

Annual Report

2024 - 2025



*Restoring landscapes across
the Mount Alexander Region*



Photo by Jane Rusden

President's Message

Brendan Sydes



This year was another successful one for Connecting Country delivering a diversity of projects with positive impacts for the environment and our community; all thanks to our dedicated staff, volunteers, land owners, funding partners and generous donors. But below the surface, we continue to face challenges and 2024-25 was a year of review and hard decisions. Faced with ongoing budget constraints, we have had to scale back operations and staffing. Our focus has been delivering core projects supported by grant funding. This report highlights the amazing work done by our Director Lori and her team - a big thank you to them from the Committee. Despite the challenges - and again starting the year with a budget shortfall - we have ended the year with a modest surplus, but our income has never been lower.

After a comprehensive review that included a workshop at our last AGM, we concluded that our key strategic focus areas remain right for the Mount Alexander Region. This is reflected in our new Strategic Plan 2025-2035. We will keep our focus on restoring landscapes, engaging community, supporting landcare and monitoring biodiversity.

Our main challenge is to build back scale in our operations. We know what needs to be done in terms of landscape restoration and community engagement in all its dimensions. What we need is to find new ways of funding this important work. The Committee of Management has put a lot of time and effort into exploring new ways of raising funds, including building a stronger base of local donors who invest directly in landscape restoration. You'll be hearing more about this as 2025-26 unfolds. We'll need to use our voices more strongly in advocating for critical investment and work hard to build new partnerships.

A big thank you to my fellow Committee of Management members and to everyone who contributes to the success of Connecting Country.



Director's Message

Lori Arthur



The 2024-25 year has brought with it a roller coaster of highs and lows for Connecting Country. We were successful in a small number of significant government grants, which, alongside continued support from key philanthropic donors, has supported us to deliver some interesting and engaging projects throughout the year.

A key focus has been on the delivery of our Partnerships Against Pests project supported by the Victorian Government, aimed at raising awareness and landholder capacity to manage established pests. We offered a range of training opportunities, field days and market stalls for community alongside a media campaign. All activities were fully booked which indicates not only a need for this type of education but also a desire from landholders seeking to do the best they can in managing their land in this region.

Sadly during the past year, we have said goodbye to some fantastic staff; Hadley, Anna and Ivan. As they move on to new adventures, financial limitations have meant that we have not been able to replace them (not that they're easily replaceable) and as such, we are now down to a small team of two part time staff. I acknowledge and thank Bonnie for her long-term dedication to the organisation now going on 15 years and her flexibility through various fluctuations over this time. Bonnie's ecological expertise, local restoration experience and relationships with landholders are some of our most important and invaluable assets.

Whilst the retraction of staff has been difficult, it has offered me the opportunity to meet and work much more closely with our partners, particularly Landcare and Friends Groups. I am constantly in awe of all the amazing contributions happening across the region in protecting biodiversity and helping build the resilience in the landscape we so desperately need for the future. Keep up the great work!

"A highlight for me during 2024-25 was hosting the Feathery Festival in partnership with Barkers Creek Landcare & Wildlife Group and Birdlife Castlemaine District.

The Festival aimed to raise awareness of local woodland birds through a series of events centred around National Threatened Species Day in September 2024.

It was wonderful to see a full house of passionate birders, at all events, including 200 viewers at the Theatre Royal filming of 'The Message of the Lyrebird'

*Lori Arthur
Director*

Photo by Anna Senior





Finance Report

Max Kay

The ongoing challenging financial environment for Not-for-profit organisations continued to put pressure on Connecting Country in 2024-25. Early budgeting indicated income was likely to be significantly lower during the year and as such, Connecting Country took proactive action to reduce expenditure, largely via a reduction in staffing levels, to avoid significant financial implications to the organisation. Through careful management, we were able to record a small financial surplus with Income \$337,374, Expenses \$332,135 and a Surplus of \$5,239 despite a reduction in net income of over \$100K from 2023-24.

A note worthy feature was the increasing level of generosity we continue to receive each year from donors. In 2022-23, Donations were \$14,648, in 2023-24 \$19,681 and in 2024-25 \$32,438. The ongoing, and increasing support from our donors is welcome and we see it as encouragement and appreciation for the work we perform.

Our Net Assets are \$157,858 (\$152,619 in 2023-24), mainly in cash reserves.

As reported by many other Not-for-profit organisations, philanthropic funding is less readily available. In 2023-24, this represented 31% of our income, in 2024-25 it was 16.5%. Fee for service represented 18% of our income whilst government income was 46.5%, in line with the previous year.

Our financial performance continues to be closely monitored with regular updating of our budget, monthly comparison of actual performance against budget and an annual audit by a qualified auditor.

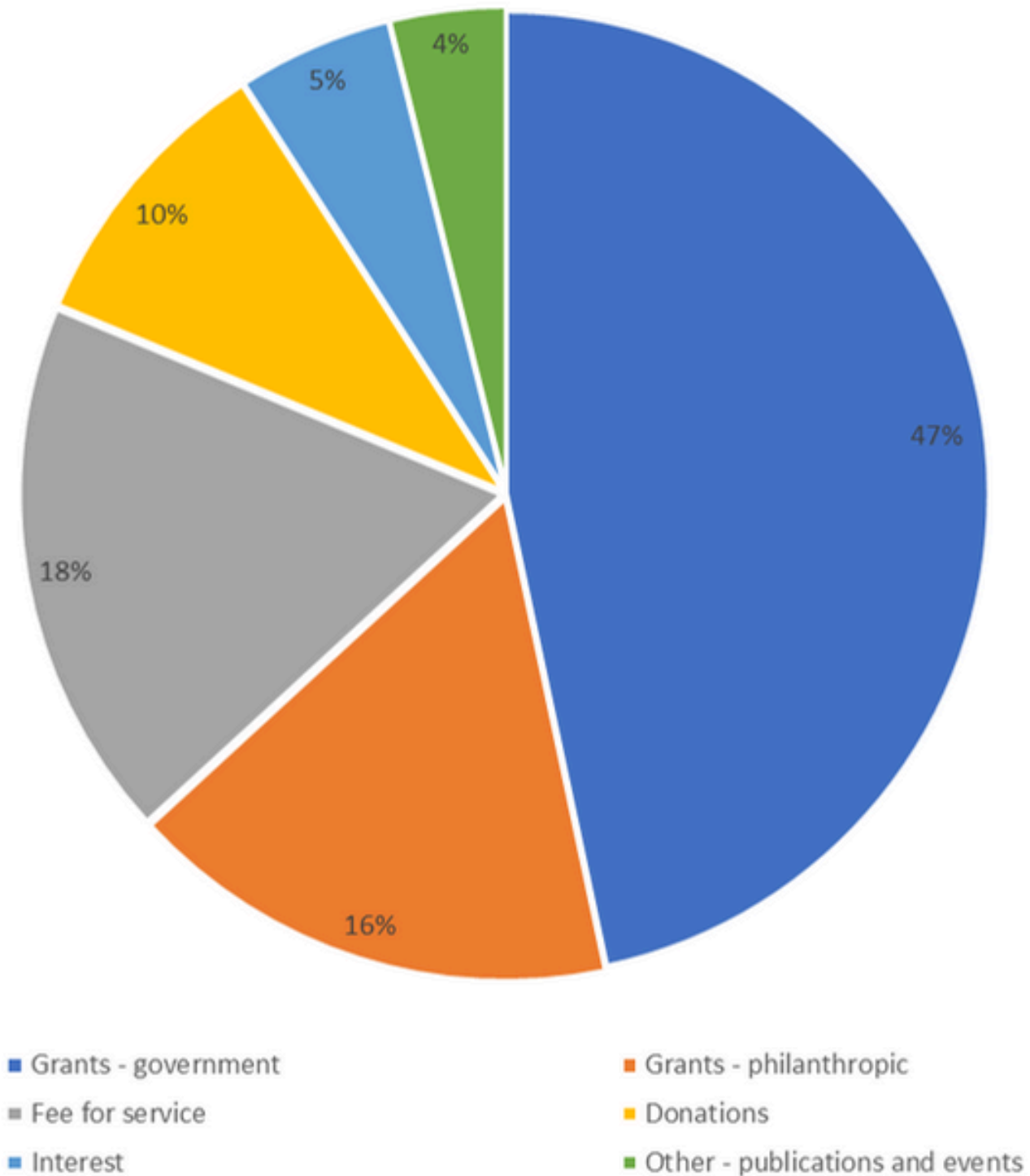
Given the decline in funding available from traditional sources (government and philanthropic), Connecting Country is investigating alternative sources of income.



2024 - 2025

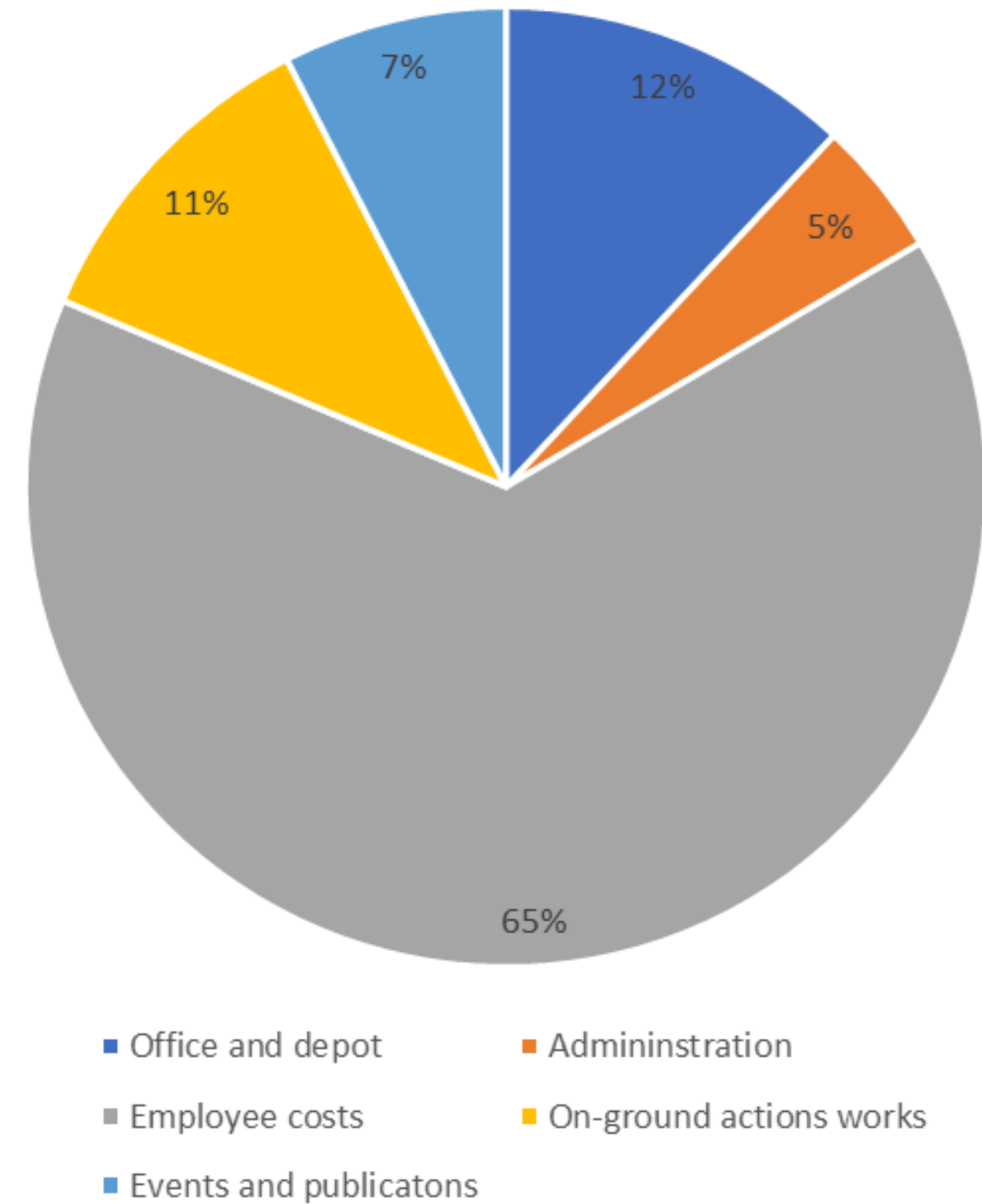
Income

Total \$337,374



Expenses

Total \$332,135



What does Connecting Country do?

Connecting Country is a community-based not-for-profit organisation that operates at a landscape scale to increase, enhance and restore biodiversity across the Mount Alexander Shire and surrounds in Central Victoria. We work on four key themes:

Engage
community



Monitor
biodiversity



Support
Landcare



Restore
landscapes



Supporting Landcare

The Mount Alexander region has a very environmentally active community and has one of the highest number (per capita) of active Landcare, Friends and other on-ground environmental groups in Australia. Connecting Country continues to host a local Landcare Facilitator, funded by the Victorian Government, to support these groups with advice, networking, educational and capacity building opportunities.

2024/ 2025 year was jam packed with activity both hosted and supported by Connecting Country including:

- Various engagement and education workshops (see projects)
- 2025 Landcare Link-up Roundtable event which attracted representatives from 12 Landcare groups from the region.
- Monthly Landcare e-news
- Bi-monthly meetings of the Landcare Steering Group

Photo by Carmen Bunting

Supporting Landcare

2024 - 2025

26

Local Landcare
groups supported

6

In-person events
for Landcare
members and the
wider community

343

People engaged
through in-person
Landcare events

14,309

Landcare member
volunteer hours
across the region

4

Attended and co-
hosted community
market stalls in
partnership with
Landcare Groups

11

Editions of the Mount
Alexander Landcare
e-news circulated to
350+ readers



Photo by Hadley Cole

Monitoring biodiversity

Connecting Country's long-term monitoring program has focused on woodland bird and nestbox monitoring for now over 10 years. Bird monitoring is conducted twice annually (winter and spring) and nestboxes are checked every 2 years (last checked 2023-24).

Woodland bird monitoring continued in 2024-25 with our dedicated team of volunteers. The program could not succeed without these fantastic volunteers but life changes have meant some of our long-standing volunteers are moving on. New recruits have seamlessly joined the team but we hope to gain more to see the continued strength in the program. Long standing volunteer Jane Rusden has expressed her thoughts on her involvement in the program:

"I see it as an opportunity to assist the land owners to understand how important the improvement of habitat on their little piece of territory is to the environment in general and birds in particular. But also a wonderful chance to do some birding on private land that no other birders have access to."



Monitoring Biodiversity

2024 - 2025

126

Volunteer hours



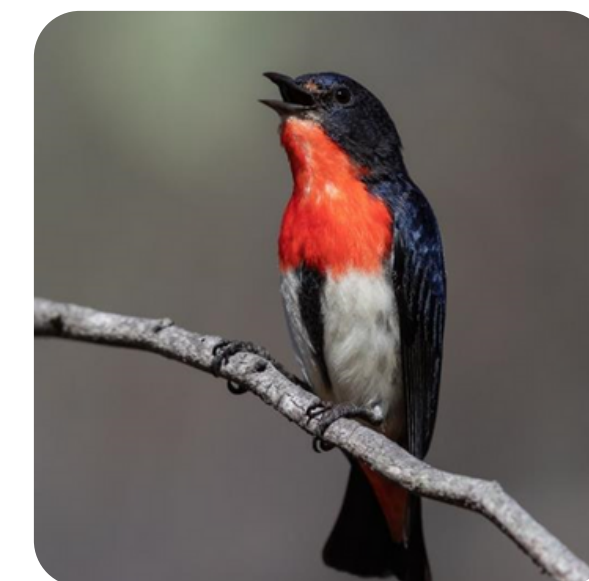
22

bird survey
volunteers



192

bird surveys



Restoring landscapes

As funding for on-ground works becomes thinner on the ground for localised conservation work, Connecting Country seeks to adapt and diversify in finding new ways to support local landholders in implementing land restoration activities.

Thanks to funding from local business, Vegetation Link, we were able to source a cost-effective bulk purchase of tree seedlings from volunteer tree-growing organisation, TreeProject, to support landholders kick starting their restoration programs or incremental ongoing tree planting activities.

Our Habitat for Phascogales /Large Old Trees Project continued this year, co-funded by the Ian and Shirley Norman Foundation and the Victorian Government Nature Fund, supporting installation of additional nest boxes across 10 properties, providing habitat for the threatened Brush-tailed Phascogale.

The Mount Alexander Region continues to attract new landholders and Connecting Country continually supports requests for advice from landholders seeking to improve and restore their land.

vegetationlink



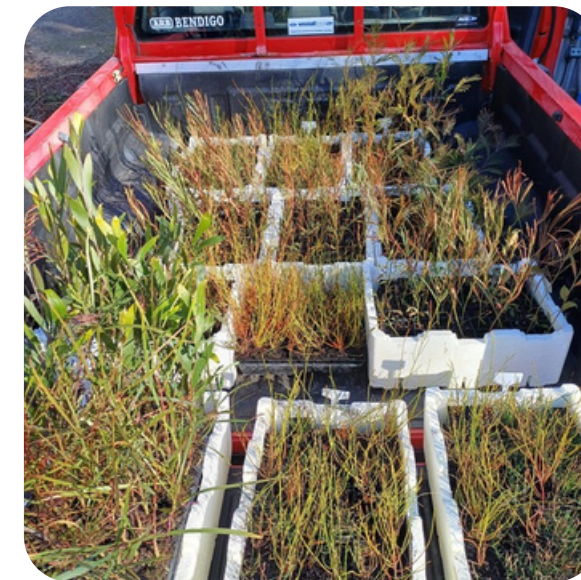
Photo by Connecting Country

Restoring Landscapes

2024 - 2025

1400

Indigenous
plants



30

Phascogale
nest boxes
installed



25

Property
visits & advice



Community engagement

Offering land management education and nature engagement opportunities for the local community continues to be an important role of Connecting Country. The 2024-25 year was jam packed with activities aimed at increasing the diversity and spread of people engaged with nature and learning new skills.

Highlights included:

- Feathery Festival 2024
- Cultural Walk with DJAARA
- Seed Collection and Propagation Workshops
- National Tree Day 2025 Community Planting and Nature Celebration
- Pest Plant and Animal Field Days and Market Stalls
- Rainbow Birdwalk
- Reproduction of Fauna Field Guides
- Walks in partnership with Dhelkaya Health



Photo by Carmen Bunting

Engaging Community



Seed Collection Workshop



Cultural Walk With DJAARA



National Tree Day



Propagation Workshop with Nalderun



Weed ID and Control Workshop

Connecting Country Projects

2024–25

Key Projects in 2024-2025



Partnership against Pests

In partnership with local Landcare groups, the Partnerships Against Pests project aimed to raise awareness of local pest plant and animal issues, and empower community with the skills to address these threats.

- Four stalls co-hosted with Landcare groups at local community markets
- Weed ID and Control Workshops
- Rabbit Control Field Day
- Cultural Walk with DJAARA
- Agricultural Chemical Skillset Course with Bendigo TAFE
- Monthly articles and promotion of pest and weed issues

This project was funded by the Victorian Government through the Partnership Against Pests program.



Photo by Carmen Bunting



Key Projects in 2024-2025



Feathery Festival 2024

In recognition of National Threatened Species Day and to raise awareness of local woodland birds, many of which are threatened with extinction, Connecting Country partnered with Barkers Creek Landcare & Wildlife Group and BirdLife Castlemaine District to host a Feathery Festival from the 5-11 September 2024.

The festival included:

- Film screening of 'The Message of the Lyrebird' (Balangara Films) and panel discussion at Theatre Royal, Castlemaine.
- Guided bird walks led by Birdlife Castlemaine District at Rise and Shine Reserve, Newstead.
- 'Birds and Beers' conversation with Tanya Loos and Dr Anna Senior at Shedshaker Brewing Taproom.
- Radio segment on 'What's Golden' on MaineFM and other local media promotions
- Local bird t-shirt and tote design and sales by Castlemaine Birdlife



Brian D Newman
Foundation
for the
Environment



Graphics by Ash Vigus & photo by Anna Senior

Key Projects in 2024-2025



Seeding our Future

Seeding Our Future project aimed to empower the local community to take direct action to increase flora populations across the region. Through the collection of seed and growing of indigenous plant species, particularly those that are rare, we can increase genetic diversity and population of local indigenous flora, creating resilient ecosystems and seed banks for our future.

- Partnered with Seeding Victoria to deliver a Seed Collection Workshop. The workshop was fully subscribed and attracted a diversity of interested community members.
- In partnership with Newstead Natives, we held two Propagation Workshops, one for the Landcare and general community and one for First Nations Youth from Nalderun. Each participant went home with indigenous native plants and a propagation booklet for their future propagation projects.
- Overall the 3 workshops engaged 67 participants

Funded by the Victorian Government Landcare Grants through the North Central CMA with additional support from Cassinia Environmental and Natural Resource Conservation Trust



Photo by Hadley Cole



Key Projects in 2024-2025



Fauna in Focus

In partnership with Castlemaine Field Naturalists we reviewed and printed our popular wildlife field guides used by many Landcare and Friends groups and also popular with the general community and schools.

- Reptiles and Frogs of the Mount Alexander region
- Woodland Birds of Central Victoria

These field guides complement Castlemaine Field Naturalists Club 'Indigenous Plants of Castlemaine' and are available at The Mill and the Castlemaine Information Centre.



Photo by Castlemaine Field Naturalist Club



Key Projects in 2024-2025



Habitat for Phascogales/ Regenerate before it's too late

Raising awareness and conservation of the incredibly important large old tree heroes in our landscape and creating habitat stepping-stones for the Brush-tailed Phascogale, an important local marsupial threatened with extinction.

This is a 3 year project for on-ground works on private properties which has included:

- Protection of paddock trees from grazing pressures
- Revegetation, installation of nest boxes
- Creating habitat stepping stones across the landscape
- The development of engagement material and events

In year 3, we extended the project to deliver a further 30 nest boxes across 10 properties supported with land management advice.

Co-funded by the Ian and Shirley Norman Foundation and the Victorian Government through the Nature Fund.



Photo by Bonnie Humphreys



Key Projects in 2024-2025



National Tree Day 2024

Celebrated 2024 National Tree Day with a community planting day at McKenzie Hill Old School Site on Sunday 27 July 2024.

- Partnered with McKenzie Hill Action & Landcare Group, Mount Alexander Shire Council and Rotary Castlemaine.
- 60+ community members of all ages attended the event and enjoyed a range of activities from planting to badge making, colouring and seed ball making.
- This event was made possible due to the generous contributions of Mount Alexander Shire Council, North Central CMA through the Victorian Landcare Grants and Rotary Castlemaine.
- The planting was part of The Bee-line pollinator corridors project, aimed at creating pollinator habitat across the region.



Photo by Ritchie Powney



Key Projects in 2024-2025



Castlemaine Pride Rainbow Birdwalk

An inclusive bird walk for LGBTQIA+ locals to connect with birds, nature and each other in Castlemaine. In partnership with Castlemaine Pride, Birdlife Castlemaine we hosted our first Rainbow Birdwalk.

- 35+ queer bird lovers and allies on Dja Dja Wurrung Country.
- An inclusive introduction to bird watching techniques

Participant quote:

“A meeting of my two worlds: my queer identity and my love of nature.”

Funded by Birdlife Australia



Photo by Castlemaine Pride

Key Projects in 2024-2025



Fee for Service

Connecting Country's ecological expertise has been engaged through fee-for-service applications for both private landholders and public authorities during the year including:

- Vegetation assessments (habitat hectare methodology and other techniques to meet accounting for nature requirements).
- Fauna surveys (bird, reptile and frog surveys and use of motion-activated wildlife cameras).
- Ecological restoration advice.

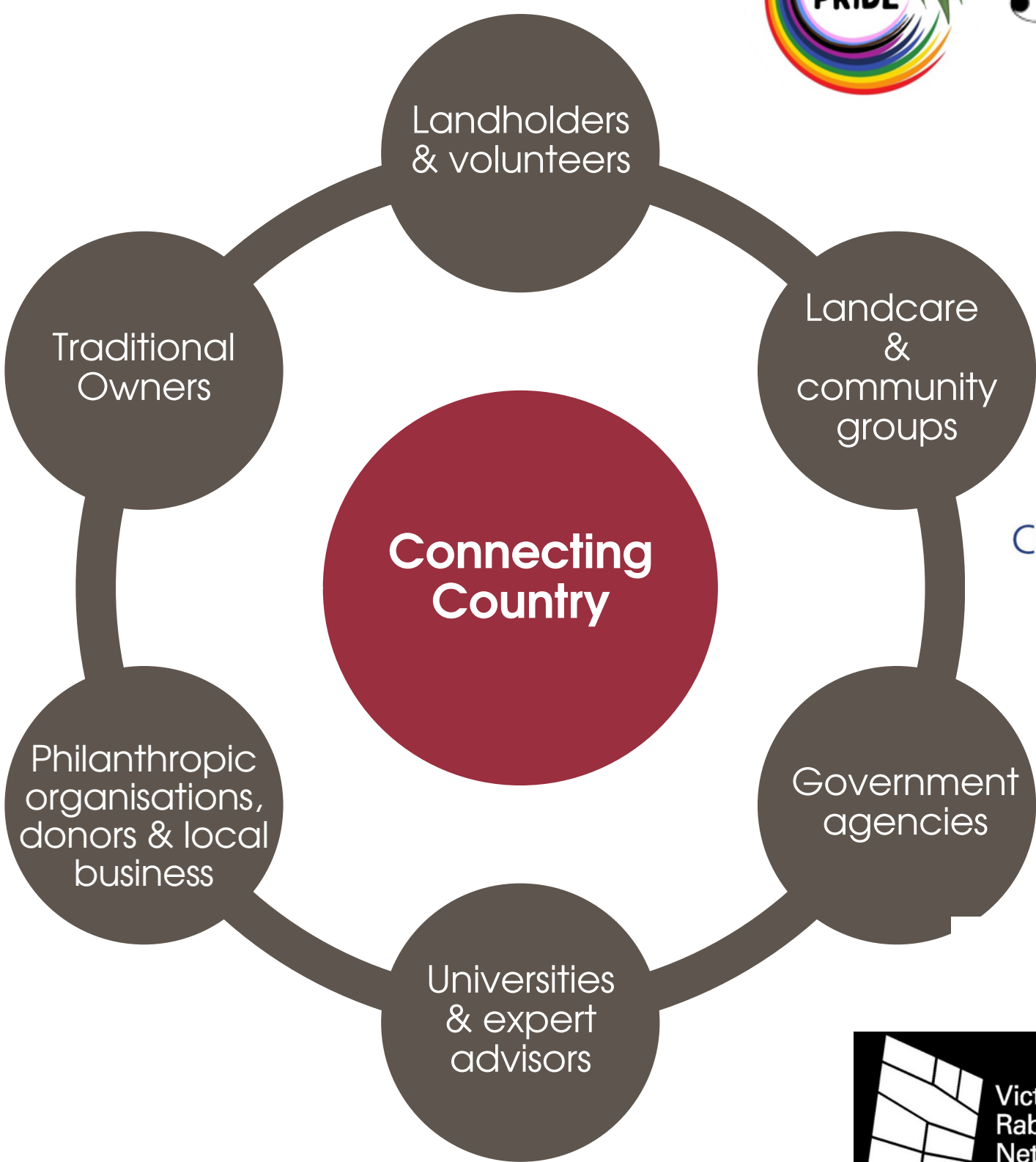


Photo by Lori Arthur



Key partners and financial supporters

2024-25



Ian & Shirley Norman
FOUNDATION

TreeProject



castlemaine
institute

vegetationlink



Brian D Newman
Foundation
for the
Environment



birdlife
CASTLEMAINE DISTRICT

EST 1856
THEATRE
ROYAL
CASTLEMAINE



Rotary
Castlemaine



THE GOOD
OP SHOP



Mount Alexander
Shire Council

Government
agencies



NEWSTEAD NATIVES



CASSINIA
ENVIRONMENTAL

birdlife
AUSTRALIA



VICTORIA
State Government



Wettenhall
ENVIRONMENT TRUST

Seeding
Victoria

Bendigo
TAFE

A huge thank you

- Staff and committee of management
- Financial supporters and project partners
- Monitoring and data entry volunteers
- Landholders
- Steering groups and advisors
- 26 local Landcare and Friends groups
- Volunteer photographers and graphic designer
- Suppliers
- Event speakers and other volunteers
- Members and donors



Volunteers

We can't thank our amazing and dedicated volunteers enough for assisting with the delivery of our shared vision for landscape restoration and on-going scientifically rigorous ecological monitoring.



Staff and committee

2024-25

Staff:

Lori Arthur
Director

Bonnie Humphreys
Landscape Restoration Coordinator

Hadley Cole (to May 29 2025)
Landcare Facilitator Mount Alexander

Anna Senior (to April 5 2025)
Ecological Project and Monitoring Coordinator

Ivan Carter (to 31 August 2024)
Engagement Coordinator

Committee of management:

President Brendan Sydes

Vice President Vacant

Secretary Marie Jones

Treasurer Max Kay

Committee members:

Christine Brooke

Cate Sinclair

Stephen Oxley





Get involved

Learn more, become a member or subscribe to our e-news:

www.connectingcountry.org.au

Get in touch:

info@connectingcountry.org.au

Donate:

connectingcountry.org.au/get-involved/make-a-donation

Follow us:

facebook.com/connectingcountry

instagram.com/connectingcountrycastlemaine/

Watch our short film:

rememberthewild.org.au/connecting-country

Download our project prospectus:

connectingcountry.org.au/prospectus2020