

Midlands Conservation Partnership



NEWSLETTER 02 – AUTUMN 2024

Photo by Matt Newton.

FROM THE TEAM

With the colder weather bringing some relief to our dry landscape, we welcome you to the second Midlands Conservation Partnership (MCP) newsletter.

It has been a busy six months for all of us in the MCP program and if the start of the year is any indication, it should be another great year for all involved. Thanks to everyone that joined our landholders' event in Ross last November, it was great to see you there. We hope Dave Hamilton's eastern quoll presentation and Matt Appleby's whirlwind tour of the properties gave you some inspiration and ideas for trying things differently at home.

There have been some recent changes to the MCP Board, with David Rickards leaving his position after more than 10 years. We would like to extend a huge thanks to David for the invaluable investment expertise he brought to MCP's capital fund during his tenure. We are also very fortunate to have Rachel Lowry joining the MCP Board after her appointment as Bush Heritage Australia's

CEO. Rachel was previously Chief Conservation Officer at the World Wide Fund (WWF) for Nature Australia and brings experience delivering regenerative conservation outcomes for some of Australia's leading conservation organisations. We are delighted to welcome Rachel and her expertise on the MCP journey.

The growing consumer awareness of the environmental impact of clothes manufacturing has meant fashion groups are looking to improve biodiversity along their supply chains, including wool production. MCP has applied (and been shortlisted) for two grants to grow the capital fund, namely Country Road's Climate Fund, and Inditex and Kering's Regenerative Fund for Nature. We are also working with our partners, NRM North and the Landscape Recovery Foundation on the final steps of securing some federal funding for conservation in the Midlands. We will share more news about these exciting opportunities in the coming months.

In January, some MCP properties played host to Friends of Grasslands,

a conservation group from the ACT-Monaro region. The group met with ecologists and landholders to learn about MCP and see how our model could be applied to protect endangered grasslands in their region. We were delighted to be joined by Diana Cameron on the day who was able to witness Andrew's continued legacy in action.

As always, we value your feedback and input. To ensure MCP remains relevant for you into the future, we are creating a landholder's advisory committee, which will help inform the Board's decision on the program's strategic approach. The expected amount of work will be minimal, at one or two meetings a year. If you are interested in joining the committee, let us know at mcp@tasland.org.au

Likewise, if you have feedback or suggestions for this newsletter, please get in touch. We want them to be informative and enjoyable for you to read. See you soon in the Midlands.

Pierre Defourny, MCP Coordinator
Matt Appleby, MCP Ecologist

11%

OF CRITICALLY ENDANGERED
LOWLAND NATIVE GRASSLANDS
IN THE MIDLANDS PROTECTED
THROUGH MCP

62 THREATENED SPECIES

RECORDED IN MCP AREAS, INCL.

16 NATIONALLY LISTED

\$2.4

MILLION

INVESTED FOR CONSERVATION
THROUGH STEWARDSHIP PAYMENTS



John and Isabelle Atkinson, with MCP ecologist Matt Appleby. Photo by Amelia Caddy.

MCP COMMUNITY: MAITLAND

Maitland is a beautiful property on the Eastern bank of the Isis river, near Campbell Town, that has been held by the Atkinson family since 1921. Today, its 1,883 hectares cover native bush and improved pastures that support a diversified enterprise, with superfine merino wool as the core business.

Maitland's current landholders, John and Isabelle Atkinson have a long history of supporting conservation. John is involved with the Members Council of Landcare Tasmania, and they host one of the Midlands study sites for the TLC, UTAS and WWF's Eastern Quoll project. In 2008, they also established a fixed-term covenant on approximately 170 hectares of black peppermint (*Eucalyptus amygdalina*) forest on iron stone, a threatened vegetation community.

In 2019, the Atkinsons purchased 1,000 hectares from neighbouring property Streanshalh, consisting of grassy woodlands bush runs and open native grasslands. Unfortunately, much of the lower slopes and gullies of these hills were suffering from dense gorse infestations that threatened the natural values of the land. Determined to manage the gorse for the benefit of the black peppermint and white gum forest they turned to MCP, and in 2019, Maitland became the latest property to join the program with a 10-year agreement.

Today 1,258 hectares, including the 170 hectares that were originally covenanted, are protected through MCP, making

it the second largest MCP area. With another 500 hectares protected through MCP on adjacent Beverley, much of the Isis Hills are protected and managed for conservation. This helps create an important link between the Western Tiers, the Macquarie Tiers and the Isis river.

Since joining MCP, John and Isabelle have committed to spending at least 50% of their annual payment on gorse control. Many years, much more is spent, with some great outcomes, including reducing the size of infestation by one third since beginning the program.

But it hasn't all been easy.

'Gorse is a really persistent weed, so long-term programmes such as MCP are a great way to have a meaningful, lasting impact,' said John and Isabelle.

'Gorse control is multifaceted because infestations occur in diverse locations and techniques vary based on area and accessibility to the concerned vegetation communities.'

But it isn't all gorse and weed control. Maitland's MCP protected areas contain 210 hectares of threatened vegetation communities, at least 8 threatened plants and many animal species that have been recorded. These include four nationally listed animal species, namely the Tasmanian wedge-tailed eagle, Australasian bitterns, Tasmanian devils and spotted-tail quolls. There are also four state-listed plants present, including propeller plants (*Stenanthemum pimeleoides*), small wrinklewort (*Siloxerus multiflorus*), prickly woodruff (*Asperula scoparia subsp. scoparia*) and dwarf fanwort (*Aphelia pumilio*).

It's thanks to properties like Maitland and landholders like John and Isabelle that we can establish long term protection for these threatened species and ensure Tasmania's Midlands thrive for generations to come.

Some of the threatened species that occur on Maitland:



Propeller plant
(*Stenanthemum pimeleoides*)
EPBC & TSPA: vulnerable.
Endemic to Tasmania.
Threats: land clearance, inappropriate fire regimes, heavy grazing pressure.



Dwarf fanwort
(*Aphelia pumilio*)
TSPA: rare.
Threats: forest clearing, sensitive to competition from other species.



Tasmanian devil
(*Sarcophilus harrisi*)
EPBC & TSPA: endangered.
Endemic to Tasmania.
Threats: Devil Facial Tumour Disease, roadkill, habitat modification.



The Midlands Buttercup (*Ranunculus prostratus*, yellow flower), Roundleaf Wilsonia (*Wilsonia rotundifolia*) and prickfoot (*Eryngium vesiculosum*, blue spikey flower). Photo credit: Pierre Defoury

ON THE VALUE OF RARITY – PROFESSOR TED LEFROY

People who study plants and animals get very excited when they come across rare species. Others wonder what the fuss is about, while some do their best to keep it quiet in case discovery of a listed species limits their options.

But it turns out that rare species like the Midlands Buttercup and Wilsonia pictured above are not just for the connoisseur. Recent studies have shown that rare species do a disproportionate amount of heavy lifting when it comes to maintaining the number and type of ecosystem functions that protect communities against inevitable disruption from fire, flood, diseases and pests. Whether they're fixing nitrogen, producing pollen and nectar, mulching soil, or hosting fungal networks, rare species do a lot to help ecosystems function.

One study found that if the rarest 20% of tree species were removed from a community, the range of functions would be reduced by 9% more than in the case where 20% of species were removed at random. Another showed that if the rarest 20% of bird species were removed, functional diversity would be reduced by 28% more than if 20% of species were removed at random. This is interesting because the concept of health gets complicated when applied to communities rather than individuals.

While we have established measures of human health such as blood pressure,

heart rate, and body temperature, measuring the health of plant and animal communities is far more challenging because death, decay and decomposition are all essential aspects of community health.

Knowing if the full range of functions is present is also challenging because the functional role of different species is poorly understood. So ecologists rely on substitute measures of community health, typically the number of different species present.



'Recent studies have shown that rare species do a disproportionate amount of heavy lifting when it comes to maintaining the number and type of ecosystem functions...'

'That's nice Ted, but how is this relevant to me?' I hear you ask. Well, it means rare species, particularly in grasslands, are not just valuable because they're rare. They're also indicators of community health with practical implications for management. The greater the number of rare species, the higher the probability there's a full complement of functions and more in-built redundancy or backup which increases tolerance to stress.

When humans make things, we tend to value efficiency over redundancy, a term with negative overtones when applied to people. But billions of years of evolutionary experience has made redundant or back-up systems essential in natural ecosystems.

This doesn't mean efficiency is unimportant in nature, it's present to a mind-boggling degree at the cellular level. Consider the effort it takes us to extract nitrogen from the air to make fertiliser - five hundred degrees centigrade, three hundred atmospheres pressure and 2% of the world's energy consumption. Fairly intensive, right? Well, legumes like the native glycine and rare silky bushpea in the Midlands' grasslands do it at ambient temperature and one atmosphere pressure - in the dark!

But at the community level redundancy rules as back-up is essential for long term survival and adaptation. A lesson that COVID taught us when just-in-time inventories ran out and supply chains broke down and we scrambled for alternatives, promising next time we'll have greater diversity of markets and suppliers.

So, when you see people getting excited about a rare plant on an MCP field day, it's not just a celebration of rarity for its own sake. It's adding to our appreciation of the range of functions present and giving us one more visual indicator of grassland health.

Biodiversity and ecosystem functioning in dynamic landscapes, Ulrich Brose and Helmut Hillebrand, Special Issue Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B, doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2015.0267



Spotted-tail quoll photographed by a camera trap in southern Tasmania.

MONITOR WILDLIFE WITH WILDTRACKER

Have you ever wondered what creatures might be calling your property home? Well, now you can find out with Tasmanian Land Conservancy's (TLC) citizen science program, WildTracker.

What is WildTracker?

WildTracker is an opportunity for private landholders involved with TLC programs to use motion-sensor camera traps to capture images, identify creatures and share them on the WildTracker website. The valuable data then helps landholders and TLC ecologists monitor wildlife trends and make well informed conservation decisions.

MCP landowners can also include WildTracker data in the MCP annual management report's section on wildlife (native and feral) observations.

How does it work?

The first step is registering online at the WildTracker website, free of charge. Once you have registered, you'll get a unique user dashboard and property page where you can invite your family, friends, or staff to see the pictures you've collected.

Once you're a part of the program you can create new survey sites on your property, upload images from camera trap surveys and tag the animals you see in your images.

Don't worry if you're not confident in identifying local species, we just want you to give it a try - every wombat you tag is one less for us. It's also a chance for you to sharpen your identification skills, with

resources to help you along the way, like how to tell a potoroo apart from a bettong, where and how to set up a camera trap effectively, and everything that is special about the critters your record.

Sounds good, but I don't have a camera trap.

No worries, WildTracker members can borrow a camera-trap from TLC - the MCP team will be able to bring it to you during their next visit and help you set it up. Otherwise, if you're in the market to buy a new wildlife camera, have a look at outdoorcameras.com.au. Give them a call, mention Wildtracker and the discount code BANDISNOOT (yes, snoot) to receive \$40 off the Swift Enduro model. All we ask is that you share your photos with us on WildTracker when your new toy arrives.

If you have any questions please reach out to WildTracker coordinator, Dr Glen Bain at gbain@tasland.org.au

WHAT'S ON

30 April A reminder that annual management reports are due

8 November Save the date for the MCP Landholders Annual Event

IN THE NEWS

Forty South - New model for conservation fortysouth.com.au/environment/new-model-for-conservation

PLC23: Conservation in Productive Landscapes youtu.be/IPKh7RqgYSU?si=dzO7dsMw71MQNm2Y

We acknowledge the Tasmanian Aboriginal people as the traditional custodians of the lands on which we work and recognise their continuing connection to land, waters and culture.

Midlands Conservation Partnership

tasland.org.au/mcp
bushheritage.org.au/places-we-protect/tasmania/midlands

+61 4 0709 0547

mcp@tasland.org.au

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MCP Board

Phillip Cornwell (Chair)
James Hattam
Rachel Lowry
Professor Ted Lefroy

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Support MCP by donating at tasland.org.au/donate-mcp

