

# Conservation

BULLETIN

## Budj Bim and beyond

Walking together with Aboriginal people

## Scent of sandalwood

Meet landholder Tuesday Browell

## Wetland jewels

Protecting swamps



TRUST FOR  
NATURE  
*Habitat forever*



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**TRUST FOR NATURE**  
*Habitat forever*

**Trust for Nature** (Victoria) is a not-for-profit organisation that works with private landholders to protect native plants and animals. Two-thirds of Victoria is freehold, making the protection of habitat vital in preventing extinction. We work with landholders to place voluntary conservation covenants on properties and buy and sell land which has conservation values through our Revolving Fund.

**Patron:** The Honourable Linda Dessau AC, Governor of Victoria.

**Trustees:** Gayle Austen (Chair), Nina Braid, Dr Charles Meredith, Jennifer Wolcott, Andrew Brookes BA, MAICD, Binda Gokhale, Sonya Rand, Jill Smith AM, Lisa Darmanin.

#### **Recognition of Traditional Owners:**

Trust for Nature recognises the continuing spiritual and cultural connection of Traditional Owners to Victoria's land, wildlife, freshwater and saltwater environments. The Trust is committed to helping Traditional Owners conserve, restore where possible and protect natural environments, wildlife and cultural heritage values.

**Front cover:** Trust for Nature team member Rachel measures an enormous old River Red Gum on a property near Mernda.

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Landholder Tuesday Browell was entranced by sandalwood trees.

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Later this year we'll be called on to make a crucial decision about the future of this country, when we vote in the referendum to enshrine in the Constitution an Indigenous Voice to Parliament.

The Voice is something Aboriginal people proposed through a process to determine what Constitutional recognition should look like. It is one of three calls from the Uluru Statement from the Heart, the others being truth-telling and treaty. It is my hope that all of us will participate in the referendum and the discussions leading up to it.

At Trust for Nature we're also proud of our partnerships with Aboriginal and First Nations People. Aboriginal and First Nations People have cared for Country for thousands of years. To properly restore and safeguard the health of our environment, we must work with the original custodians of the land. Supporting First Nations self-determination is supporting healthy Country. You can read more about some of our engagement with Aboriginal people, and why it matters, on page 8.

I'm pleased to report that in 2022-23, landholders protected another 2,434 ha on 49 new conservation covenants through Trust for Nature, bringing the total habitat we've protected to 113,698 ha. That's a massive achievement and huge testament to the dedication, passion and generosity of landholders across Victoria who have volunteered to safeguard habitat on their land. Thank you!

From 1 January 2024, land protected with conservation covenants may be exempt from land tax. This is a huge win for conservation, and one that landholders and Trust for Nature have advocated for over many years. It's my hope that this exemption will increase interest in habitat protection on private land and lead to even more covenants protecting habitat for threatened species. Anticipating this increased demand, and responding to requests from landholders, we have developed a new process to invite landholders to self-fund their covenant.

Our work continues to focus on overcoming the challenges of climate change and biodiversity loss. We are actively looking for new ways to protect threatened species and their habitat across Victoria. One of those threatened species is the critically endangered Plains-wanderer, which has one of its last strongholds on the northern plains of Victoria. In the following pages you can read about the awesome success of the Plains for Wanderer project, which has seen nearly 1,000 ha of Plains-wanderer habitat protected forever. I'm thrilled that this work will continue thanks to funding through the Country Road Climate Fund, ENEL Green Power, and other supporters, which will enable us to work with wool growers to protect more native grassland.

Thank you for your support, and I hope you enjoy this issue.

**Corinne Proske**  
CEO, Trust for Nature



# News & updates

## Another 2,434 ha protected!

Victorian landholders volunteered to protect 2,434 ha of habitat through Trust for Nature in 2022-23. Forty-nine new conservation covenants have been established, in every region of Victoria, from East Gippsland to the Wimmera. That brings the total habitat protected through Trust for Nature to 113,698 ha. Protecting habitat with a conservation covenant is the most important action landholders can take to contribute to the survival of Victoria's wildlife, the health of our ecosystems, and the global efforts to address biodiversity loss and climate change. Thank you to all who are making such an important contribution to protecting nature.

## Safeguarding swifties

Critically endangered Swift Parrots and Regent Honeyeaters have a brighter future thanks to landholders in north east Victoria who have joined forces with Trust for Nature through the Bush for Birds project. Both of these birds rely on flowering gum trees for nectar and pollen; loss of habitat is the biggest threat to the survival of these species. After five years of incredible work, 250 ha of habitat have been protected forever and another 750 ha have been managed to improve habitat. The Bush for Birds project is a partnership between Trust for Nature and the North East Catchment Management Authority, supported by the Australian Government.

## Dragons alive!

It's not often that species come back from the dead, but that's just what has happened for the Victorian Grassland Earless Dragon, which was recently rediscovered after not being seen since 1969. This critically endangered reptile, which was only recognised formally as a distinct species in 2019, is found only in grasslands on the volcanic plains west of Melbourne of which more than 95 per cent have been lost to development and agriculture. The rediscovery provides hope for the species, but means protecting native grassland is more important than ever, with at least 90 per cent of the dragon's remaining habitat found on private land.

*Critically endangered Swift Parrots have benefited from revegetation and habitat protection through the Bush for Birds project.*

*Image: Chris Tzaros.*





*Chain of ponds habitat has become rare in Victoria. Image: A. Jenkin.*

## Thank you

Our end of financial year appeal was highly successful, raising funds which will go towards protecting and improving habitat for wildlife across the state. We were especially thrilled with the support to our matched giving, raising a further \$22,135 to the \$15,000 match offered by a generous group of donors. Victoria is the most cleared Australian state, and sadly, thousands of hectares of forest, woodland, grassland and other habitats are still being lost every year on private land. Your support is helping us safeguard more land, support landholders to maintain and improve habitat, and build a statewide network of protected areas. Thank you to all those who supported our appeal; you are making a huge difference to the health of our environment.

## Flourishing ponds

Rare 'chain of ponds' habitat in the Perry River/ Providence Ponds catchment in Gippsland is returning to its former health thanks to a partnership between Trust for Nature, West Gippsland Catchment Management Authority, HVP Plantations and landholders. Chains of ponds – deep pools separated by typically dry waterways – have become rare in south east Australia since colonisation due to land clearing, altered hydrology, water extraction and sedimentation. Many have also been degraded by domestic stock and weed invasion. Through the Protecting Our Ponds project, we've worked with landholders and HVP to control weeds, replant vegetation and protect 170 ha forever, including 4.2 km of waterways with ponds. Now, after several wet years, the results are starting to show, with threatened Flinders Perch and Dwarf Galaxias found in surveys. This project was supported through funding from the West Gippsland Catchment Management Authority (WGCMA) and the Victorian Government's Our Catchments, Our Communities (OCOC) program.

## Yes to the Voice

Trust for Nature is proud to be supporting the Indigenous Voice to Parliament, with our Board and Executive endorsing their support for a 'yes' vote in the upcoming referendum on enshrining the Voice in the Constitution. Supporting the Voice will help strengthen our partnerships with Aboriginal people to protect the health of our environment. As our CEO Corinne Proske said, "Aboriginal people have cared for Country for thousands of years. To properly restore and safeguard the health of our environment, we must work with the original custodians of the land. Supporting First Nations self-determination is supporting healthy Country."

Find out more at [yes23.com.au](https://yes23.com.au).

# News & updates



## Dyed in the wool

We're thrilled to be partnering with Country Road to protect habitat for critically endangered Plains-wanderers. Through the Country Road Climate Fund, Trust for Nature has received \$200,000 to work with wool growers on Victoria's northern plains, the last stronghold in the state for this unique bird. Managing grasslands for conservation can also benefit primary producers, making protecting Plains-wanderers a win-win for farmers and conservation. We'll be working with landholders and Traditional Owners to protect and improve native grassland and educate local communities about the best ways to look after grasslands.

*Trust for Nature has been awarded a grant to protect habitat for critically endangered Plains-wanderers through the Country Road Climate Fund. Image: Country Road.*

## Land tax exemption for conservation

The Victorian Government has passed legislation that will give landholders with a conservation covenant an exemption from land tax. This is a very exciting development and something landholders and Trust for Nature have advocated for over many years. The exemption will come into effect on January 1 2024 and will apply to any land protected under a conservation covenant through Trust for Nature. We anticipate the exemption will increase interest in safeguarding habitat on private land, and we're pleased to report that we have recently developed a new process for landholders who are interested paying for conservation covenants on their land. Read more on [trustfornature.org.au/what-we-do/conservation-covenants](https://trustfornature.org.au/what-we-do/conservation-covenants).

## Homes on the plains

Nearly 1,000 ha of grassland in northern Victoria have been protected forever for Plains-wanderers through the Plains for Wanderers project. The Patho Plains are one of the last strongholds for these unique and critically endangered birds, but their favoured grassland habitat has been decimated as natural habitat has been cleared for cropping or exotic pasture. Through the project, Trust for Nature has worked with landholders to protect grassland properties forever, as well as restoring Buloke woodlands, removing weeds and controlling rabbits. The project has proven to be a win-win for farmers, who continue to graze sheep and cattle on the grasslands as a way to manage grass growth and maintain ideal Plains-wanderer habitat. Trust for Nature also supported researcher Dan Nugent to create a management plan for landholders, which you can find on our website at [trustfornature.org.au/resources](https://trustfornature.org.au/resources). The Plains for Wanderers project is a partnership between Trust for Nature and the North Central Catchment Management Authority, supported by the Australian Government.

## Where the land meets the sea

Since 2019 Trust for Nature has been working with landholders on the Corner Inlet and Nooramunga coastline to protect threatened saltmarsh habitat, protecting over 200 ha forever. Coastal saltmarsh provides critical habitat for threatened species such as Orange-bellied Parrot and Blue-winged Parrot. It also provides habitat for migratory shorebirds buffers the coastline from erosion and stores large amounts of carbon. Historic loss of saltmarsh, mangroves and estuarine wetlands in Corner Inlet has been significant, with around 45 per cent lost since 1750. Thanks to a generous donor and other funding sources we have been able to work with landholders to exclude livestock and control weeds, actions that are critical to the long-term survival of saltmarsh habitats and the plants and animals they support. John Hick, Trust for Nature Regional Manager said, "It's very exciting and rewarding that more landholders have got involved during the past few years, particularly the last six months, and are working closely with Trust for Nature to achieve great results." If you have a patch of saltmarsh or other native vegetation on your coastal property that you would like advice or assistance to look after, please contact Regional Manager John Hick at [johnh@tfn.org.au](mailto:johnh@tfn.org.au) or Conservation Officer Gabby Fitzgerald at [gabbriellef@tfn.org.au](mailto:gabbriellef@tfn.org.au). Our saltmarsh work is part of the Corner Inlet Protections project.



Trust for Nature team members Rachel and Gabby monitor saltmarsh. Image: Catherine Crowden.

## Copperburr conservation

One of Victoria's most threatened plants has also received a helping hand and trowel on Victoria's northern plains. The Turnip Copperburr (*Sclerolaena napiformis*) is a critically endangered member of the saltbush family, found only in native grasslands and Box and Buloke woodlands, and its population and distribution has shrunk with the loss of its habitat. As Senior Conservation Officer Kirsten Hutchison says, "Some people think they are ugly but I think they're beautiful!" As part of the Plains for Wanderers project (see: Homes on the plains), Trust for Nature worked with landholders to plant nearly 800 copperburrs and establish eight new populations. We're pleased to report that the young plants have settled in well and have even produced their own seed!



## Caretakers of Snape Reserve

Trust for Nature thanks Snape Reserve Committee of Management Chair Lindsay Smith and Secretary/Treasurer Sue Smith, who stepped down this year after caring for Snape Reserve for 20 years. Together, they have played an extraordinary role in maintaining the health of this sanctuary on Wotjobaluk Country, an important buffer to Little Desert National Park. Stepping up as Chair shortly after Trust for Nature purchased the 846 ha property with the generous assistance of Diana and Brian Snape, Lindsay demonstrated incredible leadership and unwavering commitment to conservation. He developed partnerships with other organisations, infrastructure to improve visitor experience and access, a strategy for ecological recovery, and identified the importance of land access for Traditional Owners. Lindsay and Sue's commitment to community-driven action is an example to the many volunteers who they have influenced. We thank Lindsay and Sue for their dedication to conservation.

*Lindsay Smith has been leading care of Snape Reserve since it was purchased by Trust for Nature in 2002. Image: Adam Blake.*



Copperburr seedlings awaiting planting. Image: Kirsten Hutchison.

# Connecting to Country at Budj Bim and beyond

One of the things Braydon Saunders loves most about being a Tour Guide Coordinator at Budj Bim Cultural Landscape in South West Victoria is seeing the ‘penny drop’. That’s how the Gunditjmara man describes the moment he recognises on the faces of the visitors he’s speaking to, when they understand the significance of the land they’re standing on and the stories of the Indigenous people who lived there for more than 30,000 years.

“It’s so empowering when you see people recognise that history,” Braydon said. “This is Country I’ve been living on for 23 years, wading across the stones, but people are still able to understand its importance just by being out here for a few hours.”

The Budj Bim Cultural Landscape is a unique place with universal heritage values that demonstrate how the Gunditjmara people worked with the natural resources and environment to establish a social and economic base for Gunditjmara society. In 2019, it was inscribed on UNESCO’s World Heritage List.

The 9,935 ha landscape includes the Budj Bim Volcano and Tae Rak (Lake Condah), as well as the Kurtonitj component, characterised by wetland swamps, and Tyrendarra in the south, an area of rocky ridges and large marshes. The Budj Bim lava flows, which connect these three components, have enabled the Gunditjmara to develop one of the largest and oldest aquaculture networks in the world. Composed of channels, dams and weirs, they are used to contain floodwaters and create basins to trap, store and harvest the kooyang. Short Finned Eel (*Anguilla australis*).

“Our people have been able to help rewrite the understanding of Indigenous people in Australia and across the world,” explained Braydon. “People now realise that the Indigenous way of living on landscape works, and there is a shift as we turn back to First Nations people to gain a better understanding of ways to care for Country.”

*Over thousands of years Gunditjmara people constructed a complex aquaculture system at Budj Bim.*







*“To think  
that  
something  
of this  
significance  
is right here  
in our own  
state is  
incredible.”*



This is a shift, a dawning understanding, that Trust for Nature has been a part of for many years. Engaging regularly with Traditional Owners through joint projects, spending time together on Country, sharing knowledge, nurturing land, the organisation is committed to First Nations people in conserving, restoring, and protecting natural environments, wildlife and cultural heritage values

Thanks to funding from the Victorian Government, under Trust for Nature's Iconic Estates Program, staff recently had the opportunity to visit Budj Bim Cultural Landscape for a tour with Braydon and his team to gain a better understanding of the significance of the area.

"It was truly mind-blowing to see the way the Traditional Owners managed the land at Tae Rak," said Amelia Houghton, Trust for Nature's Statewide Operations Manager, who was part of the visit and had the chance for a treasured penny dropping moment. "To think that something of this significance is right here in our own state is incredible."

Trust for Nature's Senior Conservation Officer Adam Merrick also had the opportunity to attend.

"It was such a great way for us to engage and learn, and celebrate the world heritage status of the Budj Bim landscape," Adam said, "and we are hoping that will lead on to other engagement with Traditional Owners in the South West. We are currently exploring the opportunity to covenant land around Budj Bim, as there is spectacular and important vegetation, geology, and habitat through that zone, and also assist with cultural burns where it might be suitable on both land we own and help manage."

Engagement and collaborative land management opportunities with Traditional Owners around Budj Bim is just one part of Trust for Nature's organisation-wide approach to Indigenous partnerships.

"We have an overarching Reconciliation Action Plan which currently guides our approach, and because we work in conservation and land management, Traditional Owner engagement is central to how we operate," Amelia said. "We are continuing to learn and embed cultural land management practices into the western science approach to managing covenants and reserves."

This includes a cool season burning pilot project in the state's North East, working with many Traditional Owner groups to improve habitat, and handing back Neds Corner Station to the First People of the Millewa Mallee Aboriginal Corporation. Trust for Nature also facilitates the Certificate III in Conservation and Ecosystem Management for First Nations/Traditional Owners (AHC31420), which has been designed by and specifically for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples to gain skills to work on Country. Trust for Nature proudly employs three Cultural Liaison Officers to support Aboriginal voices in the workplace; two are graduates of this course.

"It's important that we do everything we can to support connection to Country continuing," Amelia said.

For Braydon, it's vital that Indigenous people are there with organisations like Trust for Nature at the forefront of conservation and land management at every opportunity.

"We want to learn just as much as we want to teach, and giving that chance to First Nations people is so important," he said. "It means a lot."

The Iconic Estates 2 project was supported by the Victorian Government's Protecting Biodiversity Program.

Learn more about Budj Bim, and how to visit, at [budjbim.com.au](http://budjbim.com.au)



*Endangered Brolgas are one of the threatened species that depend on Victoria's wetlands.*

# Protecting the wetland jewels in our landscape

Wetland environments are significant in many ways, but there's one aspect of their biodiversity that often stands out.

"There's something about wetland birds," said environmentalist Chris Murray. "They're obvious and they're beautiful, and they allow people to enjoy a bit of nature in their busy, everyday lives because if wetlands are preserved carefully, they can thrive so close to urban environments."

It was a passion for this particular environment and its avifauna that led Chris to complete a PhD on wetlands and water birds in Victoria, and to generously donate funds to Trust for Nature that allowed the organisation to purchase the magnificent Long Swamp Reserve.

The 178 ha reserve is at the heart of the Moolort Plains wetland complex that lies between Newstead and Maryborough. In the 1960s the swamp was drained as part of a plan to stop rising salinity. Recognising its conservation significance, Trust for Nature purchased the property in two parts: 40 hectares in 1992 and another 138 hectares in 2016, both with thanks to generous donations and support of the local community, in particular the Murray family.

"It's one of the really good things I've done in my life," Chris said.

The drain was filled in at the end of 2020, allowing the wetland to fill again last year for the first time since the 1960s. Since being inundated, large numbers of waterbirds have been using the wetland, including threatened Hardhead, Blue-winged Shoveler, and migratory terns and crakes.

"Long Swamp Reserve is the only deep freshwater marsh in the Moolort Plains wetland complex, so it's really significant," said Trust for Nature Senior Conservation Officer Kirsten Hutchison. "It protects a large area of cane-grass wetland vegetation and is habitat to so many threatened and vulnerable species. It's absolutely covered in birds at the moment. It's providing an amazing and safe place for those animals to be."

But it's not just birds benefiting from the landscape's protection. The vulnerable Growling Grass Frog has also been recorded on the reserve for the first time. Growling Grass Frogs are one of the largest frogs in Australia and their numbers have declined by 50 per cent in the last 10 years due to a fungal disease, habitat degradation, water pollution and predation by introduced fish species.

However while Long Swamp Reserve is a success story, wetlands across the state are still under significant threat.





It's estimated that 37 per cent of all wetlands in Victoria have been destroyed since European occupation. A further 30 per cent have been degraded, and 70 per cent of wetlands are found on private land where they are vulnerable to development, grazing, cropping, and other threats. Wetlands are often destroyed in dry years when they are not as distinguishable from other habitats.

*“Wetlands are so important because they are incredibly diverse and productive areas when they are inundated, helping sustain not only aquatic species of plants and animals but also dryland species from the surrounding landscape,” Kirsten explained. “They are like the powerhouse of ecosystem health and diversity in many agricultural landscapes, and we really need to protect them.”*

Trust for Nature's updated Statewide Conservation Plan includes targets for wetland conservation. The goal is to increase protection of priority wetlands by at least 5,000 ha by 2030, with a focus on protecting wetland ecosystems that are recognised as globally or nationally significant, as well as wetland types not well reserved in the public estate.

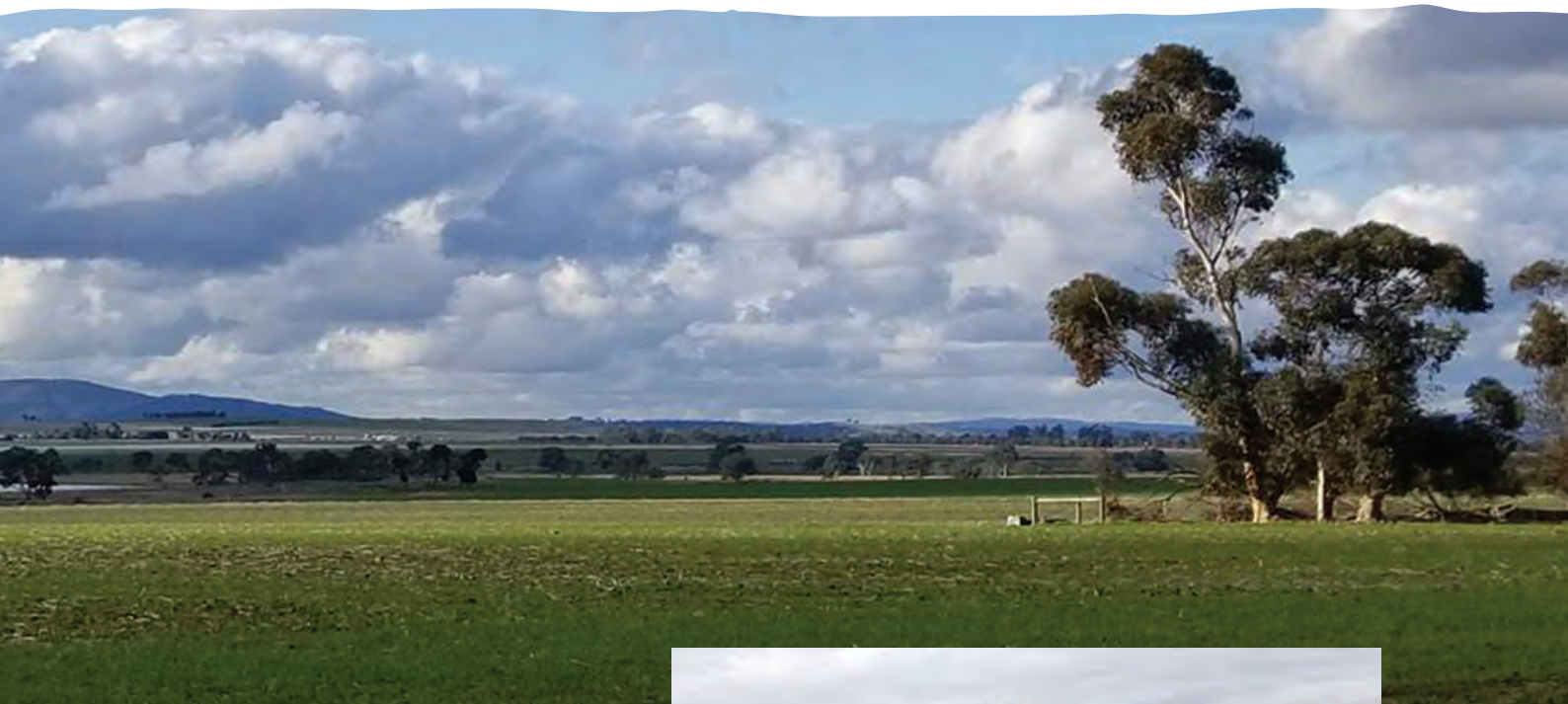
In the state's south west, Trust for Nature is working with Catchment Management Authorities and landholders to protect wetland habitat for Brolgas, snipe and bitterns.

“We've recently covenanted a spectacular 100 ha swamp near Lake Bolac, which was a real achievement,” said Trust for Nature Conservation Officer Adam Merrick. “It's superb habitat for these birds, and it's surrounded by cropping enterprises so was really a priority for us.”

But protecting wetlands doesn't just benefit the flora and fauna in that landscape.

“There's a lovely 8 ha site in urban Portland that is Brolga breeding habitat, though it's surrounded by houses,” Adam said. “It's wonderful, because the local community has taken ownership over the wetland and report issues and provide updates.”

Having these natural escapes so close to us, said Chris, has such a positive impact on our lives.



“And as long as they’re protected and given appropriate environments, they will thrive,” he said. “We need to look after what we have left, for the environment and for our grandchildren.

“Trust for Nature is doing a wonderful job, and we need to continue supporting their work. Any little bit that one person can do will help.”



*Trust for Nature began purchasing Long Swamp Reserve in 1992.*



*When Long Swamp fills it becomes a haven for waterbirds.*

# Critically endangered tree species brought back from the brink



Essential oils and environmentalism don't always go hand-in-hand, but it was a career in aromatherapy that led Torrumbarry resident Tuesday Browell to discover and conserve one of the state's most unassuming natural treasures.

"I was an aromatherapy massage therapist, and I was doing some research into Australian sandalwood when I read something really interesting," she explained. "It said there was an old sandalwood tree on a sandhill in Torrumbarry—and that's where I lived. This was in about 1995."

Tuesday knew this was rare—while relatively common in other Australian states, sandalwoods are on the brink of extinction in Victoria due to large-scale clearing—so she decided to search for it.

"It was hard to find," she said. "There was no track to it, and I had to get a canoe and paddle to the back of a property, but when I got there it wasn't one tree but about 12 of them!"

And it wasn't just the critically endangered Northern Sandalwoods that left an impression on Tuesday. She was in awe of the entire landscape around her.

"The whole place was like stepping back in time," she said. "There were centuries old native pines. It had never been logged, and it felt ancient."

After some further investigation, Tuesday discovered not only the rich biodiversity of the land—home to hundreds of nesting turtles, Brolgas, platypus, echidnas and more than 130 species of birds that come and go—but that it is also culturally significant, a burial ground for the local indigenous people, and a part of the Murray River corridor.

"It's a botanical delight," Tuesday said. "A really special place. So, I decided I had to buy it and protect it."

Tuesday purchased the 35 ha property and placed a conservation covenant on the land through Trust for Nature.

*Grazing is now the major threat to the critically endangered sandalwood.*

"I was looking for some way to protect it beyond me," she said. "Because I realised that once I didn't own it, these magnificent trees could be cut down and then the history is gone forever."

Since buying the land almost 30 years ago, Tuesday has garnered all the help she can to manage it, tirelessly trying to protect turtle nests from foxes, propagating the sandalwoods (there are now 30), and 'tree necklacing' to safeguard new vegetation from kangaroos and rabbits—a process of surrounding saplings with branches and sticks to deter the animals.

"Honestly, it's a constant challenge," Tuesday said about protecting the flora and fauna on the property where she lives with her partner Harry. "It's hard work and it's difficult to get help. At the end of the day, I'm buggered."

But despite this, the dedicated environmentalist said it's not only worth it, but it's essential.

"We really do need to save these little wild places, because they all play a part in the larger scheme of things," she said. "I'm proud of what we've been able to achieve. There's a great sense of peace here, and that we're doing something good."







*It was a search for sandalwood that led Tuesday to her Torrumbarry sanctuary.*

*“I was looking for some way to protect it beyond me ... Because I realised that once I didn't own it, these magnificent trees could be cut down and then the history is gone forever.”*



*Tree 'necklacing' protects saplings from herbivores.*




# New covenants (Jan-Jun 2023)

Another 766 ha of precious habitat for wildlife protected forever.


Thank you to the landholders who have voluntarily committed to safeguarding your properties — you are making an incredible contribution to conservation.





-  Covenants registered in 2023
-  Private land
-  Public land





**Do you have a story idea for  
the Conservation Bulletin? Feedback?**

**We'd love to hear from you!**

**Get in touch at [communications@tfn.org.au](mailto:communications@tfn.org.au)**

Trust for Nature relies on the generosity of supporters to help protect Victoria's biodiversity. To make a donation, go to [trustfornature.org.au/donate](https://trustfornature.org.au/donate)

*An ecological burn on Trustee Andrew Brookes's covenanted property on the Bellarine Peninsula, Wadawurrung Country.*