



ALL SMILES AT GOVERNMENT HOUSE FOR THE VICTORIAN LANDCARE AWARDS CEREMONY IN EARLY SEPTEMBER 2017. BRENDAN IS AT FAR LEFT OF PHOTO.

DIRECTORS' REPORT

KRISTA PATTERSON-MAJOOR AND CHRIS TIMEWELL , CO-DIRECTORS

Connecting Country has the honour of working collaboratively with over thirty Landcare and Friends groups and adjoining Landcare networks, local landholders, volunteers, all levels of government, philanthropists, the Dja Dja Wurrung, Trust for Nature, Parks Victoria, conservation groups, scientists, birdwatchers, a mothers' group and students. As you will read in the following pages of this 2016-17 Annual report, these partnerships have facilitated extensive on-ground works, numerous education and engagement events, biodiversity monitoring and direct support for local Landcare efforts.

We have enjoyed sharing the director role for the past year. It has allowed us to use our respective skills and experience for the greatest benefit to Connecting Country. Krista has focused on project management, partnerships and funding opportunities, and Chris on ensuring that the administrative and governance aspects continue smoothly.

At the end of June 2017, we reached the successful conclusion to our major five year 'Connecting Landscapes' program. We acknowledge the tremendous effort of all staff in delivering this ambitious project but especially Jarrod Coote in his management of its on-ground implementation and the work crews.

Despite our best efforts (including 19 grant applications – of which 10 were successful, and 5 still to be advised), we haven't yet been able to secure a major project on the same scale or scope as Connecting Landscapes. In preparation for this reduced level of resources, staff and committee committed to continuing to provide a baseline level of support for our core areas of community engagement, monitoring change, Landcare support and on-ground action. However, some restructuring was required and one of the main changes is the return to a single Director. We both decided not to apply for the amalgamated role and soon there will be a new Director at the helm. It is exciting to think where this new energy and experience will take Connecting Country into the future.



We have immensely enjoyed our respective times with Connecting Country, and wish to thank everyone for their amazing support and encouragement throughout.

KRISTA AND CHRIS WITH CONNECTING COUNTRY'S LANDCARE NETWORK AWARD AT THE 2017 VICTORIAN LANDCARE AWARDS

OUR ACHIEVEMENTS

2016-2017
ACTIVITY



Organisational

- 18 projects
- 12 staff
- 2710 volunteer hours
- 5 successful new grants
- new partnerships formed

On Ground Action

- 15 management plans
- 234 ha remnant vegetation protected
- 97 hectares revegetated
- 304 hectares of pest plant and animal control
- 405 hectares of habitat enhanced

Community Engagement

- 35 education events
- 1298 participants
- 10 new resources developed
- 2 videos
- 163 blog posted received by 562 subscribers
- 648 facebook likes

Supporting Landcare

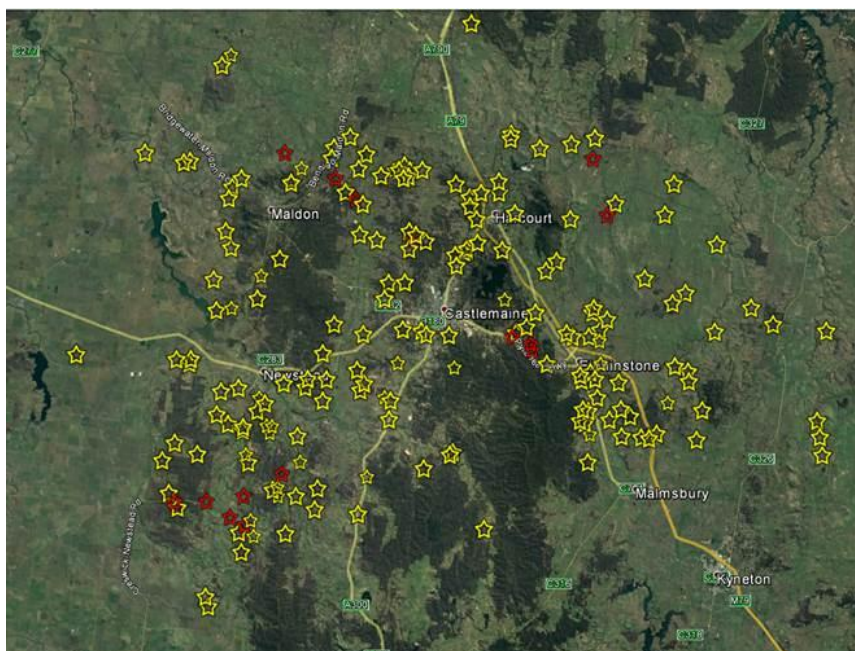
- 31 groups supported
- 2 Green Army teams
- 2 Landcare Link-up events
- 2 successful shire-wide grants

Monitoring Change

- 200 woodland bird surveys
- 16 vegetation surveys
- 48 reptile monitoring sites
- monthly bird walks

ACCUMULATIVE TOTALS IN THE MOUNT ALEXANDER REGION:

Since inception, Connecting Country has developed 234 site management plans with landholders and groups. We've protected 4366 hectares of remnant vegetation, revegetated 1557 hectares and undertaken pest plant and animal control across 6183 hectares. We have supported 187 engagement and education events to 5833 participants.



2016-2017 ON-GROUND PROJECTS HIGHLIGHTED IN RED, PREVIOUS YEARS IN YELLOW.

SUPPORTING LANDCARE

ASHA BANNON, MOUNT ALEXANDER REGION LANDCARE FACILITATOR

The Mount Alexander region is full to the brim with Landcare and Friends groups doing their best to enhance habitat and engage our local communities with the environment. This takes a lot of hard work from dedicated volunteers working together and with other stakeholders. This year there have been 12 network-wide events and 2 network-wide on-ground projects, plus at least 200 working bees and other events run by individual groups.

There were lots of opportunities for community members to be involved with Landcare and Friends groups this year. In September 2016, 350 students from 17 local primary schools attended the *Schools Landcare Days*, which were followed by *Landcare Open Days* across the shire that gave them and their families the chance to get involved with their local group. The fourth *Landcare Camp Out on the Mount* at Leanganook Camp Ground in April 2017 was attended by around 90 kids, teenagers, and adults.

Landcare Link-up events provided opportunities for groups to hear from guest speakers and to increase their skills and understanding in a number of areas. The *Meet Your Land Manager* afternoon and two cultural awareness workshops stimulated conversations between Landcare groups, Dja Dja Wurrung people, and public land managers about how we can all work together to care for the land.

Four Landcare groups also worked with Connecting Country on a landscape-scale *20 Million Trees* revegetation project to create habitat for threatened woodland birds, and 12 groups had help from a *Green Army* team to implement their on-ground projects.

Thank you to all of our local groups and volunteers for your amazing work. It is always inspiring to see what you can achieve, and I'm looking forward to continuing to work with you in the year ahead.



"PINE ASSASSINS" AFTER THEIR PINE CONTROL WORKING BEE AT THE 2017 CAMP OUT ON THE MOUNT

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

KRISTA PATTERSON-MAJOOR AND TANYA LOOS

Our community engagement program continues to provide information, practical skills and inspiration for landholders to protect and enhance biodiversity and environmental health on their properties. In 2016-17, we held 35 events with 1298 participants. We've maintained our active website with 163 blog posts received by 562 subscribers and our Facebook page continues to gain popularity. We have seen increased engagement of young families in our events. Our workshop program addressed important landscape restoration topics in the face of a changing climate. Some highlights from the past year include:

- The Little Habitat Heroes campaign which raised over \$4000 and saw 100 volunteers planting 900 understorey species on Mount Alexander.
- Our 'Water in our Landscape' workshop series which explored habitat creation in dams, ecological thinning, and gully restoration.
- The monthly Nature News articles in the Midland Express newspaper which continue to share inspiring stories and reflections from local naturalists.
- A delightful evening celebration with over sixty of our landholders acknowledging the achievements of the Connecting Landscapes project over the past five years and recognizing Connecting Country's milestone tenth year.
- Our support for the publication of the 'Eucalypts of the Mount Alexander Region' book and the on-line flora identification guide to Castlemaine and surrounds– both developed by local groups and their members, and providing incredibly valuable resources for budding botanical enthusiasts.
- The 'Gardens for Wildlife' workshop and associated promotion in the Castlemaine Open Gardens Festival guide.
- The 2017 Camp Out On The Mount hosted by Connecting Country with Harcourt Valley Landcare and Friends of the Box-Ironbark Forests. Over 90 children and adults enjoyed a packed weekend of free environmental and cultural heritage education activities.
- Being selected by Wild Melbourne as one of the community conservation video stories.
- The monthly bird walks run by Tanya and her enthusiastic team of volunteers.

We would like to offer our warm thanks to all of our participants, presenters, and event hosts.

We'd also like to acknowledge and thank the huge contribution made by Naomi Raftery for her vision and coordination of the education program over the past year.



KRISTA AND HER DAUGHTER DAISY ENJOY A SKINK AT THE CAMP OUT ON THE MOUNT EVENT

MONITORING CHANGE

TANYA LOOS AND ASHA BANNON

Monitoring the health of ecosystems and the success of restoration activities in the region is important to Connecting Country. To this end, we have broad-scale, long-term monitoring programs focusing on birds, arboreal mammals and flora. In 2016-2017, we extended our monitoring program to include reptiles and frogs.

WOODLAND BIRDS

In 2017, we now have a more comprehensive picture of woodland birds and their populations in the region than ever before. This is thanks to the combined efforts of our in-house monitoring program, and the increasing numbers of bird survey volunteers who are surveying on their properties and also in parks and reserves across the region. The data collected is telling us that populations of woodland bird species such as the Brown Treecreeper, and Jacky Winter are remaining steady, and the Diamond Firetail is declining, and in some good news – the Hooded Robin numbers are on the rise in the region.

In early 2017, Geoff Park from Natural Decisions worked with staff and members of our Woodland Birds Advisory Group to update Connecting Country's *Woodland Bird Action Plan (2014-2014)*. We have been using the data and recommendations in the updated Action Plan to inform and guide our on ground works programs, and assist us to apply for funding in a targeted and scientific manner.

The west half of the Mount Alexander region has three woodlands that are part of the Bendigo Box-Ironbark Key Biodiversity Area (KBA), which is internationally recognized for its importance as habitat for Swift Parrot and Diamond Firetail. Thanks to a workshop held in March 2017 with BirdLife Australia, we now have many community members monitoring this KBA.

REPTILE AND FROG MONITORING

With the help of 44 private landholders and an additional 7 volunteers, 480 reptile and frog monitoring tiles were checked over the spring/summer of 2016. Two local schools also set up their own tiles to monitor and used them to teach other students about reptile and frog conservation.

Species found under the tiles included the Large Striped Skink, Garden Skink, a juvenile Eastern Brown Snake, Bougainville's Skink, and a froglet (*Crinia* sp.). This first round of monitoring has paved the way for future citizen science monitoring of reptiles and frogs in the region, and fostered enthusiasm for the conservation of these wonderful animals.

The new *Reptiles and Frogs of the Mount Alexander Region* brochure was developed, launched and shared with landholders, Landcare groups, and other community members.



FROGLET FOUND UNDER A MONITORING TILE IN ELPHINSTONE, PHOTO BY SYLVIA REEVES.

ON-GROUND ACTION

JARROD COOTE AND BONNIE HUMPHREYS

We are very proud (and a little sad) to say that 2017 brings the conclusion of our Connecting Landscapes program. As the name suggests, Connecting Landscapes focused on increasing the connectivity of habitat in the Mount Alexander region by working closely with private landholders. The program has enabled us to collaborate with over 85 landholders across over 1600ha of land over the past 5 years. It has been wonderful to have this opportunity to work with so many enthusiastic and productive people.

Together we have been able to plant over 35,000 tubestock plants and sow over 250 kgs of locally indigenous seed. We have undertaken 40 kms of fencing to protect remnant and revegetated forests and woodlands from grazing pressures. Over 1600ha of pest animal control and weed control have also been important for the ongoing survival and maintenance of these projects.

Five amazing works crews of 3-5 people have been essential to the delivery of the Connecting Landscapes on-ground works. The crews were trained in many aspects of environmental works, and many have since gone on to work in the natural resource management industry. The work undertaken by the crews, combined with the direct seeding across the region, has created important habitat for threatened species. For example, the Brush-tailed Phascogale and Hooded Robin who need a connected landscape and big patches of bush to thrive, have both registered increases in their regional populations over the past 5 years.

This year also marks the first time we have worked outside of the Mount Alexander region, undertaking some contracted direct seeding work at locations to the north-west of Bendigo for the Loddon Plains Landcare Network and the North Central Catchment Management Authority.



A PROPERTY IN TARADALE IS TRANSFORMED BY DIRECT SEEDING LEFT, IN 2015, AND RIGHT IN 2017.

ON-GROUND ACTION, *CONTINUED...*

Revisiting some of the properties to conclude the program and assess the success of works has been a really positive experience. In the beginning, we were a little worried at the success of the direct seeding, but it turns out that we just needed some patience and it is now possible to look across the landscape and see little forests appearing on the hillsides. Nothing brings such joy!

We would like to take this opportunity to thank everyone who has contributed to this program and we look forward to continuing this work. While we may not see another large project like this in the near future, we will continue to find ways to enhance our local environment and protect our little animal friends.

BOOSTING BULOKES

This program was developed in partnership with Muckleford Catchment Landcare group and local landholders in the west of the shire to increase numbers of Bulokes in our area. Bulokes are a threatened species of tree which are very slow growing and are an important part of the landscape providing food and shelter for animals including Diamond Firetails and other members of the threatened woodland bird community. This project saw over 950 new Buloke specimens planted on many private properties, increasing genetic diversity and helping to bolster existing remnants. This program also enabled us to hold a planting day with the Castlemaine Steiner School in Muckleford. A big thank you to all involved!



BONNIE AND LISA HALL AT THE BULOKE PLANTING DAY WITH CASTLEMAINE STEINER SCHOOL AND MUCKLEFORD CATCHMENT LANDCARE GROUP.

LANDHOLDER STORIES

JANE RUSDEN, CAMPBELLS CREEK

Our block in Campbells Creek is a very beautiful and special place. Yesterday an Owlet Nightjar was inspecting the nest box and a Yellow-footed Antechinus was in the workshop.

Our dreams of managing our block as a mini wildlife reserve couldn't have been realised as fully without Connecting Country and their Connecting Landscapes Program. I am very grateful for the work crew's efforts, as the Blackberry and Cape Broom weeds are now at a level we can manage and continue to eradicate.

We love our resident wallabies, but between them, the kangaroos and a couple of rabbits, the understorey vegetation can get overgrazed. We excitedly watch the vegetation in the exclusion plot evolve and compare it to the growth outside the plot; it's early days and yet we already see a marked difference.



JANE'S OWLET-NIGHTJAR, PHOTO BY PETER TURNER

I've also had the pleasure of working with Tanya Loos on the bird survey program. Combined with taking part in other volunteer activities such as nest box monitoring, I am increasing my knowledge of the local native environment, which has been a wonderful experience.

TRIBUTE TO A GREAT NATURALIST: ERN PERKINS

The Connecting Country community was deeply saddened by the passing of Ern Perkins in late 2016. Along with wife Lesley, Ern's efforts to discover and document the flora and fauna of Castlemaine and surrounds over a period of more than 40 years are legendary. The findings of this research have formed the basis for so much of our knowledge about the local environment. He was passionate about making this information available to the general public.

Ern mentored many local ecologists, and was a great believer in using rigorous scientific survey methods. He was a great supporter of Connecting Country, and regularly provided advice on plant species identification and occurrence. He was also involved in many other local groups including Friends of Kaweka, Castlemaine Field Naturalists Club, Friends of Box-Ironbark Forests, and Castlemaine Landcare.

Ern is an inspiration to the staff of Connecting Country, and we are working with many local groups to continue his incredible legacy. With the endorsement of Ern's family, and the support of many local groups, the online flora identification guide to plants of Castlemaine and surrounds was launched during the first half of 2017. Vale Ern Perkins.

FINANCIAL REPORT

CHRIS TIMEWELL (DIRECTOR – BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION) AND MARIE JONES (TREASURER)

This is a financial summary for Connecting Country (CC) covering the 12 month period from 1 July 2016 to the 30 June 2017.

During the 2016-17 period, CC had a membership of 172 including 150 renewed members and 22 new members. The joining fee and annual membership fee remained at \$0 and \$0 respectively.

Financial reports are reviewed by the CC Committee of Management on a monthly frequency. At the time of writing this report, the annual audit of CC's financial accounts and processes for 2016-17 is being undertaken by Goers and Maunder Pty Ltd. Therefore, the financial figures provided below are considered to be preliminary. The audited financial reports will be presented to the AGM.

Volunteer contributions to CC are recognized in the financial reports at \$30 per person per hour, for a total value of \$81,285 in 2016-17. Generous donations totaling \$5,445.40 were received from 126 people during the year. Thank you!

The total income for 2016-17 was \$1,351,520.21 (including internal journals), which was \$214,711.21 more than budgeted. A considerable proportion of external income was received from the Federal government to implement the final year of the 'Connecting Landscapes Across the Mount Alexander Region' program. Income was also received from all levels of government, and also philanthropic organisations, to implement a range of small-to-medium size programs and to host the local Landcare Facilitator role and. The remainder of the income was from project contributions, 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 2016-17 (including internal journals) was \$1,296,977.41 which was \$41,321.59 less than budgeted. A significant proportion 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, undertaking biodiversity monitoring and coordinating education events.

CC is in a sound financial position. We have comprehensive internal checks and balances, and other good governance procedures; a moderate-sized financial reserve and a reasonable revenue stream from approved grants for at least the next 12 months.

Many thanks to book-keeper Bruce, the CC committee, the staff, the auditors and others who have assisted over the past 12 months.

OUR PEOPLE

TANYA LOOS AND ASHA BANNON

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: Marie Jones

Secretary: Jenni Thomas

Other committee members: Saide Gray, Malcolm Trainor, Max Kay, Christine Brooke

OUR STAFF

During 2016-17, Connecting Country has had a dedicated team of permanent and fixed-term staff whose contributions all extend well above and beyond their job descriptions. Other contractors, interns and short-term employees have also assisted on occasions, and we thank them for their important contribution.

Asha Bannon

Jarrod Coote

Naomi Raftery

Bonnie Humphreys

Krista Patterson-Majoor

Scott Woodman

Bruce Dolphin

Luke Archer

Tanya Loos

Chris Timewell

Max Schlachter

Anna Pike

Fritz Hammersley



CONNECTING COUNTRY OFFICE STAFF AND WORKS CREW
SELFIE IN APRIL 2017

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 may have inadvertently missed.

- **Landcare Facilitator Steering Group:** Christine Kilmartin, Kylie Stafford, Melanie Marshall, Marie Jones, Maurie Dynon, Ian Grenda, Daryl Colless, and Margery Townrow
- **Woodland Bird Advisory Group:** Geoff Park, Deanna Marshall, Beth Mellick, James O'Connor, 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
- **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, Midland Express and the Wettenhall Environment Trust 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 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 Wettenhall Environment Trust for her on-going support for our programs
- Our **landholders** and other land-managers involved in on-ground works projects, monitoring programs and the **volunteers** who have assisted with surveys for birds and reptile/frog monitoring. Too many people to mention here, but you know who you are. Thanks!
- **Jane Rusden** for the wonderful cover art for this report, and her ongoing voluntary support for the Woodland Bird Project
- Our Affiliate organization **BirdLife Australia** for advice and support for our bird monitoring program, and the establishment of the Key Biodiversity Area program
- Our local **Landcare groups and 'Friends of' groups**, and also the facilitators of our neighbouring networks; the Mid Loddon, Upper Campaspe and Loddon Plains Landcare Networks.
- The **Mount Alexander Shire** particularly Melanie Marshall, Kylie Stafford, and Ben Bowman.
- 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, Little Habitat Heroes, 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
- 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 **State Government's Victorian Landcare Facilitator Program** for supporting our Mount Alexander Region Landcare Facilitator.

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

The **North Central Catchment Management Authority** for funding the Woodland Bird Action Plan.

The **Australian Government's Green Army Programme**, North Central Catchment Management Authority, Manpower Australia, and Landcare Australia for our 2016 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 ACUP Training for Landcare project.

The **Wettenhall Environment Trust** for funding towards the 2017-18 Education Program.

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

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



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.



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