News of Friends of Grasslands

Supporting native grassy ecosystems

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July & August 2021

Events …

Sat 10 July 1.30-3.30pm
Visit to 6 Mile Reserve, near Bungendore.
Register: margaret.ning@fog.org.au

Thurs 29 July, 6.30-8pm,
Online Zoom forum – 'How do volunteers begin to weed?' with Margaret Ning and John Fitz Gerald.
Register: geoff.robertson@fog.org.au

Sat 14 August,10.30-11.30am & 1.15-4pm
Reading a grassland landscape and learning aboriginal cultural science with Geoffrey Simpson
Inquiries & registrations:
geoff.robertson@fog.org.au

Franklin Grassland
July 7 & August 4
Wednesdays 9-noon
Register: margaret.ning@fog.org.au

The latest updates are found on our website at Calendar

Visit our website -
http://fog.org.au/

Welcome new members!

Friends of the Schoolmaster's House (FOTSHINC) (NSW)
Clare Henderson (ACT)
Toni & Robert McLeish (NSW)

From the President …

The close of public submissions in June for the new ACT Natural Resource Management (NRM) Plan and the awarding of ACT Environment Grants has focussed the Committee's thoughts on what is the role of volunteers such as Friends of Grasslands versus that of government in conserving our environment. A new and bold NRM Plan could be a catalyst for the restoration and linking of remnant grassy ecosystems.

The work of the 'Friends', Land- and Park-care groups in restoring and managing bushland on public lands is highly beneficial in terms of: engendering community ownership and a mandate to actively care for their local bush; ensuring that there is consistent local monitoring and knowledge for managing these sites; and providing additional expertise and labour beyond the resources of the government agencies.

In the case of FOG, and our work to conserve grassy ecosystems in 2020, FOG volunteer hours were 9748, up 248 on 2019. Their financial contribution is valued at $487,500.

Morning tea at Gurubang Dhaura Park after planting on 8 May – see p8

However, the government environmental management agencies have a primary duty to lead stewardship of public lands. This is especially important where government policies limit volunteer management activities, for example, with overly complex approval processes or by prohibiting use of particular chemicals or tools by volunteers. In particular, the government agencies 'reliance on periodic work by weed spraying contractors, and (in many locations) prohibition of volunteers' use of selective and broad-leaf herbicides blocks those agencies from mopping up missed weed plants and regrowth, and may result in re-infestations.

In the ACT Government we are fortunate to have environmental management agency staff who are exceptionally dedicated and supportive of our community efforts. The ACT Government Environment grants are an important means of funding key bush restoration activities.

ACT Environment Grant applications require proponents to identify how ongoing maintenance will be undertaken at the target sites. However, in many cases once volunteers have achieved environmental restoration to 'care and maintenance' levels they cannot undertake key ongoing maintenance without funding or use of key herbicides. Many such activities are a core responsibility of government agencies, such as African Lovegrass control along roads in and adjoining bushland sites using flupropanate. The ACT Government could usefully plan for the transition of such maintenance into their agencies' day-to-day operational plans. FOG will be discussing these opportunities to enhance conservation of grassy ecosystems with the ACT Government.

Jamie Pittock

Advocacy Report

Naarilla Hirsch – May 2021

We provided general support for the ACT's draft Regional Fire Management Plan 2019-2028 but drew attention to three areas in particular that we thought could be improved: applying fuel reduction techniques in areas of high conservation value, the ACT Bushfire Management Standards, and the application of adaptive management to the Plan. Specific comments included the need for the Plan to consider which bushfire fuel management techniques best support ecological resilience in high quality conservation areas, e.g. how do individual methods affect the capacity of a site to retain soil and fuel moisture in the landscape? FOG urged that better resources be given to monitoring and evaluation of cultural indigenous burning techniques and ecological burning techniques.

FOG has made a substantial submission to the ACT government for its 2021-22 Budget. In it we talked about Canberra as a "city in the landscape", following on from the concepts we presented as part of the ACT's Inquiry into Nature in our City submission in 2020. The components needed to achieve this were listed, followed by a proposal for creation of a specialist unit within government that will play a leading and active role to establish the revegetation program. As well, we asked for better conservation of the many grassland areas in the ACT that are outside reserves, better support for Franklin Grasslands and implementation of the landscape and offset plans, additional funding for weed control and other work at Hall cemetery, and more support for the not-for-profit sector via environment grants.

FOG provided extensive input into the ACT's *Natural Resource Management Plan: discussion paper 2021*. As well as providing comments on each of the questions posed by the discussion paper, we made seven recommendations concerning the Natural Resource Management (NRM) plan. The first was that a review of the previous NRM plan be prepared to determine to what extent it has been implemented that elements with shortfalls can be enhanced in the new Plan. As well as agreeing with the focus on the three key threatened ecological communities in the Plan (which included NTG and BGGW), FOG asked that there be recognition that resources need to be spent on other species and ecological communities. We also asked that protection be given to all grassy ecosystem sites, not only those that are within the reserve system, and that native grassland and grassy woodland be restored by (a) enhancement of habitat and plant species diversity within existing remnants; (b) re-introduction of additional species into existing remnants; and (c) creation of new habitat to provide a more natural landscape that links remnants, and provides opportunities for the more general public to appreciate elements of the natural landscape. FOG considered that the NRM Plan should include resourcing of robust and consistent citizen science programs such as Vegwatch, and that a number of actions should be included to support Landcare and NRM volunteers, and that NRM policy should encourage the ACT Government to cement long-term opportunities and funding for the Catchment Groups as part of the mechanism to enable the community to better support what it values.

The full text of these submissions appears on our website.

Donations to support FOG

FOG makes small grants to researchers, educators and on-ground projects, known as grassy ecosystem grants, a highly effective way to support grassy ecosystems. It also supports FOG's TSR project.

To support these projects, you can make a tax-deductible donation to FOG Public Fund by:

Direct debit: BSB 633 000, A/c 153493960 (Bendigo Bank).

Please include your name and advise our Treasurer treasurer@fog.org.au.

Cheque: payable to 'Friends of Grasslands Public Fund',
Mailed to Treasurer, Friends of Grasslands Inc., PO Box 440, Jamison Centre, ACT 2614.

Note: if you want your donation to go to the TSR project please indicate this when you make your donation.

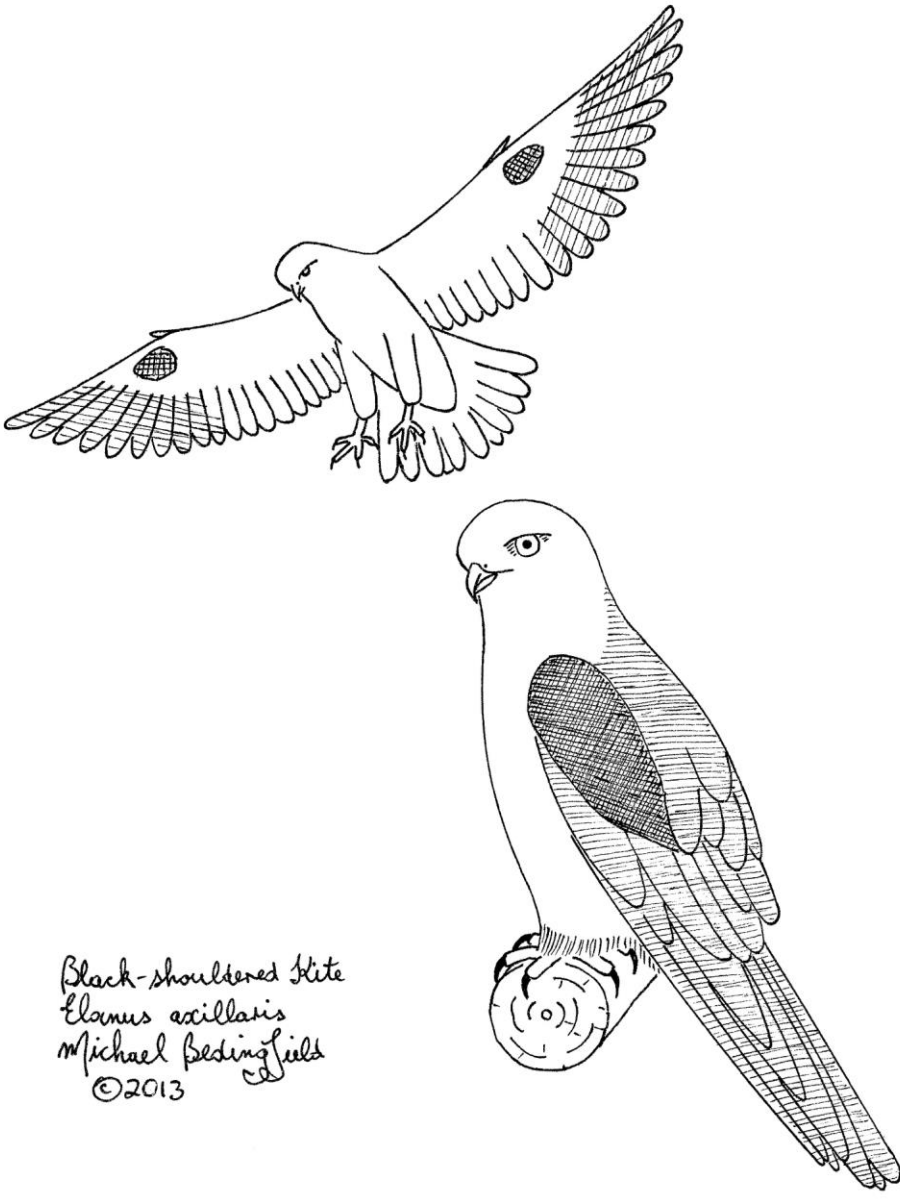
A receipt for tax purposes will be sent to you. You may also include a donation when you complete your membership application/renewal form. *THANKS*

Black-shouldered Kite – a small raptor that likes to hover over grasslands.

Michael Bedingfield

The Black-shouldered Kite hovers expertly with rapid wingbeats. It is able to stay almost perfectly in the one spot. Using the breeze to keep it aloft it may move up, down, sideways, forwards or backwards. Seen from below it appears to be mostly white with grey wingtips and a black spot under the wing. It is grey above with a black patch over the eyes. It is commonly seen perching on a high bare branch and then the black shoulders on the wings are very obvious. Males and females have the same colouring and are about 36 cm in length from bill to tail. Juveniles have reddish colouring added to the back, head and breast. The birds are usually silent but voice a repeated musical "chee" or a hoarse screech.

In the early1980's I attended a lecture at ANU where the speaker talked about the concept of a steady state economy. He described the current way of running economies worldwide, where policy is driven by a desire for continuous growth, as unsustainable. He made the analogy of an aeroplane in flight, which needs forward motion in order to maintain itself in flight. If it drops below a certain speed it looses height and may even crash. Current policies cause our economies to behave similarly. When growth is halted and there is a recession, investment falters, business slows and there is increased unemployment, etc. His alternative metaphor for the steady state economy was that of the helicopter, which can hover in one spot, or move forwards or backwards, without loosing height. But I prefer the image of the Black-shouldered Kite hovering skilfully.



Continuous economic and population growth require ever more natural resources, which can only result in environmental degradation and biodiversity decline. There is a destructive worldwide momentum that began with the industrial revolution and it is difficult to halt. So the concept of steady state economics is becoming more popular and with many scientists, economists and diplomats. A steady state economy is one in which the size of the gross domestic product and the population is stable or only mildly fluctuating. Economic decisions are made in conjunction with ethical and ecological values. And to be sustainable an economy may not exceed the limits of the available natural resources over the long term. This is a key requirement. Economic growth has always been used for building military power, but in an overgrown global economy this kind of competition is out of place. A focus on economic sustainability for all is required. You can read more about it at reference (a). Unless we can bring the two driving forces of increasing economic productivity and population growth under control then biodiversity will continue to decline.

Black-shouldered Kites form monogamous pairs for breeding and have graceful aerial courtship displays. Their nest is high in a tree and is made of sticks and lined with leaves. While they need a tree for nesting they like

open country for hunting. So their preferred habitat is open woodland or other lightly wooded areas, with their territory including grasslands or farmland. Their diet consists of small animals, especially rodents, but also reptiles, insects and birds. While they can hunt from a perch, they usually prefer to do so by cruising above the landscape using their sharp eyes to scan the ground for potential prey. When a suitable animal is found they will hover above it, watching carefully and waiting for the right moment, then drop or flutter down and capture the creature in their strong talons.

The Black-shouldered Kite is known by the scientific name of *Elanus axillaris*. It is distributed widely throughout the Australian mainland and into northern Tasmania. The bird that is most similar in size and colouring is the Letter-winged Kite *E. scriptus.* It differs by having an extended black line on the underside of each wing. It is usually confined to the arid interior of Australia and is only a rare visitor to the Southern Tablelands such as in times of drought.

Given the current state of conservative politics and established economic policies, it is hard to imagine much change in the near future. But when the current approach to managing our world is clearly unsustainable, new methods need to be considered. Perhaps we can look to the natural world works for guidance. The beautiful Black-shouldered Kite, hovering silently over a grassy expanse very inspirational.

References: https://birdlife.org.au/bird-profile/black-shouldered-kite; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black-shouldered_kite; https://steadystate.org/discover/definition/

Conserving Monaro native grasslands

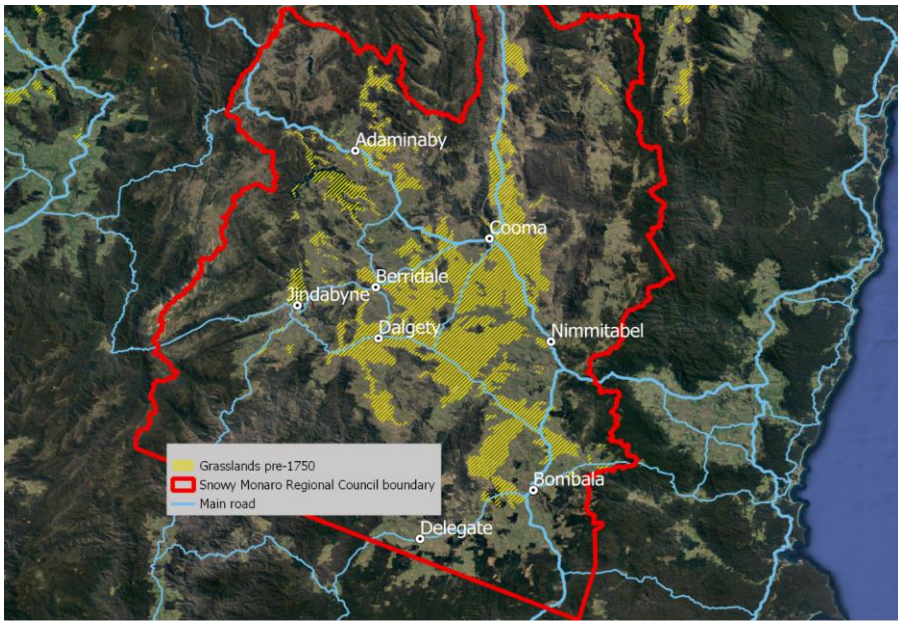
Margaret Mackinnon*

Native grasslands are an icon of the 'treeless plain' of the Monaro. Today, less than 10% of the original grasslands remain [1], leading to their current protection under environmental legislation. For conservation purposes, the native grasslands fall into three categories - 'high', 'moderate' or 'low conservation value'. The 'high' and, perhaps, the 'moderate' categories are protected under the banner of the critically endangered ecological community known as the *Natural Temperate Grassland of the South East Highlands* (NTG), while those of 'low' conservation value are not. Delineating between these types, however, highlights three practical issues with applying this protection, namely, 'Where are they?', 'What are they?' and 'How do they fit the legislation?'

Where are they? Maps, maps and maps

The indicative map [2,3], shown below, predicts the distribution of the NTG prior to European settlement based on geological, soil and vegetation surveys of the Monaro performed in the 1950s by the NSW Soil Conservation Service [4]. Most of the NTG – the 'dry grasslands' form [4] – falls on the basalt country between Cooma, Berridale, Dalgety and Nimmitabel, while the less common 'moist grasslands' occupy the river valleys on granite country at the foot of the Snowy Mountains.

Since European settlement, some of the original native grassland has been fully replaced or mixed with exotic pasture grasses or weed species, while others have shifted in native species dominance as a result of grazing pressure (e.g. from *Themeda* sp. to *Austrostipa* and *Danthonia* spp.), termed 'modified' hereon. In addition, new types of grassland have emerged as a result of widespread clearing of grassy woodlands. These 'secondary' or 'derived' grasslands are thought to bear little resemblance to the NTG. Thus, changes in species composition have blurred the definition of the NTG and, therefore, its conservation value.



Pre-European settlement

In the early 2000s, a series of studies was commissioned by various organisations to map and classify the extant grassland types using satellite imagery [5–10]. While the data were shared across studies, each applied a different classification system, all producing a high number of classes that

reflected the complexity that had evolved since settlement. To facilitate practical application of the maps, each study distilled this complexity into fewer (5-10) categories that represented degrees of conservation value: broadly, these were zero, low, moderate, and high conservation value, or not applicable. However, categorisations differed across studies. Two of the studies subsequently produced substantially revised maps following feedback from the commissioning organisations. Unsurprisingly, a consensus map for the 'High', 'Medium' and 'Low' conservation grasslands was not produced. Moreover, since these maps are predictive only, and based on a relatively low number of on-ground floristic surveys, their prediction reliability is considered low [11].

In 2014, South East Local Land Services commissioned a 'biometric' map to rationalise vegetation maps from across the South East, including the grasslands [11]. Unlike the woody vegetation, grasslands in this map were based on satellite imagery, i.e., the studies described above. Grasslands were categorised as: NTG, 'High natural value grassland', 'Moderate to low conservation value grassland', 'Speargrass grassland of the South Eastern Highlands' (native but with a different species dominance to NTG, i.e., modified grasslands), 'Derived grasslands of the South Eastern Highlands and South East Corner '(i.e., secondary grasslands), 'Alpine' and 'unable to be classified'. The report accompanying the map did not specify which, if any, of the categorisation systems from the satellite imagery studies was applied. Notably, the combining of 'moderate' and 'low' into one category in this map departed from the high/medium/low categorisation system applied in the satellite imagery studies. Combining 'moderate' with 'low' also does not align with the legislation which classifies 'high' or 'moderate' as protected and 'low' as unprotected (see below).

Two further maps are relevant to this discussion. The first is the map for the NTG provided as part of the Conservation Advice for its national listing in 2016 [12]. However, this map is low resolution and indicative only.

The second map is that used by the State government to help apply the legislation (see below). Land in NSW is classified as Category 1 or 2, under the *NSW Local Land Services' Land Management Framework* [13]. Category 1 is previously cleared land, deemed as low conservation value and may be cleared of grasslands. Category 2 is 'Regulated land' that can only be cleared under certain conditions. The map delineating Category 1 and Category 2-type land is not publicly available. Category 2 land can be one of three types – Sensitive, Vulnerable and unspecified. The Sensitive category includes the NTG and other high conservation value native vegetation. The Vulnerable category covers riparian or highly erodible land. Only the Sensitive and Vulnerable categories are shown on the NVR Map [14]: like the Category 1 land, Category 2-unspecified land is not. Thus, from this map, it is not possible for a landowner or another member of the public to determine whether clearing of native grasslands might be permissible on a given piece of land.

Legislation

There are two levels of legislation – Commonwealth and State – that govern the removal of native grasslands. Ultimately and foremost, the protection of NTG-type grasslands falls under the national legislation: this prohibits clearing of any grasslands defined as *Natural Temperate Grasslands of the South Eastern Highlands*. This ecological community was re-defined in 2016 under the EPBC Act (1999) [15] when it was reclassified from endangered to critically endangered [16]. While the Act clearly protects (under 'Method A' in the Guide [17]) the 'dry' and 'moist' forms of the pre-European grasslands [4] dominated by *Themeda*, *Poa* or *Carex* spp., it is unclear whether it protects the 'secondary' and 'modified' forms of native grassland. Whether it does or not depends on a secondary set of criteria relating to other grass and non-grass native species and their diversity ('Method B' in the Guide [17]). Importantly, the legislation does not explicitly invoke the high/medium/low conservation value classification used in the maps (see above) or in the State legislation (see below). The threshold for >50% native species composition in this national legislation does, however, align with the definition of 'low' conservation value as applied in the State-level legislation.

Managing how this legislation is applied on the ground (though not how it is enforced) falls to NSW Local Land Services. For rural-zoned land, this is under the *Land Management (Native Vegetation) Code 2018* [18], a component of the *NSW Local Land Services Land Management Framework* [13]. Other components of this Fram ework are the NVR Map [14] and, for urban and environmental-zoned land, a State Environmental Planning Policy.

For the purposes of advising on clearing of grassland under the Code, NSW Local Land Services explicitly classifies the grasslands as 'Low', 'Medium' or 'High Conservation Value' [19–21]. These correspond to the land categories given in the NVR Map: 'Low' is Category 1 (unregulated); 'Medium' is Category 2 – unspecified and therefore potentially protected; and 'High' is Category 2–'Sensitive' and thus automatically protected (excepting any caveats under the Code).

Definitions

Assigning a grassland to high, medium or low conservation value categories presents a challenge, however, and the existing maps (which are, at best, only indicative) are uninformative in this respect. This leaves the burden of assigning categories to the details in the Code. In the case of the 'high' category and NTG, this is clear since the definition of NTG

is well defined in the national legislation [17], but for other types of grassland, such as the secondary and modified grasslands which have high native content, it is not. The assignment of 'low' is also straightforward: it is defined as having less than 50% native species or having been 'significantly disturbed or modified'. The definition of 'moderate', by contrast, is not transparent in the Code or the national legislation. To objectify the process, a tool known as the 'Interim Grassland and other Groundcover Assessment Method, IGGAM' has been developed and deployed by Local Land Services. This tool can only be applied by a qualified expert. The methodology behind the tool does not appear to have been published yet. Thus, at present, the definition of 'Moderate' and 'High' conservation value grasslands remains opaque to most stakeholders.

Significantly, the burden of categorising also lies with landowners. This is because landowners can self-assess as to whether the grassland contains <50% native species and is therefore of 'low conservation value'. If it is assessed as such, it can be cleared without consulting Local Land Services. Given the species complexity of native grasslands, their intergrading with exotic species, and their seasonality in species dominance, this may be an unreliable process and thus Local Land Services recommends under the Code that expert advice is sought. If the grassland is deemed 'moderate' or 'high' conservation value using the IGGAM tool, or other crtieria, any clearing that is permissible is then subjected to restrictions under the Code regarding maximum area per year, erodible or riparian land, and a number of other allowances. Set aside areas are required.

Thus, in the end, conservation of the native grasslands does not depend on the availability or quality of maps but on a case-by-case on-ground assessment of the composition and condition of the grassland in question, just as one would hope. Whether self-assessment is adequate for achieving the conservation objective is debatable. This largely depends on whether 'Moderate Conservation Value' grasslands – the category most at risk of being cleared if self-assessment is inaccurate or negatively biased – deserve protection. This provokes the larger question of the conservation objective itself. Do grasslands dominated by native species, but not defined as NTG, have significant ecological values in the grassy ecosystems of the Monaro? Would conservation of such grasslands play a role in protecting the NTG, for example, by expanding threatened species habitat or providing connectivity? If so, are these types covered by the existing legislation, management plans and tools? Since this group is the least well-defined, possibly large in terms of acreage, and most at risk, a sharper focus on their potential contribution to, and means of protecting the endangered grassy ecosystems of the Monaro is warranted.

**Dr. Margaret Mackinnon is the current Chair of Upper Snowy Landcare Network and an Honorary Associate Professor at the Australian National University. In a disclaimer she states: 'The material in this article derives from a reading of publicly available documents over a short time period which may have led to any misinterpretations or misunderstandings contained herein. Readers are therefore referred to the source material given in the References and to the experts in the field within Local Land Services and Friends of Grasslands'.*

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19. NSW Local Land Services. Managing native vegetation on a rural property. Click here.
20. NSW Local Land Services. Clearing native groundcover. Click here.
21. NSW Local Land Services. Land categories and the Land Management Framework. Click here.

Requests for FOG assistance

Geoff Robertson

FOG receives regular requests (at least weekly) for assistance largely through its info@fog.org. The service aims to create an understanding of the many dimensions of grassy ecosystems, to provide answers to particular questions, to point to other sources of information and to encourage the use of the info provided (e.g. the inquirer might use the information in his/her communications, on-ground work and/or advocacy). Apart from hopefully assisting the inquirer, the service helps to keep FOG grounded - closer to its grass roots (pun intended). This article shares my experience in answering questions received by info@fog.

Typical types of requests are:

- A land owner (or manager) wants to manage land for grassy conservation - questions may relate to plant identification, weeding, and availability of plants and seeds. A deeper and related question is how to introduce or restore grasses and wildflowers to the property?
- A student (ranging from primary school to post graduate) wants assistance with an assignment/thesis/research paper involving grassy ecosystems or related species.
- Government staff and other grassy stakeholders may want to discover what we know about particular issues, research, sites, etc. and/or the names of people they might contact.
- An organisation or individual may want assistance with an advocacy issue.
- The media may want a briefing or comment on an issue related to grassy ecosystems or a submission that FOG has made.
- An agency or group may like FOG to make a presentation, attend a meeting, and so on.

Unless the request is a simple one, requests are best handled by a phone call, to establish the background to the inquiry and what the inquirer knows and does not know. Once the background is known, it is easier to assess what information should be offered.

Land management

Often these questions are asked by motivated beginners - where to start? Most of us remember that when we started it was all rather overwhelming. Questions I often ask are:

- What is the size of the property (or conservation area)?
- What are the landscape characteristics?, what is the structure of vegetation and what vegetation communities are present?, what native plants and weed species are present - how extensive is each of the species? Often answers to these questions may not be known.
- What advice has the enquirer obtained about each of the questions just raised? Do they have a plant list and, if so, who compiled it?
- What are the skills of the inquirer in relation to planting, weeding, etc? Does the enquirer have a land management or weed management plan, and, if so, who prepared it?

It is then possible to build on the inquirer's knowledge and experience. For beginners, my approach is one of encouragement, to take on one or two tasks, to be patient, and to stress initial learning is slow, but that the task of land recovery can speed up as one learns new knowledge and skills. Initial steps would include learning how to identify some of the native and exotic plants.

I usually suggest that the inquirer find a nearby group that has similar aims and objectives. More knowledgeable and experienced members of the group may be of great assistance with plant identification and weed issues, and advice on how to start. Also the inquirer will get a chance to see similar patches to his/her patch and what is achievable. If the inquirer can join FOG activities, this would be a highly suitable outcome - here it is necessary to explain what the different FOG activities involve and how they may assist the enquirer.

To learn how to identify plants, I suggest possible books such as *Grassland* and *Woodland Flora,* and online resources such as *Canberra Nature Map* - I explain how to obtain and use these. These are just some of the resources readily available. Sometimes I may arrange a visit to a property it that is desirable and practical.

Assistance to students

Often, after ascertaining from the student the nature of the project, it is often easy to acquaint him/her with the information available on the FOG website and other resources that they may readily access. I have often arranged to visit a student on site to explain what grasslands are about and to encourage their attendance at a FOG event.

Advocacy

When the person has an issue on which they want to campaign, it is useful to take the time to suggest how they might research the issues, build community support, talk to politicians and stakeholders, make a submission, and follow through. It is useful to explain how FOG does this work and to refer to the relevant submissions FOG has made, which are on its website. Sometimes, if practical, I have visited people on site to provide assistance.

Can FOG support a particular advocacy beyond giving advice? FOG does and will support advocacy issues. However it has limited resources and it focuses on grassy ecosystems and broader related biodiversity issues.

Government, stakeholder or media inquiries

Government, stakeholder or media may want briefing on grassy issues or about FOG's submissions. FOG readily provides background briefings, and journalists may quote any submissions on our website. Beyond that, if media want to quote a spokesperson, then arrangements are made for FOG's president to do that or to delegate the task.

FOG presentations to groups

FOG responds positively to requests that it provide a presentation or a briefing to a group on what it does, or on grassy ecosystem issues more generally - this is part of our role in supporting grassy ecosystems.

Requests for contact details

If we receive a request to provide contact details for someone, we may pass on the contact details if that contact is publicly advertised, or approach the person to be contacted seeking their permission to do so.

If anyone wants to know more about this or even assist, please contact me at geoff.robertson@fog.org / 0403 221 117.

Recent FoG Events

Planting at Blue Gum Point

16 May. On a cold morning, temperature 5 degree C, the FOG National Lands volunteers planted 180 natives in place of a mess of woody weeds, blackberries and weed grasses (previously nuked). Restoration will reduce weed invasion of Button Wrinklewort habitat. This demonstrates what a finely-honed group of volunteers can achieve - first removal of weeds from a degraded site and then planting. This is part of the work supported by an ACT Government Environment Grant.

The view back from lake end towards main planting area in gully with some nice Yellow Box trees in the background – Andrew Zelnick.

Bellarine Grasslands Group

On Wed 5 May, at the invitation of the Grasslands Interest Group (GIG), within the Bellarine Landcare Group (BLG), Geoff R and Andrew Z took part in an online forum. The group has been formed by people with a common interest in understanding the grassy vegetation layer and how to restore it, starting with existing remnants.

The group had sent a list of questions to guide the discussion: How has FOG remained vibrant for almost 30 years?; FOG's practical experience in establishing native grasses on farms, and getting rid of pasture grasses; FOG's views on soil testing and management of nutrients to enhance native grasslands; What works well, and what doesn't, in terms of organising FOG activities and keeping members engaged?; and How the FOG committee works - any suggestions for us?

Geoff and Andrew gave honest answers to these and many other follow-up questions. They focussed on FOG's history, the issues it has faced, and the ups and downs. The take away message, if any, was that while FOG has much to celebrate, it has required developing and keeping a vision of what might be achievable, finding ways to achieve it, and valuing each person's contribution. There was some discussion of a visit to the Bellarine later in the year.

One of the group's projects is *Smart Farms - regenerative agriculture on the Bellarine.* BLG has received a $50,000

Smart Farms Grant towards building local knowledge of and the practice of regenerative agriculture, particularly where it applies to reestablishment of native grasses. The project has strong alignment with the GIG, which is planning the project rollout, which runs until June 2023. BLG's latest newsletter may be found here.

Yass Gorge

On 15 May, members of Friends of Grasslands visited Yass Gorge. While the weather was threatening rain and cold, especially with a very cool breeze, within the gorge away from the breeze it was very pleasant and for the most part sunny.

Led by Geoff Robertson, co-author of *Welcome to our Yass Gorge*, and Kath McGuirk, Yass Area Network, the group enjoyed seeing the many wonderful landscape scenes observable from various parts of the gorge, and learning about the three vegetation communities present, namely riparian vegetation, yellow box red gum grassy woodland, and natural grassland. The group stopped at many places along the walk to look at some of the plants, with explantations by plant guru, Margaret Ning. The unusual ones are shown here: nine-awn grass, also known as bottlewashers *(Enneapogon nigricans)*, blanket-fern *(Pleurosorus rutifolius)* and tick indigo *(Indigofera adesmiifolia).*

Throughout the morning the chatter of the many small birds could be heard, and the group was welcomed by the gorge's sometime resident, a little eagle, which soared above us.

Grasses are a fascination to the group and many native and introduced grasses were identified. The youngest member of our group, Arthur, seen in the photo, collected many specimens and proudly knew the name of the most prevalent grass, kangaroo grass.

Yass Gorge has a rich history of Ngunnawal occupation, even until recently, and since the 1980s much has happened in the Gorge to remove weeds that once overwhelmed it, such as blackberry and willows, and to put in pathways - easily walked on the northern side and more challenging on the southern. These efforts have been a partnership largely involving the Council and volunteers, such as Yass Area Network and Friends of Yass Gorge, and outside groups such as Kosciuszko to Coast, Greening Australia and Friends of Grasslands.

Photos by Kath McGuirk and Heather Sweet.

Franklin Grassland

Since our last newsletter, the FOG Franklin Grasslands Parkcare Group has held work parties on April 28, May 4 and 26, and June 2. One of the work parties was devoted to planting wallaby grass in one of the patches that was opened up by the removal of blackberries – these plants were grown by Vanessa Goss, one of the group's members. Three further work parties each consisting of three people met to ensure that the plants were watered – the survival rate has been good.

The main focus of the group has been to weed, extend and link up patches of high-quality grasslands. Many of these patches were initially created by spraying out blackberry, leaving large areas of bare ground. These were subsequently colonised by native grasses and forbs and many weeds. By removing the weeds, these became patches with a diverse range of native plants. Mostly the weeding was done manually. These areas were also successfully seeded with wallaby grass and hoary sunray - the proliferation of sunray daisies make these areas very attractive.

Before its last work party it was decided that the group would start to spot spray, particularly isolated phallaris plants that grew in better quality areas. Four of the group members have ChemCert qualifications. At the last work party some of the volunteers spot sprayed. Other developments include: laying the ground work for the seed orchard in the north east corner; agreement with the Ngunnawal people that the site will change its name to *Budjan Galindji,* a reference to water birds (e.g. Latham's Snipe) that may be seen at the site; participation in FOG's on-ground projects day (12 Jun); and the on-line forum on the offset planning, particularly related to *Budjan Galindji* (17 Jun). Also FOG provided informal comments on the draft offset plan. More on these matters has been held over to our next newsletter. During the winter months, it has been decided that only one working party will be held each month – on the first Wednesday (9am to noon).

FOG at Environment Day Dinner

5 June. Those at the FOG table at the Con Council's Environment Day Dinner had an enjoyable night participating in the fast-moving spectacle. For many years now the dinner, a major fundraiser for the Con Council and its campaigns, has built on previous years. Guest speaker Rebecca Huntley talked about her recent book *How to Talk About Climate Change in a Way That Makes a Difference.* Her talk, like her book and recent radio interviews, gives very useful insights into how to discuss this issue with those who don't accept climate change. These insights are useful to explain many a controversial subject, focusing on how to listen and respond rather than using a confrontational approach (there is plenty of material on the web to follow this up). Local ABC personality Lish Fejer, MC, and Roland Manderson, auctioneer, gave their all - it was entertaining just to watch them in action.

A big theme for the night was the fundraising to save Lawson North and its wildlife. The aim is to raise $40,000 - by the end of the night it was announced that they were more than halfway there. Other achievements and campaigns were also mentioned, such as the Make the Switch website to stop using gas, and the Make the Move website supporting the move from car-based to active travel. The announcement of progress on ACT cat containment was also welcome.

The evening was also a great opportunity to catch up with friends and to lobby, especially with so many politicians in the room: Andrew Barr (Chief Minister), Mick Gentleman, Shane Rattenbury, Rebecca Vassarotti (Ministers) and Leannne Castley (opposition spokesperson on the Environment), Peter Cain (Lib), Jo Clay (Green) and Suzanne Orr (Labor). Congratulations to the Con Council - FOG supports your efforts.

Stop housing on Lawson Nth grasslands!

The Conservation Council is raising $40,000 to support protecting our local environment. It is more than halfway there. Can you donate to help us reach our target? A key target is to stop housing development on grasslands, woodlands and habitat for threatened species at Lawson North. You can make a difference by donating to its appeal, signing the petition to save Lawson North grasslands, or volunteering on a campaign!

News Roundup

ABC Grasslands Podcast

In this ABC podcast 27 Feb 2021, Miyuki Jokiranta interviews Ann McGregor (Merri Creek), John Delpratt (University of Melbourne), Alan Appelbe (owner of Melaleuca), Reg Abrahams (Wurdi Youang) and Peter Wlodarczyk, and asks the question "So how can we learn to see the landscape anew and protect the remaining grasslands?"

ACT Grassy Grants Announced

In early June, the ACT Government announced its Environment and Nature in the City Grants valued at $300k. The full statement of the government's announcement may be found here.

FOG was pleased to be awarded $27,375 for Phase 2 (2nd year) of its Blue Gum Point Woodland restoration at Yarralumla. FOG president, Jamie Pittock said "This is a recognition that groups like FOG, comprising solely volunteers, can take on major projects. It was also an endorsement of the work already undertaken in 2020-21 when FOG received $20,865 for Phase 1 of the project. This involved removing many woody weeds and exotic trees from the south shore of Lake Burley Griffin and expanding and improving the adjacent natural temperate grasslands. FOG also played a role in several other grant applications and is pleased that so many focus on grassy ecosystems vegetation or associated species" Jamie said.

Photo (Andrew Zelnik) is a view back from lake end towards main planting area in gully with some nice Yellow Box trees in the background. These plantings were undertaken in Phase 1 of the FOG project.

Bredbo Gentian & Wandiyali

On 21 April, the Upper Murrumbidgee Landcare Network held the first of its 2021 series of mini-forums on *Landscape Recovery, Restoration and Resilience.* There were two presentations of interest to FOG members.

Laura Canackle's presentation was titled *The resilient Bredbo gentian.* She is a project officer working with the NSW Saving our Species program, and describes herself as "a flora nerd from way back". "Her purpose in life is to inspire people to get excited about our unique and captivating native flora in the hope that by being noticed, it will be protected." She also started the FOG Facebook page. While her presentation broadly covered many issues associated with threatened species, her focus was on the genus *Gentiana,* 400 species world wide, 4 in Australia: *G. baeuerienii, G. bredboensis, G. wingecarribiensis* and *G. wissmanii.* All four are annual and open only in full sun; restricted to swamp margins and grow in wet seepage areas; and are listed as threatened. The news on each species is majorly concerning, but our Bredbo gentian after a non appearance during many years of drought, bounced back with over a thousand plants seen after the 2020 heavy rains. What are the lessons here? Suggest you view the Bredbo gentian.

The second was by Carolyn Larcombe on *Wandiyali: recovery, restoration and resilience*. Many FOG members are familiar with Carolyn and her work at Wandiyali (near Queanbeyan) as a result of FOG's visit late last year and her presentation to the first of FOG's online forums earlier this year. Caroline is a passionate visionary. For those who want to understand how to manage and restore this large reserve consisting of many grassy ecosystems, please take the time to view this (Wandiyali).

Flea Bog Flat receives grant - Julia Raine

Great news – we were successful with our grant application, announced yesterday, full list here here. I know we'll all be looking forward to working with Dr Catherine Ross from Capital Ecology to develop a management plan for Flea Bog Flat. We'll get together soon to celebrate and plan next steps.

Special thanks to all those who have helped us along the way including TCCS Volunteer coordinators, Allan and Jayne, Dr Masumi Robertson, GCG staff, Kat & Fiona, **Geoff & Margaret and others from Friends of Grasslands**, and to Linda Roberts, ACT Heritage, South Bruce Residents Association, Hughes Garran Woodlands and Canberra Ornithologists Group (COG) for their letters of

support. Friends of Grasslands are already planning follow-up visits and Chris Davey from COG is keen to help us monitor birdlife.

Of course, we wouldn't have Flea Bog Flat to work on without the efforts of the original South Bruce residents more than 20 years ago who successfully lobbied against development plans. Thank you!

FOG supports kangaroo plan

FOG recently endorsed the Joint Statement on Improving Kangaroo Management. It was workshopped at the Australian Rangelands Society and Ecological Society of Australia conferences in 2019, and it is hoped that it will form a springboard to improving the nation-wide management of kangaroos and to gaining financial support from the Future Drought Fund. The statement is found here.

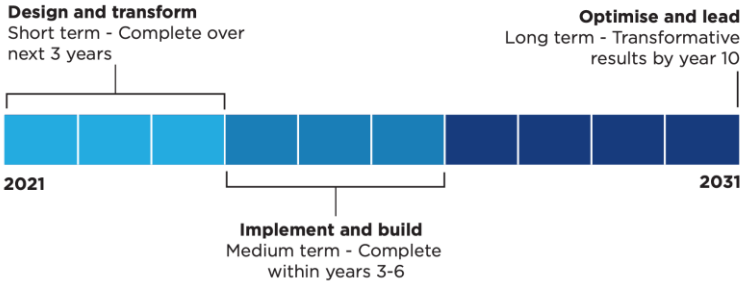
Crown Plan Strategic Plan released

The NSW Government has just released *Crown land 2031 - State Strategic Plan for Crown land, June 2021.* Given the time lapse and the many hours that have been involved in consulting with stakeholders, stakeholders preparing submissions, preparing various drafts of the plan, it is a very disappointing document. The vision and priorities are generally vague.

The vision is "Crown land supports resilient, sustainable and prosperous communities across NSW." The five priorities focus on: strengthening community connections with crown land; accelerating economic progress; granting native title to Aboriginal land recognising that legally land rights remain, unless the title has been extinguished; protecting cultural heritage; and protecting environment assets, improving and expanding green space and building climate change resilience. The three outcomes under each priority are a little more substantial but the timetable shown below is vague. There is no mention of monitoring its success.

FOG has made various submissions to the drafting of the strategy - the latest is 10 August 2020. None of our recommendations seem to have been picked up. For example, there is no mention of threatened species and ecological communities, and while there are several mentions of "biodiversity" - the term is neither explained nor elaborated upon. The plan may be found here (Crown land 2031).

Figure 6: Outcomes will be achieved in short-term (1-3 year), medium-term (3-6 year) or long-term 6 to 10-year timeframes



FOG Grassy Ecosystem Grants Update

Andrew Zelnik

The closing date for 2021 Grassy Ecosystem Grant applications was 30 April. This year, again aided by a further widening of our advertising net, we have received seven applications for grants totalling just under $9800.

Three are for public education and outreach initiatives at three notable sites in the ACT. Three, from university PhD candidates in Sydney and Wollongong, are for experimental research projects on various aspects of native grassland soil microbe function in relation to grassland restoration and to climate change. The other, our first from SA, is for on-ground works (weed control and revegetation) on a significant remnant of grassy woodland on a town common. In addition we also received four other associated enquiries including two from private landholders (not FOG members) looking to enhance the condition of native grassy vegetation on their properties.

The FOG Supported Projects Sub-committee is in the process of completing its assessments of this year's applications with a view to making its recommendations to FOG Committee and notifying applicants of the results by mid-June. In the next issue we'll provide more details about the successful applications and also provide a progress update on 2019 and 2020 grant projects.

Hughes Garden woodland

Geoff R recently visited the Hughes Garran Woodland following an enquiry about native grass mixes that might survive frequent mowing and summer drought. Ruth and Bill Kerruish showed him around the park and explained its history - they pointed out that the area had gone from "sheep paddock to grassy woodland in 56 Years" .

When Hughes and Garran were developed in 1965, the 8ha park was sheep paddock, with three surviving trees and a patch of kangaroo grass. Most of the park, except for the kangaroo grass area, was planted with a range of eucalypts, predominately yellow and apple box. The

Bill Kerruish sitting in the woodland on a seat he carved from a branch of a 300 year old yellow box. The seat has become a popular meeting place

Hughes-Garran Woodlands Management Plan (2013) was put together (with input from Sarah Sharp) to provide a guide that would move the park towards the original yellow box, red gum grassy woodland landscape.

According to Ruth and Bill it has come a long way from the sheep paddock of 1965! The Department of Interior plantings re-established the woodlands, and more recent plantings by the volunteers have extended the trees and re-established an understorey. Walking tracks encourage the local community to make full use of the park.

Many native grasses have survived 150 years of sheep, including the iconic kangaroo grass, spear grasses, wallaby grasses, river tussock and snow grasses, redleg grass, hairy panic, windmill grass, etc.

The challenge ahead lies in controlling the troublesome exotic weeds such as African love grass, Chilean needle grass, serrated tussock, bromus grasses (several species), paspalum, phalaris, panic veldt grass, squirrel-tail fescue, pigeon grass and wild oats, etc. This will not be an easy task as the exotic grasses are so dominant.

An interesting park and well worth visiting.

The branch and the insert shows earlier carving by longicorn beetle larva – photos by RuthK

Reclaim Kosci

FOG regularly receives the *Reclaim Kosci* bulletin – FOG supported the group's establishment to protect the alps, particularly against feral horses. The latest bulletin criticises the NSW government for dragging the chain, encourages submissions on Victoria's draft plan for *Alpine National Park*. It also mentions it has received 12,000 signatures for its submission on horses. Those who want to learn more can click here: https://reclaimkosci.org.au.

Red Hill Integrated Plan

For many years, FOG has supported attempts by the Red Hill Regenerators to get a good balance between protecting the woodlands while allowing sensible development to take place, making many submissions on the Federal Golf Course and Kent Street Deakin. In recent years FOG has participated in efforts to come up with an integrated plan for Red Hill, which has now been released and is found here. This is a good outcome for a very long-running issue.

According to the a spokesperson for the Regenerators "For more than two decades the Red Hill Regenerators battled a near constant barrage of ad hoc, ill-conceived development proposals on land in and adjacent to Red Hill's woodland. This was incredibly frustrating and time consuming. We, together with other local community groups, called for a strategic plan that takes a landscape focus that protects the woodlands key values and functioning and reflects community wishes before setting development options. The plan strikes a balance between providing protection for biodiversity both inside and outside the Red Hill Reserve, protecting the amenity of residents and allowing for some limited development activity. It provides an opportunity for adding several areas of woodland to Red Hill Reserve, limits development on Kent Street Deakin to the existing built footprint and to commercial/business purposes, seeks to enhance the ecological functioning and community use of open space corridors joining Red Hill to woodland patches in Hughes and Garran and allows for up to a 125 unit retirement village in the southern portion of the Federal Golf Course (well away from Red Hill Nature Reserve and at least 50m from any existing houses).

The Red Hill Regenerators consider that the Plan balances the diversity of community needs. The Plan is a framework document which now requires a great deal of implementation activity, including funds, to deliver real outcomes. We trust (and remain vigilant) that the coming years will bring to fruition the strategic, well informed vision of the Plan." n."

Lawson North campaign

In June 2020, FOG became aware of a proposal by Defence Housing Australia (DHA) to establish a housing estate at Lawson North that will destroy areas of natural temperate grasslands, box gum woodland and habitat for related species. FOG members attended a number of presentations by Tait Network on the proposal and, in a meeting with Tait and DHA, made a number of comments on the proposal, essentially opposing it.

Subsequently, the Conservation Council and FOG organised a letter to DHA, copied to many other Commonwealth and ACT government agencies. The letter was signed by 109 organisations and individuals familiar with the important ecological and habitat values of the site, stating their concerns over the proposal. As a result of the letter, we understand that DHA reviewed the ecological and heritage assessments for the site.

In the ACT Election campaign, the Lawson North development was highlighted to candidates. ACT Greens candidates announced their opposition to the development given its biodiversity values, and since forming government with the ALP have confirmed their opposition. Lobbying decision makers and appeals to the community have been ongoing.

DHA has indicated to us that there will be further community consultation on its revised proposal currently being developed. The proposal will be referred under the Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Act (EPBC), at which point there will be public consultation on whether it triggers the Act. We are unable to see at this point how any development on site could not be considered a controlled action at the very least, and so expect further assessment under the EPBC Act will be required. If approved by the Commonwealth Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment, the National Capital Authority, as the relevant authority, would need to update the Development Control Plan in order for the development to proceed.

Helen Oakey, Executive Director of the ConCouncil, recently provided an update on Lawson North speaking to Hedda Murray on 2XX 98.3FM Canberra. It is a great explanation of the issues involved and you can listen at situation at Lawson grasslands.

Keep an eye on the Conservation Council newsletter for their next event on Lawson North, and to find out how you can help as the campaign proceeds. In the short term, you can sign the petition to Barry Jackson, CEO of Defence Housing Australia.

Are offsets being ripped off?

Geoff Robertson

FOG has many reservations about conservation offsets. What are they? When land containing threatened ecological communities or habitat for threatened species, is required for some other purpose resulting in the destruction of the community or habitat, an offset is arranged for the loss. In theory the offset results in something being created of equal value. For example, loss of golden sun moth habitat in one place can be offset by creating additional golden sun moth habitat (and moths) elsewhere.

While in theory, offsets can result in "no net loss" and "like for like", how this is achieved in practice is highly questionable. Lisa Cox (Guardian 28 Apr 2021) goes much further and in an article headed '*Deeply concerning': government consultant made millions from NSW environmental offsets'* details examples of individuals and companies making huge profits from offsets. She quotes:

Anthony Whealy, the director of the Centre for Public Integrity and a former NSW supreme court judge:

> "The sheer magnitude of the profits realised by private individuals and companies from a scheme essentially designed to protect and restore the environment raises serious concerns."

Chris Gambian, the chief executive of the Nature Conservation Council of NSW:

> "The problem with commodifying natural assets like water and biodiversity is they inevitably become prey to speculative investors."

James Trezise, a policy analyst at the Australian Conservation Foundation:

> "Biodiversity markets were relatively new, under-regulated and had so far escaped the oversight of corporate regulators such as the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission. There is a clear need for a corporate regulator to step in here and give the public confidence that everything is above board. We're stepping away from this being solely an environmental issue to it being a corporate governance and accountability issue."

Reference:
https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/apr/28/deeply-concerning-government-consultant-made-millions-from-nsw-environmental-offsets

Australia joins HAC

14 June. Prime Minister Morrison (at the G7 Summit) joined Australia to the High Ambition Coalition (HAC) for Nature and People, an intergovernmental group of 60 countries. The HAC is a global pact to protect 30 per cent of the world's land and sea, to halt the loss of species and ecosystems. G7 leaders have championed global biodiversity targets and with a view to supporting these global targets, Australia is committing to protecting a combined 30 per cent of domestic land and ocean by 2030. "Currently, Australia has more than 29 per cent of its land and sea in protected areas, compared to 15 per cent of land and 7 per cent of seas globally. We are well placed to make a strong contribution to a global '30 by 30' target and encourage other countries to do the same." Read more on HAC here.

Soil carbon

If you haven't caught up on the debate on soil carbon, we recommend two items from the ABC's science show. The first took place on 6 February and featured PhD candidate Thomas O'Donoghue, who is working on crops and farm management techniques which together can result in build-up of carbon in the soil, and emeritus professor Robert White who described some of the wider challenges in relying on our soils to hold and continue to hold carbon drawn down from the atmosphere. Both are fascinating contributions to this issue. What are the implications for our grasslands? The program may be found here 6 Feb 2016.

The second is from 19 September last. The National Farmers' Federation is working towards zero emissions by 2050. In 2018, thirteen percent of Australia's greenhouse gas emissions came from agriculture. Red meat producers have a target of zero emissions by 2030. Alexandra de Blas takes us to a Victorian farm where change is happening. Soils are being used to trap carbon with the help of fungi. Degraded soils are being restored with multi-cropping, and a new approach to grazing is allowing plants to collect carbon and deposit it deep in the soil. The program may be found here 19 Sept.

The effects of herbivore overgrazing in semi-arid Australia – *Sue Ross*

A 2018 academic study by Charlotte H Mills, Helen Waudby, Graeme Finlayson, David Parker Matthew Cameron and Mike Letnic in The Global Ecology and Conservation newsletter (20 Dec 20) describes the impacts of kangaroo and rabbit grazing in conservation reserves in semi-arid Australia. Kangaroos were the dominant herbivore and the main cause of the degradation.

The study used previous findings that large herbivores have grown in numbers mainly because of fewer predators. The study methodology is described in some detail including the use of exclusion plots and assessment of vegetation and soil impacts.

The findings include, inter alia, that "Kangaroo grazing was linked to reduced understorey vegetation complexity, grass cover, and grass and forb species richness, depletion of the soil carbon and phosphorous pools, and increased soil bulk density."

Read more in
https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2351989420309252

ACT Waterwatch report 2020

Waterwatch is a largely volunteer organisation, funded by the ACT Government, that monitors water quality at various points within the ACT. It has been collecting data from the Murrumbidgee catchment upstream of Burrinjuck Dam (with the exception of the Goodradigbee catchment) since 1995. The total area monitored by Waterwatch is more than 11,400km^2.

The group publishes the data analysis in its 2020 report Catchment Health Indicator Program (CHIP). The following are some of the report's key points, based on a record 1,872 water quality surveys, 184 water bug surveys and 219 riverbank vegetation assessments collected by over 200 volunteers from 229 sites:

- Of 98 report cards, 4 are in 'excellent' health, 36 were 'good', 55 were 'fair' and 3 were 'poor'.
- Overall, 59% of 'reaches' fell into the fair/poor range which is approximately the same as 2019 and a rise from 55% in 2018.
- The 2020 results can likely be attributed to a mix of changes to the conditions, including the 2019/20 bushfires and the upper Murrumbidgee catchment receiving above annual average rainfall.
- This is following the already extreme dry period in 2019, the driest year on record, that saw all three main CHIP parameters adversely affected to varying degrees.
- Every volunteer returned in 2020 to sample our waterways following significant changes in the year, including the COVID-19 lockdown.
- Waterways in our upland reserves such as Gibraltar Creek and the Cotter River were found to have the best health.
- Platypus numbers also saw a rise in 2020 with 31 individuals detected during Platypus Month across eight 'reaches'. This number is much higher than the 11 individuals spotted in 2019, however this rise may also be attributed to three additional sites being added to the survey in 2020.

Temperate Woodland Birds CAP - *Geoff Robertson*

Every so often a nice piece of work appears which provides great analysis of a particular issue of concern to our members. Such is the recently published *Temperate Woodlands Birds Conservation Action Plan* (aka CAP) prepared by the Temperate Woodland Bird CAP Steering Committee. Woodland birds provide a good focus for conservation efforts associated with grassy woodlands. As the report points out, nationally, one-third of Australia's woodlands (and 80% of our temperate woodlands) have been historically cleared and continue to degrade due to threatening processes. The plan focuses on a total of 51 temperate woodland bird species, which have been grouped into ten functional groups (conservation targets), based largely on habitat requirements. Each conservation target provides the

basis for setting goals, implementing actions and mitigating threatening processes - these are explained in the plan. The ten targets are: ground foragers, pouncing robins, shrubby-understorey specialists, bark and foliage gleaners, nectar-sippers, hollow-dependent parrots, arboreal Insectivore specialists, mistletoe specialists, seed-eating parrots and nocturnal carnivores.

The CAP for each category explains the threats, actions, progress and implementation, and the role of the CAP implementation team. This 80 page report is well worth a read and is an ideal way to grasp a good understanding of the woodland bird conservation effort. This 80 page report may be found here.

Using salicylic acid to grow native grasses

Research undertaken by scientist Dr. Simone Pedrini at Curtin University and reported by Simone Pedrini, Jason C. Stevens and Kingsley W. Dixon in PLOS ONE has found that seed encrusted with salicylic acid improves plant establishment for three familiar grass genera: spear grass, weeping grass, and wallaby grass.

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