



News of Friends of Grasslands

Supporting native grassy ecosystems

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March & April 2025

Activities

Work Parties

Gurubung Dhaura

Sat 8 Mar 9-12:30pm, plant maintenance

Register: [Paul Archer](#)

Sat 13 April 9-12:30pm, woody weed control, Blue Gum Point

Register: [Jamie Pittock](#)

Budjan Galindji (Franklin Reserve)

Wed 5 & 26 Mar 9-11:30am

Wed 2 & 23 Apr 9-11:30am

Register: [Margaret Ning](#)

Top Hut TSR, near Cooma
NSW

Sun 16 Mar work party

(campout/star gazing PM Sat 15 Mar)

Register: [Margaret Ning](#)

Hall Cemetery

Sat 5 Apr 9am-11am

Register: [John Fitz Gerald](#)

Excursions

Murrumbateman Village

Grassy Woodland

Sat 29 Mar, 2pm to 4pm

Visit the area and meet the new owners, the Local Land Council

Register: [Margaret Ning](#)

Crace Grassland

Visit the grassland: Is the Button Wrinklewort resisting the SJW & CNG advance?

Register: [Margaret Ning](#)

President's report

Prof Jamie Pittock, President, Friends of Grasslands

The Dragon

The fate of the Canberra Grassland Earless Dragon has been a focus for FOG's work in recent weeks. In 2009 the Capital Airport Group (CAG) obtained an approval under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act (EPBC Act) to build a road around the northern end of Canberra Airport. The road would bisect the largest remaining area – 340 hectares – of critically endangered Natural Temperate Grassland (NTG) habitat left in the ACT, the patch is on the Canberra airport lease and contiguous Defence lands.

FOG has opposed the road since it was first proposed in 1998. At the urging of CAG the original approval was varied by the Morrison government in May 2020 - in secret - to a more damaging alignment. When this new approval became public in 2022, FOG asked the environment minister to revoke the approval.

In the intervening time, the Grassland Earless Dragon was recognised as four separate species. The three remaining populations have also greatly declined. They are thought to survive on just over 40 hectares of critical habitat. The airport population would be bisected by CAG's road. The Dragon was also adopted as one of 110 nationally threatened species that are a priority to recover.

The owners of CAG have made tremendous social contributions to our community through their philanthropic trust, the Snow Foundation. It is perplexing that CAG appear unwilling in this case to consider similar nation-leading contributions for the environment through stewardship of the critically endangered natural temperate grasslands on their airport lease.

In October 2023, the Federal Department of Climate Change, Environment, Energy and Water (DCCEEW) started a stakeholder consultation process on the road development to consider stronger protections for the Dragon. It is very disappointing that the Department and the Minister failed to take a decision before CAG fired up the bulldozers in late February 2025.

CAG has agreed to an ill-defined moratorium on building the most environmentally destructive half of the road while they "develop a nature-positive plan". Despite the mellifluous words, it is hard to see how that plan would be more than greenwashing, and the moratorium may simply postpone a decision to a new and possibly more pliant minister.

Minister Plibersek has the power to revoke the approval before the Federal election is called. Please email the minister today at tanya.plibersek.mp@aph.gov.au or phone: (02) 6277 7920 and ask her to revoke the northern road at Canberra airport. The Dragon deserves a chance.

Offsets

In the last newsletter, I criticised the failure to legally protect in reserves the EPBC Act development approval offset areas – often grassy ecosystems – where conditions apply for periods of up to 40 years. This was not entirely accurate and the truth is even stranger. It turns out that some offset areas are quickly included into Canberra Nature Park (or other reserves), even as the condition period applies, while others languish as zombie parks for years. However, on a case by case basis, the EPBC Act approval conditions do not require all offset areas to become reserves. Indeed, it is possible that after the condition period expires, for offset areas that are not protected, there could be double dipping where the area is then developed or used as an offset for a second time. Clearly, this is a farcical situation and the Commonwealth Government should require all offset areas to be legally protected in perpetuity.

The Committee

FOG has the most wonderful committee. A number of committee members will be stepping down at our Annual General Meeting on Wednesday 30th April (Conservation Council offices from 5:30 pm). New nominees for the committee would be particularly welcome. The work is not onerous and it is a fun way to contribute to our shared goal of conserving grassy ecosystems. We need regular committee members who can participate in our bi-monthly meetings. There are also a number of office positions where we are looking for new people to step up, including our two Vice-President positions. Please contact me if you would like to know more or are willing to stand.

See you in our grasslands.

Best wishes - Jamie

Time for a motivational spray – FOG needs hands on deck!

Matt Whitting

Decades ago, I was a Coach Captain. Now, I am a plain old wannabe bus driver who knows the importance of a good road to keeping people safe (starting in 1989, my wife and I managed camping tours all around Australia).

There *are* a few things better than looking out of the moving office window on a dirt road upon a long thin swathe of country. One is getting out of the bus and getting amongst Country up close. Ahead of that is doing so in the company of First People. I have seen ‘amazed’ on the faces of passengers as they return from a walk through a species-rich grassland with Traditional Custodians. If you haven’t had such an experience, value and look out for the opportunity.

With the long-distance tours behind me, I volunteer with FOG instead as one way I can give back. In this role I welcome the challenge of safeguarding the existence and of maintaining and improving the condition of important places. FOG was an obvious choice given grassy ecosystems are *the* most critically endangered and *the* most under-appreciated of this country’s wondrous places.



I am *particularly* angry about people disrespecting grassy ecosystems (there is so little left); so, it has been a very tough week. Capital Airport Group (CAG) has fired up the bulldozers and is destroying a precious area FOG has been trying actively to protect for three decades. We have explained to CAG over and over that the site they are now bulldozing is precious. It is clear CAG do not care. It is wasteful and unnecessary. It is stupid!

FOG is doing what we legally can. Keep watch on the [FOG website](#) for the latest updates. Right now, please, write to The Hon Tanya Plibersek MP, Minister for the Environment and Water and ask, respectfully, that she suspend the approval for the northern Road (tanya.plibersek.mp@aph.gov.au).

Members were buoyed when the Minister prioritised Canberra Grassland Earless Dragons in the fight against extinctions and listed them as threatened at the 'critically endangered' level. I expect you, like me, are *beyond* disappointed that the Minister has not acted to stop CAG's bulldozers.

I remain positive and determined. I will, for as long as I am vertical, keep trying. FOG gives me that chance. I can pull a weed, rip out a fence *and*, when it takes my fancy, I can blast out a submission or a letter to the Minister.

I am now convening FOG's Advocacy Group. I thank the previous convenor, Sarah Sharp, for all her many years of efforts and for her help and guidance. I am *really* grateful Sarah is continuing her involvement.

Right now, as ever, FOG is looking for volunteers. If you're keen to prevent habitat loss, or limit the introduction or spread of weeds and feral animals throughout the grassy ecosystems in and around Canberra, please join FOG. Volunteer and help us.

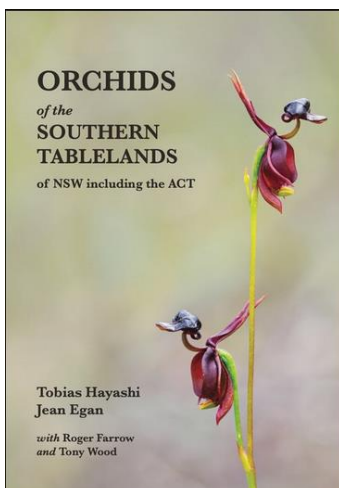
If you join our Advocacy Group, you could prepare, *or contribute to the preparation of*, a submission. You could assess, *or contribute to assessment of*, all *or part* of a proposal. There is guidance. We monitor reports, review declarations, comment on land management methods and more. It can be intense at times but the tasks are flexible and different every day.

If I have piqued your interest, look [here](#) at the very high quality work members and former members of this Group have delivered over many years. In my short time at the helm, representatives of conservation organisations have contacted me looking for our drafts, because they know FOG is seriously good in the advocacy space. We don't tackle everything. We can't. Our focus is protecting and promoting the effective management of all the valuable remnant grassy ecosystems that remain. When it gets busy, we prioritise. If you want to get involved, please email me at matt.whitting@fog.org.au.

Our Advocacy Group is meeting on 6 March at 5 pm in Tilleys in Lyneham. If you intend to join us, please let me know so we will know to look out for you.



These stunning photos are by Jess Thompson. Left: An adult Canberra dragon basking on a tussock Right: Canberra dragon in a rasy cricket burrow. The photo on the previous page is by Emma Carlson



Orchids of the Southern Tablelands

Features updated information, new and improved introductory chapters on orchid biology, threats and conservation. It is a comprehensive field guide to the native Orchids of the Southern Tablelands of NSW including the ACT. It covers Canberra and surrounding areas, including the entirety of the Canberra Nature Map region. Each of the 202 species in the region is described in detail and illustrated with beautiful photos showing key identifying features. Distribution maps show known records for each species in the region. Each of the 30 genera is introduced in detail, including information on taxonomy, ecology, pollination, and mycorrhizal fungi. [Click here](#) to order.

FOG and Conservation Council media release 17 January 2025

Act now, Minister, to prevent the slaying of a Dragon at Canberra Airport

Friends of Grasslands (FOG) and Conservation Council ACT Region (the Council) have today called on Federal Minister for the Environment, Tanya Plibersek, to rescue the Canberra Grassland Earless Dragons from the Canberra Airport Group (CAG) by revoking development approval of a road running from Fairbairn to the north of the Airport (see map below). This road will destroy essential habitat for the Dragon. When first approved in 2009, the road's route went *around* significant habitat.

President of FOG, Professor Jamie Pittock said "After 15 years it is time for the Federal Minister to kill off the "zombie" development approval for the proposed road around the north end of Canberra Airport. If built this road would slay Canberra's Dragon."

"In 2022, the Minister identified the reptile as one of 110 endangered species nationally to be recovered under her new *Threatened Species Action Plan*," Pittock said

At that time the Minister asked CAG to demonstrate the road could be built and operated *without* increasing the risk of extinction for the Dragon population, *without* destroying habitat that is *critical* to the Dragon's survival. Instead, the proposal does the exact opposite."

Chief Executive of the Council Dr Simon Copland said: "Canberra Airport have had 15 years to demonstrate that they can build the road without slaying our Dragon. Enough is enough. It is time to cancel this approval."

"Canberra Airport is home to one of just three Dragon populations known to remain on just 40 hectares of habitat in the Majura and Jerrabomberra valleys, in the western Australian Capital Territory and outskirts of Queanbeyan. The Dragons are charismatic small lizards that live in spider burrows in endangered natural temperate grassland

ecosystems. They should be protected, not face extinction due to this unnecessary road."

Canberra Airport claim that the proposed new road is essential to their business. Professor Pittock said: "They have had 15 years to build the road but haven't. Clearly the proposed road is not essential. The Federal Government should not allow this questionable, zombie approval to stand."

Left: Executive Director of the Conservation Council, Simon Copland; President of Friends of Grassland, Jamie Pittock, and our resident 'dragon', Matt Whitting, standing outside the proposed site for the North Canberra Airport Road. Photo: Hedda M.



Background – the Dragon

The Canberra Grassland Earless Dragon (*Tympanocryptis lineata*) was only identified as a separate species in 2022, when taxonomists split the former (threatened) Grassland Earless Dragon into four species. The Canberra Dragon species is now only found on 40 hectares in three small locations in the eastern Australian Capital Territory.

Dragons are the 'goldilocks' indicator species for healthy grasslands as they need enough space between tussocks to hunt insects but also enough grass to hide from predators. This 'just right' grass cover is the ideal habitat for a number of endangered animal and wildflower species on natural grasslands.

Tawny Frogmouth, a nocturnal bird and master of camouflage

Michael Bedingfield

Unless you go out at night, you will not hear the song of the Tawny Frogmouth. It makes the most wonderful soft call of "oo-oo-oo-oo-oo-oo-oo". You might hear it coming from above you in a tree, but the bird will be very difficult to see among the foliage. The syllable "oo" may be repeated ten to thirty times. The bird then takes a pause before beginning again. The call is low-pitched and throaty. During the day the bird is quiet and uses its plumage as a camouflage to remain inconspicuous. You may see it roosting on a tree branch, looking as if it is part of the tree itself. It perches in a stiff, elongated attitude with head forward and eyes closed narrowly, looking like a broken dead branch. If approached during the day it will remain still and trust in its camouflage for protection. So you can get quite close to the bird, but if it feels too threatened it can make a loud hissing sound, facing aggressively toward the offender with feathers fluffed out and mouth and eyes wide open.

This bird's colouring is mostly grey mottled with dark grey, light brown, black and white. The undersides are paler in colour. It has a large head with bristly feathers on its face which partially hide its broad curved bill. The wide bill is what gives it its name. It does have a different colour phase in which the grey is replaced by rufous brown. The size of the bird is variable throughout its range, being 34cm to 53cm from bill to tail with the males being larger than the females. The feathers are soft, like those of owls, so their flight is silent.

The scientific name for the Tawny Frogmouth is *Podargus strigoides*. There are two other species of the *Podargus* genus and both are similar in appearance to the Tawny Frogmouth. There is the Papuan Frogmouth, *P. papuensis*, which is found on the Cape York Peninsula. The Marbled Frogmouth, *P. ocellarus*, has two races, one found in the tropical rainforests of northern Cape York, the other in the subtropical forests of the North Coast of NSW and Southeast Queensland. The Marbled Frogmouth is regarded as vulnerable in NSW. However the Tawny Frogmouth is quite common and widely distributed across the Australian continent and in Tasmania. Its habitat preference is for eucalypt woodlands but it occurs in a great variety of other places, including urban areas, though not in dense rainforests and treeless deserts.

When foraging it likes to perch motionless in a tree or on a post, now in an upright posture, waiting for sights and sounds below. Then it will swoop down to the ground to capture its prey. It feeds predominately on nocturnal insects and other arthropods, as well as worms, slugs and snails. But it also eats small mammals, birds, reptiles and frogs. It is also able to capture insects in flight, such as moths. It hunts silently like an owl with the help of its soft feathers. However it is not related to the owls but is more closely related to the nightjars. It lacks the strong talons of an owl and has small feet and claws. One may occasionally see this bird passing through the glare of a car's headlights and then its wing colouring looks very pale. It performs this dangerous practice to capture insects made visible in the lights, but unfortunately sometimes meets an untimely end in this way.

Breeding season is around August to December, except in arid regions where the birds may breed after good rain. They are sedentary and are known to live up to 14 years, usually occupying the same territory. A couple will pair up for life, working together to build the nest, normally on a fairly horizontal forked tree branch. The nest is a platform of twigs, leaves and grass. At night both

male and female participate in the incubation of the eggs, taking turns, but during the day the male usually sits on the eggs. Maintaining the pair bond is important and during breeding season the pair will roost close together on the same branch often with their bodies touching. Normally only one brood is raised in a season and both parents work to feed the young. After the chicks have grown enough to leave the nest, the family will roost closely together on the same branch in a very cosy group.

I have provided a drawing of the Tawny Frogmouth perching upright and quietly surveying the scene. I made this from a photo taken at night. There is some value in going out late at night when all is quiet, to hear the different sounds wild creatures make in the darkness. There are other interesting things to hear apart from the usual crickets and frogs. You may hear the haunting sound of the Boobook Owl with its distinctive “mopoke” call, or the guttural growl of a Common Brushtail Possum. And if you are lucky you might hear the soft “oo-oo-oo-ing” of a Tawny Frogmouth.



References: <https://australian.museum/learn/animals/birds/tawny-frogmouth/>; <https://www.bushheritage.org.au/species/tawny-frogmouth/>; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tawny_frogmouth

Latest Progress on the Biodiversity Network

Sarah Sharp

The Conservation Council's Biodiversity Working Group and Friends of Grasslands (FOG) developed a proposal in early 2023 to establish a [Biodiversity Network](#) to protect remnants of natural value that are not reserved, whereby these remnants, together with those in reserve, will be unified into a single legal and management framework. The proposal is consistent with the International Union for the Conservation of Nature's (IUCN's) Protected Area Network category, 'other effective area-based conservation measures' (OECMs). ^[1]

The Biodiversity Network will facilitate best practice conservation on and off reserve.

A collaborative arrangement between government, landholders, first nation representatives, community and scientific organisations will:

- Map and describe conservation areas outside the reserve system;
- Provide protection to conservation areas through incorporating remnants into adjacent reserves or creating conservation areas on leased and unleased land outside the reserve system which are exempt from development but may be used for other compatible purposes (such as agricultural land uses or recreation);
- Implement coordinated, consistent and best practice ecological management across land tenures; and
- Improve engagement, cooperation and support between land managers, community, special interest groups and associated management and research professions.

Progress update, February 2025

The Conservation Council of the ACT and Region and the Friends of Grasslands are working together to lobby for the completion of the implementation of the Biodiversity Network. During 2023 and 2024 every opportunity has been taken to promote the network. The concept has been favourably met, and many moves by government and the Legislative Assembly are likely to facilitate implementation of the network in terms of protection and management. We are optimistic that the network will be achieved.

Achievements to date:

- Inclusion of the Biodiversity Network in early drafts of Nature Conservation Strategy;
- Recognition of the term 'Biodiversity Network';
- Amalgamation of all public land managers into one unit;
- Near completion of survey of off-reserve conservation areas; and
- Discussions about conservation options for leased conservation areas.

Further actions that FOG and the Conservation Council plan:

- Lobbying as part of the review of the Nature Conservation Strategy and the Nature Conservation Act to ensure conservation areas are protected under legislation so they are quarantined from destruction or modification;
- Continue to lobby to ensure covenants on leased land are voluntary, and applied as an incentive, not a disincentive;
- Lobby to ensure amalgamation of land management on reserves and other public land will facilitate sharing of knowledge and ideally better management on conservation areas; and
- Preparation of a simple map to demonstrate where off-reserve areas occur.

Contacts

For further information contact sarah.sharp@fog.org.au or director@conservationcouncil.org.au

^[1] IUCN, *Recognising and reporting on other area-based effective conservation measures. Protected Area Technical Report Series No. 3, 2019*

Close up - *Wahlenbergia luteola*

John Fitz Gerald

For this issue I've investigated a forb species that grows well in some of our local temperate native grasslands. I've chosen the genus *Wahlenbergia* and all of you who have attempted to identify species in this group will know that using the corresponding ID keys to guide you is not an exercise for the faint-hearted. So I've chosen a species which is distinctive, the Yellowish Bluebell, *W. luteola*, where I can be certain of my ID from the yellow-brown shading of the back of the petals.

My favourite site, Blue Devil Grassland, was the source of plant material and the species here responded well to an April 2024 ecological burn. I was interested to find in spring that many of the plants growing quickly were being pruned just as fast. The culprits were a family of Australian Wood Ducks with a clutch of five hungry fluffy ducklings. Once these youngsters grew enough to fly away and chew other greenery, the *Wahlenbergias* flowered well and set plenty of seeds.

ALA tells me that *W. luteola* grows across the SE corner of our continent with over 5000 records extending from eastern SA to northern NSW. ALA holds 200 records from ACT lowlands, 56 of these are from Canberra Nature Map (CNM) which can be consulted for local floral images. The flowers have five petals that are backed by five narrow triangular sepals. In the field, this bluebell often seems to have very intense blue petals, maybe something to do with the density and opacity of the back of each petal. (Note that formal botanical descriptions speak about 'corolla lobes', which are not true petals, but I'll keep to my short and incorrect term.) Each flower lasts for many days and closes up every night. Single plants have many-branched stems and usually bear flowers and fruit at the same time on different stems.



My first image of a plant shows three stages: some flowers just budding (these are dangling inverted at both top and bottom of the image); some finished flowers with shrivelled browned petals atop upright green seed capsules; and a few dried upright seed capsules no longer carrying petals. Sepals can be recognized at all flowering and fruiting stages since they are firmly bonded to the top of the seed capsule.

The botanical description for the capsule shape for *W. luteola* is 'elongate-obconic' and keys record that its relatively long and slender capsules have a length-to-width ratio greater than 3. To add some data for those interested, I measured 27 dry capsules and their average length was 9.9 (1.7) mm with the average l-to-w ratio 4.3 (0.6), the figure in brackets being the standard deviation for each result. For comparison, the sepal length for these capsules was 4.0 (0.7) mm, almost twice the capsule width.

Each green fertilized ovary doubles its size in all three dimensions as it matures, then begins to brown and dry as seeds inside ripen. The green ovary has a small domed cap in the centre of the ring of five sepals. I managed to cut a part of one outer wall from one side of a green ovary to show the tiny ovules/seeds growing inside - see picture right. This image also shows the five sepals and the domed cap at the top right.





Each capsule has three chambers, termed by botanists 'ovary locules'. When the capsule is mature and dry it opens by apical slits i.e. the domed cap breaks and peels back into three short segments. This creates three apertures inside the ring of sepals, each aperture about 0.3 to 0.4 mm in size, through which seed is released from one of the three chambers.

My image (left) shows two capsules, viewed end-on, with an opened cap, plus apertures and sepals on each.

Finally I show an image of a mass of tiny, shiny brown seeds, 0.5 mm long and ellipsoidal in shape, beside one dry and open capsule viewed side-on (right). From the green-seed image above (showing only one chamber opened), I suggest *W. luteola* will release a remarkable 1-200 seeds per capsule, in line with the genus keys noting that locules and capsules have 'many' seeds.



I dug a little into the literature of *Wahlenbergia*. There are about 200 species worldwide, most are from the southern hemisphere. Ovaries in them can have two, three or five locules. It seems two and three are quite common in south-east Australia. I've looked quickly at dried capsules for *W. stricta* and *W. multicaulis* - both have three apertures, like *W. luteola*. I am quite fascinated that external flower parts with five-fold symmetry contain reproductive structures with fewer sectors - my education about both flower structures and Wood Ducks continues!

High magnification images were taken using the Nikon microscope at the National Seedbank in the Australian National Botanic Gardens. Images can be reproduced freely with reference to the Creative Commons licence CC BY. Scale bars in micrographs are all 1 mm.

Information above was gathered from websites, principally:

ALA - www.ala.gov.au

CNM - Canberra Nature Map

Florabase - florabase.dbca.wa.gov.au

Plantnet - plantnet.rbgsyd.nsw.gov.au

Contributions welcome

Do you have a story from your favourite grassland or grassy woodland that you would like to share?

If so, please contact the Editor: newsletter@fog.org.au

Advocacy report

Matt Whitting

Proposal for a 1000-home gateway greenfield estate in North Canberra, 8 December 2024

FOG and the Conservation Council called jointly for improvements to a proposal by Purdon to develop residences in Kenny ([submission](#)). Information about the proposal can be found in this Riotact article ([here](#)). No development application has been submitted at this stage.

Variation to EPBC Act approval of development in West Belconnen – does the variation affect the recent decision, at the ACT level, to approve the widening of Drake Brockman Drive? December 2024

On 28 November 2024 the ACT Planning Authority (ACTPLA) approved the widening of Drake Brockman Drive, subject to conditions ([the decision](#)). On 11 December 24 we discovered that, on 15 November 2024, the project's underlying EPBC Act approval had been varied by the Department of Climate Change, Energy and water (DCCEEW) ([the variation](#)). This presented an *opportunity* to seek a review, through the ACT Civil and Administrative Appeals Tribunal, of the ACTPLA decision. FOG ultimately determined that the variation to the EPBC Act approval was not significant as it did no more than correct administrative issues, so we decided not to pursue the matter further.

Proposal to move high voltage transmission lines in West Belconnen, January 2025

With support from Canberra Birds, FOG and the Conservation Council, commented jointly on a [proposal](#), referred to the Federal Environment Minister under the EPBC Act, to move high voltage transmission lines in West Belconnen. The proposal, 60 per cent of which is owned by the ACT Government's Suburban Land Agency, aims to make possible more housing construction in Ginninderry. Our submission calls for the proposal to be subject to a comprehensive assessment as to whether it should be determined a 'controlled action', because of its expected impacts on Box Gum Woodland and woodland birds such as the Superb Parrot ([submission](#)).

UPDATE: A delegate of the Federal Environment Minister determined on 7 February 2025 that the action could proceed without the need for any further assessment *at the federal level* ([decision notice](#)).

Assessment at the ACT level is continuing. An EIS (Environmental Impact Statement) Scoping Paper has been made and the proponent is, we presume, continuing as promised to prepare an EIS that will describe in detail the action and its expected impacts after avoidance and mitigation.

Act now, Minister, to prevent the slaying of a Dragon at Canberra Airport, 8 & 17 January 2025

On 8 January 2025, FOG's President wrote to the Federal Minister urging her to revoke the approval for the Northern Road at Canberra Airport. Three reasons were cited: Canberra Airport Group's failure to provide new, acceptable options to protect the Grassland Earless Dragon if the road is built and operated; the compromised state of her Dept; and the dire state of the Dragons. On 17 January 2025, a media event (the media release for which is [here](#)) drew attention to the issue. Channel 7 did a story and the event was covered in [this Riotact article](#).

Comment on threatened invertebrate species nominations relevant to NSW/ACT, 10 February 2025

FOG commented on three nomination documents proposing to list each of three invertebrate species in the endangered category of the ACT Threatened Native Species List. Thank you to Michael Mulvaney for his work informing [this submission](#).

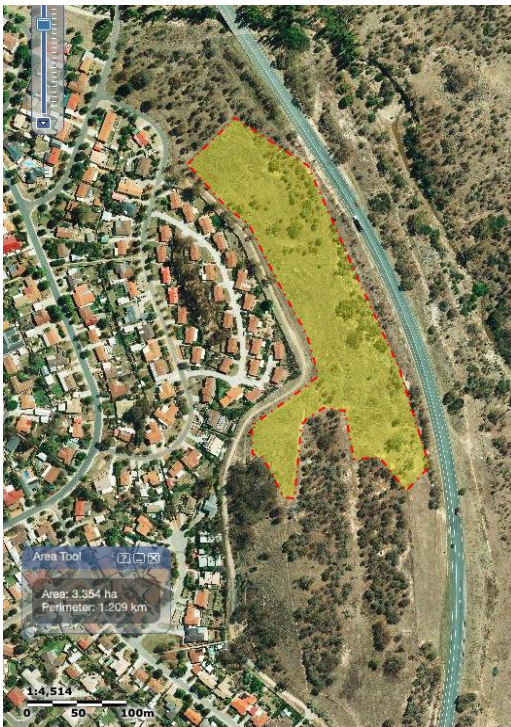
FOG contributes to ACT Conservation Council comment on early thinking about a new Nature Conservation Strategy, 5 February 2025

On 5 February 2025, three FOG members (Sarah Sharp, Rainer Rehwinkel and Matt Whitting) joined representatives of other ACT conservation organisations to examine the ACT Government Nature Conservation Policy Team's latest thinking about a new Nature Conservation Strategy. Please contact matt.whitting@fog.org.au if you would like to see what the NCP Team has shared with FOG, or the comment that (by the time you read this) will have been submitted by the Council (we do not feel we can publish either document).

Theodore Axe Grooves Grassland Visit,

Margaret Ning

Thursday 23 January 2025: Ten of us gathered at 6pm in extremely comfortable weather, and managed to see all the special features of this fascinating little site during the 60 to 90 minutes of our visit. The site is approximately 3.5ha, as shown in the map below, and we wandered over roughly one quarter of the grassland areas.



The site has not changed much since FOG's last visit there in late January 2019 (see *News of Friends of Grasslands*, March-April 2019, p.10). My main memory of this Theodore grassland is that it contained the highest number of Yellow Rush-lily (*Tricoryne elatior*) I had ever seen, as well as a large expanse of Cotton Panic (*Digitaria brownii*), with generous smatterings of Slender Wire Lily (*Laxmannia gracilis*) and an uncommon sedge (*Fimbristylis dichotoma*). The *Tricoryne* and *Laxmannia* had finished flowering but were still obvious.

We ticked off these targets relatively quickly, and also marvelled at the number of native grass inflorescences we were seeing. We listed 17 native grass species during our wander, one fewer than on our 2019 visit. Other highlights were flowering mistletoe, lots of peas, and a second flowering of the native St Johns wort (*Hypericum gramineum*) for the season. Vera, one of the convenors of the local parkcare group, Friends of Tuggeranong Hill, told us of Chocolate Lilies (*Arthropodium sp.*) that flowered earlier in the season.

The condition of the grassland area is still very good, in spite of the last three years of rainy seasons. Its inter-tussock spaces still exist, as there hasn't been a build-up of grassy biomass, and presumably the resident kangaroos are responsible for that balance. Photo right: Andrew Zelnik

For those who had never visited the site before, there was the added bonus of viewing the Aboriginal axe grooves in the middle of the grassland, a bit of a distance from Tuggeranong Creek but possibly still the closest suitable rocky site for axe grooves.

In 2019 the main threats to the grassland were St Johns Wort (*Hypericum perforatum*) and African Lovegrass (*Eragrostis curvula*), and that continues to be the case. Sadly, the northern part of the site has that 'wave of incoming wort' look about it. And, unfortunately, an African Lovegrass contractor has recently sprayed some native grass



species in addition to the target species: Kangaroo Grass (*Themeda triandra*) and Barbed Wire Grass (*Cymbopogon refractus*) have been the victims of that episode. I am not sure how this can still happen in the present day and age.....

Four of us wandered with a weeds bag in our hands, and had the satisfaction of removing some Fleabane (*Conyza sp.*) and other obvious weeds from the site. The resilience of the site is obviously high, and much of that is no doubt due to Vera's vigilance.

Wonderful weekend, Shoalhaven River properties

Margaret Ning

15-16 February 2025: Most of us arrived at Wayback, Penny's property, late Friday afternoon, and relaxed from the outset. We chose our beds, campervan site or swag position..... The sky clouded over, but being safely under cover, we were not intimidated by that, and the evening proceeded apace. Our Friday dinner involved an excellent meal by Penny, with all seven of us catching up, as it was three years since we last visited the area. A couple of downpours challenged our hearing, but we learnt more about the district and our fellow participants, with a bottle of champagne introduced by John Blay later in the evening, ostensibly to raise our musings to an even higher level.

Some of us had beds in Penny's loft, another was on the verandah in a swag, another in a campervan and others were elsewhere..... On Saturday morning, joined by other FOG members from the area, we ambled through the dry sclerophyll forest (basically *Eucalyptus viminalis*) down to the nearby Shoalhaven River, along at least half a kilometre of huge conglomerate outcrops with an interesting range of woodland, forest and riparian vegetation. One of the highlights of our meander was a platypus sighting by Amanda (see below).



Platypus in the Shoalhaven River at Wayback. Photo: Andrew Zelnik



Then it was a leisurely lunch at which we were joined by another FOG member, Larry from nearby Reidsdale. This was then followed by a much longer hike (around six kms) to Berlang Swamp by five of us.

We followed Amanda and John (wading) across the Shoalhaven River at Berlang campground (photo left: Andrew Zelnik), a little swollen after the previous evening's downpour and walked to the south east corner of the swamp, and pretty much promised ourselves we would return at a more floristically opportune time!

We took a hypotenuse line back to the Big Hole track to return to our river crossing which, we decided, was a little deeper than when we had crossed earlier.

Tufted Xanthosia (*Xanthosia atkinsoniana*) was everywhere, looking like it was at peak flowering, but we were assured the following day at our second Shoalhaven property, Woodford, that it had looked even more attractive a month earlier.

The pink Xanthosia flowers (photo right: Andrew Zelnik), which eventually fully open to be solely white, presented a truly beautiful display!



Dinner time was once again at Penny's, but was brought over by Karen and Michael, our hosts at the Shoalhaven property we would visit the following day. It was another excellent meal, with respect to the food, company and convivial atmosphere.

Our next leisurely stroll began around 10am on Sunday morning, when we set out on a well-trodden track on nearby Woodford, Karen and Michael's property. This took us up a gentle slope with low heathy vegetation on both sides of the track.

Occasionally we wandered off track to investigate something, but our best sighting (photo right: Andrew Zelnik) of around 20 Mongarlowe Midge Orchid (*Corunastylis oligantha*) was invariably either on the edge of the track, or within a couple of metres of it.



Interestingly we did not add many species to the existing combined species list compiled over the years by Roger Farrow, Kris Nash, Brigitta Wimmer and me.

And then it was time for lunch provided by Karen and Michael with some delicious spatchcocks on offer from Penny. We covered a lot but somehow managed it at a leisurely pace. There are other parts of the property that we should investigate next time as we never seem to quite get there...

Did I say 'leisurely' ...? It was a perfect weekend, from the refreshing downpour on Friday evening to the flora, the company (the less than 6 degrees of separation in our mutual connections that emerged), our accommodation, and the planning for our return to the area later this year. Huge thanks to Penny, and Michael and Karen, for their hosting us over the weekend.



A break on the Shoalhaven at Wayback (photo: Andrew Zelnick)

Grassy Plains Network

Geoff Robertson

The *Grassy Plains Network* newsletter pops into my in-box a little more frequently than monthly. While only a few pages, it is always informative and a good read. It is probably the most FOG-like group and so reading the *GPN* provides the stories and insights of the parallel world of Victorian grasslands.



Grassy Plains Network
GPN News #69 | 25 February 2025
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More grassland destroyed after governments' collective protection failure

Another irreplaceable grassland has been bulldozed, with local, state and federal authorities all failing to protect it despite knowing the destruction was ongoing.

The privately owned land at Faulknors Road, Mount Cottrell was grassland intended to become part of the long-promised 15,000 hectare Western Grassland Reserve (WGR).

But developers ignore the law and clear grasslands like these, hoping their profit-at-any-cost habitat destruction can create a path to future riches.

The cover story in the 24 Feb issue is a familiar one - private landowner clearing high quality NTG illegally. Outcomes: the developer escaped criminal conviction, and was fined \$170,000, plus \$90,000 costs. The legal fight now moves to federal authorities who intend to prosecute the landowner under the EPBC Act. EPBC penalties can be much higher. Also the Victorian Environment Protection Authority has ordered the site to be cleaned up. That's going to be expensive.

My suggestion is that FOG members read the newsletter. It provides many stories and useful insights about grassland management, advocacy, plants and fauna.

The reader can obtain the newsletter free by [joining the mailing list](#). Past issues may be found [here](#). The website for the Grassy Plains Network may be found [here](#). If you wish to donate to the work of the grassy plains network, you can do this [here](#). Donations go to the Victoria National Parks Association who employ facilitator Adrian Marshall, well known to many FOG members. Donations are earmarked as coming through the Grassy Plains Network.

Some good news from the ACT Government

Rainer Rehwinkel, Friends of Grasslands, Conservation Council's Biodiversity Working Group

30 January 2025. It's not that often we get a good news story when it comes to the interaction between community groups and the maze of ACT agencies, so this story is worth celebrating, even if it represents apparently only a small victory.

The story starts with a chance visit to a site at Dawn Crescent in Lawson, where I had previously seen some flying individuals of the threatened Golden Sun Moth. It was in a patch of the then somewhat ordinary-looking grassland adjacent to the southern fringe of the Lawson North Grassland. (The Lawson North Grassland is another story to be told later, when hopefully we also get a good resolution). On that chance visit, in the company of FOG's Margaret Ning, we realised that we were onto something very special. That grassland had transformed from an ugly duckling into a graceful swan, with a magnificent wildflower display chock full of iconic grassland beauties. There were Bulbine Lilies, Blue Devils and Yellow Rush-lilies

galore, and signs of Early Nancies that had flowered earlier, plus a sea of Golden Buttons and a dozen other grassland wildflowers. I identified this site as a very fine example of Natural Temperate Grassland, which is a critically endangered ecological community listed under both ACT and Commonwealth legislation.

I immediately swung into action to protect this grassland and spoke with a member of the Transport Canberra and City Services (TCCS) staff, who promised to get me some stakes so that my newly-formed Landcare group could mark out the site. I was concerned that it would not be safe from undue mowing. Unfortunately this was at the height of the Covid lockdowns (remember them?), so the stakes never arrived. With lockdowns and other intervening issues during that time, little further action could be taken. And to make it even more difficult, that government staff member moved on, possibly never to have notified the necessary people within the relevant government agencies about the marvellous grassland that we had found.

What had been a very early encouraging sign soon evaporated: the following year, the grassland was delivered an injury in the form having a row of eucalypts and bottlebrushes planted along its perimeter. Ecologists know that too-dense tree-planting in grasslands changes their ecology, because of resultant shading and litter-drop when the trees mature. Despite FOG's meeting with people from TCCS regarding the inappropriateness of trees being planted at other sites, the trees remained firmly in the ground at Dawn Crescent.

In the intervening year I was approached by a worker in the government's ecology and research wing; they were keen to lay down monitoring stations in the form of roof tiles, in an effort to discover additional locations for the endangered Grassland Earless Dragon. I suggested the Dawn Crescent site, because it seemed to me the habitat there was suitable for that species. So, a couple of arrays of tiles were laid down in the hope that this rare reptile might be found.

Then to add insult to injury, when Margaret and I revisited the site in the following spring, we saw with utter dismay that not only had the grassland been mown, with all its Bulbines and Blue Devils mown down at the height of their growing and flowering season, but the reptile tile arrays had been smashed to a hundred pieces! It really highlighted to us that the different agencies with responsibility for managing our environs were simply NOT talking with each other. Not only did one agency not know that the site contains a critically endangered ecological community, and planted trees on the site, but another agency mowed the site while it was in its most glorious spring display, after yet another agency in this octopus of a government had laid down, no doubt at great expense, a series of tiles to survey for an endangered reptile.

I was, needless to say, bitterly disappointed, and sought a meeting with a senior member of the TCCS. To be fair, I received a very good hearing and promises of action, but then, nothing more was done, despite me raising the issue about inappropriate tree-planting and untimely mowing at a forum designed to discuss matters of environmental concern between the Conservation Council and the government agencies with the responsibility of looking after Canberra's natural resources. So, it wasn't until the spring of last year (2024) when I still hadn't seen any progress in the conservation of this really special site, that, on revisiting it, I was dismayed to find significant populations of African Lovegrass, Serrated Tussock and St John's Wort invading the grassland; and of course, the trees were still there! There's nothing like a bit of bitterness to spur some action, so I decided to go in with all guns blazing. I decided to write a report describing the history of the site to date and discussing the grassland's values in detail. To add weight to this, I even set up a couple of plots to measure the grassland's Floristic Value Score, the Federal Government's preferred method to assess a Temperate Grassland site's value. In my report I set out a series of recommendations, including the erection of conservation bollards, application of an appropriate mowing regime, removal of the trees, erection of interpretive signage to explain the value of the site, and importantly, an urgent call to spray the invasive weeds. I sent my report to a number of ACT Government agencies, addressing most of the heads of the various relevant departments.

To be fair to the government people to whom I sent the report, I received a response the very next day. And in the following week, I had a call from a staffer responsible for weed spraying asking for a meeting on-site. This person not only promised to get onto the weeding as a priority, but then and there marked out a

boundary around the perimeter of the site for the erection of conservation bollards. Not only that, but the following week, after discussing the issue on site with a staffer from the government's ecology research section, they informed me that they had decided to increase the area to be protected, because they had found a patch of Chocolate Lilies outside the boundary that we had previously defined. Because of the urgency of the weeding, I organised a Landcare weeding party to at least remove the seedheads of some of the nastier grasses on the site, but when we arrived the following Monday morning, to my surprise I found that the weed sprayers had beaten me to the job! And it was not long after this that I received an email from the government's tree-planting team to arrange for a meeting regarding the trees.

I'm very pleased to report that I had a very fruitful and informative meeting with a senior representative of the tree team today, and they explained in detail why trees are planted, where and by whom. That discussion was encouraging because of its outcome, but it really also solidified my suspicions that the various government agencies and non-government bodies, like the Suburban Land Authority, the National Capital Authority, and others are simply working in parallel universes when it comes to looking after Canberra's environmental assets. As I have already implied, it seems that even within the ACT Government, the different departments have poor channels of communication.

However, I am also pleased to report that we have a resolution that will suit the critical values of the grassland, as well as the neighbouring residents who will no doubt be a little surprised to see their neighbourhood trees being ripped out. The tree unit has agreed to remove the eucalypts, leaving the bottlebrushes that alternate with them in place. The bottlebrushes, being much lower in stature, will not interfere with the grassland with undue shading or litter-drop; additionally, being a low, dense shrub, they will continue to provide habitat for birds, and a connectivity pathway along the edge of the site. Another row of bottlebrushes will be planted closer to Dawn Crescent, in the verge that is dominated by exotic grasses. (It is necessary to plant these to provide cooling shade; the main reasons for planting trees in our suburbs are aesthetic, and ever-increasingly, to provide cooling shade in the face of our changing climate. Note that both the existing bottlebrush species on site, the River Bottlebrush, and the species proposed to be planted, the Lemon Bottlebrush, have flowers in shades of cream, pale pink or white – this is critical in our bird-rich suburbs, because red-flowered bottlebrush species are favoured food plants of a couple of aggressive honeyeater species, the Red Wattlebird and Noisy Miner, which have a nasty habit of driving most other small birds from our gardens and parks.)

So, yes, I think we have reached some nice solutions to the problem that the Dawn Crescent grassland has presented to date. This superb site that seemed to be in the too-hard-basket has now, I feel, a far better future, in the management of which my Landcare group will have pleasure in assisting. And dare I say it, but I have hope that the agencies that have responsibility for management of Canberra's environment now also face a clearer future, one less prone to miscommunication and cross purposes, under a proposal to roll them all into one agency under the care of one minister.

Identification and seed collection of native grasses of the Victorian Volcanic Plains (VVP)

Sarah McMaster - Landcare Facilitator, The Lismore Land Protection Group, Lismore VIC (LLPG)

Introduction by Andrew Zelnik: In 2023 LLPG was awarded a FOG Grassy Ecosystem Grant of \$1500 to assist with costs associated with promotion and conducting of field training in native grass identification and native grass seed collection, cleaning and storage. This report from Sarah acquits FOG's grant. The LLPG is located southwest of Ballarat, at the northern end of Lake Corangamite, and has a strong biodiversity focus. It operates in the Corangamite Lakes Landcare Area working in conjunction with six (6) other community groups covering a combined area approximately 200,000 ha. As many readers will be

aware, it contains one of most depleted and least represented ecosystem types in Victoria i.e. Natural Temperate Grassland of the Victorian Volcanic Plain.

The native grass seed collection workshop, held on 15 November 2024 at the Lismore Murrnong Indigenous gardens, was a comprehensive event aimed at educating the 10 eager participants on the various aspects of grass and grassland species seed collection, storage and uses.

The primary objectives were to (a) improve knowledge and appreciation of grassland ecosystems among members in the local community; (b) improve identification skills of native grasses and other grassland plant species; and (c) to increase capacity of the community to undertake responsible and effective harvesting of native grassland species seed to facilitate future projects involving on-ground restoration works.



The workshop started with a presentation from Seeding Victoria expert Dan Frost covering permits needed for seed collection on public land, ethics of seed collection, methods of determining if seed is ready for collection on different trees, shrubs and grasses common on the VVP, identification of native grasses of the VVP and best practices for harvesting, storing and sowing native seeds.

The group then headed out to participate in a hands-on demonstration of how to identify and collect different species in the field. Grass species included Kangaroo Grass, Wallaby Grass, Poa species, Windmill Grass, Red-leg Grass and

Spear Grass. Along with grasses there were also many native flowers and shrubs that the group was able to identify and collect seed from.

Participants had great feedback from the event and were impressed by Dan's knowledge and ability to answer questions. The event was also a great networking opportunity as there were a few people within the industry at the workshop. This was valuable as there was lots of knowledge-sharing during the day.

The workshop enhanced the knowledge and skills in native grass identification amongst participants and helped to improve their understanding and appreciation of grassland ecosystems. There were lots of discussions on why these species are important and the benefits of using native species over introduced species.



Some participants are now excited and keen to collect native species on their properties, both grasses and trees, since attending this workshop. They now have the confidence to identify grasses like wallaby grass and now know the correct time to harvest and the best ways to store or sow the seed. FOG's grant represented approximately 45% of the associated project expenditure with the remainder (\$1900) provided by LLPG.

In conclusion the workshop was a valuable experience for all involved. It succeeded in raising awareness, enhancing skills, and fostering a community dedicated to seed collection and grassland management. The insights gained and connections made during the workshop will undoubtedly contribute to ongoing efforts

in this field. We look forward to organising similar events in the future and continuing to advocate for the threatened grasslands that we live on here in Lismore.

Arthur: a poem by Edwina Smith

*They call him a dragon
Yet he breathes no fire
His keen, sharp eye
We love to admire
Looks like he's earless
But sound is loud and clear
Tucked within Arthur's head
A tiny inner ear*

*Such a sweet little chap
Very rarely seen
Found in native grass
Where a plough's never been
He smartly scamps to hide
'Neath rocks, in burrows too
Sadly 'tis come to pass
His numbers are so few*

*Along came a drought
The worst for many years
Sightings even rarer
Worries turned to fears
What's to be done
To bring him from the brink?
Clever minds gathered round
They all began to think*

*Working on the detail
How to breed and feed
Three agencies combined
Together took the lead
United in their cause
Success with raising young
Progress drawing nearer
The challenge has begun!*

*Found nowhere else on Earth
So precious and so rare
His plight ever urgent
With no time to spare
It happens in a heartbeat
Another species lost
Lest change comes this very day
We'll forever count the cost*

*Tidbinbilla is Arthur's home
He lives in 'lizard style'
With everything he needs to be
And all the while
More baby dragons
Are hatching from their eggs
Close to extinction
Now running on lively legs!*

*We must protect our grassland
Or chances will be missed
This dainty little fellow
On our 'Endangered' list
Needs habitat to grow
To feed and to thrive
Efforts have been made
We hope he does survive*

*Numbers are increasing
Knowledge timely gained
Has helped a little lizard
His kind have been regained
We trust the day will come
'Critically' can be filed
And we see them dart about
The grasslands of the wild.*

News Roundup

Paul Archer

Act now, Minister, to prevent the slaying of a Dragon at Canberra Airport

Reference: FOG website 5 March 2025

On 17 January 2025, Friends of Grasslands and the Conservation Council called on Federal Minister for the Environment and Water, Tanya Plibersek, to rescue the Canberra Grassland Earless Dragons from the Canberra Airport Group by revoking development approval for a proposed road running from Fairbairn to the north of the Airport. The proposed road will destroy essential habitat for the Dragon. The full media release is on Page 5 of this issue.



1 March 2025: The bulldozers have fired up at Canberra Airport and, as a result, Canberra Dragons are at extreme risk. FOG and the Conservation Council ACT Region held a snap protest on Monday 24 Feb, outside the Environment Department office.

Details about this, the case and action you can take are in this [document](#) (pdf, 0.3 MB). The short version is this: Please write, right now, to the Minister. Ask that she cancel the approval for the Northern Road at Canberra Airport. Then, keep watching the FOG website for next steps in the fight against this outrageous road development.

Canberra Grassland Earless Dragon – captive breeding program at Tidbinbilla

Link provided by several members

An article in The Riotact on 26 January 2025 by James Coleman described how things are “looking up” for the Canberra Grassland Earless Dragon, six years into a project to bring the species back from its ‘critically endangered’ status.

The lizard (*Tympanocryptis lineata*) was only classified as a separate species in 2019 when taxonomists reclassified the former (threatened) Grassland Earless Dragon into four species. At the time, there were just three small populations scattered across temperate grasslands in the Majura and Jerrabomberra valleys, totalling no more than 40 hectares.

But come 2025, 81 earless dragons have been relocated back into the wild, according to Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve threatened species program manager Dr Sarah May. In 2021, the southside nature reserve received funding from the ACT Government to establish a breeding colony. “We started with 27 dragons in a brand-new facility to house and breed them,” Dr May said. “We’ve bred 93 dragons so far at Tidbinbilla and 81 of these have been used in conservation translocations and provided for research to help us better understand how to recover this species in the wild”.

The full article is available [here](#)

Our wealth is worthless without a healthy environment

Link provided by Ann Milligan and Sarah Sharp

Patrick O'Connor (University of Adelaide) in an article in the Canberra Times on 8 February 2025 argues that delaying environmental law reform is not in our economic interest and that the economy will dry up if we do this. The article gives great arguments for the importance of the natural area for human and other welfare (Sarah Sharp). The full article is available [here](#). Note: Link requires a CT online subscription.

Warrant out for cute gravediggers

Link provided by Margaret Ning

This Canberra Times article by Tim the Yowie Man from 15 February 2025 describes how wombats have spent years bulldozing their way through the hallowed ground of Old Adaminaby Cemetery, until a 'shoot to kill' order from the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service granted the local council permission to take them out. However, fate intervened when the council found gentler ways to 'deter' and 'move' them (for now). This graveyard is of particular interest to FOG because it also has a resident population of the threatened Monaro Golden Daisy (*Rutidosis leiolepis*)



The full article is available [here](#). Note: Link requires a CT online subscription.

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This high quality native forb rich grassland on Aaminaby Town Common was a new gem found during our November 2020 Best of the Monaro TSRs trip - see Rainer Rehwinkel's Jan-Feb 2021 article. Amongst the highly diverse floral display were also threatened species (Monaro Golden Daisy, Mauve Burr-daisy, Silky Swainson-pea and Hoary Sunray) and other significant grassland plants (Australian Anchorplant, Highland Golden Moths). It is hoped the local trust and their grazing lessees have since managed it in a way that has maintained and conserved its natural values. Photo & caption: Andrew Zelnik.
