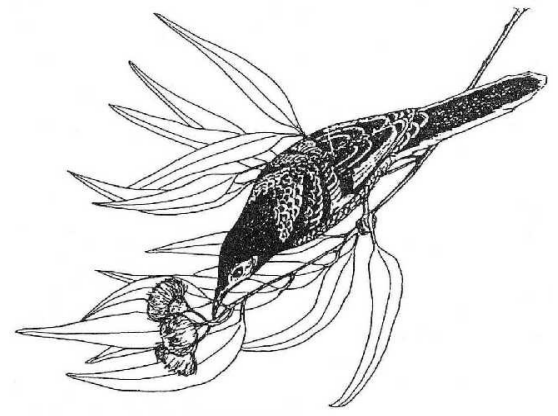


Regent Honeyeater Project

Co-ordinator's Annual Report

24 December 2015



Greetings to everyone who has helped make this year highly successful in so many ways, despite the severe weather we've had this Spring and Summer.

I always enjoy collating the year's achievements. Firstly, I get astonished how much all the little bits add up to, and secondly, it's a great opportunity for us to reflect on where our project is up to:

What have we achieved?

Where are we aiming?

How are we tracking against those aims?

What are the difficulties?

How are we adapting?

And even more importantly:

Are we doing the best we can?

Success indicators

I think the results of our actions give us the best feedback:

- Area of habitat restored
- Increasing amount of fertile habitat
- Threatened bird surveys
- Babbler surveys
- Nest Box occupation
- Landholders engaged
- Schools involved
- Volunteers involved
- Multi media exposure
- Progress with our 5 year plan

There is pretty clear evidence of outstanding achievement, and lots of reasons for pride in our joint efforts!

Overall tallies for the season

- 34 sites worked on in total
- 13 of these sites had weed treatment only - too weedy to plant now, so need several sprays before 2016 planting
- 59.05 ha of habitat restored/protected
- 15.506 km of fencing built
- 43.5 ha of planting
- 0.5 ha direct seeding
- 32,288 seedlings planted

Planting season

July-Oct were heavily engaged with planting, often 3 days per week with schools, every 2nd weekend with community groups, and 2 days in the nursery batching up seedlings to be ready for the planting days. It's always a very busy season, but greatly rewarding to see the whole year's work coming to fruition.

It's also very inspiring to see the enthusiasm, good will, team work, generosity, leadership and sense of fun that all our volunteers bring to the mix. These '*people*' outcomes are not as concrete as a tree in the ground, but they have positive ripple effects that we all take with us into the rest of our lives and work.

Scouts' Planting

Our first planting weekend of the year has become a Scouting tradition

This year, the event grew to 100 Scouts from all across the state

We'd selected a dry site for the group, but a sudden deluge the night before changed all that!

30 mm of rain meant the site was seriously wet underfoot

Great for the plants, but a challenge for the people, and also for our usual planting techniques

We altered our methods, and people rose to the challenge to plant over 1300 seedlings in the day

Their site will become a highly significant bio-link from the Warby Ranges to the Winton Wetlands

Schools' Planting

Despite the shortened planting season, 610 students from 14 schools have taken part, with a total of 8,090 seedlings planted on 14 sites. This included 3 secondary schools visiting our district from urban centres as far away as Melbourne. They come for the rural experience itself as well as the conservation focus, and it's really clear they value the opportunity to help a worthy cause. I've pursued this thought with other likely schools, and quickly made strong connections with 2 more that have gone on to book camps in late 2015 and into 2016.

The participation numbers were lower than usual, due to the very cold July that postponed school plantings for weeks, and the very dry October that brought planting to a close about a month early! To fit more planting groups in the remaining time, we often worked with 2 classes together, which gave some amazing results by the end of the day - often up to 600 or 800 seedlings planted!

The feedback from school teachers remains very positive, with frequent comments such as:

- "The students really enjoyed the day."
- "We'll come back and do it all again next year."
- "There's no other way the kids can learn these things – just by doing it."

And seeing the genuine engagement and sense of wonder in the students is the best feedback of all! We know they leave the day with a positive "take home" message.

Melbourne University, Masters Students

This is the 5th year visiting our project area as part of their Forest Ecology course, and it seems to fit their educational aims on many fronts. They see some of our best remnant vegetation areas to understand the natural values we're protecting, and also get first-hand experience of the ecological threats to our Flora and Fauna.

We visit a variety of older sites to see what we've done and the successes we've had in restoring ecological processes they study in class. It's a practical demonstration of the "what, why, how, where and when" decisions that are made for all the different sites with their own individual circumstances.

And once again we ran a 2½ hr planting session to show how the restoration theory works on the ground. Feedback from staff & students shows that the hands-on work is the "icing on the cake" of their 3 day excursion, and the growing number of students each year also points to our positive reputation amongst the students.

Latrobe University, Bendigo

The Outdoor Education students returned again this year for their traditional 2 day camp, which includes a detailed ecological tour on the Friday (similar to Melb Univ's), then joining in with our weekend volunteers for planting on Saturday. The interest in and care for the "great outdoors" is something both groups share. Nearly all of them are robust bushwalkers, so they make a stronger-than-average work team.

So this year we allocated them to a difficult site that was mostly solid clay, where making holes for planting was bound to be tough going. The challenge provided a marvellous opportunity for trials with different tools, different ways of planting and guarding, and new ways of working as an overall team. We were truly amazed to plant the entire site in a day with a fairly small group, and it's given us confidence to tackle other difficult sites that we'd previously put in the "too hard basket"!

New approaches to planting

The new terrain of Winton Wetlands and Mokoan inlet channel, demand new approaches to deal with the very different soils! So we're examining our failures as well as successes, to build our skills and increase the effectiveness of our efforts. eg:

- Hamilton Tree Planters in combination with mattocks allow easier planting in heavy clays
- But we need to plant earlier in these conditions to ensure roots can get established before soils dry out
- Poison woody weeds a year in advance, so we can kill the regrowth before planting
- Weed control needs strategic timing to kill each weed when it's most vulnerable
- For wet spots, use tree guards that are off the ground, to give better root aeration
- Our trials with 2 types of heavy-duty tree guards are holding up well against Kangaroos & Wallabies

Site selection pays off

We've planted some wonderful sites over the years, including many on fertile creek flats that looked very promising from the start. We all know that their productive soils will be the basis of very rich habitats in the future, but I was still startled when I saw it for myself recently while assisting the annual Woodland Bird Survey of Lurg.

Walking through the dry gravelly slopes of a Box-Ironbark forest, the effects of El Nino were clearly visible in the dusty ground, and audible in the lack of small birds!! But as soon as we reached the broad, shallow gully line, the grass was green, the shrubs were regenerating, and the small bird numbers just jumped up! The better soils really are the basis of any food web, and it's gratifying to know that we've been focussing on that for years now!!

Nursery progress

Andie & his team have done lots of size sorting & weeding to get trays of even-sized plants ready for planting. They've also done much careful work preparing seedling batches to suit the soils on each site and even different parts of each site. It begins with assessing the broad vegetation type, as indicated by the geology and existing trees on site, and is refined further by landscape features, soil types, moisture levels, and the proportion of weedy grasses versus natives.

Weedier sites are allocated a mix of only the more robust plant species for the initial planting, with the more delicate species added 5 or more years later when the trees have dried out the soil, and the weeds are therefore substantially reduced. More intact sites with fewer weeds are allocated the rarer and more delicate species that would be swamped by weeds, and this approach is giving us safe new homes for many species that are seriously depleted across the region.

Seed genetics progress

We've planted over 5,500 of the region's rare and depleted plants in our rabbit-proof and kangaroo-proof enclosure. This highly significant collection encapsulates the genetics from up to 10-15 different populations of each species, and at least 400 seedlings for each, to ensure this mixed population is robust enough to evolve over the generations. We've carefully planted the seedlings in neighbouring, alternating rows to maximise cross pollination, so the seeds we collect as early as next year will have the broadest genetic mix in the region!! We repeated the process to establish 29 different shrub and groundcover species in the site, so it's a real genetic Noah's Ark for future revegetation efforts.

Communications

Perhaps the most notable items were 3 films that featured various aspects of our work: a French documentary titled "Nature's Keepers", a Landcare Video on the what, where, how and why of Nest Box programs, and an informative background piece to raise interest from potential sponsors.

My media releases about the community planting weekends have been picked up and publicised by various local papers around the region, and we've had number of new volunteers phoning up as a result. Articles to celebrate the efforts of our local schools and the visiting Scouts have also been taken up, for example through an interview on the ABC's regional radio.

I've also given quite a number of presentations about our work and achievements to diverse groups such as Monash University Biological Society, Latrobe Univ Biol Dept's teaching and research staff, plus a local Landcare group wanting to know more about how biodiversity helps farming. Closer to home, we've hosted 3 university students and 1 secondary student for work experience to get a broader and deeper understanding of the many aspects of our project. It's really beneficial for them and they've helped Andie greatly with the background work in the nursery preparing for big weekends.

Social media

Andie has maintained a regular Facebook presence for our project, with a flow of interesting pictures and comments about our activities, new findings, and achievements. It's great to be able to share new insights and exciting outcomes so quickly with our supporters.

And our Website manager, Chris, is currently uploading some of Charlie's snapshots that highlight the different aspects of our big volunteer weekends: the hard work, the concentration and good fun of recent plantings, or a walk through a typical day out checking nest boxes, and how it all looks from a visitor's perspective.

Most recently our Webmaster has been working to place Andie's wonderful nest box videos on YouTube, to show what goes on after dark out there in the bush. There are many surprises in the footage, even for the experienced viewer, but the message is clear about how seriously these animals need the boxes!

Rabbit control

We've proven that rabbit control is so much more effective with a combination of several techniques. Ripping by mini excavator, followed by smoke machine and burrow fumigation, has basically shut down whole warrens in a fraction of the time. But we are still using tree guards in areas where populations can't be completely eradicated at present.

We were lucky this year that several of our sites had no rabbits, so we are able to plant without tree guards. It makes the speed of the operation just amazing, with up to 700 or 800 seedlings planted by a group of 60 primary students in just a few hours.

Woody weed removal

We've sprayed Blackberries on 4 creek gullies and 1 hill site over the past couple of years, and after almost a year of drying off, have come to the burn off stage. 2 of the earlier sites have progressed to the 2nd spraying this November, and that should knock those problems completely out.

We also have a list of at least 10 more sites with foreign shrubs or trees such a suckering prunus and Robinia, and it would be great to remove these before summer to free up soil moisture for our indigenous plants. It's worth the effort, because exotic plants don't have the same habitat value as our own vegetation. On rich creek soils it's all the more important, as it gives more space to local plants and hence more nectar for the Regents.

Plant watering brigades

With the severe dry conditions, we had to water all the sites we've planted since the rains stopped, and that's 1000's of plants!! Small teams of only 2, 3, 4 or 5 people with buckets and our 1000 li water tanks on trailers, have saved the day for many sites that were starting to look stressed.

The *Green Army* team from Wangaratta, and the Beechworth Prison *Landmate Crew* have helped enormously with watering sites that were just impossibly large for our small local team. And the Goulburn Broken CMA lent us their purpose-built water wagon, with pumps and hoses that reach a long way into the bigger sites. Our sincere appreciation to these groups for much needed help in a difficult time, and to Andie who has taken the lead to make it all happen when it was so urgent.

Direct seeding

This was basically cancelled due to the dry conditions, but we trialled a ½ ha site of hand sowing with a visiting secondary school group. They did all the steps from scratching and mixing the seed, selecting micro niches on site where they judged the most moisture would collect, scalping off the weeds, and sprinkling the treated seeds. The seeds will just sit and wait for years until the conditions are right.

Arranging new sites for 2016

I've already been liaising for months with landholders about projects for next year, and already have approx 30 potential sites. Several of these are 2015 sites that we just had to defer due to the sudden dry conditions this spring. But I'm also frequently approached by new landholders in the district, asking if we might be interested in a planting on their new property. At times this turns out to be projects that have been on my 'wish list' for years!

Grey-crowned Babbler surveys

- Mick Moylan has taken up this important voluntary role to continue the research begun by Nigel Lacey.
- The work has revealed a population rise from 50 something birds to ca 120 over the past decade
- Most significantly, several new family groups have set up home in previously unused territories!
- The dry seasons have made things tougher, but population has been able to hold its own fairly steadily.
- The birds have richer habitat, denser vegetation to hide from aggressive birds, so more access to food.
- This exciting news further confirms the effectiveness of our habitat restoration strategies and methodology.

Special thanks

- To the landholders of the Lurg Hills, who have given so much of their land to the future of our rare wildlife.
- To our schools & volunteers from bushwalking clubs, universities, cycling clubs, scouts, guides, etc
- To our generous sponsors whose cash and in-kind support allows us to launch into each year with confidence – The Norman Wettenhall Foundation, Exetel Pty Ltd, Goulburn-Broken CMA, the Federal government's Community Environment grant, the State government's Communities for Nature grant, Rockwell Collins, Benalla Rural City, June Canavan Foundation, and Telstra.
- To Andie Guerin for his outstanding and inspiring commitment to quality outcomes in all he does!
- Our local semi-retired volunteers, Chris, Helen and Peter, who work 2 or more days each week preparing for planting days in the nursery, then out in the field doing everything from digging holes to making hot milos and cooking the sausage sizzle! And also to our youngest team member (only in year 6 at school), who comes along with her grandparents to join our regular team on every opportunity she can.
- To our voluntary project committee who manage the administration and all our financial dealings.
- To our local contractors who provide quality work and expert advice, sometimes in difficult circumstances. Tom & Gayle Lee, Garry Bruce, Maurice Welsh, Steve Curnow & Lise Andreassen, Wangaratta Coach Lines, Benalla Bus Lines, Robert Voss, Benalla Bowls Club.
- Last but not least, thanks to *Yooralla* for the marvellous site we have as our home base. We couldn't operate without this solid support to our project.

I'm constantly reminded of lots of people with their amazing collection of skills and talents, helping to make this project not just a survivor, but a growing community that has a life of its own.

And it only works when people choose to give. It can't be forced, required, demanded or manipulated. We are lucky indeed.

Ray Thomas and the Regent Honeyeater Team.