

Conservation BULLETIN

Spotlight on reserves

Decades of dedication to conservation

Landscape transformation

Regenerating degraded habitat

Plus, meet landholders and supporters making extraordinary contributions to conservation



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TRUST FOR NATURE

Trust for Nature works with Victorian landholders to protect habitat for wildlife on private land. Since 1972 Trust for Nature has protected more than 119,000 ha of native habitat in partnership with over 1,800 landholders. Trust for Nature's work is made possible through the generosity of partners, supporters and donors who together want to make a difference to Victoria's natural environment. Trust for Nature acknowledges the support of the Victorian Government.

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Front cover: David Cummings and Mary Lush have protected this incredible waterfall on Gunaikurnai Country forever. Read more on page 22. Image: Annette Ruzicka.

Back cover: Beautiful tree ferns and rainforest protected on David and Mary's covenant. Image: Annette Ruzicka.

From the CEO



After an extended dry period and forecasts for hotter weather, we began this summer with a sense of trepidation. And indeed with heatwaves and strong winds, we've seen several periods of extreme and catastrophic fire weather.

Sadly, at least 55 conservation covenants, over a hundred Land for Wildlife properties, and one Trust for Nature reserve have been impacted by fires across the state, particularly by the Longwood fire in central Victoria.

The impact on landholders and habitat has been devastating. To help landholders impacted by fire, we launched an urgent appeal to support habitat recovery on burned properties. Thank you to all who have responded to this call. In the coming months, funds will be distributed to impacted landholders as small grants.

The fires highlight the increasing pressure nature is under as the climate changes, but also the importance of protecting habitat on private land. Unburned properties can serve as vital refuges in the landscape, and the care and dedication of landholders will help nature recover.

That's one of the reasons we're increasing our effort to support landholders to improve habitat across the state. After trialing our first Landholder Support

Program in Gippsland in 2025, I'm excited to have launched further programs statewide. Keep an eye on your local Trust for Nature staff member emails for opportunities, and read about one of the landholders who got involved on page 26, as well as other stories of the incredible transformations that are possible.

Another area we are focusing on is our network of over 40 reserves – many of which have been cared for by dedicated volunteers for decades. In this issue we put the spotlight on some of these special places, and the wonderful people who look after them and whose efforts led to their protection. Thanks to the generosity of supporter Chris Murray, we are also supporting the management of these reserves for generations to come through the Bridie Butterfield-Murray Memorial Fund. Visit our website to find out how you can get involved.

Although there are challenges and setbacks, I take heart from the stories of recovery and regeneration I hear about whenever I meet landholders across Victoria. You can read many of those in this issue, including the spectacular success of the Bank Australia Conservation Reserve, an ambitious and innovative partnership protecting vital habitat in the Wimmera.

I hope you find some inspiration in these stories too.

Corinne Proske
CEO, Trust for Nature

Trust for Nature acknowledges the First Peoples, the Traditional Custodians of the sky, land and waters since time immemorial. We commit to listening and learning from their deep knowledge and continuous cultural and spiritual connections.

Together, we can protect, care, and heal Country, so nature can thrive. We walk together. Forever & Always.

News and updates

Vale Geoff Durham

Geoff Durham was a driving force behind the protection of our Wanderslore Reserve and a strong voice for conservation. As a student, Geoff was inspired by his teacher, Constance Coleman, and connected her to Trust for Nature. In 1987, Constance donated her Yarra Valley property Wanderslore to Trust for Nature, creating a legacy that will last forever. As convenor of the Friends of Wanderslore, Geoff led efforts to keep the reserve healthy, weed free and connected to the community. Geoff's contributions to conservation extended far beyond Wanderslore and in 2022 his lifelong service earned him an OAM. "His leadership and passion shaped how many people understand and protect habitat across Victoria. His influence will be felt for many years to come," says Ben Cullen, South Central Area Manager at Trust for Nature.



Welcoming Land for Wildlife

We've been thrilled to welcome thousands of landholders into the Trust for Nature community since we took over management of Land for Wildlife from the Victorian Government. The iconic program, which has been running since 1981 in Victoria, is free, voluntary, and non-legally binding. Landholders receive expert advice, educational resources and recognition through a Land for Wildlife sign. As we welcome Land for Wildlife community members, we are asking that previous Land for Wildlife landholders to re-register their properties, and we will provide you with a new, updated sign. For further information, please visit: trustfornature.org.au/what-we-do/land-for-wildlife/

Working with wool-growers

We're excited to be continuing our work with Country Road to care for critically endangered grasslands on Victoria's northern plains. Thanks to the Country Road Climate Fund, we are working with wool-growers to improve the health of over 1,000 ha of grassland, home to threatened species like the critically endangered Plains-wanderer. Fencing, weed and fox control are some of the ways we are supporting landholders to care for grasslands alongside farming businesses. The project continues our partnership with the Country Road Climate Fund, which along with other partners enabled us to work with wool-growers and protect 650 ha of grassland forever.



Partnering for conservation

We're thrilled to announce our new community partnership with the Melbourne Convention and Exhibition Centre, who are committed to supporting community-led organisations that make a real difference and drive long-term change. As a community partner, we're excited to host events at this iconic venue and offer new ways for event organisers to support conservation.

Conserving saltmarsh

Coastal saltmarsh is incredibly important habitat for wildlife and the health of our coasts. We're continuing our work with landholders on Corner Inlet to help restore coastal saltmarsh vegetation and build climate resilience. Supported by West Gippsland Catchment Management Authority through funding from the Australian Government's National Heritage Trust, we're providing fencing, weed control and monitoring to protect saltmarsh from threats such as grazing; restore and improve saltmarsh habitat; and increase community awareness. This year we will have provided 2.5 km of fencing and 100 ha of weed control. We are still looking. Please contact Billie Emmett to get involved: billiee@tfn.org.au.



Creating links in central Victoria

The box-ironbark forests of central Victoria are home to incredible biodiversity, but have been degraded by the legacy of gold mining during the Gold Rush. Trust for Nature is partnering with the Biolinks Alliance to restore these rich forests on covenanted private land, and help create links across the landscape. The project will support landholders to improve habitat on their properties through on-ground works including fencing, planting and nest boxes. Keep an eye out for updates!

Connecting over nature

Thank you to all those who joined us at the end of 2025 to celebrate another wonderful year of conservation action. We held events in each region of Victoria with dozens of landholders and supporters. From a lovely morning at Halls Gap Botanic Garden, to our Stratford Woodland Reserve, a tour of covenants

in Barkers Creek and Peechelba, and an evening at the Abbotsford Convent, we loved connecting over the thing that brings us together: nature. Thank you in particular to covenantors who shared your passion and dedication with others. Keep an eye on our emails for future upcoming events.



Meet the team!

Tess Bresnahan joined Trust for Nature in 2024 as our Conservation Program Manager in West Gippsland. From the forests of the Strzelecki Ranges to the coast around Wilson's Promontory, Tess works with landholders across this spectacular region through our Stewardship Program, as well as supporting landholders who are interested in protecting their properties. Here, we chat with Tess about her passion for nature.

How did you become interested in nature?

I grew up in the outer eastern suburbs of Melbourne, surrounded by Mountain Ash forests. I now reflect that as a child I had little concept of how much Victorian land had been cleared. I was lucky to have parents that loved walking, so I spent much of my childhood on long, steep walks in the forest, spurred on by mint slice biscuits.

As a teenager, I continued to spend a lot of time outside walking and mountain biking and recognised the positive impact that being in nature had on my mental health. I think the thought of these spaces not being available to me created a natural motivation to work in nature and protect it. My passion has grown through studying and learning at work over time. It has been interesting and special to begin to understand the ecology of areas that I once just appreciated for their visual beauty.

What's a day in the life at Trust for Nature for you?

Field days are my favourite days, and I spend about half my time in the field. My work is predominantly visiting existing covenants with the occasional trip to new properties to establish a new covenant. It is always great when the covenantor can be present, as they often have incredible ecological and historical knowledge of their property to share with me. Some also have long photographic records, and I can't believe when I see old photos of unrecognisable grazed paddocks, transformed into thriving forests revegetated over decades. During the visit, I record observations about flora and fauna, complete ecological monitoring, and re-take photopoints to record change. This all feeds into our online records and covenant Management Plans which I update back in the office.



*Team member Tess Bresnahan (right) with covenantors Mary Lush (centre) and David Cummings (left).
Image: Annette Ruzicka.*

What's the best thing you've seen while working at Trust for Nature?

One of the covenants in my region has a spectacular waterfall that cascades down basalt rocks (read more on page 22). It's hard to believe when you see things like that on private property, and I'm so excited that it has been recently protected by a covenant. The few remaining pockets of Warm Temperate Rainforest are always exciting too. When I've shared photos with other team members they have commented it looks like country for dinosaurs.

When you're not working, where will we find you?

I have left the hills for the beach at the moment in an attempt to learn to surf, so you will mainly find me in the ocean. I completely underestimated the athleticism of the sport; I will check back in with my progress in another decade.

Celebrating life with a gift for nature

Anne and Jim U'Ren were walking near the Cobungra River in the Victorian Alps when they came across a peculiar stand of wattle trees. They were a bit like wattles they'd seen elsewhere, but also a bit different, and they were growing in the wrong place.

"That's what sparked Anne's interest in the property," Jim recalls.

A local farmer had given them permission to explore the land and its natural wonders. When the property came up for sale, Anne and Jim bought it.

The couple met at a golf club in south east Melbourne. Anne had grown up in western Victoria, where she'd discovered a love of nature. After settling in Melbourne, they became involved with bushwalking through the Victorian National Parks Association. Anne later became an accredited bushwalk leader, and volunteered as a leader at the Cubs their children attended.

It was through the then-Bird Observers Club that the pair first got to know the Cobungra area in 1979, and they settled on a small block in 2000. Anne purchased the 42 ha bush block in 2012, which she named Sinza. She spent most days exploring the block and identifying hundreds of plants and animals. As well as nature, Anne was interested in the history of the area, and supported community organisations

"We made quite a good team, Anne could identify all the flowers and I could identify all the birds," Jim says. "She discovered more and more plants, spent a lot of time walking down to the river and along the river and photographing everything. She must've taken thousands of photos of all around the area. She just loved it all. It became such an important part of her life after moving up here."



*The Cobungra Wattle, Acacia ureniae.
Image: VicFlora/Symes, P., CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.*

In 2018, Anne and Jim protected the property forever with a conservation covenant, conserving montane grassy woodlands of Snow Gums, Mountain Gums and Peppermints, of which more than half have been cleared in this area of the ranges. The property provides a sanctuary for several rare plants.

One of those was the unusual wattles Anne had found, which she sent to Neville Walsh at the Royal Botanic Gardens in Melbourne. Over the years Anne had sent many photos and specimens to the herbarium, and Neville would respond with his identification. But the wattle didn't match anything previously known. In 2020 Neville described it as a new species, and named it *Acacia ureniae* after Anne and Jim.

"We were very pleased that it had been officially recognised as a new species, and Anne was very proud of the fact that a new species bore her surname."

With the naming of the wattle, Anne's love of nature has been recognised forever. Anne also left an extraordinary legacy by gifting her property to Trust for Nature in her will, after she passed in 2023.

The property has been sold to new custodians, with the proceeds used to protect and look after more habitat forever.

"It was the best way it could be looked after," Jim says. "Anne wanted it to go to someone who would look after it and enjoy it as much as she did."

Leaving a gift in your Will to Trust for Nature is an extraordinary contribution to conservation. To discuss making a bequest, please contact Neil Venables: neilv@tfn.org.au, 0417 052 861.



Anne on her property in 2021 after the Black Summer bushfires. Image: Anna Foley.

Conserving connections through partnerships in the Wimmera

Spend enough time in the woodlands of the Wimmera, and you might be lucky enough to glimpse a flock of one of Australia's rarest birds gently wafting over the trees. South-eastern Red-tailed Black-cockatoos are unique to this part of Australia.

"When you sit and watch these birds, you see they've got a lot of character," says Rachel Farran, a Wimmera local and Coordinator of the Red-tailed Black-cockatoo Recovery Project at Birdlife Australia. "They're universally loved. Growing up with them is special."

In spring, pairs find a hollow, and once the female lays an egg she remains in the nest for four months until the chick fledges. Her partner calls her out, feeds her, and each evening takes her out for a drink. The calls they make during this daily ritual are key to monitoring the birds.

"They use six different vocalisations around their nesting trees," says Rachel, who traverses the Wimmera over the hottest summer months to survey nests. "We use those vocalisations to monitor nests and how successful their breeding has been."



Trust for Nature staff Laura McLean (left) and Fiona Copley (right) monitor the Bank Australia conservation reserve.



Despite ranging across Australia, the south-eastern population of Red-tailed Black-cockatoos is critically endangered. Found only in far western Victoria and far eastern South Australia, the cockatoos depend entirely on the seeds of three species of trees for their survival: Desert and Brown stringybarks, and Bulokes.

The trees only produce a fresh crop of seeds every couple of years, and the numbers of all three have declined dramatically as woodlands have been cleared for agriculture. Ninety-seven per cent of Bulokes have been lost.

One of the shining examples protecting woodlands the cockatoos depend on is the Bank Australia conservation reserve, on Wotjobaluk Country in the



'Cockatubes' have been installed on the reserve to help black-cockatoos.

Wimmera. Seeing a flock of five black-cockatoos on a staff trip has been a highlight for Camille Goldstone-Henry, manager, nature and biodiversity at Bank Australia.

"It was so special. It makes you feel like you're part of something bigger," says Camille. "It's a reminder that nature was here before us and will be here after us. The question is if we want to be here too in the long-term."

Driven by the concerns of its customers, in 2008 Bank Australia purchased a 201 ha property in the Wimmera at Minimay. It was the first piece of what would become the bank's conservation reserve, the first of its kind in Australia.

Over the following decade, the bank added to the reserve, including purchasing 1,200 ha at Salvana in 2021, doubling the reserve's size. Today, the bank's customer surveys show that nature continues to be a priority: in 2023 70% of its customers reported they were concerned about the environment.

The reserve is now made up of four properties across the Wimmera – Salvana, Ozenkadnook, Minimay and Boorooopki – each protected forever with a conservation covenant.

"Even among the four properties the ecosystems are quite different," says Camille. "You've got classic Australian bush landscape at Minimay with open woodland of Bulokes and red gums. And then Salvana is completely different, with giant grass trees that have been there for hundreds of years."

"These private reserves are essential for recovery because it's where we get new feeding trees and nesting trees into the landscape," says Rachel.

To help the birds, Rachel and the recovery team have installed over 200 nest boxes, such as 'Cockatubes' across the birds' range. These artificial nest tubes are lined with wood chips that must be restocked regularly. Because the females enter the nest backwards, the tubes have a wire ladder for them to climb down. Ten have been installed on the Bank Australia Conservation Reserve, and staff have helped construct the nest boxes.



A juvenile and female Red-tailed Black-cockatoo on the reserve. Image: Jennifer Goldsworthy.



The reserve comes alive with colour in spring. Image: Laura McLean.

For Laura McLean, Project Manager at Trust for Nature, the variety of habitat that makes up the reserve is a constant source of wonder.

“The reserve never looks the same each visit. Rainfall changes everything. The coolest thing is seeing the wildflowers – sometimes you don’t know where to walk because there is so much happening. You can see fields of purple chocolate lilies, then the pink fringe myrtles that go on for miles, and all the colours of the orchids,” Laura says.

Surveys reveal over 250 plant species and over 280 animal species on the reserve, including 19 threatened species such as the Fiery Jewell Butterfly, Diamond Firetail, and the pink-flowering and critically endangered Small Milkwort, of which Laura recently discovered a new population on the reserve.

“You can think of the reserve properties as stepping stones in the landscape between other reserves,” says Laura. “In such an agricultural landscape the pockets that are left are so important. We don’t just want to be protecting threatened species – if we’re not protecting these areas and establishing new areas of revegetation to provide connectivity, then we’re definitely at risk of losing what is remaining.”

Fires in early 2025 burned over 70 per cent of the nearby Little Desert National Park, highlighting the importance of the Bank Australia conservation reserve.

“Many species such as the Red-tailed Black-Cockatoos lost food resources in the recent fires, so reserves such as these provide a safe haven following natural disasters. These remaining unburned patches provide a refuge for fauna that were displaced in the fires,” says Rachel.

Bank Australia has partnered with conservation organisations like Trust for Nature to care for the reserve. Revegetation, weed and pest control, fire protection and monitoring are all part of managing the conservation reserve every season.

Working with Traditional Owners is a key part of looking after the reserve and deeply connected to the bank’s First Peoples strategy and Recognition and Respect strategy says Camille, including plants supplied by Dalki Garringa Native Nursery, owned and operated by Barengi Gadjin Land Council. The nursery ethically collects seed from Country for propagation and preservation that can later be used in revegetation.

Businesses and corporations are becoming increasingly aware of their impact on biodiversity, says Camille, guided by the Taskforce on Nature-related Financial Disclosures.

“Nature is one of the strongest defences against climate change,” Camille says. “At Bank Australia we want to act boldly to demonstrate and influence nature positive behaviours.”

Conserving habitat for black-cockatoos has benefits for other species too.



Critically endangered Buloke Mistletoe grow on threatened Bulokes.



Butterfly on grass tree. Image: Laura McLean.

Not only vital food sources for the birds, Bulokes are also hosts for the critically endangered Buloke Mistletoe, which Laura has recently been surveying on the reserve. Recently, she found a flowering mistletoe on one of the Bulokes planted on the reserve over ten years ago.

For the cockatoos, the outlook is still concerning. Each May, Rachel coordinates dozens of volunteers to survey for flocks across the Wimmera.

While the numbers appear to be holding steady, counts still indicate an overall decline in this long-lived species.

The recovery team is working hard to reverse this trend through successful partnerships such as the Bank Australia Conservation Reserve.

“With so many increased pressures and ongoing loss of habitat, we need to protect and restore every patch of woodland we can to give these birds a brighter future,” says Rachel.

A volcano of their very own

Celebrating 25 years
of Mount Elephant
Reserve

Showers of fiery red, molten volcanic bombs streaking through the air, rivers of flowing lava across the land. This chaotic, noisy and spectacular scene is not Hawaii or Iceland today but Victoria, 180,000 years ago.

At 240 m above sea level the almost perfect cone of Mount Elephant, on Eastern Maar Country at Derrinallum, is one remnant of this explosive time in the state's history. For millions of years molten rock erupted from over 400 fissures, rifts and cones across Western Victoria, many witnessed and recorded by First Peoples.

Huge volumes of lava flowed across the land. The rock, basalt, was used by settlers to build stone walls and houses, and was crushed for developing roads and farm tracks.

Twenty-five years ago, members of the communities surrounding Mount Elephant rallied to protect this extraordinary place.

“It has a lot of meaning to the community – it really came from the heart. At some of the meetings people were in tears,” says Lesley Brown, Treasurer of the Mount Elephant Committee of Management, volunteers who have been caring for the mountain since it became a Trust for Nature reserve.

Originally from Melbourne, Lesley moved to Derrinallum to become a dairy farmer with her husband. When Mount Elephant came up for sale in 2000, the community held several meetings to discuss

purchasing Mount Elephant. The desire to keep the mountain as part of the community and for recreation was overwhelming, and for Mount Elephant to be restored to its state before European colonisation.

Assisted by a then-Trustee and community member, Trust for Nature formed a partnership to raise \$200,000 to purchase Mount Elephant and manage the reserve. Volunteers door-knocked in the local community, a media campaign was launched, and through this \$100,000 was raised in five months by the community. Trust for Nature contributed to the balance.

“It was the right thing to do,” Lesley says. “The previous owners wanted it to go to the community. If we hadn’t bought it some other private owners would have.”



Mount Elephant stands over the western plains. Image: Mount Elephant Committee of Management.

What do you do with a dormant volcano? “We wanted to bring it back to the way it was before European settlement and bushfires swept through the area,” says Lesley. But that posed a problem: how to find out what used to live on Mount Elephant?

The answer involved artistic detective work, using the paintings and sketches of Austrian-born painter Eugene von Guerard. These show that the mountain was likely covered in a woodland of banksias, she-oaks, Blackwoods and Manna Gums, with shrubby Sweet Bursaria, Tree Violet and native grasses growing amongst the trees. This is a rare habitat today in Victoria, and much of what remains is degraded. A management plan developed by the Centre for Environmental Management, University of Ballarat, documents the plants and animals that would have lived on Mount Elephant, and how to restore it.

Over the past 25 years volunteers have planted thousands of trees and grasses. Rabbits have been baited and warrens removed. Weeds have been sprayed. The changes have been remarkable: from hundreds and thousands of rabbits, there are now only a handful.

“When we first started there was nothing – it was brown and full of rabbit warrens. Now it’s green and there are lots of trees. People said, ‘You’ll never get rid of the rabbits, you’ll never get rid of the weeds’ – but we have,” says Lesley.

Wildlife is returning, including Wedge-tailed Eagles, wallabies, and kangaroos. This is posing an interesting dilemma: the kangaroos are eating freshly planted trees, which now need to be guarded and fenced. But both are signs that Mount Elephant’s recovery is well on the way.

Walking tracks have been installed, and a visitor center open on Sunday afternoons, and at other times by request, provides information about this fascinating place and the work that goes into looking after it. Lesley is particularly energised by the people who visit Mount Elephant, including groups of students from local schools and the commitment of the Mount Elephant committee.

“How many people have the opportunity to do what we have done?” says Lesley. “We just get on with the job and then you look back and think ‘The trees are growing, we did that’. It’s a legacy to leave behind for the future, so that future generations can continue to enjoy this place.”

Some of the volunteers who care for Mount Elephant. Image: Mount Elephant Committee of Management.



Celebrating the caretakers of Ralph Illidge Sanctuary

Thanks to the incredible efforts of community, Ralph Illidge Sanctuary became a Trust for Nature reserve 50 years ago. This extraordinary reserve is a precious remnant of forest in south west Victoria and protects vital habitat for threatened species. Here, we celebrate how the reserve was created, and the volunteer Friends of Ralph Illidge Sanctuary who have cared for the reserve with such dedication for 25 years..

For a quarter of a century, dozens of dedicated volunteers have tended Trust for Nature's Ralph Illidge Sanctuary on Eastern Maar Country.

"It's one of the few remaining untouched bushlands," says Peter Batistello, former President of the Friends

of Ralph Illidge Sanctuary. "It used to be bush all the way from the Otways to Warrnambool, but farmers cleared the land and everything changed. It would be a shame if it was gone."

Formed in 2000, and taking up the mantle of the earlier volunteers, the Friends are the caretakers of Ralph Illidge Sanctuary. Every month volunteers visit the reserve, contributing countless hours of weeding and maintenance.

Peter was born in the area, and farmed dairy cattle on land opposite the sanctuary, and got involved in the committee when a member approached him.

"I was always looking at it and I've always loved the bush. I enjoy the whole ecosystem of it, not just one thing. You're always learning, you never stop learning," says Peter.

Today, the sanctuary protects nearly 100 ha of habitat, including threatened forests. Brucknell Creek flows through the reserve, before joining the Hopkins River and Bass Strait at Warrnambool. Nearly 200 species of plants and animals have been recorded on the reserve, including threatened species such as Long-nosed Potoroos, Rufous Bristlebirds, Powerful Owls, and species of orchids.

Keeping on top of the weeds is an ongoing challenge – particularly Blackberries and Arum Lilies, which are creeping into the reserve from upstream.

The sanctuary provides important habitat for threatened Powerful Owls. Image: Perry Cho.





Ralph Illidge Sanctuary protects habitat around Brucknell Creek.

“It’s never-ending,” Peter says. “But without constant weeding it will just go backwards.”

The sanctuary regularly hosts visitors at the reserve’s information centre, including school groups and field naturalists. In 2021, the Friends hosted an art show featuring some of the area’s wonderful plants and animals.

This year, the sanctuary was visited by birders from far and wide when an unusual Black-faced Monarch showed up the reserve, well west of its usual range. The Friends have encouraged visitors to respect habitat and tread lightly.

“We like visitors,” says Peter, “but big mobs of people can damage the environment, particularly if they go off trails.”

With the dedication of the Friends of Ralph Illidge Sanctuary, the reserve will continue to provide important habitat for wildlife, and a place for people to connect with nature.

Some of the volunteers who care for Ralph Illidge Sanctuary. From left to right, Peter Battistello, John Keogh, Phil Baulch, Eamon Maher and Georgina Bedford. Image: Amy Marshall.



Lifetime of care

“I was walking home one evening when I heard a young owl, and I stopped to look for it,” says Shirley Duffield. “Next thing I knew, an adult Powerful Owl swooped past me so close I could feel the wind.”

Being swooped by Australia’s largest owl has been for Shirley one of the wonders of caring for Ralph Illidge Sanctuary. That such a large and threatened predator calls the sanctuary home is testament to those who have protected it.

Born in Horsham, Shirley remembers going out to look for wildflowers with her mother and aunt while her father was away at war.

“In the springtime during the war we went out to look for Early Nancy’s – I can still feel how lovely it was to find those. Going to the Grampians was amazing, Mum and Auntie knew where to look for orchids. It was part of what I took on as a child. To me nature is so interesting, I don’t know the word for boredom.”

Shirley moved with her family when she was 17 to become dairy farmers in the Warrnambool region. “When we came down here, it was all forested,” Shirley recalls. “We had a little farm on the edge of the forest.”

In the 1950s and 60s, clearing intensified dramatically. As she surveyed plants for the local nature society, she witnessed firsthand the destruction. “I remember finding an orchid on a roadside, and went back to see it flower, but it had been ploughed up.”

Aware of the urgent need to safeguard habitat, Shirley and others gathered together to see if they could purchase some of the remaining bush and protect it for the community.

“Sixty people turned up to a public meeting, convened by Ralph Illidge and chaired by the Mayor, and resulted in the formation of an action committee, who became the first managers of the property. It’s amazing how many people cared about the bush,” she says.

Ralph came to the fore, wishing for his property to be protected. Born in Western Australia, Ralph had a photography business in Warrnambool. He was also a professional opera singer and had bought a property at Naringal East in 1958 which he called Bimbini, place of birds.

Although he had started to clear the property to run cattle, Ralph soon switched to focusing on nature conservation. Wishing for the property to become a national park, he turned his attention to Trust for




Shirley tackling weeds on Ralph Illidge Sanctuary. Image: Terry Goessling.

Nature. He died in April 1975, three months after giving the property to the organisation.

“It’s just a priceless bit of bush that’s preserved now. It’s an oasis,” Shirley says. “Ralph said to me the day before he died, ‘I know you will see the right thing is done by the place’. Maybe that lodged somewhere in my head.”

Shirley took the message to heart. In the 1980s, she became one of the first landholders to protect a property with a conservation covenant, just across the road from Ralph Illidge Sanctuary, where threatened Rufous Bristlebirds displayed near her gate. Based now in Warrnambool, she continues to regularly visit the sanctuary to tackle weeds.

“Weeding can still be pleasurable because you’re down there and you see things, you’re so immersed,” Shirley says. “It’s just a lovely peaceful place. I’m always aware of how it goes back to the real original Australia. You can never be sure that you won’t find something you didn’t know was growing there before. It’s a great place for birds, especially when I’m there just quietly weeding,” Shirley says.



Healthy water, healthy nature

From snow gum woodland, down through rainforest gullies, and across wide valleys, water makes its way from the slopes of Mount Baw Baw to the Gippsland Lakes. But tucked away under the mountain at Erica, on Gunaikurnai Country, one of the creeks takes a flying leap, pouring spectacularly over basalt into a narrow gorge.

When Betty Lush first saw the waterfall and its magnificent columnar basalt back in the 1970s, she fell in love. Despite much of the adjoining land having been cleared for potato farming, she purchased the property. Later, her son-in-law David Cummings took it over from her to continue her desire to restore and protect the land.

“The commitment made to Betty was that we’d get it back to what we regard as really good condition. The family feel connected to land – they feel this is heritage from them to the future,” says David.

For over 40 years, Betty, her daughter Mary, and David have let the land heal, helped by their effort into planting trees, and controlling weeds.

“For the last eight years we’ve been concentrating on getting rid of the blackberries. There were areas where they just dominated. Pulling them back has changed the whole property in terms of its appearance and the habitat potential for different animals and plants,” David says.

The property is home to towering mountain gums and silvertops, huge blackwoods and gullies filled with tree ferns. It will continue to change as species adapt and move with climate change, some disappearing, others finding a new refuge.

Formerly a soil scientist, David is keenly aware of the importance of the ecosystem services the property provides.

“I like to think of ecosystem services as important to all life on the planet, not just people. Catchments are very important – we want to deliver high volumes of good quality water. We’re not to control nature through management, we’re trying to assist nature in doing its own thing.”

In 2019 David registered the property with Land for Wildlife.

“It makes a commitment, and it’s a valuable tool for giving us access to information,” he says

Since then, supported by the Australian Government’s Protecting Important Biodiversity Areas Program, David has protected the property forever with a conservation covenant, contributing half the costs of covenanting.

“It’s locking in the commitment beyond me. It recognises other people’s appreciation of the property, and our obligation to look after it. I don’t see the property as a possession, I am just the caretaker for the time being.”

Supported by the Australian Government’s Protecting Important Biodiversity Areas Program, Trust for Nature is partnering with landholders to permanently protect habitat with conservation covenants, with landholders contributing half of the cost of covenanting. Register your interest at trustfornature.org.au/what-we-do/conservation-covenants.



*David and Mary underneath a large Blackwood on the covenant.
Image: Annette Ruzicka.*

Restoring grasslands on the edge of Melbourne

A hot north wind stirs the grass into waves. Flies buzz around faces looking for sweat. In patches among the grasses, a brilliant display of wildflowers: yellow everlastings and bulbine lilies, purple bluebells, and the fluffy cones of Feather-heads. This is one of the last remaining patches of grassland on the plains west of Melbourne, and one of the most diverse.

“What makes this property special to me is the diversity,” says Simon Jolly. “I just find it amazing – you know, we walk out every day, and it’s just a delight to see something new or something flowering.”

Twenty years ago, Lorraine and Simon Jolly were looking to go off-grid. On Wadawurrung Country, where the Werribee River has cut a deep path through the basalt, they found what they were looking for. But it wasn’t as healthy as it is today.

“We’ve seen tremendous changes in the last 20 years,” says Simon. “Once upon a time, the property was choked with wild oats, almost head-high in places. We’ve got the oats down to almost nothing. Now

we are seeing a lot more diversity of grasses and wildflowers across the property. By getting rid of weeds, a lot of natives have cropped up that we’ve never seen before. It’s been very gratifying – steady improvement, steadily increasing diversity.”

How do you restore a weed-infested grassland? For Lorraine and Simon, it meant years of hard work: spraying, burning small patches year-to-year, and weeding. Now, they mostly manage weeds by hand. They harvest the seed heads of native species, like kangaroo grass, and spread them across the property.

The results of this intimate and manual care have been spectacular. Lorraine and Simon have found around 20 species of native grasses on the property, and 60 species of wildflowers, including Lemon Beauty-heads, Yellow Rush-lily, Creamy Candles and Blushing Bindweed. They’ve recorded 160 species of birds, like the Yellow-rumped Thornbills that have woven their dome nest in the branches of a large Yellow Box, and the endangered Diamond Firetail.



Trust for Nature team member Ben Cullen (left) with Simon Jolly.



Feather-heads (Ptilotus) on Simon and Lorraine's property.

“We used to see them in small numbers, and I just saw one again recently,” says Lorraine. “It’s really important that these habitats are available for them and that they’re still surviving here.”

Apart from the grassland, the Jollys’ property is home to woodlands and lignum swamps, as well as ancient moonah clinging to the edge of the gorge that drops down to the river. Recognising the importance of the property, Lorraine and Simon protected part of it with a covenant in 2011. Now, with support from the Victorian Government, they are protecting the rest.

“We’re very pleased that we can protect the property for future generations through covenants. That’s the way we intend to protect it as much as we can because we won’t be here forever,” they say.

With less than two per cent of the grasslands on the Victorian Volcanic Plain remaining, and the remainder under pressure as Melbourne expands westwards, the Jollys’ property is more important than ever. The couple enjoy sharing their love of the grasslands, regularly hosting groups to learn about the significance of the habitat.

“If we didn’t look after these areas, in 100 years we would have no idea what the grassland flowers looked like,” Lorraine says. “So it’s very important to keep them for future generations. We see ourselves as temporary custodians, looking after as much diversity as we can so it can be conserved for the future.”



Simon and Lorraine's property protects critically endangered grassland.

Transforming the landscape



When Melissa Ainsworth and her family came to their property at Stradbroke West, on Gunaikurnai Country in West Gippsland, it was an overgrazed paddock.

“It was basically open paddocks that had sheep and cattle accessing and damaging remnant vegetation, and eroding the creek banks. But over the last 21 years we’ve put our heart and soul into this place, and it’s completely transformed,” says Melissa.

Located between reserves to the north and south, the property sits on Merriman Creek which flows from the Strzelecki Ranges to Seaspray, and supplies the town’s water. Growing up locally, and formerly working as a park ranger, Melissa saw the potential to restore nature by protecting the remnant vegetation and the creek.

“I used to have lunch on Holey Hill which has a magnificent view over the Merriman Creek valley.

I’d think how beautiful it was and how it would be great to have a property there,” she says.

Melissa joined the Merriman Creek Landcare Group and has been secretary since 2009. The creek is a major focus of the group who collectively have fenced more than 40 km of the creek to prevent livestock access, as well as weed control and tree planting projects.

“Improving habitat has been a priority. We’ve created lots of strategic corridors to link up the native vegetation with the creek to create shelterbelts and a nice biolink,” says Melissa.

Over the years Melissa and her family have planted over 100,000 trees and shrubs. After registering the property with Land for Wildlife, in 2008 they protected 20 ha of the property with a conservation covenant.

“We just knew how special the vegetation was and how vulnerable it was,” Melissa says.

The covenant protects a deep limestone gully with spectacular fossils that has been fenced and revegetated, as well as a 10 ha patch of forest, which has tall stands of White Stringy-bark, Golden Grevillea and white-flowered Sweet Bursaria where King Parrots come to feed and nest.

When Melissa noticed dieback appearing at the exposed edge of the forest, she seeded a belt of native plants to create a buffer. This, however, created a new problem: dense thickets of Hedge Wattle that created a haven for rabbits and damaged the fences protecting the bush.



*Melissa and Justin Ainsworth.
Image: Melissa Ainsworth.*



Trust for Nature’s Landholder Support Program supported Melissa to control Hedge Wattle that was damaging fencing (top), creating more space for other plants (above). Images: Melissa Ainsworth.

In 2025, Melissa applied for assistance through Trust for Nature’s Landholder Support Program, supported by the Gippsland Conservation Fund, to trim the wattles and plant other endemic species to increase diversity. In the long-term, she will continue to plant in the buffer area annually.

Today, the property is a haven for wildlife including threatened Strzelecki Koalas, Lace Monitors and Long-nosed Bandicoots. Bird surveys conducted by Birdlife Australia’s Birds on Farms program have recorded 102 species on the property. Recently, Melissa found a Ringtail Possum tail on the ground in the gully: a sign Powerful Owls may be visiting.

The health of the creek is improving. Platypus, spiny and burrowing crayfish have been recorded, and DNA surveys show the threatened Dwarf Galaxias and Flinders Pygmy Perch may call it home too.

Each year, Melissa and the family plant trees to continue improving habitat, as well as controlling foxes. For Melissa, the transformation of the property and the surrounding area is inspiring.

“We’ve now got stands of tall trees along the creek. It’s much cooler and there is much more birdlife and wildlife. The longer we’re here the more we see that we wouldn’t have seen 20 years ago. I suppose that to me is an incentive to keep doing what we’re doing, and to keep up the good work because it is working,” she says.

Trust for Nature is providing support for on-ground works to improve and manage habitat on conservation covenants through our Landholder Support Program. New opportunities for support are now available – keep an eye out for updates via our email newsletter.

Environmental ethos at the heart of farming



For Julie Cameron, farming is a way of caring for nature.

“I wouldn’t be a farmer if it meant that I was going to destroy a rare and endangered ecosystem,” she says.

Conservation has always been at the heart of Meredith Dairy, on Wadawurrung Country, which Julie and Sandy Cameron founded in 1991 on land Sandy’s family had farmed for generations.

“We did a Business Strategic Plan and considered the issues that would really make or break the business. We decided that we would not continue this enterprise if the environment suffered.”

Over the past three decades, and influenced by Sandy’s family, Julie and Sandy have built a vision for Meredith Dairy: “We strive to produce food sustainably”. This means reducing greenhouse gas emissions, protecting and promoting natural biodiversity, as well as farming to maintain natural assets. Some initiatives include planting trees, using

renewable energy, controlling weeds, protecting natural ecosystems including waterways, and managing waste.

In 2023, they protected nearly 30 ha of grassy woodland forever with a conservation covenant. Sandy and Julie’s first land purchase contained the only area of remnant Manna Gums on the entire farm, and it was where Julie spotted a wild Koala for the first time.

“We needed to revegetate a lot of the site. Now, 35 years on, it is so special, because we grew many of these trees ourselves. We collected seed from the remnants that were here to ensure we planted the correct species. These trees have grown from tiny seedlings into mature trees and habitat for birds and animals,” says Julie.

“We fenced it off to prevent stock from grazing the grasslands. We got busy and didn’t visit the site for five years. When we looked at it again, we found all these amazing grassland orchids and everlasting daisies. We had experts visit who were just amazed by the biodiversity even within a square metre.”

The property protects some of the critically endangered woodland and grassland of the Victorian Volcanic Plains, of which more than 90 per cent has been cleared on the plains west of Melbourne. The property is home to the threatened Golden Sun Moth, Clover Glycine and native orchids. Although part of the farm was impacted by fires in January 2026, the covenant was spared.

“Knowing that there is so little Victorian Volcanic Grasslands left intact, I want to make sure this is still here for future generations. It’s a benchmark to show us what species should be present when we want to restore habitat in the future.

“We regularly survey the covenant so that as the climate changes we can adapt how we manage what needs to be protected and what we can do to make sure that the losses are not too enormous,” says Julie.

Growing up in the Flinders Rangers in South Australia, Julie had always been immersed in the environment.



When she came to the western plains, she was struck by the difference between the landscapes and enjoyed learning about this unique environment.

“Every year we discover something new. This year we recorded a new bird for the property. I couldn’t believe it the year we found yam daisies.”

She has a picture of their daughter with a remnant she-oak from nearly 30 years ago. The tree has since fallen, but around it new saplings have grown.

“We’re seeing the whole lifecycle of nature,” says Julie.

Maintaining that life cycle is core to Meredith Dairy, and Julie encourages other farming businesses to consider how they can work with nature.

“It strengthens the brand and consumers are looking for where their food comes from,” she says. “If you’re using natural assets to make an income, then you need to protect those natural assets. At Meredith Dairy our aim is to produce food sustainably. That means protecting native ecosystems like this covenant.”



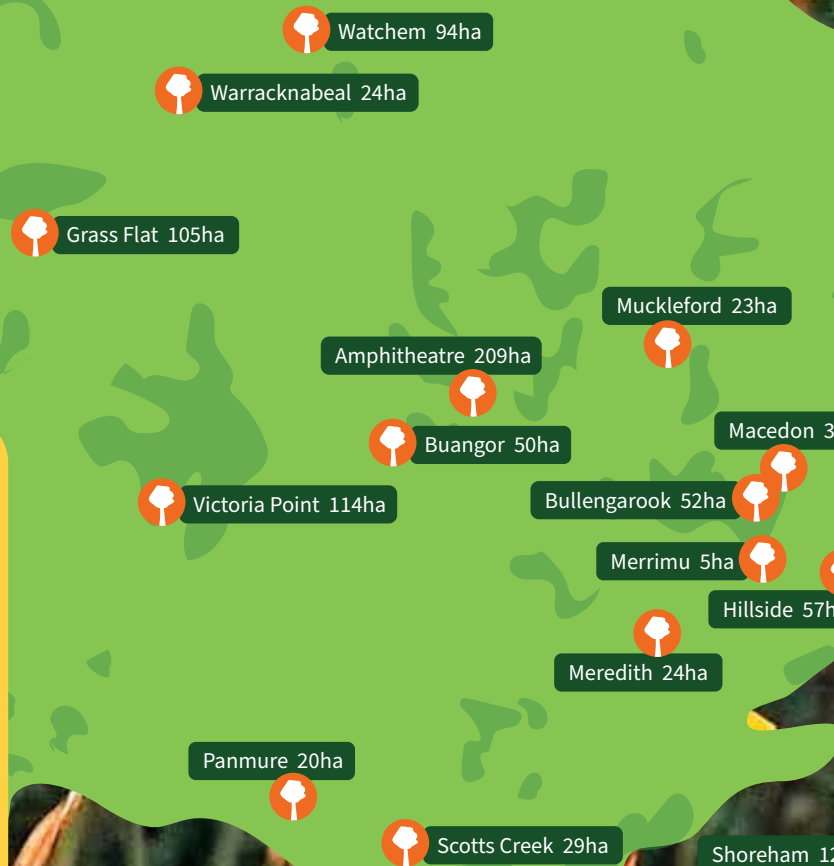
Above left: Julie’s property protects important woodland and grassland.. Top right: Mistletoebirds help spread the seeds of mistletoe to new host trees. Image: Adam Fry. Above right: Blue Devils (Eryngium ovinum) flower in summer.

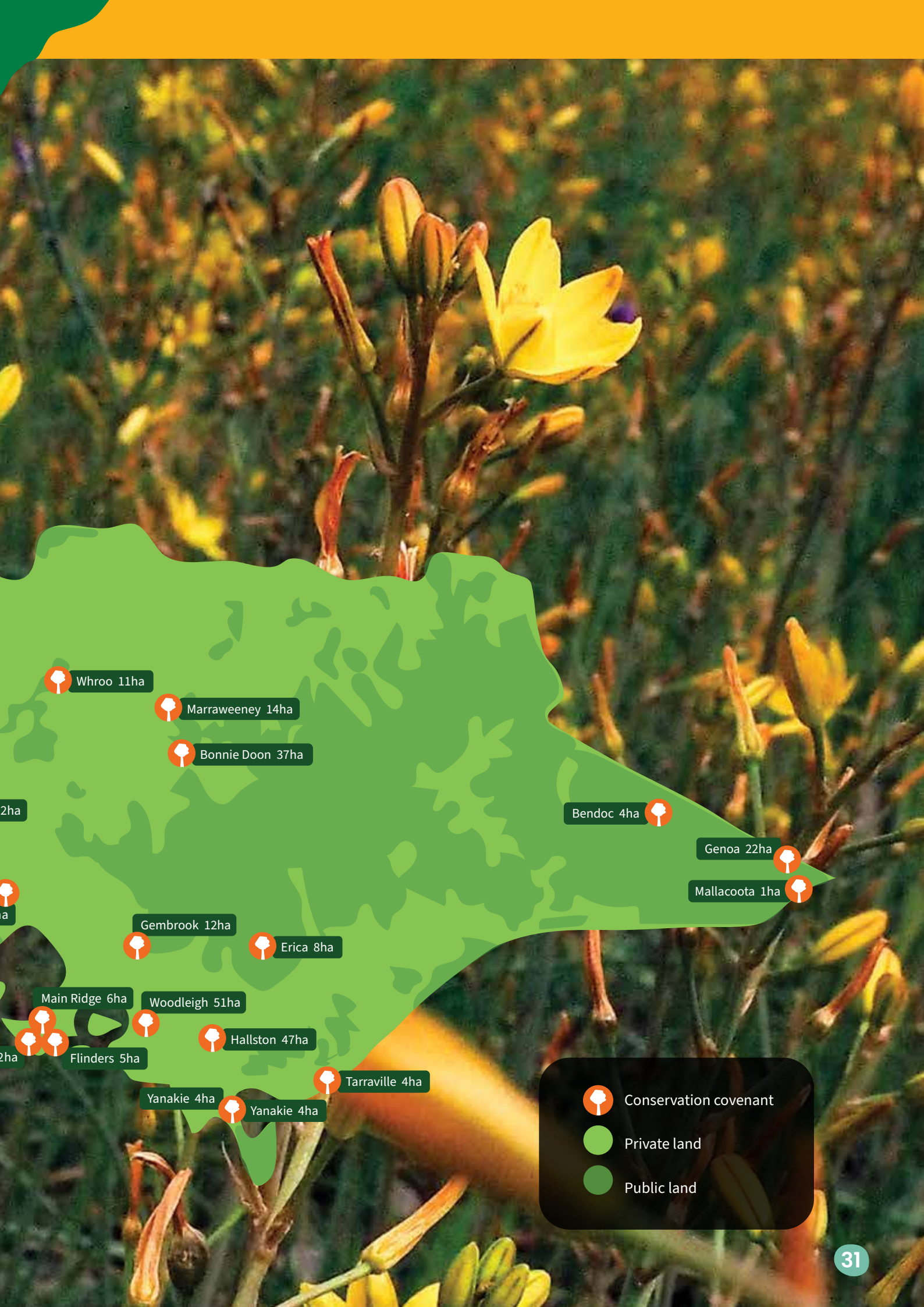
New covenants

(July – December 2025)

Another 1,080 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.





Whroo 11ha

Marraveeney 14ha

Bonnie Doon 37ha

2ha

Bendoc 4ha

Genoa 22ha

Mallacoota 1ha

2ha

Gembrook 12ha

Erica 8ha

Main Ridge 6ha

Woodleigh 51ha

2ha


Flinders 5ha


Hallston 47ha


Yanakie 4ha

Yanakie 4ha

Tarraville 4ha

 Conservation covenant

 Private land

 Public land

