

# Connecting Country



**ANNUAL REPORT  
2018-2019**





Cover photo: Ian Higgins leads a wattles walk in Campbells Creek during the 2019 Prickly Plants for Wildlife on Small Properties event. Photo by Gen Kay.

Photo credits: GK – Gen Kay; GP – Geoff Park; EB – Elaine Bayes; LE – Leonie van Eyk; TT – Tarrangower Times; JR – Jane Rusden; TMC – Theo Mellick-Cooper; AB – Asha Bannon; IC – Ivan Carter; FH – Frances Howe; BL – Bonnie Humphreys, TL – Tanya Loos; JS – Jacqui Slingo.

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# PRESIDENT'S REPORT

Welcome to our 2018–2019 Annual Report.

As you will read in the pages that follow, the year has been another busy and successful one for Connecting Country.

The organisation has remained resilient in the face of a challenging funding environment. As our current portfolio of projects and programs demonstrates, we have needed to become adept at assembling funding from multiple sources.

Welcome support from philanthropic funding partners including the Helen McPherson Smith Trust, together with our longstanding relationship with the Wettenhall Environment Trust has allowed us to expand what we do well beyond the important work supported by public funding. Thank you to all of our funders for supporting our vision.

Our capable staff team lead by Frances ensures that Connecting Country is much more than the sum of our various individual projects at any point in time. Our community – the staff team, those who volunteer their time to help with our projects, citizen scientists critical to our monitoring programs, and landholders and everyone else who joins in our activities – is critical to our reach and impact.

Over the past year the Committee completed a review and refresh of our long term strategic plan. Narrowing our focus and avoiding trying to do everything proved a challenge – a nice problem to have as they say because it indicates that despite being a well established organisation we still have lots of new ideas about what needs to be done to protect and restore our local environment.

Thank you to my fellow Committee members who along with many others in our community volunteer their time to support the work of Connecting Country.

**BRENDAN SYDES**

President



# DIRECTOR'S REPORT

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Connecting Country had a year of abundance coupled with a drought.

Community remains at the heart of all we do. We support Landcarers and landholders to revegetate and protect bushland. We monitor native plants and animals, and engage people to raise awareness about our special local environment. We empower people to take positive action and connect with their landscape.

Like many non-profit groups, we struggle to find enough funds to support our important work. In the current environment, we're increasingly reliant on philanthropic and volunteer help, and forced to limit our scope. We're so passionate about our community and landscape, we want to help everyone, but our limited resources can only go so far. More than ever, we're experts at doing a lot with a little!

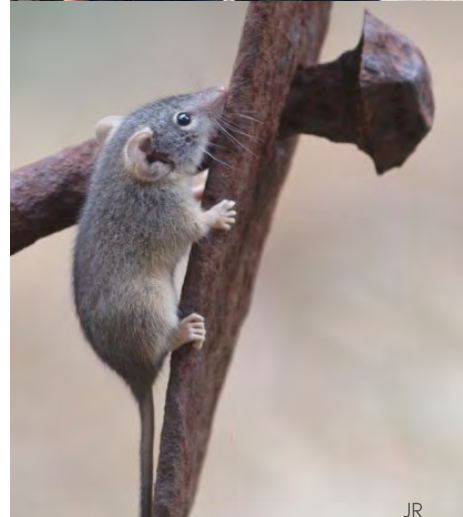
The upside is the collaborative achievements of our wonderful staff, volunteers and project partners, both longstanding and recent recruits. Their commitment, enthusiasm and sheer hard work is inspiring. This year we recruited a whole new cohort of keen landholders and supported them with practical actions to protect and restore habitat on their land. For the first time we've extended help to people on smaller bush properties.

We've revamped our whole monitoring program into a collaborative, community-driven model supported by skilled citizen scientists. We've run workshops on diverse environmental topics that generated a buzz of community interest. We've worked together with our 30 local Landcare and Friends groups through our dedicated Landcare Facilitator. With increased community concern about climate change, we've been actively exploring how to adapt our restoration efforts for the future. We simply wouldn't exist without our generous community of supporters.

Your ongoing support helps safeguard Connecting Country's future and drive practical on-ground actions for our local environment.

**FRANCES HOWE**

Director





# FINANCE REPORT

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This financial summary for Connecting Country covers the period from 1 July 2018 to 30 June 2019. Detailed financial reports were reviewed monthly by Connecting Country's Committee of Management. An audit of our financial accounts and processes for 2018-19 was completed by a qualified independent auditor, Sean Denham and Associates. In accordance with good governance practice, Connecting Country changed auditor this year, following a Special General Meeting on 24 August 2019.

Total income for 2018-19 was \$525,808, which was considerably less than budgeted. We received grants from the Victorian government, North Central Catchment Management Authority, Helen Macpherson Smith Trust, Wettenhall Environment Trust and several other organisations. We used these funds to implement a range of projects. Funds not required short term continued to be held in term deposit accounts to generate interest. During 2018-19 we earned \$11,168 from term deposit investments.

Volunteer contributions to Connecting Country were not included in financial reports. However, we recorded an impressive 1,279 volunteer hours during 2018-19. When valued at \$30 per hour this equates to a total value of \$38,370. Connecting Country does not charge for membership, but we received generous cash donations from supporters totalling \$3,017.

Total operating expenses for 2018-19 (including provisions for depreciation, annual leave and long service leave) was \$607,486, which was less than budgeted. Our profit and loss statement for 2018-19 indicated a net loss of \$81,678. This was expected. It occurred because we did not spend all the funds received for multi-year projects during the previous financial year (2017-18), resulting in a 2017-18 profit of \$105,137. The remaining project funds from 2017-18 were used to complete projects during 2018-19. Because these funds were counted as profit when received during 2017-18, when spent during 2018-19, they appear as a loss.

At the end of June 2019 Connecting Country remained in a sound financial position, backed by net assets of \$262,987. We have comprehensive internal checks and balances, and a good-sized financial reserve. Unfortunately, our confirmed income from secured grants for 2019-20 (\$561,253) is insufficient to cover expenses. However, we will continue to actively pursue further grant opportunities and alternative income sources to address this gap. Connecting Country's committee has agreed to use our existing financial reserve to cover any shortfall, if required to maintain our office and staff capacity for 2019-20.

Many thanks to our bookkeeper Bruce Dolphin, Connecting Country's committee, staff, donors and volunteers who assisted over the past year.

**MAX KAY**

Treasurer







**Did you know?**

**OVER THE PAST 10 YEARS WE HAVE...**

- Delivered over 50 projects to enhance, maintain and monitor our natural landscape
- Empowered 11,000 hours of volunteer work
- Enhanced over 9000 hectares of habitat
- Delivered over 200 education events
- Operated entirely from grants and donations, with no ongoing funding



# ABOUT CONNECTING COUNTRY

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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 biodiversity



## Engaging community



## Supporting Landcare

## Restoring landscapes







# SUPPORTING LANDCARE

In any given month of the year, the calendar can show upwards of twenty events being run by Landcarers in the Mount Alexander region. These could include forums with guest speakers, community gatherings, nature walks, wildlife monitoring, and regular working bees doing revegetation, weed control and rubbish removal. All these revolve around the two things at the heart of every Landcare and Friends group: community and a love for the land.

Behind all these events and other Landcare projects are teams of dedicated volunteers. To support this wonderful work and the people who do it, Connecting Country has offered free training in grant writing, first aid, governance, financial management, and volunteer engagement over the past year. Our botanist offered specialist advice tailored to five groups through site visits.

We ran our regular 'Landcare Link-ups' for representatives from each group. The July 2018 Link-up focused on waterway management, while the February 2019 Link-up was an opportunity for groups to present to each other about their work. To encourage community members to engage with their local group, we published a new 'Landcare in the Mount Alexander region' brochure, ran five stalls during Landcare Week 2018, and coordinated the ever popular 'Camp Out on the Mount 2019'. As anyone who has undertaken revegetation will know, you need to be able to look forward and imagine what your work will look like in the future. Adapting to a changing climate is now a big part of this, so in 2018 Connecting Country ran two seminars on 'Planting for the future' and 'Weeds to watch', and developed associated resources.

A huge thank you to all our groups in the Mount Alexander region for the work you do to care for our environment and our future.

## ASHA BANNON

Mount Alexander Region  
Landcare Facilitator





# MONITORING

This has been an exciting year of change for our monitoring programs. Through our Habitat Health Check project we reviewed our nestbox and woodland bird monitoring programs, with the help and experience of key community members, the Wottenhall Environment Trust, La Trobe University, and Department of Land, Water and Planning (DELWP). We analysed our existing long-term data with the help of BirdLife Australia and La Trobe University, and began to transform our monitoring into community driven citizen science programs. At our successful BirdWatch event, community members raised their key concerns for bird monitoring. This gave us a wonderful snapshot of the concerns that community members have about birds in our region, to guide our future project planning.

We've continued to support community projects, including the Muckleford KBA group, Communities Listening for Nature and the Perkins legacy project, and have continued to work closely with Birdlife Castlemaine District, including two joint bird monitoring events. We've also began work with the Centre for eResearch and Digital Innovation (CeRDI) at Federation University, who will be adding our data to their Visualising Victoria's Biodiversity (VVB) database.

This year our Renovation Rescue nestbox project allowed us to repair or replace 20 damaged nestboxes, so they can continue to provide safe homes for our resident phascogales and sugar gliders, and our nestboxes will be ready for our next survey round in 2020. The next 12 months will be inspiring, as this will be the first year that all our long-term monitoring sites are surveyed by volunteer citizen scientists, rather than Connecting Country staff. I'm delighted to be working with such an engaged, switched-on group of people.

**JESS LAWTON**

Monitoring Coordinator





# COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

We engage and empower our members and the broader community through a combination of education events, print, radio, newsletters and social media. Connecting Country's e-news blog provided our subscribers with 180 nature stories, notice of upcoming events and updates on our projects.

Our social media presence has grown by 25% over the past 12 months, with over 1,000 Facebook followers and our most popular posts being seen by over 2,500 people. 'Nature News' was published monthly in the Midland Express newspaper, focusing on interesting stories and projects from community members and Connecting Country staff.

Most pleasing has been the success of our monthly radio segment on MaineFM, the best small station of the nation. We have been lucky enough to be hosted monthly by Suzanne Donisthorpe, on her community show 'Hear Say'. This has allowed us to talk about Connecting Country projects to the broader community and focus on some important topics such as bird monitoring, Landcare success stories and the importance of habitat creation.

The highlights of our eight education events were the popular snake awareness workshop in mid-summer and the Visualising Victoria's Biodiversity (VVB) Database training. All our events attracted strong and enthusiastic crowds, who took away some important lessons and practical knowledge.

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

**IVAN CARTER**

Engagement Coordinator





# RESTORING LANDSCAPES

We were thrilled this year to work with landholders from smaller properties within the Mount Alexander region for the first time, after many years of focusing support for restoration projects towards larger private properties. Over 30 landholders, many new to Connecting Country and the region, participated in Prickly Plants for Wildlife on Small Properties, supported by funding from the North Central Catchment Management Authority.

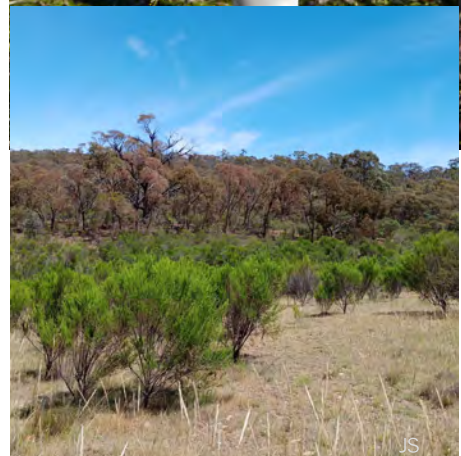
This project engaged landholders with existing native vegetation, to volunteer their time and improve skills in protecting and enhancing habitat for woodland birds.

The project helped landholders identify and control threats such as priority weeds and rabbits, and provided additional habitat through planting of prickly understorey plants – locally indigenous species missing from the landscape that are vital habitat for our threatened woodland birds. Participants' combined efforts included planting more than 2,000 tubestock plants and signing up to monitor and maintain nestboxes for hollow-dependent fauna on their properties.

Woodland birds received further assistance through our Remnant Rescue project, funded through the Victorian Government's Biodiversity Response Planning program. Working in partnership with Dja Dja Wurrung's works crew Djandak, Parks Victoria and Trust For Nature, this three-year project kicked off in 2018-19 with property assessments, management plans and works planning across 60 hectares of private land and 40 hectares of public land.

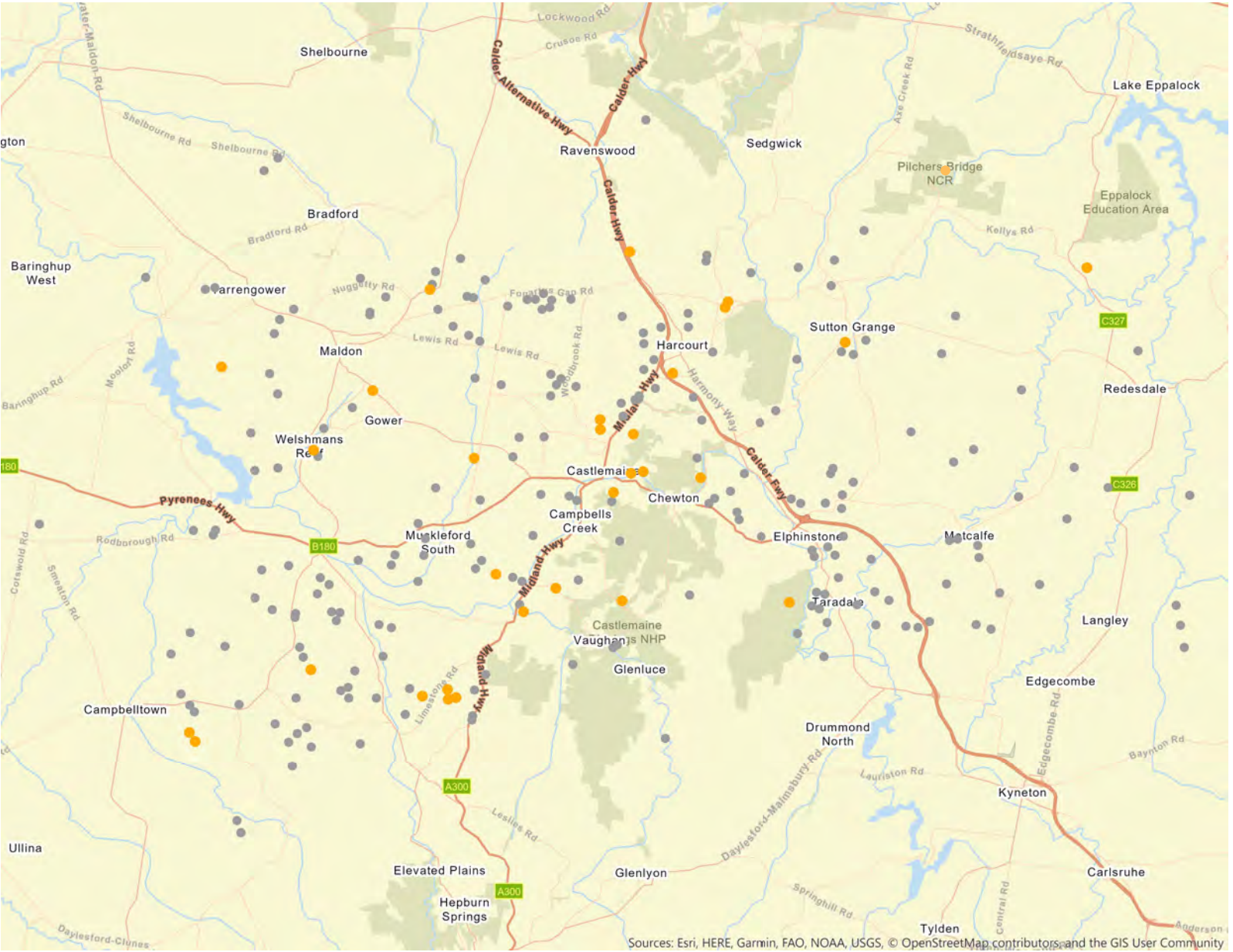
**JACQUI SLINGO**

Landscape Restoration Coordinator





# RESTORING LANDSCAPES SITES



- Landscape restoration sites initiated in 2018-19
- Landscape restoration sites initiated prior to 2018



# 2018-19 ACHIEVEMENTS

## SUPPORTING LANDCARE



- Camp Out on the Mount
- 2 Landcare Link-Ups
- 1 grant writing workshop
- 2 climate change seminars
- 5 site visits with our botanist
- 5 Landcare week stalls
- Safe and skilled training
- New 'Landcare in the Mount Alexander region' brochure

CK

## RESTORING LANDSCAPES



- 4 projects
- 33 site management agreements
- 32 nest boxes installed
- 3125 plants in the ground
- 45 property visits
- 211 hectares of private land actively managed for restoration

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# 2018-19 ACHIEVEMENTS

## ENGAGING COMMUNITY



- 700 subscribers to our e-news
- Over 1,000 Facebook followers
- 12 videos on our video channel
- Monthly Nature News media article
- Monthly MainFM radio segment
- 8 education events
- 4 new factsheets

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## MONITORING BIODIVERSITY



- 72 bird surveys
- 2,302 bird records sent to BirdLife
- 20 nestbox repairs or replacement
- 4 monitoring events
- Nature hotspot sign at Castlemaine Visitor Information Centre
- Key Biodiversity Area (KBA) Easter health check

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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>			
Director:	Frances Howe	Mount Alexander Region Landcare Facilitator:	Asha Bannon
Landscape restoration coordinator:	Jacqui Slingo	Monitoring and engagement coordinator:	Tanya Loos
Monitoring coordinator (from February 2019):	Jess Lawton	Engagement coordinator (from February 2019):	Ivan Carter
Office support:	Margaret Muir	Bookkeeper:	Bruce Dolphin
Intern:	Karen Stuart	Parental leave:	Bonnie Humphreys

Members	
<i>Members provide support for everything that we do, either directly or indirectly.</i>	
Members:	During 2018-19 Connecting Country had 215 registered members. Membership is free.



Volunteers and supporters	
<i>Connecting Country acknowledges and thanks the many people who generously contributed during 2018-19. 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, Sue McLennan
Monitoring and engagement steering group:	Deirdre Slattery, Marie Jones, Beth Mellick, Kylie Stafford, 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 events:	All the amazing presenters, attendees and volunteers at our workshops and events Landholders who hosted events on their properties Wettenhall Environment Trust, Centre for eResearch and Digital Innovation (CeRDI) at Federation University Australia, BirdLife Australia and BirdLife Castlemaine District
Local media:	Midland Express for hosting our monthly Nature News column Maine FM and Suzanne Donisthorpe for hosting our monthly radio session Local newsletters, especially the Chewton Chat, for publicising our events
Photographs:	Geoff Park, Gen Kay, Chris Tzaros, Patrick Kavanagh, Bronwyn Silver, Allison Pouliot, and others
Graphic design:	Jane Satchell
Depot maintenance:	Richie Powney
Plant delivery:	Fritz Hammersley and Paul Kent
Day to day advice:	Marie Jones and Max Kay
Local nurseries:	Especially Newstead Natives, for plant supply and donations
Landholders:	All the landholders involved in our on-ground works projects
Bird survey, nest box and reptile and frog monitoring volunteers:	There are too many volunteers to mention here, but special mention must go to Jane Rusden, Damian Kelly, Tanya Loos, Chris Timewell, Geoff Nevill, Golo Maurer and Greg Turner - our monitoring programs would grind to a halt without your help!
BirdLife Castlemaine District:	Especially Convener Jane Rusden
Landcare and Friends groups:	All our local Landcare and Friends groups - 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 and Sedgwick Landcare, Nuggetty Land Protection Group, Post Office Hill Action Group, 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, BirdLife Australia, BirdLife Castlemaine District, Little Habitat Heroes, Mount Alexander Sustainability Group, Muckleford Forest Friends Group, Chewton Bushlands Association
Mount Alexander Shire Council:	Especially Kylie Stafford, Jarrod Coote, and our Mayor, Bronwyn Machin
Donors:	All those who made donations to Connecting Country, or contributed in other ways
Partners for 'Camp Out on the Mount 2019'	Little Habitat Heroes, Friends of the Box-Ironbark Forests, Harcourt Valley Landcare, Mount Alexander Shire Council, Big Tree T-shirts, Harcourt Lions Club, Parks Victoria Partners for 'Camp Out on the Mount 2019'



Funding	
<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	Funding for the Victorian Landcare Facilitator Program Funding for 'Caring for Key Biodiversity Areas in central Victoria' project Funding for 'Box Ironbark East: woodland bird community habitat protection and enhancement' (Hubs) project Funding for 'Remnant rescue: restoration of additional woodland bird habitat' (BRP) project
North Central Catchment Management Authority	Funding via the Victorian Landcare Program for the 'Landcare Connections' project Funding for 'Prickly plants for wildlife' project Funding for 'Prickly plants for wildlife on small properties' project Funds to support Landcare Facilitator attendance at National Landcare Conference 2018
Helen MacPherson Smith Trust	Funding for 'Habitat Health Check: empowering citizen scientists to monitor habitat health in central Victoria' project
Wettenhall Environment Trust	Funding for 'Renovation rescue: improving homes for Brush-tailed Phascogales' project
Mount Alexander Shire Council	Support through a Memorandum of Understanding Funds for reprinting brochures
Key project partners	
Parks Victoria	Partner for 'Box Ironbark East: woodland bird community habitat protection and enhancement' project
Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation	Partner for 'Box Ironbark East: woodland bird community habitat protection and enhancement' project Partner for 'Remnant rescue: restoration of additional woodland bird habitat' project Contractor for 'Caring for Key Biodiversity Areas in Central Victoria' project
Trust for Nature	Partner for 'Box Ironbark East: woodland bird community habitat protection and enhancement' project Partner for 'Remnant rescue: restoration of additional woodland bird habitat' project
Birdlife Australia	Support for our education events and expert advisory panel





Projects for 2019-20				
Funding	Project	Total grant	Timing	Scope
Victorian State Government	Victorian Landcare Facilitator Program	\$55,191	July 2019 to June 2020	Funding our Mount Alexander Region Landcare Facilitator and the Landcare network program to support our 30 local Landcare and Friends groups
Victorian State Government	Box Ironbark East: woodland bird community habitat protection and enhancement	\$300,000	June 2017 to Dec 2019	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
Helen Macpherson Smith Trust	Habitat health check: empowering citizen scientists to monitor habitat health in central Victoria	\$89,600	July 2018 to June 2020	Building on our long-term bird, nestbox, reptile and plant monitoring programs, moving to a new, community-driven approach and better supporting our volunteers
North Central CMA	Prickly plants for wildlife on small properties	\$99,700	June 2018 to June 2020	Reintroducing key prickly understorey plants to provide habitat for small birds and mammals, targeting landholders with smaller properties
Victorian State Government	Remnant rescue: restoring woodland bird habitat in central Victoria	\$333,500	July 2018 to June 2021	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
Victorian Landcare Program	Landcare connections	\$7,900	Dec 2018 to October 2019	Supporting Landcare groups to engage new volunteers and partners, focusing on public land managers and Traditional Owners
Wettenhall Environment Trust	Renovation rescue: homes for Brush-tailed Phascogales	\$14,100	Jan 2019 to Jan 2020	Maintaining and repairing our 450 established nestboxes, reviewing our monitoring program and analysing our nestbox data
Mount Alexander Shire Council	The butterfly effect: saving Castlemaine's threatened butterfly	\$9,000	June 2019 to June 2020	Raising awareness and building community capacity to monitor Castlemaine's population of the threatened Eltham Copper Butterfly
Bank Australia	Checking-in with our threatened phascogales	\$9,650	June 2019 to June 2020	Monitoring our 450 phascogale nestboxes during 2019, empowering citizen scientists to collect data for informed conservation decisions
Victorian Gorse Task Force	Gorse in the Kangaroo Creek valley, Taradale	\$10,500	June 2019 to June 2020	Working with Taradale Landcare to support private landholders to control weeds on eight gorse-infested properties in the Taradale area
Albert and Barbara Tucker Foundation	Prickly Plants for Wildlife and Community	\$21,840	Jan 2020 to Dec 2020	Working with local Landcare groups to help revegetate three key public reserves



# GET INVOLVED



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watch our short film

[www.rememberthewild.org.au/connecting-country](http://www.rememberthewild.org.au/connecting-country)



find out more

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

[www.connectingcountry.org.au](http://www.connectingcountry.org.au)



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