



Bringing the Plains-wanderer back from the Brink

Annual update 2022



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.

Since the start of the program in 2017, nearly 30 landholders have joined the Paddocks for Plains-wanderer project. With most of the Plains-wanderer's primary habitat occurring on private land, the survival of these birds is very much in the hands of private land managers. The concerted effort of those landholders involved in the program provides a great example of how farming and conservation can work hand in hand.

The long-term goal of this project is to support landholders who have Plains-wanderer habitat on their properties and to assist them to maintain habitat in suitable condition for the long-term. This year an additional 5 land managers have signed into the program, raising the total amount of habitat

managed under the project to nearly 14,500 hectares. This far exceeds the initial goal of the project, which was to conserve 10,000 hectares of habitat in 'Ideal' condition, through both good and poor seasons.

Matt Cameron started calling the Plains-wanderer the 'Goldilocks' bird due to their picky preferences. They will not occupy an area if it is either too dense or too sparse with vegetation...it has to be just right! Plains-wanderers favour native grassland areas having around 50% bare ground, and 40% herbs and grasses.

Again, this year we have funding available through the NSW Saving our Species Program and the National Landcare program. If you are interested in being involved, please contact one of the project officers. This is the final year of the National Landcare program. Even though we hope to receive future funding from the federal government, we will still be around to help support landholders in managing their habitat into the future.

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.



Female Plains-wanderer. Photo: David Parker, DPE

Plains-wanderer release a first for NSW

Following on the back of the zoo-bred to wild release on the Northern Plains of Victoria in 2021, March 2022 has seen the first ever release of zoo-bred Plains-wanderer into the wild in NSW.

The first release in NSW consisted of 10 zoo-bred birds, all of which were fitted with VHF radio-transmitters so that we could track their movements once released.

Three pairs were released onto Bedarbidgal with Bert and Liz Matthews, and two pairs released onto Narrawong with Stephen and Carol Huggins. This release is part of several small trial releases of Plains-wanderer being undertaken in Victoria and NSW.

From these releases we will learn about critical information on the survivorship and dispersal of zoo-bred birds once released. It was great to be joined by the NSW Environment Minister, Minister Griffin, as well as members of the Taronga Conservation Society Australia, Department of Planning and Environment staff and the local landholders for this release.

Once released the birds were monitored closely by staff from the Department of Planning and Environment, with assistance from Taronga Conservation Society Australia and field biologists. The birds were monitored with hand-held receivers as well as some nocturnal spotlighting.

Over the 13 weeks that the birds were monitored, we watched most of the birds stay within their release areas. Three of the ten birds wandered away from their release sites, including two which dropped their transmitters before departing. Unfortunately, at the present, we are unable to know the fate of these three birds. We also lost four birds to predation events. An early review of feather material remaining at the site indicates that these birds were predated by birds of prey, however samples have been sent away for analysis to see what else we can learn.

But most importantly, three birds, all males, have continued to wander the paddocks and have remained in the patch of habitat that they were released into. The exciting news is that two of the three birds have been joined by wild females. This coming together of zoo-bred birds with wild birds provides a positive demonstration that zoo-bred birds are able to attract



Minister Griffin and landholder Bert Matthews release the first pair of zoo-bred Plains-wanderers. Photo: Alex Pike, DPE

wild birds. Hopefully the pairings will result in a successful breeding attempt in the near future.

While the monitoring comes to an end, the zoo-bred birds may still be located opportunistically through ongoing surveys around the release sites. Each of the bird carries a small metal leg band which will help us identify them from other Plains-wanderer we may encounter while out and about. Any data that can be collected on the birds will continue to provide valuable information on this experimental release.

Returning the Plains-wanderer to local properties is a collaborative effort of all involved with the recovery of this species. The Matthews have been involved in Plains-wanderer conservation for many years, stemming back to the 1990's. More recently, Bert has been one of the many landholders involved in the Paddocks for Plains-wanderer program, funded through the New South Wales Saving our Species and Australian Government National Landcare Programs. In 2018 staff of Taronga Western Plains Zoo and Taronga Sydney travelled to the region to collect wild Plains-wanderer to take back to Dubbo as founders for the breeding program. The successful trip saw two birds being collected from Bedarbidgal.

Similar stories can be repeated by many of the incredible landholders involved with the conservation program for the species, and hopefully they too can be part of releases of zoo-bred birds in the future. It has been a privilege to be a part of this release, and to work so closely with such dedicated staff from Taronga Western Plains Zoo, Taronga Zoo Sydney and the awesome landholders who are managing Plains-wanderer habitat on their property so that the species has a bright future.

The NSW Plains-wanderer release is delivered by the Department of Planning and Environment and Taronga Conservation Society Australia in collaboration with the landholders of the NSW Riverine Plain. The release forms part of the National Recovery Plan for the Plains-wanderer and is a key strategy to recover the species in the wild. Funding for this conservation breeding program in NSW is being provided by the New South Wales Government through its Saving our Species Program, the Taronga Conservation Society Australia, the Kennards Hire Foundation and several generous donors and philanthropists.

Protecting Plains-wanderers from foxes

Did you know the Plains-wanderer’s scientific name, ‘Pedionomus’, comes from the Greek word pedionomus which means ‘plains-dweller’ or ‘haunting the fields’.

Unfortunately, Plains-wanderers are not the only species “haunting the fields”, with foxes and cats also abundant across their grassland habitat. Sadly, fox predation is a major threat to recovering populations of the critically endangered bird.

As part of the NSW Plains-wanderer conservation program, three large-scale landscape baiting programs, near Boooroban, Hay and Urana, were established in 2018, thanks to the funding from the NSW Saving our Species Program and the Australian Government’s National Landcare Program. Ten properties are currently covered by the program, baiting approximately 94,000 hectares.

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

It is estimated that through this program, Robert (Blacky) Black and the team at Saunders Spraying Pty Ltd have removed more than 7,000 foxes and

100 cats from the three Plains-wanderer landscape baiting areas.

Ongoing monthly baiting over these large landscape areas has a positive impact on Plains-wanderer survival and abundance, with evidence of successful breeding of birds within these landscapes.

The large-scale baiting also positively affects other species of ground-dwelling birds, with emu and quail numbers also increasing. Participating landholders have also reported that the landscape baiting program has a positive impact on sheep production in the area, with higher lamb survival rates, reduced ewe disturbance, and less mismothering, especially in ewes with multiple lambs.

On behalf of the Project Team, we would like to thank Robert (Blacky) Black for all his hard work establishing and maintaining the landscape baiting program. Every month, Blacky has ensured that 1343 bait stations are checked and re-baited, often working long hours and in adverse weather conditions. Blacky recently retired from working on the plains-wanderer project. We wish him all the best and hope to see him again soon.



Fox spotted on motion detection cameras within the baiting area



Blacky showing NLP staff how the fox baiting program is undertaken

Rescue of Riverina Native Birds Art Exhibition

The Rescue of Riverina Native Birds Arts Exhibition has recently started touring the area. The exhibition aims to raise awareness of three endangered birds in our region- the Plains-wanderer, Malleefowl and Australasian Bittern.

This educational exhibition features over 40 works from nineteen talented artists.

The opening night of the exhibition was held in May at the beautiful historical Willows homestead by the banks of the Billabong Creek in Jerilderie. Around 50 people attended the exhibition, which included some of the artists there to showcase their pieces.

The exhibition was then displayed at the Hive in Narrandera and then Griffith Regional Theatre.

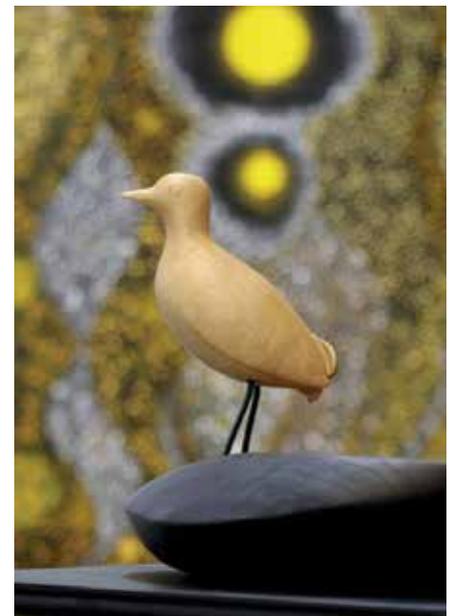
If you would like to see the exhibition, it will be displayed until the end of the year at:

Hillston: 31 August to 16 September

Hay: 19 September to 13 October

Moulmein: 17 October to 16 November

Deniliquin: 21 November to 19 December



Photos: Top - Aayna Whitehead from Western Riverina Arts at the opening night in Jerilderie.

Left - Sharon De Valentin pictured with her Malleefowl and Plains-wanderer pieces.

Right - One Little Piece Of Endless Earth, Hape Kiddle.

This project is proudly funded by NSW Local Land Services and Australian Government National Landcare Program. This exhibition is supported by Western Riverina Arts, South West Arts, Create NSW and Murrumbidgee Council.



Plains-wanderers help to save a “Sheep” load

By Eva Fleetwood

You “herd” it here first, it’s “woolly” true that, far from being an ecological enemy, sheep grazing can actually play a role in saving one of our most endangered bird species.

At Bullawah Station 60km south east of Hay, The McCulloch family, Rhys, father Craig, mother Wendy, and brother-in-law James, have seen a ten percent increase in lambing, as well as financial savings and an improvement in the health and condition of the flock, since improving the habitat for the endangered Plains-wanderer.

Plains-wanderers are small, ground-dwelling birds found in the native grasslands of the Murray & Riverina. Their natural habitat has been largely destroyed or degraded by clearing, overgrazing and by introduced grasses.

The Murray Local Land Services ‘Paddocks for Plains-wanderers’ conservation project offers support for landholders to manage paddocks for livestock production and Plains-wanderer

conservation. The program offers incentives for pest and weed control, fencing, water points, saltbush plantations, stock management areas, and feeding infrastructure.

Funding from the project has helped the family construct a 4000ha stock management area with feeders and water, keeping their flock in better condition.

Rhys said: “Just a few simple changes means we have been able to significantly cut costs particularly in supplementary feeding. We don’t have to muster as much, our sheep are healthier and we’ve seen a 10 per cent increase in lambing.

In the past we were relying on annual pastures, which created a short supply of pasture feed, particularly during drought. Maintaining sufficient quality feed was costly and time-consuming and we wanted to get away from that. We were covering close to 100km to feed out three times a week, which has an impact in terms of diesel costs and wear and tear on people and equipment.”



Rhys examining the perennial pasture within one of the Plains-wanderer habitat paddocks on his property

“The funding helped us introduce a more sustainable grazing routine, with more perennials in our pasture which cope better with irregular rainfall. We are also rotating the flock into stock management areas to rest paddocks. This increases the resilience of the farm over dry years and limits feed curve variability.

The preferred habitat of Plains-wanderer ties in perfectly with this grazing program.

So, the project gave us an opportunity to support the Plains-wanderer but it has also helped increase the overall productivity and sustainability of the farm.”

“The area we chose for stock containment has shade for stock but traditionally it was pretty flogged out, so we were not losing any productivity by creating the stock containment areas. We instead gained an area we can utilise on a regular

basis that enables us to decrease costs and allows us to rest Plains-wanderer habitat. We have also noticed since utilising rotational grazing that more palatable grasses such as wallaby grasses are making a comeback where previously less palatable grasses such as spear grasses dominated. We have also noted other herb species appearing within the habitat.”

Rhys said as well as grazing, the new multi-functional stock containment areas are ideal for holding stock for shearing, drenching, and bringing stock to market.

“We are a family business, so any changes we made had to have low levels of risk for us to be involved. The Plains-wanderer project gave us an opportunity to transition from an overreliance on annual dominated pastures and supplementary feeding to perennial dominated pastures. This will help us manage drought years.”



Stock Management Area used for confinement feeding when paddocks are looking too dry

Keep an eye out for African boxthorn

By Tara Pitman Regional Weeds Coordinator

Brought to Australia from South Africa in the 1800s, African Boxthorn (*Lycium ferocissimum*) is now common across well drained soils of the western slopes and plains.

And far from its beginnings as a beautiful hedge plant, it is now considered a weed of national significance. African boxthorn is also a hazard to both humans and stock, it is poisonous to humans and its large thorns can injure livestock and stop them from accessing shade. The plant also provides shelter and food for pest animals such as foxes, rabbits and starlings and is a host for pest insects including fruit fly, tomato fly and house fly.

How can I tell if it's on my property?

African Boxthorn is a woody, thorny shrub that can grow up to 5 m high and 3 m wide. Young plants grow quickly. Plants sometimes drop their leaves and appear dead during drought and winter.

What can I do to remove it?

The preferred method of removal of large mature thickets of African boxthorn in Plains-wanderer habitat is by physical removal using machinery. The thickets down to the roots should be pushed or pulled out of the ground, moved out of the habitat area and burned. Successful weed control relies on follow up after the initial efforts. This means looking for and killing regrowth or new seedlings. Using a combination of control methods is usually more successful in keeping

African boxthorn under control.

A series of video guides to help you manage African boxthorn can be found at:
<https://bit.ly/3MImGjT>

African boxthorn is a thorny shrub with red berries and purple flowers. It forms impenetrable, spiny thickets that block access for vehicles, livestock and people. It's large thorns has large thorns which can injure livestock and its berries, leaves, stems and roots are toxic to humans. It changes the habitat suitable to Plains-wanderers and provides shelter and food for pest animals including foxes, rabbits and cats.

The preferred method of removal of large mature thickets of African boxthorn in Plains-wanderer habitat is by physical removal using machinery.

Check out the African boxthorn pulling video on YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VuQNGSXJ6gA>

The Priority Weeds of the Murray and Riverina Regions Identification Guide provides basic information to help identify and manage weed species listed as priority weeds in the Murray and Riverina Regional Strategic Weed Management Plans.

For more information on the Priority Weeds of the Murray and Riverina regions, please call your local project officer for a copy of the Identification Guide, or check out priority weeds on the Murray Local Land Services website <https://www.lls.nsw.gov.au/regions/murray>



Boxthorn on local properties. Photo: Sam Steel



Boxthorn removal undertaken by Murray River Council.



Sam Steel undertaking monitoring on paddocks signed up to the Paddocks for Plains-wanderer project.

Meet the Project Officer | Sam Steel

Plains-wanderer Project Officer, Murray Local Land Services

I have been working with Local Land Services since November 2021 as a project officer assisting the Plains-wanderer back from the brink project team implement this financial year's program.

It has been great working with passionate landholders and project team members on what is now a fairly mature program and I am looking forward to contributing to the development of the next phase of the project.

I was attracted to the project as it was an opportunity to work with landholders and scientists to secure the future of one of Australia's most unique and threatened species. Landholders can and do play a very significant role in the conservation and protection of species and I was keen to work with landholders to achieve that.

I have worked in the conservation and protection industry over the last 15 years in various roles and organisations to protect threatened species in Northern Territory, Western Australia, and more recently in western NSW and north-western Victoria on both public and private land.

One of the things that really struck me as my time in this industry wore on was the importance of landscape conservation programs. Landholders play an important role in protecting diverse and significant landscapes that support native species associated with those landscapes.

Landholders are strongly invested in maintaining sustainable farms and are interested in achieving the long-term survival of threatened species such as the Plains-wanderer.

I am very excited to be a part of the Local Land Services team, and I look forward to supporting landholders through the Plains-wanderer Project.

I encourage all participating and any non-participating landholders to provide suggestions for the future direction of the program to make what is an already great and successful project into an even better one.

The Plains-wanderer team including myself look forward to hearing your suggestions however left-field they may seem.

Landholder surveys

As part of the Paddocks for Plains-wanderers project we undertake surveys of participating landholders each year to see how we can improve the project. We value this feedback and try to take as much on board to alter the program for future years.

Tom Porter has been involved in the project since 2017, and has received two rounds of funding to undertake boxthorn control and purchase feeders.

During this period, he has managed to keep the signed up paddock in ideal condition through the drier times, which has allowed Plains-wanderers to inhabit and now breed in the area.

During the last round of surveys, Tom indicated he would like to spotlight on his property. In December we were able to visit the property, and after only 23 minutes the first bird was spotted. Over the course of the night we found two juvenile males, two females and a male sitting on a nest with four eggs.

Scan the QR code opposite to hear Tom's story.

SCAN ME



Tom Porter and Project Officer Megan Purvis

In the survey conducted in June last year, several landholders told us they were interested in learning more about exclusion fencing and containment areas.

After a few delays due to COVID, we were finally able to organise a bus trip up to Booligal in May. Sixteen landholders and 36 final year students from Sydney University jumped on board and headed north from Hay.

We first visited the Crossley's property 'Riverside'. They have undertaken between 50 to 60 kilometres of exclusion fencing. The main motivation behind construction of the fences was to minimise the movement of wild dogs and pigs onto and throughout the property. They also were having

issues with wildlife coming onto paddocks that were destocked, and thought the construction of the fences would help with rotational grazing and manage total grazing pressure.

Unfortunately, we weren't able to visit the containment area on 'Curragh', but were lucky enough to have Rob Inglis from Elders present to us the benefits of containment areas and logistics behind them. Hopefully we will be able to head out to look at some Stock Management Areas later in the year. To view the video on Exclusion fencing at 'Riverside' check out the QR code (below).

SCAN ME



Participants on the bus trip listening about different types of exclusion fencing.



Monitoring Plains-wanderers on the Hay plains

Plains-wanderer conservation with the NSW Biodiversity Conservation Trust

As part of a recent NSW Biodiversity Conservation Trust (BCT) conservation tender in the NSW Riverina region, ten landholders were each offered the opportunity to enter into a funded conservation agreement.

These 10 properties cover a collective area of over 21,000 hectares of riverine plain vegetation, including more than 4,000 hectares of primary Plains-wanderer habitat and a high proportion of secondary habitat nominated to be protected.

As of June 2022, six of the landholders had signed agreements with the BCT, with an additional three in active consideration of the BCT offer made in late 2021.

The landholders who have partnered with the BCT under this tender are located between Hay and Lockhart, a key area for Plains-wanderer habitat. As part of this tender, the BCT will provide annual payments and support for the life of the agreements, ranging from 15 years to in-perpetuity.

The payments from BCT are aligned to tailored management plans focused on maintaining primary Plains-wanderer habitat in ideal condition on each property. The recipient landholders will work with BCT support staff on monitoring and reporting on the condition of their conservation areas and associated management efforts, such as fox and feral cat control and balancing total grazing pressure with seasonal conditions.

BCT agreements are registered on title and offer secure, long term investment in the conservation values of a site. Entering into an agreement with the BCT can provide an additional source of income to help private landholders increase their resilience to drought and external shocks while benefiting the environment.

The recent BCT investment complemented existing conservation efforts, working in partnership with the NSW Government's Saving our Species program and both the Murray and Riverina Local Land Services. The BCT is proud to be part of a collaborative effort where private landholders and multiple government agencies are working together to support sustainable, productive enterprises alongside management for Plains-wanderers and conservation of riverine plains vegetation. The BCT is confident that their agreement-holders will be a critical part of the broader conservation efforts for Plains-wanderer populations.

The BCT is looking forward to continuing our partnership with these new agreement holders and growing the private land conservation network in the Murray Riverina region. As many readers of this newsletter will attest to, conserving habitat on private land, in partnership with landholders, is vital to both the production and conservation values of the landscape.

Information: info@bct.nsw.gov.au or 1300 992 688.

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