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## Connecting Country (Mt Alexander Region) Inc.

# Brush-tailed Phascogale and Yellow Box Woodland Project



**Award-winning gorse bunny  
sculpture in preparation for a  
bonfire.**

*This was constructed by landholders who have recently become involved in an on-ground works project with Connecting Country. Their project aims to control noxious weeds and pest animals alongside a waterway in the Taradale area.*

## The First Two Years October 2009 to September 2011



CARING  
FOR  
OUR  
COUNTRY



Department of  
**Sustainability  
and Environment**



**NORTH CENTRAL**  
Catchment Management Authority

## Introduction

Connecting Country (Mount Alexander Region) is a community based not-for-profit NRM organisation that was established on the premise that an effective whole of landscape approach is as much about connecting people and communities as it is about connecting landscapes and habitat. Across the project area in the Mount Alexander region there is broad based community interest across land tenures. The active participation and membership of Connecting Country by the 29 local Landcare and community environment groups with over 1100 members is critical to the organisations success. The organisation is managed by an eight member Committee of Management comprised of elected community members who have a wide range of skills and backgrounds. Connecting Country also has a dedicated group of experienced staff based in Castlemaine, a Reference Group representing the Landcare community and other local stakeholders and an Expert Advisory Panel comprising of specialists from across the state.

In October 2009, Connecting Country commenced working on a major project in partnership with the North Central Catchment Management Authority. This unique landscape-scale project aims to achieve long-lasting environmental improvements across the region, with a primary focus on the nationally threatened Yellow Box-White Box-Blakeley's Red Gum and derived native grasslands community<sup>1</sup> and the state-threatened Brush-tailed Phascogale (*Phascogale tapoatafa*). It aims to capture the community interest in understanding the natural environment and how it can be sustainably managed in the long term. The funding for the project has been received through the Australian Government Caring for our Country program and the Victorian Government Natural Resource Investment Program (Victorian Investment Framework).

This report describes the achievements and successes of the project during the first two years, and outlines the plan for the remainder of the Yellow Box Woodland project.

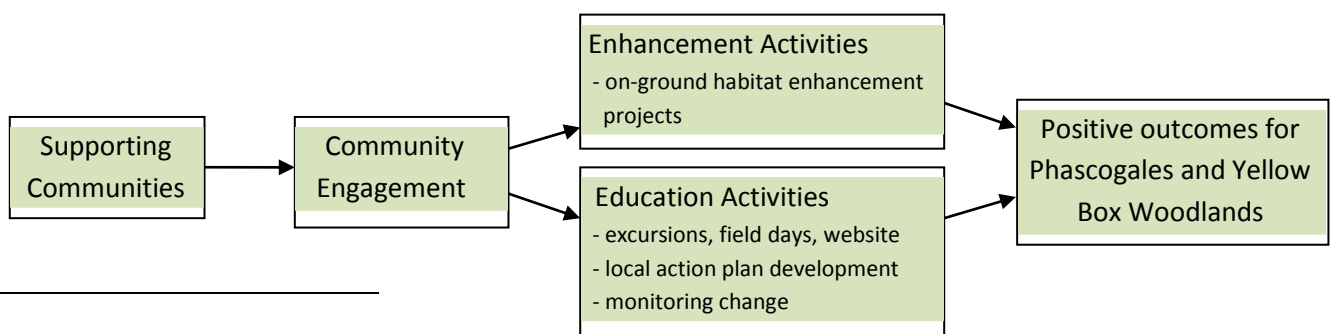
## The Yellow Box Woodland Project

This project seeks to implement landscape scale change with a specific focus on a flagship, threatened species - the Brush-tailed Phascogale (also known as the Tuan). The overall goal of the project is to increase populations of the Brush-tailed Phascogale across Mount Alexander Shire by improving the condition of existing habitat and by increasing connectivity between core habitat areas. This is to be achieved by:

- Increasing the extent of priority vegetation (remnant Yellow Box Woodland communities) across identified core habitat connectivity zones from 5000 ha to 6000 ha by 2018.
- Improving the condition of this habitat by 10% by 2018 (as measured by the standard metric: Habitat Ha).

As at the 30 September 2011, two years of the project have been completed. The range of activities undertaken by Connecting Country to achieve its goal during this period include:

- Delivery of on ground works that protects and enhances remnant Yellow Box woodlands including fencing, grazing regime change, weed control, pest animal control and strategic revegetation.
- Community engagement and education events and local area planning,
- Implementation of long term monitoring including fauna using nest boxes, habitat quality and birds.



<sup>1</sup> For simplicity in the promotion and advertising of our project, this threatened vegetation community is what we are describing as 'Yellow Box woodland'.

## On Ground Works

In the 2009-2011 period, Connecting Country supported 53 landholders and groups with projects covering 2554 ha of priority native vegetation that are to be managed, protected or expanded. A selection of these are displayed in the photos below. Another 23 projects covering over 900 ha are already in the process of developing agreements with Connecting Country (as at November 2011) and many others are being targeted for the year ahead. In addition, many hundreds of hectares are being managed more appropriately by landholders and managers as a result of the installation of nest boxes (over 400 boxes at more than 140 locations), and the implementation of monitoring sites for birds (50 properties) and vegetation (30 properties). Other land managers are also managing their land in a more ecologically-sensitive manner after attending workshops, field days and other events hosted and/or promoted by Connecting Country.



*Left: Large scale direct seeding of native plants on a private property in Maldon that was funded by the project*

*Right: Despite flood-related delays, funded activities such as fencing, weed removal and subsequent revegetation was undertaken at this Newstead site.*

In the first year of the project (2009-10), Connecting Country invested with the Department of Sustainability and Environment 2010 *Bush Tender* program which resulted in priority vegetation protection and enhancement across nine sites and 761 ha. During 2009-2010, Connecting Country also entered into conservation stewardship agreements with 13 community on-ground works projects, involving seven Landcare groups, 34 landholders and approximately 213 ha.



*Grazing regime change instigated in a Yellow Box Woodland remnant in Baringhup to promote regeneration.*



*Community group in Castlemaine providing in-kind weed control support as part of broader Yellow Box project*



*Stock and Rabbit proof fence installed around planting area. Expanding Yellow Box Woodland habitat near waterway.*

During the second year (2010-2011), Connecting Country independently identified and delivered on-ground projects with landholders and community groups. The management plans were expanded and improved, resulting in documents that provide a high level of baseline information about the current values on their property, as well as detailed descriptions and timelines for the management activities to be undertaken. Nineteen projects covering 1569 ha were funded, each with a five-year conservation stewardship agreement. The landholders involved in on-ground projects range from those owning large multi-generational family properties used primarily for agricultural through to smaller 'lifestyle' blocks owned by recent arrivals to the local area – all are very interested in improving and protecting the ecological values on their properties. Connecting Country has been mindful of limiting promotion of on-ground works to protect the privacy of local landholders. We believe this approach also encourages the networking within the community for the promotion of the on ground works and the subsequent benefits of being part of the project.



*Fencing installed to facilitate natural regeneration of highly degraded Yellow Box remnant near Sidonia.*



*Fencing installed to protect area of Yellow Box Woodland with recently revegetated understorey in Newstead.*

The existing on-ground works projects are spread widely across the Mt Alexander region. Most encompass or expand important areas of Yellow Box Woodland, while the remainder provide important linkages between them. A number of potential projects have been unable to proceed due to their lack or paucity of benefit for Yellow Box Woodlands or Brush-tailed Phascogales. In a number of cases we have also found that the extent of priority vegetation (based on DSE EVC mapping) differs from that found on the ground when our finer scale mapping is undertaken. For the remainder of the project, the primary focus for the location of on-ground works projects will be the larger 'core' priority area remnants and the habitat linkages between them. A strategic approach to landholder and group engagement is to be used, which will involve internal workshops, targeted publicity, visits and talks with particular landholders and the use of local community stalwarts and respected groups such as Landcare to assist in the project prioritisation and engagement process.



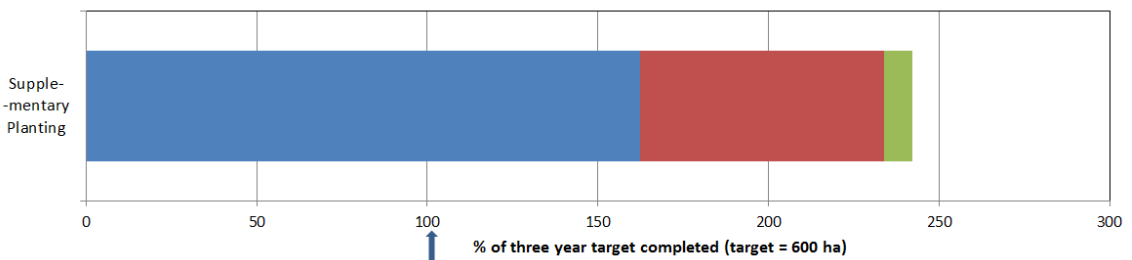
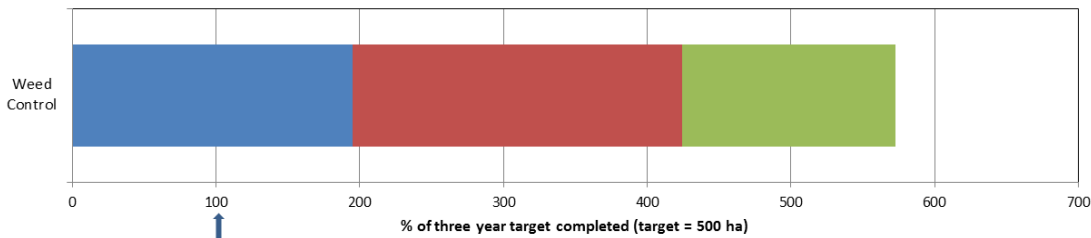
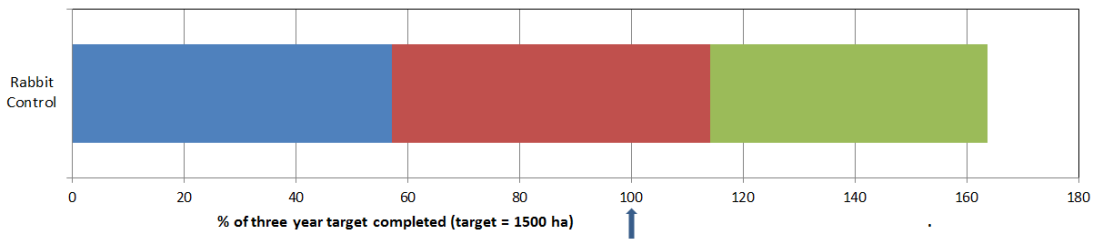
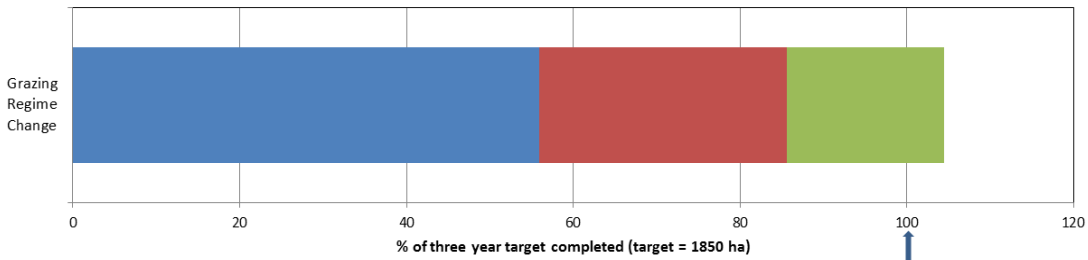
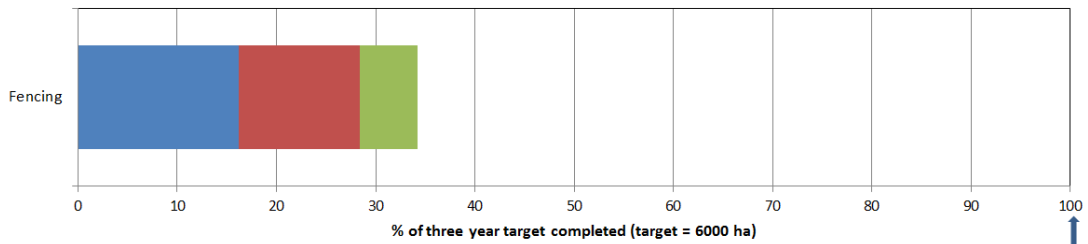
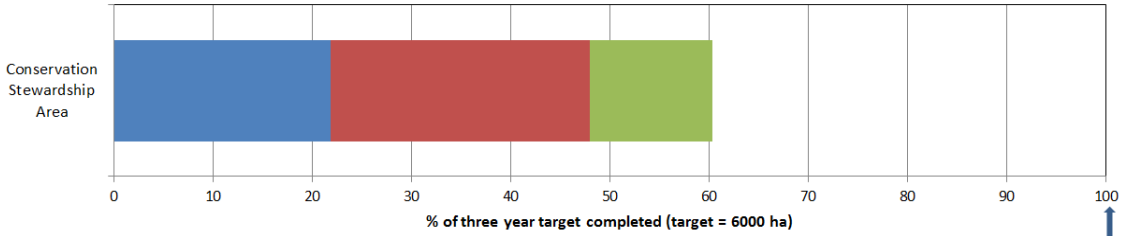
*Support provided to assist landholder implement rabbit control program at a site with difficult access issues, Yapeen.*



*Chemically treated woody weeds left as small animal refuge while regrowth of native vegetation occurs in Chewton.*

To achieve the project objectives of managing and increasing the extent of priority vegetation to 6000 ha, Connecting Country set annual targets for the project of 2000 ha. We have learnt that, in retrospect, these targets should have been staged to increase annually. Fire, drought, global financial crises and then floods have also made many landholders and groups wary of initiating new projects. More importantly, we have learned that it takes time to engage and develop working relationships with landholders and groups to successfully involve them in on-ground works projects. Many have watched to see projects develop on neighbouring properties before deciding to embark on a project themselves. Positive word of mouth has spread during the project, and continues to grow.

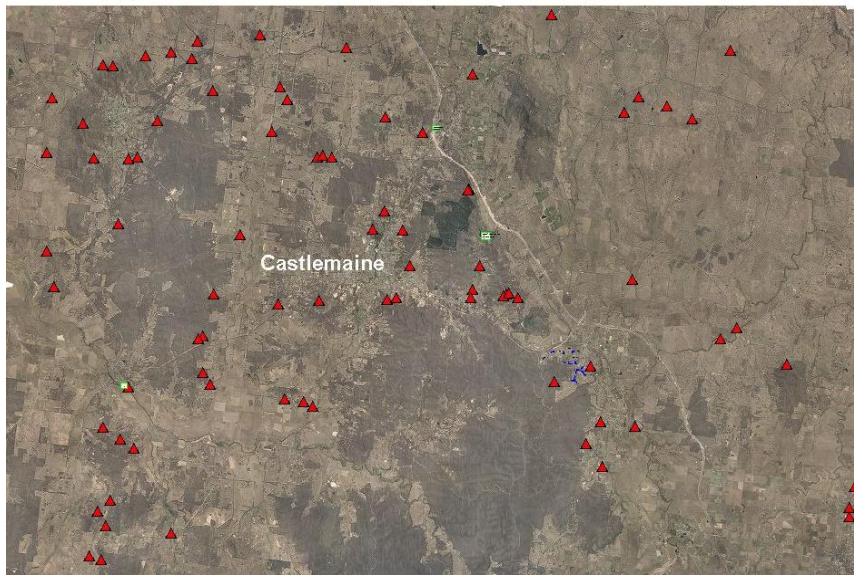
The graphs below display Connecting Country's outputs for the key on-ground works targets. Blue represents the achievements of the first year of the project (2009-10) and maroon represents the second year (2010-11). The green represents projects that were already in-progress at the commencement of the third year of the project. Many additional projects will be initiated and completed prior to the year's end than are shown in these graphs. Some outputs displayed below have already significantly exceeded the three year targets (weed control, rabbit control and supplementary planting), others are at or close to the target (grazing regime change), with the remainder being outputs of high importance for the remainder of the third year (conservation stewardship area, fencing).



## Monitoring Change

A significant component of Connecting Country is to measure the long term change in key biodiversity indicators across the landscape. Connecting Country's long-term monitoring strategy was produced in partnership with Dr Andrew Bennett from Deakin University. The strategy aims to determine whether the ecological health of the local area is increasing, decreasing or relatively stable, and also the extent to which habitat enhancement activities are influencing these changes.

Over 360 nest boxes were constructed and have been installed at more than 120 separate sites throughout the region. As well as being a good monitoring tool for Brush-tailed Phascogale, the nest boxes also increase the availability of habitat in the local landscape as hollows are a limiting resource for phascogales. There has been widespread community support for the nest box program, with all of the boxes being installed either on private land, or within areas of public land and being managed by a community group. There was also encouraging numbers of community participants who attended a phascogale/nest box information evening in early 2011.



*Locations where groups of three 'phascogale' nest boxes have been installed.*

Two hundred and sixty nest boxes were surveyed in autumn 2011, with a relatively high proportion supporting arboreal mammals - either phascogales (5.0%) or Sugar Gliders (39.4%). Connecting Country commissioned the construction of another 60 boxes which are being installed in target areas during the third year of the project. Feral bee management in the boxes is also being undertaken. Articles on the Connecting Country website regarding the nest box program were consistently the most read, and a number of related articles were also published in local newspapers and special-interest magazines.



*Left - Green Corp team learn a range of skills during nest box installation with Connecting Country*

*Right - the nest of a Brush-tailed Phascogale within an installed box*

As well as the nest box monitoring program, Connecting Country has initiated activities for other key biodiversity indicators in the local area. Sites for woodland birds and vegetation have been established 80 locations across the region, with surveys being undertaken within areas of good quality native vegetation, areas undergoing some form of habitat enhancement (e.g. revegetation, weed removal, etc) and also areas that have been heavily modified (e.g. agricultural paddocks). A specialist has been engaged to undertake surveys at these sites at different times of the year, and a report is in preparation on the results obtained thus far.

## Community Engagement

In the 2009/10 project year, we developed and ran six full day workshops that aimed to help landholders protect and enhance their remnant woodlands and increase the productivity of their land. In addition, we held three public talk events featuring woodland birds, bats and cultural landscapes, which proved very popular with up to 180 attendees at each talk.



*Left: Elaine Bayes walks participants through a waterway assessment tool that they can utilise on their own properties.*

*Right: A crowd of 180 in Newstead to hear Prof Andrew Bennett and Chris Tzaros share their wisdom on Woodland Birds.*

In the 2010-11 project year, Connecting Country organised three fascinating field trips on geology and soils, yellow box woodlands and rivers and streams. Connecting Country also ran another three very popular evening talks with over 200 community members attended to hear our expert speakers talk about “Fungi: Exploring a forgotten kingdom”, “Box Ironbark Woodland: How much fire in enough?” and “The landscape of squatters, miners, selectors and conservationists”.

Other events hosted or otherwise assisted by Connecting Country included the launch of a locally-produced Swift Parrot DVD, the launch of a field guide on local plants and a Family Nature Day held in central Castlemaine which had over 700 attendees. Local Area Plans for six locations across the region were produced. Connecting Country is also represented on two local working groups for two weeds of national significance, and has worked with students at local schools.



*Left: Botanist Paul Foreman assists participants with completing a vegetation assessment.*

*Right: Arn Tolsma from the Arthur Rylah Institute talks on fire ecology*

Connecting Country’s website is continually being improved and updated with current news and events for the Mount Alexander Community as well as information and links for further reading. The blog has more than 130 subscribers, and the website receives up to 200 ‘hits’ per day. The interactive mapper continues to provide a forum for community members to record sightings of local flora and fauna. Landcare groups, the North Central CMA, Friends groups and others regularly use the website to promote local events such as planting days, weed control, meetings, seminars and talks with regular eNews sent to the Landcare community and Connecting Country members.

## Concluding Comments

Over time, it is anticipated that the landscape scale enhancement activities occurring as a result of the Yellow Box Woodland project will lead to an increase in the local phascogale population and an improvement in the quality of Yellow Box Woodland remnants. The first two years of Connecting Country’s Yellow Box Woodland project have been filled with significant agreements for long term managed on ground projects, events, education and the important collection of monitoring data and has been greatly supported by the local media. The on-ground works projects by private landholders and community groups are gaining tremendous momentum following positive word-of-mouth. The Committee of Management is confident that the project is sufficiently resourced, managed and locally acknowledged so that we will meet or exceed our targets by the completion of the 2011-2012 project year. We are very excited by the prospects for this project in the years ahead. We welcome any feedback, comments, discussion, ideas on the project thus far or opportunities for the future ([info@connectingcountry.org.au](mailto:info@connectingcountry.org.au) or 03 5472 1594).