

# PLAINS FACTS

EDITION 27 WINTER 2023

## A VINEYARD WITH A PURPOSE

Story and Photography by Renate Faast, Ecological Associates

WHEN RICHARD AND PAMELA AUSTIN PURCHASED THEIR PROPERTY IN THE MOORABOOL VALLEY, THEY DIDN'T REALISE THAT IT CONTAINED A RARE PATCH OF THREATENED GRASSY WOODLAND. NOW, THE AUSTIN FAMILY IS KEEN TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THIS SPECIAL PLANT COMMUNITY AND WANT TO SHARE IT WITH THE PUBLIC.



Richard and Pamela had a desire to grow grapes and make wine, and purchased their beautiful acreage in Sutherlands Creek in 1990. The 30 ha woodland has not been grazed since horses were removed in 2014 but the significance of the grassy Yellow Gum woodland was not fully appreciated until they were approached by Corangamite CMA (CCMA) staff in 2020.

Since then, Richard has worked with the CCMA to treat weeds like boxthorn, serrated tussock, horehound and carpet weed. Understanding the value in protecting the woodland's habitat, fallen logs are now left to lie. Regular monitoring by researchers from the Arthur Rylah Institute has helped guide management decisions for caring for the condition of the vegetation community at the site.

Richard would like to encourage local naturalists to record the flora and fauna that live in the woodland. He has a vision of providing a parking area with interpretive signs, encouraging cellar door visitors to pause, appreciate and learn more about these grassy communities.

The family business is now run by their son Scott and his wife Belinda, who are eager to learn more about the







GRASSY WOODLAND ON THE AUSTIN'S PROPERTY

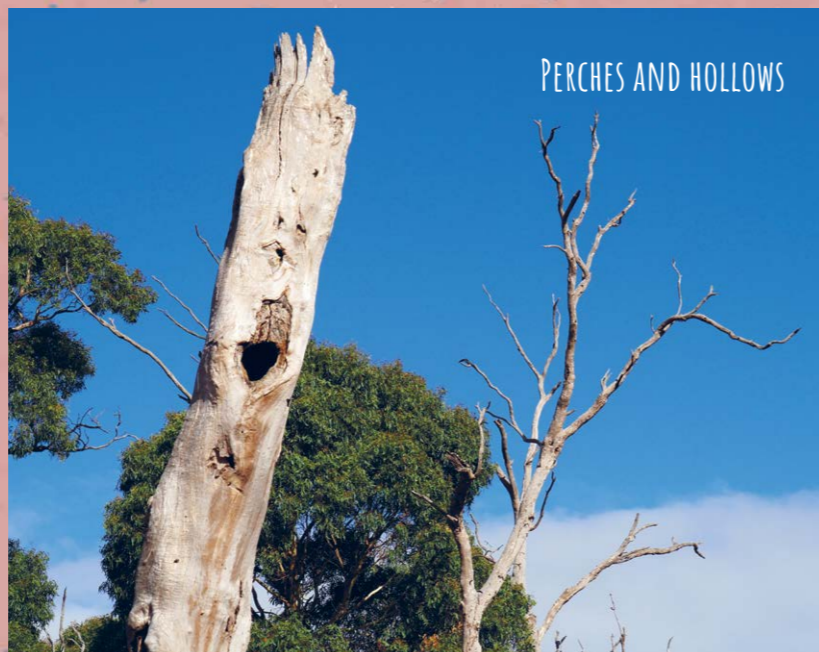
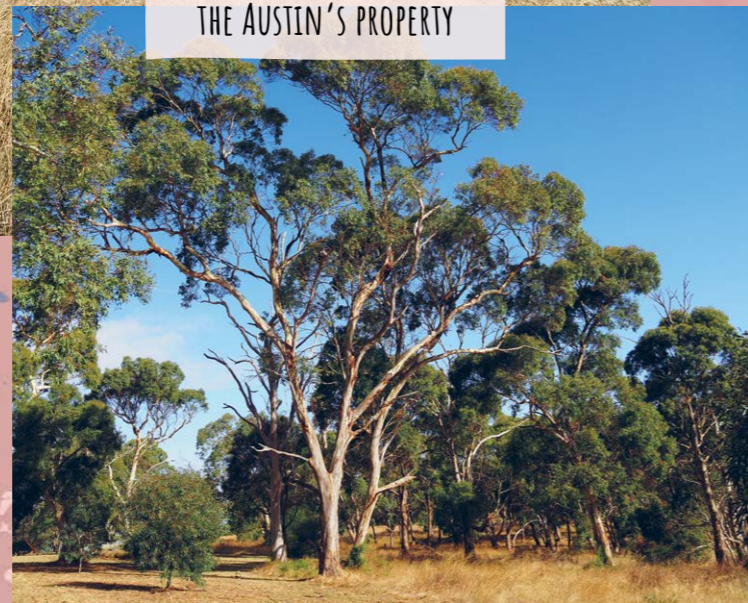


## A VINEYARD WITH A PURPOSE

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woodlands and how they might fit into their business operations. They are keen to explore the marketing potential of their grassy woodlands, as a way of bringing these unique ecosystems to the attention of the wider community.

Together with operations manager, Tim James, the family are steering their vineyard management towards more sustainable practices. They hope to harness the benefits offered by the woodland's biodiversity, such as native pollinators and beneficial birds, microbats and insects to help reduce the need for pesticides in the nearby vineyards. They have already expanded the areas of native vegetation, engaging local school groups in revegetation projects to create natural corridors between the woodland and nearby creek lines. Future revegetation plans include a "planting for pollinators" focus.



PERCHES AND HOLLOW

# A KANGAROO THORN IN THE SIDE OF RESTORATION AND LAND MANAGEMENT.

Story and Photography by Simon Heyes, Department of Environment & Genetics at LaTrobe University



ACACIA PARADOXA

THE HEDGE WATTLE (ACACIA PARADOXA) CERTAINLY LIVES UP TO ITS SPECIES NAME AS A PARADOX. IT IS BOTH AN EYE-CATCHING BEAUTY AND IS COVERED IN ROWS OF NEEDLE-SHARP SPINES THAT COULD TAKE OUT THOSE EYES IF ONE IS NOT CAREFUL.

Hedge wattle is a medium to large shrub with golden yellow globular flowers and small modified leaf stems called phyllodes. At the base of each phyllode are two spiny stipules that gives this species its alternative common name 'Kangaroo Thorn'. Considered a native to Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria, and South Australia, it provides important habitat for wildlife, such as small birds. It has also been introduced to Tasmania, Western Australia, and South Africa where it has since become a problematic weed. Historically, it has been used as a hedgerow in Victoria with records in nursery catalogues as far back as the 1850s and continues to be commonly used in revegetation projects. In some cases, Hedge wattle has even become invasive in some grassy woodlands in Western Victoria, such as Inverleigh, where it has become a monodominant shrub.

In Western Victoria, different forms have been observed, some with a dense coppice-like growth and others that have a larger spindlier form. There are suggestions that some forms may have been introduced from South Australia as a hedgerow, and introduced or hybrid forms may be behind the apparent invasiveness of Hedge wattle there. Polyploidy may even play a role by helping plants colonise novel habitats or increasing plant fitness – all important characteristics for a would-be invader. To try and answer some of these questions, a collaboration between La Trobe University, Royal Botanic Gardens Victoria and the Corangamite CMA is attempting to understand if these invasions are a result of introduced or hybrid forms. To do this we aim to look at the morphology and genetic evidence of an introduced/hybrid provenance that may be behind invasiveness of this shrub. An understanding of these different forms will help guide revegetation and management to ensure invasive forms are not being introduced and that truly "native" forms are not being removed.

ACACIA PARADOXA





# FIRE RETURNS TO HIGH-QUALITY ROADSIDES

Story by Madeleine Slingo, Corangamite CMA / Photography by Dale Smithyman

OVER THE WEEKENDS OF 18TH MARCH AND 25TH MARCH 2023, CFA VOLUNTEERS SUCCESSFULLY CONDUCTED EXTENSIVE ROADSIDE BURNING ON SOME KEY FIRE BREAK AND NATIVE GRASSLAND ROADSIDES IN THE CORANGAMITE CMA (CCMA) REGION: ROKWOOD-SHELFORD ROAD, CRESSY-SHELFORD ROAD, SHELFORD-MT MERCER ROAD, POORNEET STATION ROAD NORTH AND SOUTH.

These burns were conducted as part of a District 7 exercise. Phil Campbell, CFA Vegetation Management Officer for Districts 6, 7 and four brigades in District 16, described this exercise as “a really good idea because the brigades wouldn’t have been able to get all these roads done”, due to challenges with resources. Phil has been in this role for three seasons which involves fuel treatment planning across the south-west region, predominantly roadside and planned burning.

“We’re very quickly learning on the job where to go and how to help the brigades do the burning. [When] there’s more people around to help out, the more support makes it easier for the brigades to get stuff done.”

The community benefits from these roadside burns are numerous, Phil says. “It’s about them feeling safe, they’re seeing black lines and it’s a really good fire break. I don’t know how to quantify the feeling of safety in the

people and for the brigades but that’s how we look at it and the districts do too. The roads are high-valued roadsides so there’s ecological benefits as well”.

The regular burning of these “high-valued roadsides” every 2-3 years results in grasslands that are providing crucial habitat for native flora and fauna species, the diversity of which is rarely discovered elsewhere on the Victorian Volcanic Plains. The history of fuel reduction burning throughout Victoria has seen the ecological benefits of these areas maintained over many years, as well as reducing the fire risk with a higher coverage of native grasses.

Ammie Jackson from the Department of Environment, Energy and Climate Action (DEECA), manages the Linear Reserves Project, in partnership with the CCMA and CFA. “It’s a fantastic result to see this many priority roads burnt this year. These roads have been included in the Linear Reserves Project, with most receiving regular weed control treatments. Weed control on its own is not adequate for maintaining the condition of the native grasslands, it is much more effective following a burn.

There is a long history of CFA burning on these roadsides, that’s one of the key reasons why the native grasslands remain there. In recent years, on roads where planned burning has been declining in frequency, we are seeing an increase in Phalaris and other pasture grasses. Phalaris will quickly outcompete the native species if not burnt regularly and it poses a much higher fire risk, with flame heights reaching 3-5 times higher than that of native grasses.”

The two days of roadside burning also displayed a strong sense of community partnerships between neighbouring CFA brigades, Phil explains.

“THE SENSE OF COMMUNITY AND THE BROADER PICTURE THAT WE’RE ALL HERE TO HELP EACH OTHER MADE A BIG DIFFERENCE. THESE ROADSIDES BELONG TO THE COMMUNITY AND TO THE REGION AND WE SHOULD BE DOING THIS TO HELP EACH OTHER. THERE WAS A LOT OF POSITIVE TALK THAT CAME OUT OF THOSE TWO DAYS.”

For the Vegetation Management Officer and his team, the 200 - 250 people who came to help was a sign of the willingness from the community. “The first day we got more people and more trucks than we were expecting. We had trouble feeding them all!”

Looking forward, Phil has hopes that this exercise has ripple effects over the south-west region to keep this momentum up. “As long as we’re reaching our objective of getting our burns done”.

A huge thanks to the CFA brigades and community volunteers for their amazing efforts in getting fire back into these high-quality roadsides, some of which haven’t been burnt in over 10 years!



ROADSIDE BURNING: SHELFORD - MT MERCER ROAD



ROADSIDE BURNING: SHELFORD - MT MERCER ROAD



LEFT: ROADSIDE BURNING: SHELFORD - MT MERCER ROAD





FEMALE PLAINS-WANDERER.  
PHOTO COURTESY OF ZOOS VICTORIA.

# THE PLAINS-WANDERER A UNIQUE AUSTRALIAN BIRD

Story by Chris Hartnett, Wildlife Conservation and Science, Zoos Victoria

THE WORD 'UNIQUE' IS OFTEN USED TO DESCRIBE AUSTRALIA'S WONDERFUL WILDLIFE, BUT NEVER MORE APTLY THAN FOR THE PLAINS-WANDERER. THIS VERY SPECIAL BIRD IS IN A FAMILY OF ITS OWN (THE PEDIONOMIDAE FAMILY), WITH NO OTHER SPECIES QUITE LIKE IT ANYWHERE ON THE PLANET.

The Plains-wanderer has one of the most ancient lineages of any Australian bird species – with a link to the super-continent Gondwana, dating back to 180 million years ago when the Australian continent split from what is now South America. The Evolutionarily Distinct and Globally Endangered (EDGE) of Existence program has recognised the species as the most genetically distinct and at-risk bird

species in the world. The 'most distinct' title makes the Plains-wanderer a species we should celebrate as uniquely Australian, but the fact that they are so at risk, is a call to action.

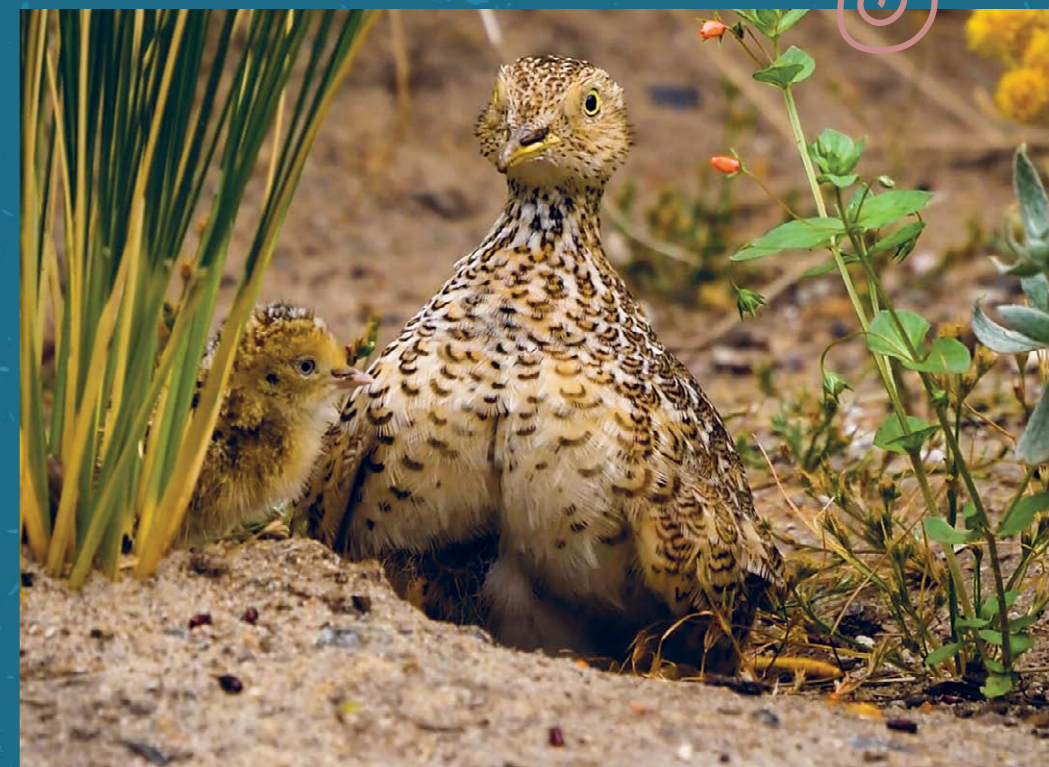
Unfortunately, this species has had little recognition among the general Australian population. Zoos Victoria and our conservation partners, including the Corangamite Catchment Management Authority, are working hard to change that. It is our wish that one day Australians will know the Plains-wanderer as widely as a magpie or an emu and will support conservation actions for the species, and others that share its grassland habitat. Despite being a truly special bird, the fact that the Plains-wanderer is not widely recognised is less surprising when you hear that it now persists in a tiny portion of its former distribution. The species was once widespread in grasslands through eastern Australia, from Queensland into NSW, Victoria and across to South Australia, however its range has severely contracted, and we now know of only two small strongholds in northern Victoria and southern NSW. In the years from 2001 – 2014, there was an estimated 93-95% reduction in Plains-wanderer numbers in Victoria and NSW and we now estimate there may be less than 1000 birds in total.

The Plains-wanderer is a small, ground-dwelling bird found in semi-arid grasslands of eastern Australia. It is a grassland specialist, with a very specific need for vegetation that is not

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too dense and not too sparse, and an aversion to trees. Luckily for the Plains-wanderer, it does not mind pastureland if there are tussocks for cover and nesting, and some pathways between the vegetation for finding food and mates. They tend to be solitary outside of the breeding season from September to March, and females, in particular, are quite territorial. This is another trait that sets Plains-wanderers apart from most bird species, with females being the more decorative gender, calling for mates, and known to abandon their mating partners to take on the tasks of incubating eggs and raising chicks while they seek another pairing. They may not be the most exceptional

mothers, but their quirky behaviours have certainly captured the imagination (and admiration) of all who are lucky to see them. Plains-wanderers are highly cryptic with an amazing talent for camouflage, and much of what we have learned about Plains-wanderer behaviour has come from close observation of birds brought into zoos for the national conservation breeding program. Zoos Victoria is one partner in the program that includes Taronga Conservation Society Australia and Featherdale Wildlife Park in NSW, and Monarto Zoo in South Australia. The program has been so successful that we have been able to trial releasing birds into the wild in the Victorian and



RIGHT: PLAINS-WANDERER CHICK WITH FATHER AT WERRIBEE OPEN RANGE ZOO. PHOTO COURTESY OF ZOOS VICTORIA.



# THE PLAINS-WANDERER – A UNIQUE AUSTRALIAN BIRD

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New South Wales strongholds. To hear the ancient call of the Plains-wanderer from their home at Werribee Open Range Zoo is heartening. This site and the grasslands to the west across the Victorian Volcanic Plain (VVP) were once home to abundant Plains-wanderers. The climate here is comparatively mild, and if grassland habitat persists into the future, this region may provide a critical refuge for the Plains-wanderer and other grassland birds when heat waves strike further north. Land managers across the VVP have noticed, on more than one occasion over the past couple of decades, a 'strange quail-like bird', and while the sightings are few and far between, we think this is a hope worth following. Zoos Victoria's Threatened Species team is working with Traditional Owners, farmers, and land managers

to search for the Plains-wanderer in the west. Following successful deployment of the technology in the north of the state, we have installed sound recorders known as 'song meters' on several properties from Cressy to Little River and Werribee to capture the females' calling. Call recognition software developed by researchers at Museums Victoria is helping us sift through the recordings to isolate our target – like sifting for gold, but an even more valuable reward if we find confirmed Plains-wanderer calls.

Every acre of land that can provide suitable habitat to support Plains-wanderers, whether remnant or restored grassland or suitably managed grazing land, could make the difference in conserving this ancient Australian species and making sure it persists for many more thousands of years.



BELOW: 'SONG METER'  
SOUND RECORDER.  
PHOTO CREDIT: DAVID BAKER-GABB.



This project is supported by Corangamite CMA, through funding from the Australian Government.

