

# Annual Report

2023 - 2024



*Restoring landscapes across  
the Mount Alexander Region*



Photo by Carmen Bunting

# President's Message

**Brendan Sydes**

Welcome to our 2023-2024 Annual Report.

This year was another successful one for Connecting Country. We're a small operation, but as this report demonstrates, we have an oversized impact in terms of the range of our activities and the number of projects we run. This impact is down to our dedicated staff team and committed community of volunteers, land owner participants, our funding partnerships and the support of generous donors.

A big thank you from the Committee goes to Lori who has settled in well as our Director and leader of our wonderful staff team. Lori has proved herself adept at managing operations on a tight budget and ensuring that Connecting Country maintains its record of delivering a diverse range of programs and projects.

We embarked on the year with a shortfall in our budget, but as our Treasurer's report outlines, we were fortunate that the combination of some spending cuts and hard work securing funding, meant we ended the year with only a small loss. Regardless of this good outcome, the Committee has not lost sight of the need to adapt the way we work to respond to ongoing changes in our funding environment. We have been doing a lot of work over the past year developing strategies to better secure our financial sustainability. We look forward to engaging with the Connecting Country community on some opportunities for new approaches and new partnerships in the year ahead.

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



Cover photo by Natalie McCarthy





Photo by Ivan Carter



# Director's Message

Lori Arthur

As the impacts of climate change start to hit home with intense storms and predicted hot summers to come, the need to build environmental resilience has never been more important. Whilst interest in carbon and nature-repair markets offer some potential opportunities for biodiversity protection, the importance of grass-roots conservation cannot be underestimated. Connecting Country continues on our mission to support landscape restoration across the Mount Alexander region in this time of climate change.

As a small not-for-profit with no core base funding, we need to work with a range of stakeholders and partners with mutual interests and goals to deliver our mission. This offers us flexibility to be creative, to engage with new people and embark on a diversity of projects. As in previous years, we've received funding from a variety of government and philanthropic sources and delivered a diverse range of projects from big to small. As in ecology, the large old trees and the teeny-tiny pollinators are all equally important in maintaining a healthy ecosystem. Our key projects and achievements for the year are outlined in this report, so read on to find out what we've been up to.

A big thank-you to our wonderful staff, Bonnie, Anna, Ivan and Hadley, who always go above and beyond to ensure every project, activity or event is delivered with care and consideration to benefit both the environment and the community.

We could not do what we do without the wonderful contributions from many volunteers. Whether participating in Landcare, attending events, tackling a restoration project on their own property, or taking part in citizen science, your contributions are all greatly appreciated!

A group of people, including men, women, and children, are walking along a paved path in a wooded area. The path is lined with trees, and the ground is covered with fallen leaves. The scene is captured from a low angle, looking down the path. A large, semi-transparent text box is overlaid on the right side of the image, containing a quote. The quote is in a black, serif font and reads: "A highlight for me has been building relationships with Traditional Owner groups, DJAARA and Nalderun, walking together on country with Landcare. This was possible thanks to funding support from our philanthropic partner, the Ian and Shirley Norman Foundation. It has been a good first step in healing country together and I look forward to seeing this partnership grow." Below the quote, the name "Lori Arthur" and the title "Director" are written in a smaller, black, serif font. The background shows a line of trees and a clear sky, with sunlight filtering through the leaves.

*"A highlight for me has been building relationships with Traditional Owner groups, DJAARA and Nalderun, walking together on country with Landcare. This was possible thanks to funding support from our philanthropic partner, the Ian and Shirley Norman Foundation. It has been a good first step in healing country together and I look forward to seeing this partnership grow."*

*Lori Arthur  
Director*





# Finance Report

**Max Kay**

Connecting Country continues to operate in a challenging financial environment and this is reflected in our financial performance for 2023-24. Our income was \$441,193 but this fell short of covering our expenses of \$449,249 resulting in a loss of \$8,056.

Pleasingly, donations during the year were \$19,841, up from \$14,648 in 2022-23, an encouraging trend and we are grateful to our supporters for their generosity. The higher interest rate environment also assisted with interest income from our bank deposits up from \$6,665 in 2022-23 to \$17,794.

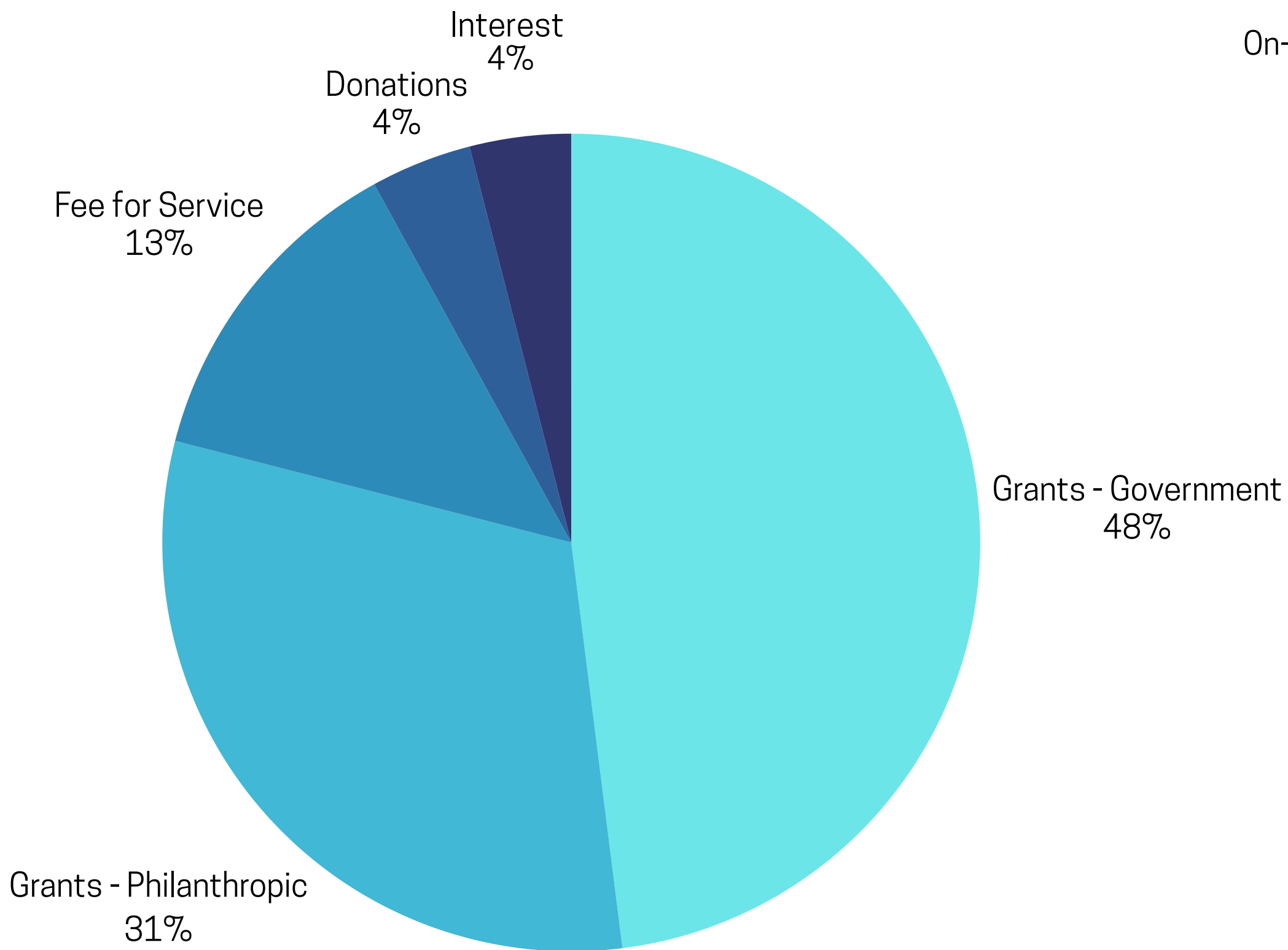
Our financial position remains satisfactory with net assets of \$152,619, held mainly in the form of cash reserves.

Sourcing funding in the current financial environment remains challenging and all opportunities continue to be keenly pursued. We are now more dependent on philanthropic funding than in the early years of operation when State and Federal grants were our main source of income. The current split is 48% government and 31% philanthropic.

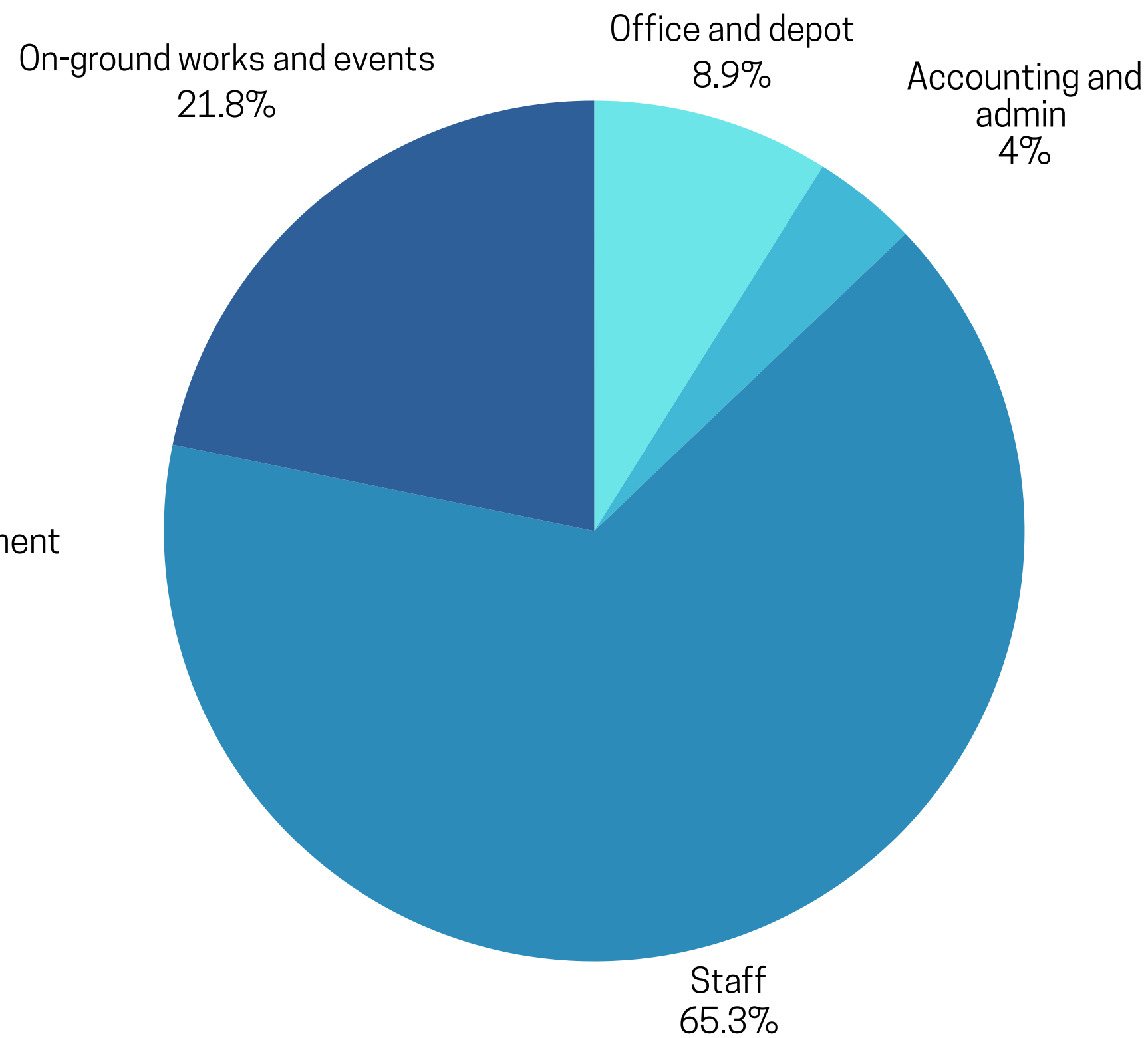
Our financial performance and position is closely monitored with monthly review including comparison with actual results against budget by Connecting Country's Committee of Management and an annual audit by an independent qualified auditor.

# Income

## 2023 - 2024



# Expenses





# 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





# Key Projects in 2023-2024



## 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.

- Year 2 of 3 year project for on-ground works on 13 properties including protection of 39 paddock trees from grazing pressures, revegetation and installation of nest boxes, creating 20 habitat stepping stones across the landscape.
- Coordinating volunteer nest box monitoring program, inspecting 331 nest boxes.
- Series of engagement and communications including presentations, fact sheets, walk and talks, blogs and webinars.

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



Ian & Shirley Norman  
FOUNDATION





# Key Projects in 2023-2024



## The Beeline Project

Building on the momentum of our Buzz Project: Promoting pollinators of Central Victoria in 2022-2023, this project aimed to further engage community members in collaborative on-ground action to enhance pollinator habitat across the landscape.

- Supported 5 Landcare Groups by providing 1600 pollinator attracting plants and materials to create pollinator pods across the landscape – Barkers Creek Landcare, Victoria Gully Landcare, Elphinstone Land Management Association (ELMA), Taradale Landcare and McKenzie Hill Action & Landcare Group.
- Hosted a community planting day with McKenzie Hill Action & Landcare Group for National Tree Day (July 2024).

Funded by the North Central Catchment Management Authority through the Victorian Landcare Program. Mount Alexander Shire Council supported the community planting day.





# Key Projects in 2023-2024



## Woodland Bird Monitoring

The woodland bird monitoring program continued, with our dedicated team of volunteers conducting bird surveys in winter and spring 2023, with support from data entry volunteer Vicki Ryan. Time was also allocated to data collation and preliminary analysis of 2010-2023 data set.

Some highlights from monitoring include 4 out of 5 of the feathered five detected during surveys; Jacky Winter, Brown Treecreeper, Painted Button-quail, and Hooded Robin. The feathered five are good indicator species for the health of woodland birds in the region, so if they are doing well, we can expect other species are too. Of particular note in 2023, is the recording of Brown Treecreeper, Jacky Winter and Hooded Robin using Connecting Country restoration sites, as well as intact woodland habitat. if you built it, they will come!

This program is supported by the  
Brian D Newman Foundation for the Environment.



**Brian D Newman  
Foundation**  
for the  
**Environment**





# Key Projects in 2023-2024



## Nature Kids

A series of fun and engaging, local environmental educational resources that can be implemented by teachers and carers who may not have a background environmental teachings. Through learning more about our local environment, it is hoped that kids (and their families) will want to care for and protect it.

- Targeted towards kinder and primary school aged children and the people that care for them. Partnered with Carinya Child Care Co-op and Chewton Primary School to develop the resources.
- Engaged local artist to create a beautifully illustrated local Nature Map.
- Input from Djaara and Nalderun to include cultural knowledge and language.
- Resources are anticipated to be ready for release late 2024.

Funded by Mount Alexander Shire Council Partnership grant.





# Key Projects in 2023-2024



## Future-proof our Forests

Final year of a three-year project to develop two pioneering 'climate future plots' for ongoing monitoring to assist climate change adaption for key local species. Climate future plots are areas of revegetated land which incorporate genetically diverse plant material with the view to enhance resilience to predicted climatic conditions.

- Hosted a 'Revegetation in a time of climate change' event engaging experts from University of Melbourne, DJAARA and North Central Catchment Management Authority.
- Maintained and replanted 600 Silver Banksia (*Banksia marginata*) and Sweet Bursaria (*Bursaria spinosa*) plants in our climate future plots in Moonlight Flat and Greenhill (lost due to flooding in 2022).

Funded by the Ross Trust.





# Key Projects in 2023-2024



## Supporting Landcare

The 2023/ 2024 year has offered many and varied ways to engage with Landcare and promote local biodiversity conservation.

Highlights have included;

- Strengthening relationships between Landcare and Traditional Owner groups Dja Dja Wurrung Aboriginal Clans Corporation (DJAARA) and Nalderun through the Cultural Competency Training and Landcare Partnerships workshop.
- The 2024 Landcare Link-up: Caring for Large Old Trees coordinated in partnership with Maldon Urban Landcare Group.
- Regular bi-monthly Landcare Steering Group meetings provide opportunities to guide the Landcare Facilitator support activities and provided a platform for Landcare members to share and connect.

Funded by the North Central Catchment Management Authority through the Victorian Landcare Grants and the Ian & Shirley Norman Foundation.



Ian & Shirley Norman  
FOUNDATION



# Key Projects in 2023-2024



## National Tree Day

Celebrated 2023 National Tree Day with a community planting day at Post Office Hill Reserve on Sunday 30th July 2023.

- Partnered with Post Office Hill Action Group, Mount Alexander Shire Council, Birdlife Castlemaine District and Mount Alexander Youth Advisory Group.
- 70+ community members of all ages attended the event and enjoyed a range of activities from planting to badge making, colouring and bird walks.
- This event was made possible due to the generous contribution from community members who supported Connecting Country's 'Trees for the next generation' GiveNow campaign throughout June and July 2023.

Supported by Mount Alexander Shire Council.





# Key Projects in 2023-2024



## 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 (including 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).
- Project support in waterway health assessments for the North Central Catchment Management Authority.
- Ecological restoration advice.





# Engaging Community

## Nest Box Monitoring



Djaara Landcare  
cultural competency



National Tree Day - Post Office Hill

**NATIONAL TREE DAY 2023**

**SUNDAY 30 JULY**  
**10.00AM – 12.00PM**  
**RAILWAY STREET, CHEWTON**

FAMILY PLANTING CELEBRATION  
KIDS OF ALL AGES WELCOME WITH SUPERVISING ADULT

- TREE PLANTING
- BIRD SPOTTING
- KIDS' CRAFT
- FREE LUNCH

FUNDED GENEROUSLY BY SUPPORTERS OF CONNECTING COUNTRY AND VICHEALTH.

HOSTED BY: **CONNECTING COUNTRY**, **MOUNT ALEXANDER SHIRE COUNCIL**,  
AND **POST OFFICE HILL ACTION GROUP** WITH SUPPORT FROM **BIRDLIFE**,  
**CASTLEMAINE** AND **MOUNT ALEXANDER YOUTH ADVISORY GROUP**.

Logos: Mount Alexander Early Years Steering Group, Connecting Country, YAG (Youth Advisory Group), Mount Alexander Shire Council, birdlife, LANDCARE



Photos by Hadley Cole, Lori Arthur and Kerrie Jennings





*"Thank you for all the behind the scenes work to get the nest box inspections happening. I absolutely love this program and hope it continues."*

*Kim Peric  
Vounteer Team Leader  
- Nest boxes*





# Monitoring Biodiversity

**2023 - 2024**

**331**

nest boxes  
checked

**33.2%**

evidence of  
Phascogales

**30**

nest box  
volunteers

**4,594**

birds

**138**

bird surveys

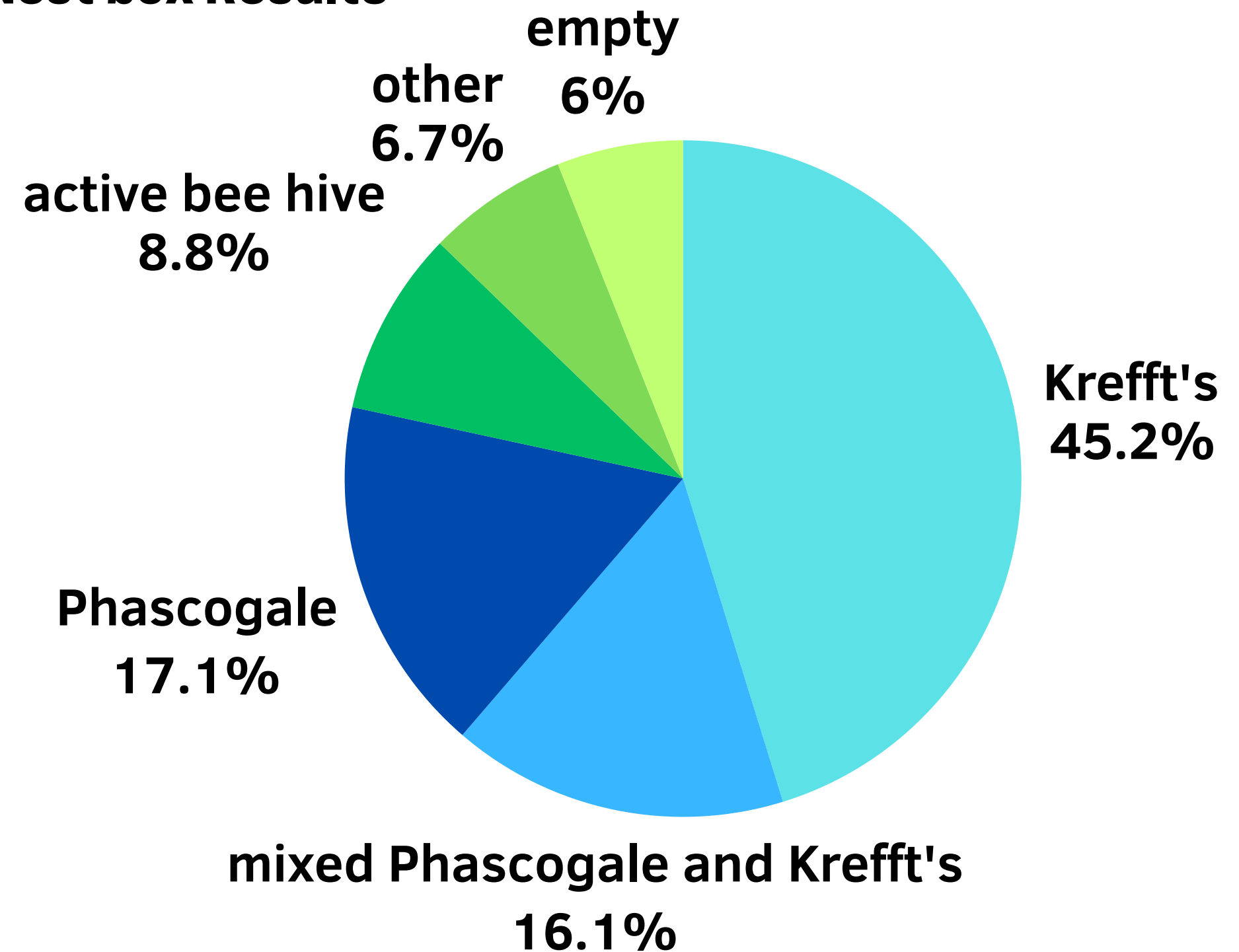
**22**

bird survey  
volunteers



# Monitoring Biodiversity

## Nest box Results



*Percentages presented are 'evidence of' meaning a nest of the animal was found.  
Not all nests were occupied at the time of survey.*





# Supporting Landcare

**2023 - 2024**

**26**

Local Landcare  
groups supported

**6**

In-person events  
for Landcare  
members and the  
wider community

**132**

People engaged  
through in-person  
Landcare events

**13000 +**

Landcare member  
volunteer hours  
across the region

**1600**

Pollinator plants  
distributed to  
4 Landcare groups

**11**

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





# Restoring Landscapes

**2023 - 2024**

**3500**

Indigenous  
plants

**39**

LOTs  
protected from  
stock grazing

**33**

Phascogale  
nest boxes  
installed

**26**

Landholders  
supported with  
onground works

**45**

Different  
species of  
indigenous  
plants

**2km**

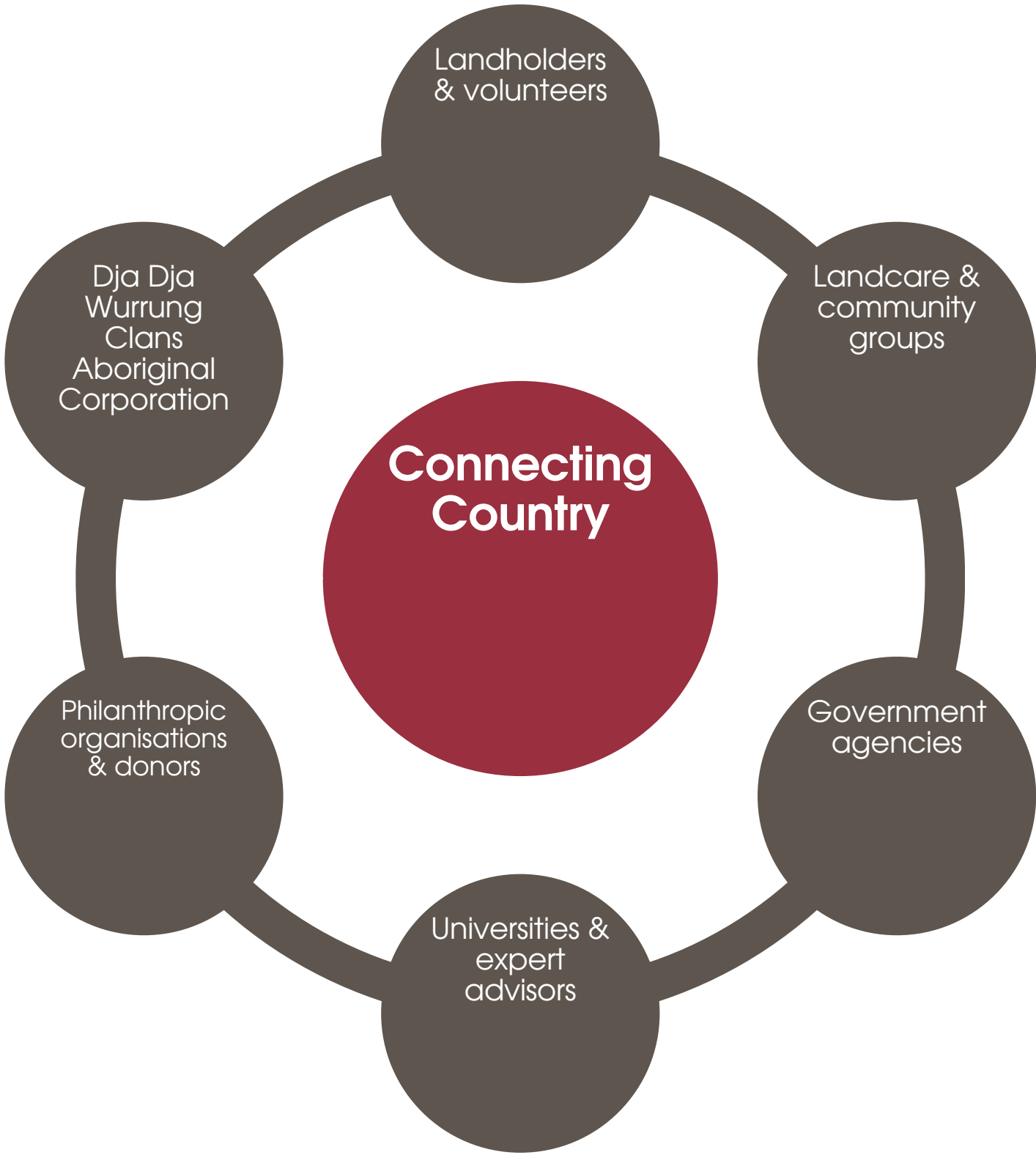
of stock  
exclusion  
fencing





# Key partners and financial supporters

2023-24





# A huge thank you

- Staff and committee of management
- Financial supporters and project partners
- Monitoring and data entry volunteers
- Landholders
- Steering groups and advisors
- 25 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

## 2023-24

### Staff:

Lori Arthur  
*Director*

Bonnie Humphreys  
*Landscape Restoration Coordinator*

Hadley Cole  
*Landcare Facilitator Mount Alexander*

Anna Senior  
*Ecological Project and Monitoring Coordinator*

Jess Lawton (resigned Oct 2023)  
*Monitoring Coordinator*

Ivan Carter  
*Engagement Coordinator*

### Committee of management:

*President*      Brendan Sydes

*Vice President*      Vacant

*Secretary*      Marie Jones

*Treasurer*      Max Kay

### Committee members:

Christine Brooke

LouLou Gebbie

Deborah Wardle

Stephen Oxley





# Get involved

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

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

**Get in touch:**

[info@connectingcountry.org.au](mailto:info@connectingcountry.org.au)

**Donate:**

[connectingcountry.org.au/get-involved/make-a-donation](http://connectingcountry.org.au/get-involved/make-a-donation)

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[instagram.com/connectingcountrycastlemaine/](https://instagram.com/connectingcountrycastlemaine/)

**Watch our short film:**

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

**Download our project prospectus:**

[connectingcountry.org.au/prospectus2020](http://connectingcountry.org.au/prospectus2020)