

Plains-wanderer

Newsletter - Winter 2021



Local Land
Services



National
Landcare
Program



Paddocks for Plains-wanderers Incentive Program update

The Paddocks for Plains-wanderers incentive program has been running since 2017 to help secure a future for the Plains-wanderer in the NSW Riverina region.

Over the 2020-21 financial year, 10 Landholders received funding for incentives to assist them to manage Plains-wanderer habitat in 'Ideal' Condition.

Fencing and installation of watering points were a popular incentive this year, with more than 10km of fencing being funded over several properties.

These sorts of projects generally aim to divide large paddocks up into smaller paddocks to help with grazing management. In one project, an existing fence that went through Plains-wanderer habitat was pulled down and replaced with a fence in a more ideal location.

Funding for construction of several Stock Management Areas and other feeding infrastructure was also given this year. These types of projects are forward thinking and can be beneficial for overall property management in dry times and in drought conditions.

Stock are able to be maintained in the Stock Management Area paddocks for maintenance feeding to primarily help minimise loss of groundcover and soil during drought across the remainder of the property.

Over the past 12 months an additional 3,000 hectares of Plains-wanderer primary habitat on private properties was committed to the program.

These landholders have committed to manage the Plains-wanderer habitat in these paddocks in 'Ideal' condition. Ideal habitat has roughly equal parts of bare ground and plants.

Expressions of Interest for the 2021-22 round of funding are open again until September. Incentives are available to support and assist eligible landholders with grazing management to conserve habitat for the Plains-wanderer.

You may be eligible if your property is within the project area and there are more than 100 hectares of Plains-wanderer primary habitat on your property.



Expression of
Interest close
30th of
September...

Tactical Grazing Workshop

Local Land Services facilitated a Tactical Grazing Management workshop with the assistance of Department of Primary Industries on a property South-East of Hay in September 2020.

The workshop was tailored specifically for producers who manage Plains-wanderer habitat on their property and focused on balancing conservation of the Critically Endangered species with primary production.

Unfortunately, the previous two decades have been challenging for the population of Plains-wanderer. It has been estimated through long term monitoring that there may be as few as 500 Plains-wanderers left in the wild, which has categorised Plains-wanderer as Critically Endangered at a national level.

Landholders play a key role in preserving the species, as strategic grazing management is crucial to maintaining ideal habitat for the small bird. The Tactical Grazing Management workshop attracted 15 landholders who between them manage 120,000 hectares of land over the Riverina region. The workshops content included practical tools to assist landholders with grazing management across their property such as ground cover monitoring, farm planning, feed calculators and pasture identification as well as focusing on grazing management of Plains-wanderer habitat.



Participating landholder Tom Hooke of 'Warwillah', said that "we found the course to be very practical with real take homes that actually work for our environment."

The landholders involved have committed to being part of the group effort to help reverse the long-term decline in population and increase the numbers of Plains-wanderers to a level where there is a viable population present.

It was a benefit to the landholders to come together as a group with similar goals not only for their primary production but also for their management of threatened species habitat on their property.



Protecting Plains-wanderers from Foxes

As part of the NSW conservation program for the Plains-wanderer, three large-scale landscape baiting programs were established during 2018 thanks to the funding received by the NSW Saving our Species Program and the Australian Government's National Landcare Program.

Ten properties are currently covered by this program, baiting a total area of approximately 94,000 hectares - one landscape is located near Booroorban covering 42,000 ha, another south east of Hay covering 37,000 ha and a third landscape near Urana covering 15,000 ha.

These landscapes receive some of the most intensive baiting undertaken in south-western NSW to reduce fox numbers and limit fox predation on Plains-wanderers. Follow-up shooting is also undertaken to remove bait-shy foxes.

It is estimated that through this program, Robert (Blacky) Black & the team at Saunders Spraying Pty Ltd have removed more than 6,250 foxes from the three Plains-wanderer project - fox baiting landscapes over the past two years.

Ongoing monthly baiting over these large landscape areas will not only have a positive impact on Plains-wanderer survival and abundance, but it is already having a positive impact on sheep production in the area. Landholders participating in the landscape fox baiting program have reported higher lamb survival rates, reduced ewe disturbance, and less mismothering, especially in ewes with multiple lambs.

The large-scale baiting also has a positive effect on other species of ground-dwelling birds, with emu numbers reported as increasing.

In addition to this large landscape scale fox baiting program, other landholders within the project area are also involved in fox baiting throughout the year. Early autumn is traditionally a great time to target foxes not only to protect valuable livestock as we come into lambing season, but to help vulnerable native species like the Plains-wanderer. Landholders signed up to the program are able to access free fox baits throughout the year.





Conservation breeding program update – a trial release

There has been much happening in the Plains-wanderer captive breeding program, with successful breeding occurring across our captive facilities, and the new breeding facilities at Monarto Zoo in South Australia coming online and receiving their first group of birds during a challenging, Covid-influenced period.

Over the past five years, program partners have researched and developed specialist skills in Plains-wanderer husbandry. Thirty-two Plains-wanderers have obtained from the wild as foundation birds for the captive breeding program, resulting in a number of positive breeding events and the births of healthy and thriving chicks.

During April, eight captive-bred Plains-wanderers were released into the wild for the very first time – the first steps in what will hopefully be a vital journey to recovery. As with all parts of the Plains-wanderer recovery effort, the trial release involves a strong collaboration with Zoos Victoria as the lead, partnering with Victorian Department of Environment, Land, Water & Planning (DELWP), Parks Victoria, Trust for Nature, Taronga Conservation Society Australia, the NSW Department of Planning, Industry and Environment (DPIE), and private landholders.

In this first release, four pairs were released on public and privately-owned land in Victoria's Northern Plains, with species experts and conservation staff undertaking ongoing monitoring of the birds' movements at each site.

This trial release is a critical step in the conservation breeding program and will be critical in informing us on what actions we will be to undertake to ensure future releases continue to be successful.

The release of captive-bred Plains-wanderers is a major milestone for the National Recovery Plan for the Plains-wanderer established by the Australian Government in 2016. The program aims to replenish wild populations and complement improved habitat management strategies.

Being able to release birds into paddocks of well-managed habitat is a credit to both the organisations involved in the breeding program and the land managers who have made the significant commitment to manage their paddocks for the bird. Planning is underway to undertake further trial releases both in Victoria and New South Wales. Stay tuned!

Image: Searching for the released birds – Chris Hartnett from Zoos Victoria with Daniel Nugent, PhD student, LaTrobe University

Bringing the Plains-wanderer Back from the Brink art exhibition

The 'Bringing the Plains-wanderer back from the brink' art exhibition is currently doing the rounds throughout the region.

The exhibition features works from twelve talented artists and aims to raise awareness of the critically endangered plains-wanderer and its conservation needs.

The exhibition opened on the 5th of February at the Peppin Heritage Gallery in Deniliquin. The launch was attended by the artists and over 50 community members. The exhibition then travelled to The Foundry Art Space in Echuca before moving onto The Spot in Hay.

Throughout April and May the exhibition was on display at The Spot in Hay, where the gallery hosted an exhibition night to showcase the pieces. The night was an absolute success, with around 30 community members attending, including a few landholders currently involved in the project, as well as others within the project area.

In addition to holding this Exhibition night, gallery owner Steph Cattanach ran activities with the local schools throughout May to increase awareness about the critically endangered Plains-wanderer and what is being done locally for its conservation.

One of the artists is Hay's very own Samantha Davies, who very beautifully depicted the female Plains-wanderer in her piece 'Now you See me....?'. Samantha lives in the Hay region on a family-owned farming and grazing property.

She balances her time between family-life, helping on the property and working part-time in schools. Passionate about the Australian environment, particularly the outback, Sam draws realism works of Australian flora and fauna using graphite and coloured pencils.

Samantha's description of her piece of art titled 'Now you see me....?' reads:

The most recognisable and beautiful of the two sexes, the female Plains-wanderer is presented here walking carefully across a moonlit field of grasses and yellow-buttons, with lichen softly covering the clay pan Hay plains. In creating this work, I wished to provide the viewer with a detailed image of the female and an insight into its environment and behaviours. The title I have chosen asks the viewer to think about what future this critically endangered bird may have and invites the viewer to think about actions they may take to ensure that the answer to the question is not '.... Now you don't'.

To view these amazing pieces of work, you can visit them in Narrandera from the 10th of July or at Jerilderie Community Centre in August. Or check them and the artist descriptions out on the South West Arts website

- <https://www.southwestarts.com.au/single-post/bringing-back-the-plains-wanderer-from-the-brink>





Concertina booklet called 'Plains-wanderer: surviving paddocks' by Josephine Duffy



Hay artist Samantha Davies with her artwork 'Now you see me...?'



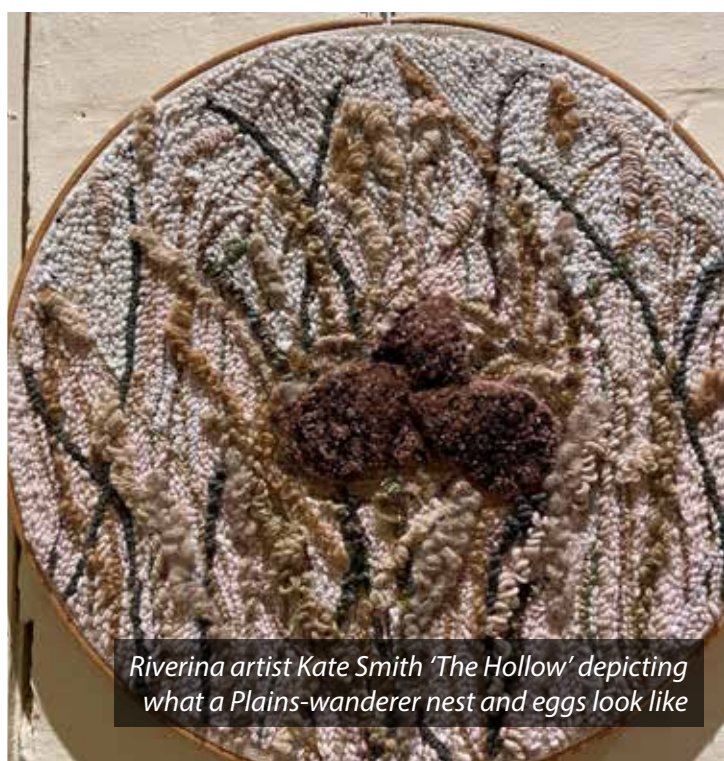
The owner of 'the Spot' Steph Cattnach with local community members at the exhibition night in May.



Miranda Brett 'Hidden in Plains Sight': A graphic exploration of the distinctive pattern of the female Plains-wanderer's plumage... within a diminishing form.



Jan Lawler 'The Plains Wanderer': Jan has lived in Balranald for nearly 50 years and has an abiding interest and love of the plains, its colours, its people and most importantly the fauna and flora of the region.



Riverina artist Kate Smith 'The Hollow' depicting what a Plains-wanderer nest and eggs look like

NSW Plains-wanderer Population Monitoring Summary

David Parker from the Department of Planning, Industry and Environment continues to undertake the Plains-wanderer population monitoring. Below is an update from this work.

Compared to 2019, where the number of Plains-wanderer observations recorded during the monitoring rounds were the lowest ever recorded since the program commenced, 2020 was a more positive year for the bird.

A total of 13 adult Plains-wanderer, one juvenile and three chicks were observed over a distance of 547 kilometres of spotlight transect.

No Plains-wanderers were observed during the autumn round. By winter, the rain had made its mark on the plains and access to some sites was tricky and other sites impossible.

Only 6 of the 16 monitoring sites were able to be surveyed during the winter round. From those sites that were visited, there was already a noticeable improvement in habitat condition compared to autumn conditions.

Three birds were observed on one monitoring grid. At that site a male Plains-wanderer was observed on a nest and two adults females were also found nearby. Banded Lapwings were also nesting.

By spring the paddocks had all dried and the habitat across all sites looked spectacular, resulting from higher than average rainfall and reduced stock numbers.

Spring monitoring resulted in 10 adult or sub-adult Plains-wanderer being observed, one juvenile and three chicks.

Fingers are certainly crossed that the improved conditions continue to favour the Plains-wanderer and that an increase in numbers occurs.

In regard to the other grassland fauna, the autumn rains brought out the frogs, with a number of Sudell's Frog (or Common Spadefoot Frog) being observed at a number of sites.

Some exciting news was that in a first for the monitoring program, a Bandy Bandy, a strikingly distinguishable, nocturnal, burrowing species of snake was observed during the autumn round. What a great looking snake it is!

With apparent milder spring nights than normal, the number of reptiles observed during the season were lower than what would normally be expected.

Pipit's continued to be present at almost all sites and were by far the most common grassland bird observed throughout the year. Bushlarks and Brown Songlarks were also about, albeit in low numbers, while the influx of quail into the area was very noticeable.

Little Button-quail outnumbered Stubble Quail and Red-chested Button-quail, an irregular visitor to the area, were also present at seven of the monitoring sites.

As always, thank you to those landholders who have been a part of the monitoring program since its commencement.



"Fingers are certainly crossed that the improved conditions continue to favour the Plains-wanderer and that an increase in numbers occurs."



Meet the Ives family

The Ives family operate a cattle property near Hay, where they run an Angus breeding herd over 10,000 hectares. They have been involved with the Plains-wanderer project now for around two years, but have adopted a holistic management approach to their property over the past 15 years.

Recently while undertaking some feral animal control at night, Jim caught sight of four Plains-wanderers, and was able to follow one which he identified as a young bird. This paddock is one which Jim had destocked three months prior.

With the good recent rain and light stocking, the Plains-wanderer habitat in the paddock is in great condition for the birds to live and breed in.

When asked why the family got involved with the project, Jim explained that "We have been involved in Regenerative Agriculture and Holistic Management for around 15 years. Even though we have been on the property for nearly 30 years, we were not happy with the direction of the property and wanted to promote the biodiversity at the time. It was actually a neighbour who got us involved in this Holistic Management approach, who had been utilising these principles on his property with great success".

Jim continued that "the Plains-wanderer project fits in perfectly with our Holistic Management approach, and we were really excited to be involved in the conservation of an endangered species".

The project has helped him identify what Ideal habitat for the bird looks like, and even though they previously undertook feral animal control, he says that since signing up "we have been going a bit harder with the fox and rabbit control to try to encourage the birds back to the area".

"We were really excited to be involved in the conservation of an endangered species..."



Gate signs on show

The Paddocks for Plains-wanderers incentive program has been running since 2017 to help secure a future for the Plains-wanderer in the NSW Riverina region. Since the program commenced, 25 landholders have committed to managing nearly 13,500 hectares of primary habitat.

This is a fantastic achievement and is a testament to the dedication and commitment of those landholders across the region to conserve that habitat and assist the species in its recovery. We have exceeded the projects initial target of conserving 10,000 hectares of primary habitat.

The most important thing landholders can do is to manage their habitat in 'Ideal condition'. Ideal habitat has roughly equal parts bare ground and plants, with most of the plants being herbs and grasses around five centimetres tall plus a scattering of taller plants.

You may have noticed some new gate signs appearing on property entrances around the project area. All landholders involved in the Paddocks for Plains-wanderer Incentive program will receive a sign to place on their property entrance as a mark of their involvement in the project and their hard work towards conservation of the Plains-wanderer.

Left: Tom Porter showcasing the property entrance signs

Top right: Example of habitat that is in Ideal condition

Bottom right: Property entrance signs



Follow us on social media

Did you know there is a Facebook page dedicated to the Plains-wanderer? You can search Plains-wanderer on Facebook, or by pasting the URL into your browser you will be able to view the page. It contains media articles and social media posts about Plains-wanderers from state agencies, zoos and other groups involved in Plains-wanderer conservation.

The link is <http://www.facebook.com/Pedionomidae/>

Other Facebook pages that may be of interest are the Murray and Riverina Local Land Services pages. Follow them to keep up to date with everything happening in your area:

Murray: www.facebook.com/Murray.LLS

Riverina: www.facebook.com/riverinalls

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