News of Friends of Grasslands

Supporting native grassy ecosystems

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May & June 2024

Activities

Work Parties

Gurubung Dhaura: 18 May, 15 June
Saturdays 9am to 12:30pm
Register: Jamie Pittock

Budjan Galindji (Franklin Reserve)
Wed 1 & 22 May 9-11:30am
Wed 5 & 26 June 9-11:30am
Register: Margaret Ning

Activities

Sat 11 May 2-4pm,
St Johns Wort investigations.
Friends of Mt Majura's experience - *What can be done about this scourge*?

Sat 29 June
Visit to Gundary TSR (south of Goulburn), *home of Australia's largest Button Wrinklewort population*

July afternoon winter wander *circumnavigating Parliament House's native garden* perimeter.
Date TBC
All activities, register with Margaret Ning

New members

Welcome to new members: Matthew Kent (ACT), Natasha Robinson (ACT), Jane Ann Gray (NSW), John Morgan (VIC)

From the President …

What could the Nature repair market do for grassland conservation?

In the previous newsletter I wrote about the FOG field trip to Tasmania where I and others were inspired by the successful collaboration between pastoralists and conservationist for large natural temperate grassland remnants on private lands. In that article I wrote that:

"On private lands, the minority of farmers who are determined to over graze or fail to control weeds can soon ruin their grasslands within the law. We can't regulate our way to effective grasslands conservation in rural areas. [We need to] think harder about the opportunities to partner with pastoralists who can undertake the necessary biomass and weed control from day to day, to conserve grasslands for both biodiversity conservation and livestock production."

In December 2023 the federal parliament adopted the Nature Repair Act with the intention of establishing tradable biodiversity credits that may attract investment in conservation. This is detailed further in this newsletter [see Matt Whitting's article below. Ed.].
In April, FOG held a public seminar to further explore what this might mean for conservation of natural temperate grasslands. In my view there are a number of implications for our mission:

a) This could be a source of income for conservation and provide a welcome additional incentive for owners of grasslands to conserve them, although it is unclear who will buy the biodiversity credits;
b) Government agencies and market players will want to use remote sensing as far as possible to identify priority sites for conservation investment and monitor the conditions of these sites, but as we know, the condition of natural temperate grasslands is not readily identified remotely;
c) These kinds of market schemes – as is evident in the carbon credit market - often want to invest in fewer, larger sites which may mitigate against conservation of smaller and more scattered natural temperate grassland remnants;

d. Rules being developed for the overarching biodiversity market and specific methods to authorise projects may favour woody ecosystems unless the government and others can be persuaded to consider measures suitable for natural temperate grassland conservation; and
e. To succeed, methods for conservation of natural temperate grasslands need to provide incentives for appropriate grazing, ecological burning and weed control.

These opportunities and challenges point to the need for people with expertise to engage with the Federal Government and others to help design a nature repair market that may actively help conserve natural temperate grasslands. For these reasons, FOG will be actively making submissions in public processes to establish the market.

In addition, on May 31st FOG will be hosting a workshop on conserving the natural temperate grasslands of the south east highlands of NSW. NSW and federal government agencies, and community organisations will gather to share information on our current conservation programs, lessons learnt, and opportunities to enhance grasslands conservation. We hope that this collaboration will identify new ways for us to protect this most threatened of ecosystems.

See you in our grasslands!
Jamie Pittock, President, m 0407 265 131

The Nature Repair Act and related changes at the federal level

Matt Whitting

On 4 April 2024 FOG held a Forum to build understanding of the Nature Repair Act, an Act that has established a framework for a national, voluntary nature repair market. With the support of independent senators, the Act passed the Parliament in December 2023 and came into effect soon after. There is still a lot of detail to come, including the Rules that will control the market. The following is a quick summary of what we discussed, updated with the latest developments.

The first-listed object of the Act states it will 'enhance and protect' biodiversity in Australia. An explanation of the Act states that repair works can include: restoration, maintenance, regeneration, rehabilitation, remediation and habitat augmentation; threat abatement including weed and pest management; and fire management.

Taking the perspective of a land manager wondering whether to get involved, it's only when:

1. the market system is established:

- Rules are made under the Act;
- One or more "Assessment Instruments" are approved – procedures that will list steps land managers must take to measure and report on the progress of repairs;
- One or more "Methods" are approved – methods will be made for different kinds of repair projects, each will list the activities that must (and must not) be done;

2. land managers apply and the Regulator registers projects:

- The first land manager applies to conduct a project by applying an approved Method;
- The first project applying an approved Method is registered by the Regulator; and
- The first land manager gets regulatory approvals and consents required of them by the Regulator (if any) that a "nature repair project" could begin marketable repair works. Then, it's only when:

3. there's evidence that good outcomes are expected, i.e:

- the land manager applies for a tradeable "biodiversity certificate" (discussed next);
- the Regulator is satisfied that the "project is sufficiently progressed to have resulted in or be likely to result in, the biodiversity outcome for the project", for the Regulator to issue a certificate;
- the Regulator publishes details of the biodiversity certificate in the Register; and
- someone buys that biodiversity certificate;

that the land manager will recoup expenses and–*maybe*–make a profit.

The commodity that will be traded is a "biodiversity certificate", a form of personal property. The Act states a "biodiversity certificate represents the biodiversity outcome that a registered biodiversity project is designed to achieve". In other words, it's the promise of the outcome of the repair the land manager has undertaken to deliver during their project. Projects will be established for a "permanence period" of between 25 and 100 years.

The Government's motivation in creating this market is "to unlock private finance". If people and companies want to bolster their reputations by contributing to nature repair, then the market has a potential to do good things; however, no-one knows how much demand there will be nor how much buyers of the certificates will be willing to pay.

A key point raised on the night was that before the Bill was passed, the independent senators secured an amendment which ruled out one group of buyers of biodiversity certificates, i.e., developers needing to satisfy offset approval conditions. To explain:

1) If development actions are going to be approved anyway, then requiring compensation, i.e., an offset, is better than nothing. Of course, the better approach, and the one nature needs right now, is for no further damage to be approved in the first place.
2) *Under current policy*, wherever the federal Environment Minister accepts that an action will have significant impacts that cannot be further avoided or mitigated and approves it anyway under the EPBC Act, the Approval Holder chooses to proceed with the approved action, and a condition attached to the approval requires that as compensation the Approval Holder establish, manage and securely protect a like for like offset site, *the Approval Holder must then find, acquire, manage and protect a like for like offset site*. Given scarcity, that is not easy.
3) Until Tuesday 16 April 2024 the Government was saying its proposed Nature Positive (Environment) Bill would be introduced to the Parliament during this term of office. This was to be a comprehensive response to the deterioration in and increasing threats faced by Australia's environment. As part of the proposed Bill, the plan was to enable Approval Holders to pay "restoration contribution payments" as compensation instead, i.e., to wave their credit cards, a fast and easy way to satisfy offset obligations.

4) The amendment prevented the flow of developers' compensation payments into a fund that could have been used to acquire biodiversity certificates. This *appears* to be a big hole in demand within the unfolding market.

It's arguable legislating to continue the existing approach (2. above) would be better, i.e., if a developer cannot find a like for like offset site to acquire, manage and protect, that says something. Don't do the damage at the impact site! It appears Senator David Pocock agrees. On 17 April, he described the "restoration contribution payment" proposal, which the Government – if it is returned at the next federal election – may still introduce in its next term of office, as a 'pay to destroy' scheme.

Although major environmental law reforms are now on hold, work on the nature repair market is continuing apace. The next steps will probably be the appointment of a Nature Repair Committee and publication of the draft Rules, where comment will be invited and there is a real chance to call for robust sensible regulation that will be transparent etc. At the Forum several people expressed interest in looking over the Rules when the time comes; if you are interested in doing this, please email me on matt.whitting@outlook.com

A good balance is needed. If the requirements are too onerous, or it takes too long for land managers to receive a tradeable certificate, then no land manager will participate. Too little regulation and the market may be open to rorting or fail to achieve much-needed repairs.

There are a lot of other new things happening at the federal level, too many to squeeze into this article. For more about:

- The Government bringing forward some aspects of their reform plans (code for postponing others) – see this article: https://theconversation.com/its-time-to-strike-an-environmental-grand-bargain-between-businesses-governments-and-conservationists-and-stop-doing-things-the-hard-way-228620.
- Regional planning – this is a major reform, now seemingly on hold. If it is enacted in the future then conservation groups will have a great opportunity to see biodiverse places protected. For more, see this Conservation Council ACT Region website.
- Conserved Areas - the Government's proposal is to count not just protected areas but other areas achieving biodiversity benefits toward Australia's protected area targets. For more look here.

Grassland management for the Plains Wanderer

Geoff Robertson

Over the years FOG's visited sites have included Riverina grasslands, which have provided an opportunity to see and learn about efforts to manage grasslands and especially to protect and expand the habitat for the Plains Wanderer.

The link provided here contains insightful lessons for grassland management everywhere. The video, prepared by the Biodiversity Conservation Trust takes about six minutes to watch. [This video ties in with the previous articles and is well worth watching Ed.]

Golden-headed cisticola, a grassland bird so small it can perch on a grass stem.

Michael Bedingfield

The Golden-headed cisticola is a tiny bird that I was fortunate enough to photograph when visiting the East Jerrabomberra Grasslands. Its size is only about 10 cm from bill to tail-tip. Being so small and light it can perch on small plants, and some grasses can support its weight.

The one in my photo was perched on a stem of Phalaris, *Phalaris aquatica*. While this is an exotic grass, weed patches of it do provide a suitable habitat for the bird. It likes long or dense grass and prefers to be close to water.

The male in breeding plumage has his head covered in golden feathers, which gives the species its common name, and a shortened tail - about 30 mm instead of 45 mm, so that the size of the bird becomes less than the 10 cm given above. At other times the male's crown is cinnamon-brown and streaked with black.

When not breeding the male and female are similar but duller in colour. The back and wings are tan and streaked with black and whitish below. The photo is of the bird at non-breeding time.

The preferred habitat is variable and includes grassland where the grass is tall and thick, savannah, woodlands, scrublands, swamp margins, wetlands, irrigated farmland and other dense or tangled vegetation. The species is distributed throughout Victoria and along the east, north and northwest sides of the Australian continent. It also extends north into New Guinea, south-east Asia and China, and west into India. In the Canberra region it is regarded as uncommon and is not seen often, but it does breed locally and is a sedentary resident. Overall it is relatively abundant and there is no concern for its future.

The Golden-headed cisticola has the scientific name of *Cisticola exilis*, with the pronunciation for the genus name being sis-tic-ola. These birds build their nests in grass tussocks, shrubs or other thick vegetation, less than three metres above the ground. They create a rounded structure with a side entrance near the top. For camouflage, living leaves are often stitched around the outside of the nest using spider threads, so another common name is Tailorbird. The nest is built by both parents. During the breeding season the males are quite territorial and have an elaborate aerial display with noisy vocalization. The female incubates the eggs and feeds the chicks while the male defends the nest against intruders.

The male likes to perch on something prominent such as a shrub when making his song. Then he makes a persistent buzzing "zzzzt", often followed by a sharp "click, click". The bird's voice also includes a nasal sneezing "chew". When hidden it makes different sounds, such as "keet-keet-keet".

During non-breeding periods these birds are more difficult to observe. They feed mainly on insects and their larvae but also on seeds. They forage quietly and inconspicuously on the ground among the tall grasses or other vegetation.

Cisticolas are grouped with the old-world warblers. Similar locally-occurring species are the Australian Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus australis* and Little Grassbird *Poodytes gramineus*. Both these birds like dense vegetation in a variety of wet habitats including those where our subject occurs.

While the Golden-headed cisticola is uncommon in the Canberra region it is abundant throughout its expansive range and is believed to be increasing in numbers. This is very reassuring for this petite and unusual bird. If you have never seen one that is a good reason to visit the East Jerrabomberra Grasslands. You might find other unusual creatures as well as enjoying the clear air and vast open spaces that these natural grasslands offer.

Main references:
https://www.birdsinbackyards.net/species/Cisticola-exilis
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Golden-headed_cisticola
https://collections.museumsvictoria.com.au/species/7343

Seeds from three native species in Hall Horse Paddock #4 - a close up

John Fitz Gerald

For this newsletter edition, I was inspired by the quality of native vegetation which a FOG group was able to view when this at-risk site near Hall was visited in mid-February. Margaret Ning's writeup of the event with much detail can be found on the following pages.

The three species I've selected, two grasses and one sedge, all occurred near our entry point in grassy Box-Gum open woodland.

My first species is *Paspalidium distans*. While this grass is uncommon in the ACT, a visit to ALA showed over 5600 records from NSW, Queensland, around to the NT and WA. The ACT lies near the SE extent of the species distribution and is only represented by eleven ALA records.

This grass at Hall in February was holding many seeds on long, bright-lime-green foliage. My image shows some florets and seeds, demonstrating the complex packaging that is common in panicoid grasses.

At the right of the image are three florets with all their thin and smooth glumes and lemmas still attached. At the left of the image is one fertile and textured floret with its glumes and sterile floret removed. This green-coloured material is very tough and it was difficult to prise the structure open to extract its single seed. The image at left shows the lemma at the back, and it

wraps over the palea which is imaged at the front of the fertile structure. Three small seeds from three other fertile lemmas are possibly a little under-ripe as they are pale and soft; these are arranged in a vertical column near my image centre. The scale bar here is 0.5 mm.

Second native species is *Cyperus lhotskyanus*. Images in Margaret's writeup show superficial similarity of inflorescences of this species to those of the moderate-priority common weed Umbrella Sedge. Usefully, *C. lhotskyanus* commonly has rich red-brown colours of its glumes (see CNM) plus clearly exposed flower parts (stigmas). The native species also seems to have narrower leaves than the weed, though Plantnet suggests this should not be relied upon as the maximum leaf widths of the two species are similar.

ALA records, nearly 340, reveal this species grows in NSW and Victoria within 2-400 km of the coastline. For the ACT, observations total just 44 with only 15 preserved specimens in herbarium collections. So, this is an uncommon plant here. My image shows five exposed nuts of *C. lhotskyanus* at the centre and right side. Some of the nuts still carry flower parts. At the left side are two nuts which remain partly wrapped in their papery glumes. Scale bar here is 0.5 mm.

My final species is *Rytidosperma laeve,* Bare-backed Wallaby Grass. This grass is reasonably common based on ALA showing over 3100 records. It is widespread in NSW and Victoria within about 300 km of the coast, and also occurs in the southeast corner of SA.

At Hall and elsewhere tussocks of this grass are mid-sized, and in February inflorescences were conspicuously bright white and fluffy, each with a continuous rim of hairs around the top of the lemma. This attractive grass, however, had a very disappointing seed content. Many florets were empty and, of those carrying seed, just 10% or so look to be viable. I did check plants in some other Belconnen locations with similar results but I don't know if this is normal or whether the season was not good for the species. My image shows seven dried, dark and shrivelled seeds. In the top right corner are three lighter smoother seeds but they also seem too thin to be fertile. For comparison, the plump shiny seed in the bottom right hand corner of my image does have high potential. The scale bar in this mage represents 1 mm.

Maybe entirely coincidentally, these three species also occur in native-rich grassy areas of the Pinnacle Nature Reserve west of the Belconnen suburbs of Weetangera and Hawker, however there they grow in both grassland and mixed woodlands.

 Information above was gathered from websites, principally: ALA - www.ala.gov.au, CNM - canberra.naturemapr.org and Plantnet - plantnet.rbgsyd.nsw.gov.au/search/simple.htm

Hall Horse Paddocks and Cemetery

Margaret Ning

Eight of us gathered at the northern entrance to Hall Horse Paddocks at 9am, Sunday 18 February, knowing that the forecast was for a warm one (photo below). However, with the exception of the first 100 metres or so, we were going to be walking in shady eucalypts, so it was all under control. Rainer gave our new safety induction, better known as 'take five' where, between us, we all proffer five suggestions of something that could go wrong in the course of the activity, and we would all be aware of what they were, and avoid them happening. (For the record, on the day, our antennae were heightened for jumper ants, snakes, trip hazards, falling over and horses……. and it was effective, as we didn't experience any of them).

We were led by local orchid enthusiast, Christian, who is also a much-valued volunteer at Hall Cemetery work parties. Christian introduced the site, and explained the horse paddock background. The horses had been absent for three months, but had been put back for the last week prior to our visit. It is part of ACT territory agistment, with four subdivisions nestled in between the Barton Highway and Gibbs' Street west of Hall. The total area covers around 50 hectares. Horse paddock #4 in the north-east has the highest biodiversity covering an area of about 13 ha with over 200 native plant species (and counting). The horses are mostly held in paddocks one to three. It was suggested that if the horse paddocks were closed, nearby private land would be required for horse agistment.

ACTmapi shows the site consisting of three distinct vegetation community patches: "Red Stringybark-Scribbly Gum-Red-anthered Wallaby Grass open dry forest"; "threatened Yellow Box-Apple Box tall grassy woodland"; and "Red Stringybark-Mealy Bundy grass-forb open forest".

Our route initially took us through an area of open Box Gum grassy woodland where grasses were rather thick. Small patches of Redleg Grass (*Bothriochloa macra*), wallaby-grasses (*Rytidosperma* spp.*),* Weeping Grass (*Microlaena stipoides*), a native lovegrass (*Eragrostis* sp.), and, rare in the ACT, Spreading Panic Grass (*Paspalidium distans*) were being overwhelmed by a much larger expanse of African Lovegrass (*E. curvula*). Sadly Pigeon Grass (*Setaria* sp.) and Paspalum (*Paspalum dilatatum*) are also sneaking in.

In the course of the morning, we removed any ALG as well as any Centaury (*Centaurium* sp.) that we saw along the edges of the track. Although we did fill a bag, the woodland is impressively free of most weeds.

Photo by Andrew Zelnik.

Next we stopped for a *Cyperus eragrostis* (exotic) vs *C. lhotskyanus* (native) lesson from Rainer, best illustrated here by Jane Roberts' two images from Nature Map (below), which, given the explosion of the former during the La Niñas, is a good one to be aware of.

Once we reached the shade of the eucalypts, the native understorey was growing nicely, although not much was flowering. However, we welcomed sightings of flowering Little Dumpies (*Pterostylis truncata*), Rufous Midge Orchid (*Genoplesium clivicola*), bluebells (*Wahlenbergia* spp.), Common Everlasting (*Chrysocephalum apiculatum*), Small St John's Wort (*Hypericum gramineum*), Grass Triggerplant (*Stylidium graminifolium*), New Holland Daisy (*Vittadinia cuneata*) and Yellow Rush Lily (*Tricoryne elatior*). An unusual sighting was Love Creeper (*Comesperma volubile*), albeit not flowering.

Little Dumpies *(Pterostylis truncata)* (Andrew Zelnik)

A Little Eagle (vulnerable in the ACT) flew off as we advanced along the track, and Christian let us know that it was nesting on the other side of the road. Rainer suggested that the Horse Paddocks area of 50 ha supports seven ACT-listed bird species and an additional two NSW-listed species. ACTmapi also shows it as being habitat for the threatened Rosenberg's Monitor.

Rufous Midge Orchid (*Genoplesium clivicola*)

Christian began a discussion of the Horse Paddocks' floral highlights found in the course of a normal year, and all were of the type that could well do with protection from marauding horses. They include Yam Daisy (*Microseris lanceolata*), Milkmaids (*Burchardia umbellata*), various small lilies (*Arthropodium fimbriatum, A. minus*), Native flax (*Linum marginale*), Indigo (both *Indigofera australis* and *I. adesmiifolia*, which the horses love), some 20 orchid species (starting with Dusky Fingers (*Caladenia fuscata),* Golden Moth *(Diuris chryseopsis)* in early spring, and culminating with the tall forest orchids Swollen Sun Orchid *(Thelymitra megcalyptra),* Forest Sun Orchid *(T. arenaria)* and Scented Sun Orchid *(T. nuda)* in early summer, and a few late summer/autumn orchids Little Dumpies (*Pterostylis truncata)* and Parson's Bands (*Eriochilus cucullatus*).

There is no doubt that this area requires protection and should become a nature reserve. The horses prefer the exotic pastures to the west, closer to the Barton Highway.

There had been 30mm of rain the night before, which gave the lichens and mosses a boost, and a freshness to the bush in general. The native grasses on the site stood up to be counted, and we had recorded 20 by the end of our morning. We also enjoyed insect sightings, including a Hop Bush beetle. The threatened Key's Matchstick Grasshopper (*Keyacris scurra*) has been recorded at the site.

Leaving the Horse Paddocks, we arrived at Hall Cemetery by 11.30am, and, first up, enjoyed a grasses lesson on how to distinguish the three most common native *Eragrostis* species from each other. It is an excellent site for that.

We wandered around inside the cemetery 'proper' and discussed some of the management issues experienced in the past and present. The current situation is dire, with the Tarengo Leek Orchid (*Prasophyllum petilum*) eluding monitoring teams, in any numbers, for the last few years. Plenty of Fog Grass, Sweet Vernal Grass, Paspalum and Onion Grass however! The woodland area surrounding the cemetery looks fantastic in the spots where Weeping Grass (*Microlaena stipoides*) is thriving. Not that Phalaris and Paspalum don't exist in the woodland, but the Weeping Grass is particularly enjoying this year's conditions. And there was evidence that the huge effort put into the cemetery woodlands a few years ago had been very effective, as there were few Spear thistles, Milk Thistles or Prickly Lettuce to be seen.

It was a very pleasant morning at both sites. We stayed cool, saw a great-condition woodland site, learnt things, and enjoyed the company we were with. Thanks Christian and Rainer.

Advocacy report

Sarah Sharp

1. Submissions

Copies of all submissions are available at Advocacy (fog.org.au)

DA202342246, Drake Brockman Drive duplication development application, submitted 6/3/24
FOG appealed for reconsideration of the environmental impact that the road duplication will create and the flow-on effects for the local community. FOG urged a review of size and design details of DA202342246. The proposed clearing of a high number of trees amounts to severe ecological loss and plans need to be reconsidered on the basis of existing ACT legislation (Nature Conservation Act 2014: Loss of Mature Native Trees: a key threatening process; and Urban Forest Act 2023). Revegetation should aim to replant native species (trees, shrubs, grasses and flowering plants) that are characteristic of the local natural grassy woodland community that is being lost.

ACT 2024-25 Budget submission, 11/3/24
Proposed budget measures centred around three tenets:

- Improving the quality of the environment;
- Reducing costs to the community;
- Identifying lands for conservation over development.

Update of Australia's Strategy for Nature 2019-2030, submitted 04/04/24
FOG comments relate to the need to improve thinking regarding three of the six priority areas and associated targets:

- Priority area 1: Effective restoration of degraded terrestrial and inland water ecosystems;

- Priority area 2: Tackling the impact of invasive species;
- Priority Area 5 (which is also the target): Protecting and conserving 30% of Australia's land and 30% of Australia's oceans by 2030.

Issues relate to the need for standards for protection and management of all areas that count towards Australia's protected area target; definitions for 'degraded areas' and requisites for specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and timetabled actions.

2. Other matters
The Territory plan report and associated documents released 07/03/24
is available here: Inquiry-into-the-Territory-Plan-and-other-associated-documents-report-CURRENT-version.pdf . FOG is pleased that recommendations related to grassland and grassy woodland habitat have been made, including:

- Recommendation 20 - The Committee recommends that the ACT Government, where practicable, ensure the protection of biodiversity and conservation areas in the Territory Plan using the framework outlined in the discussion paper 'Building a Biodiversity Network Across the ACT'.
- Recommendation 21 - The Committee recommends that the ACT Government consider reviewing the Biodiversity Sensitive Urban Design Guide to examine whether it should apply to areas smaller than one hectare in line with the Nature Conservation Act 2014 and the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999.

Committee chair Jo Clay's additional recommendations, Appendix E:

- Recommendation 3 - Ensure that native areas are protected upfront, not in a piecemeal way, and that areas with high environmental values not be developed, even if environmental offsets are available.
- Recommendation 6 - Amend the Territory Plan to be in line with the Biodiversity Sensitive Urban Design Guide so that both documents aim to improve, restore and enhance biodiversity.

Meeting with Minister Cheyne, Minister of City Services, 25/02/24
Sarah met with Minister Cheyne in order to introduce her to FOG, and to highlight matters of concern to FOG. These included in particular lack of resources to undertake ecological management of areas of conservation value, and the concept of the Biodiversity Network. Our concerns were well received, and discussion ensued on processes to address these.

Biodiversity Network update, 04/04/24
A stakeholder group meeting was held on 28 March, with Hugh Coppell and Sarah Sharp representing FOG and the Conservation Council's Biodiversity Working Group. Options for legislative changes were narrowed down, with consideration given to unleased land to be protected as Special Purpose Reserves and/or through modifications to the Nature Conservation Act.

In the case of leased land, investigations will commence to consider how some form of voluntary conservation agreement may be used, to include stewardship payments and other support to lessees. Mapping in TCCS is continuing, and there is progress with collating various maps to be available publicly on ACTMapi. The election priorities proposed by the Conservation Council are being finalised now, and include many matters relating to the implementation of the Biodiversity Network.

Invasive Plants Working Group, 04/04/24
Hugh attended the bi-annual Invasive Plants Working Group, hosted by the ACT Government, on behalf of FOG. The group heard updates from government agencies and community organisations on their weed management activities. There was also a good discussion about the proliferation of African Lovegrass in the ACT and measures to mitigate its impacts. Hugh introduced a report he had prepared concerning the prioritisation of control of St John's Wort by the ACT Government, which will be followed up in the coming months.

A Native Garden

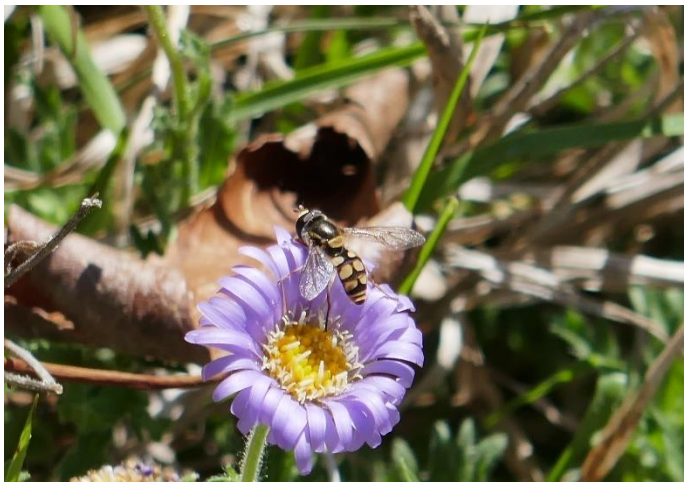
Alan Ford

I have a local Australian native garden. There are a couple of plants that are probably not local but the genera are definitely local. There are also a few weeds but they are under control, for the moment.

There are around fifty-five native plants in the garden at the moment. I have recently completed a survey and found one that I had lost and found another that was forgotten about. Such is a garden that is spread around the block.

The front was planted twenty years ago, landscaped by Leon Horsnell. The back yard is about fifteen years old. The shrubs in both cases were planted around the edge. I discovered, after it was clear that the *Cassinia quinquefaria* really enjoyed the garden, that its natural habitat was on Oakey Hill 300 metres away.

Canberra Nature Map is a marvelous invention as you can access advice on the animals that utilise the garden. So far, apart from the possum that lives nearby, a skink and a growing list of birds, it is the invertebrates that stand out. Two of these, a hoverfly and a tiny beetle, are the subject of accompanying photos. What is significant is that over the last decade approximately 90-100 species of invertebrates have called this garden home. Why approximately? Because it is very difficult, in the case of some orders (flies, for example) to identify the species.



Moths, flies (Common Hover Fly above) and beetles (below) are the real winners, representing over half of the invertebrate life of the garden which is of course an exercise in creative conservation.

Often only one example of each plant species has survived the changing weather patterns. Some of the grasses, the Acacias, Bursaria and Cassinia have played a dominating role and some have had to be ruthlessly controlled to give others a chance.

Weeds are a constant struggle. It is a matter of paying attention to the weak points or to parts of the edge that have suffered from external pressure. I have a small bee hotel (right) and it will be interesting to see what emerges in time. There appears to be a small number of native bees around and I am interested to see whether the bee hotel is responsible for an increase in numbers of genera.

My thanks to Geoff and Margaret from FOG, Gwyn, Geoff, Iris and Leon from ANPS.

Sterling Service Andy

Geoffrey Robertson

Recently, long-term FOG activist and until recently FOG's almost-forever Public Officer, Andy Russell, was presented with a Sterling Service award by Scott Saddler AM, Executive Branch Manager of the National Arboretum Canberra and Stromlo Forest Park. STEP president Jane Cottee said "the shaded picnic area down in Forest 20, surrounded by *Eucalyptus blakelyi*, Blakeley's Red Gum, provided a fitting location for this significant occasion" (photo below).

Andy is the Southern Tablelands Ecosystem Park (STEP) Newsletter Editor and publisher of the monthly *Of Interest at Forest 20* photo-sheet, two pages of photos of flowers usually with an associated invertebrate.

STEP, located at Forest 20 within the National Arboretum, Canberra, was founded in 2001 by the Australian Native Plant Society (Canberra Region) and FOG, to showcase the region's ecosystems. After eight years of

wandering in the wilderness amid efforts to plant indigenous local plant species, it is well settled at the National Arboretum and is now a created, functioning ecosystem, adopted by local fauna as their home. Sterling Service Andy!!!

Richard Bomford for honorary life membership

Geoff Robertson

Under the Association Rules of Friends of Grasslands (FOG), Honorary Life Membership is a special award through which FOG can recognise exceptional service by a member or former member. The committee can propose an award as part of the business of any general meeting of the association; the person proposed will not be a current serving member of the committee; the general meeting will vote on the committee's proposal, with a majority of votes indicating acceptance. A maximum of two new honorary life members can be recognised in any calendar year.

For the 2024 annual general meeting, the committee recommended that honorary life membership be awarded to Richard Bomford for his exceptional services to FOG. In making Richard Bomford an honorary life member, FOG recognises his voluntary contribution, over a long period of time:

- Creating and maintaining FOG's easy to use and informative website, which:
  - Creates a strong public image for FOG – with over 100,000 visits a year;
  - Provides important information published by FOG, such as its newsletters, formal submissions, annual reports, description of projects, notices and so on;
  - Contains a powerful search facility;
  - Facilitates people to join FOG as members or renew membership, and to purchase publications and is done at minimum cost to FOG.
- Participating in and helping to facilitate FOG's activities, especially but not confined to the south coast;
- Along with his partner, Bernadette O'Leary, demonstrating to FOG's members and neighbours how to maintain and restore their 40 hectare grassy property at Brogo, which has hosted a number of FOG's events;
- Providing, on many occasions, sensible advice and solutions to FOG, especially on public communication approaches; and
- Voluntarily participating in other community, heritage and biodiversity projects.

In 2007 FOG had already embarked on a web presence, using Yahoo's Geocities as a platform, established by Paul Hodgkinson. With his interest in websites, Richard offered to take it over as Paul didn't have the resources to keep managing that site. Richard's interests involved learning the basics of web publishing. The text was taken off Geocities and converted to native HTML, FOG registered its own web address, and found a low-cost hosting service to take it live. From there it has been a process of accretion of content, and evolution of formatting.

Richard maintains the website, ensuring it remains up to date. He maintains a complete list of all submissions the group makes and all newsletters. These contain invaluable information about the work of FOG in its advocacy, education and communication roles and he ensures FOG's website is transparent in all its processes, decisions and activities. A lot of the website usage is by school pupils getting information for assignments – in particular, the fairly technical Grasses of NSW pages are very popular.

Richard has a geology degree from ANU, which included study of geography and forestry; has an electronics and communications certificate from Canberra TAFE; and he studied law for a couple of years at ANU. He worked for twenty-two years in the Australian Public Service mostly in policy roles in the Environment Department, with some shortish stints with the Joint Committee on Public Works and AusAID. Richard says of his and Bernadette's bush block "Three decades of weeding, a bit of planting, protection of seedlings as they come up, years of droughts, flooding rains and the occasional bushfire have left their marks, and the place is now a mosaic of grassy bits, woodlandy bits, viney bits and some places vaguely resembling forest. Give it another 300 years and it might get to

some semblance of its former majesty, but with rabbits, foxes, deer, cats and rats, not to mention invasive plants, it certainly won't be what it was. If Australia's human population by then is in the 200 – 300 million range, then it might just be a very valuable little pocket of a granite soils ecosystem, given that nearly all the granite soils along the coast have been cleared for agriculture."

Richard is not unlike many of FOG's members who have had a successful professional career, combined with a strong interest in managing land for its biodiversity values, and who have used their skills both to learn and contribute to FOG's objectives. Acknowledgement must also go to Bernadette for her role within FOG's committee and in her career advocating for grasslands and grassy ecosystems.

FOG thanks Richard for his many years' contributions to the organisation and to grassy ecosystems generally.

[The Annual General Meeting held on 20 March 2024 accepted the committee's recommendation and endorsed Richard's appointment as FOG's newest Honorary Life Member. Ed.]

Ecological burn in Yarralumla

Paul Archer & Jamie Pittock

Following consultation with FOG, a prescribed ecological burn to reduce thatch, decrease weeds and enhance potential Golden Sun Moth habitat was conducted by the ACT Government Parks and Conservation Service (PCS) on 8 March 2024 in a well-established area of Themeda grassland between the Yarralumla Shores townhouses on Black Street and Alexandrina Drive.

The Black Street grassland is urban parks land, and FOG welcomes City Services and PCS taking this collaboration to conserve the site.

The photo on the left was taken 8 days after the burn and the one on the right 17 days after the burn with both photos showing significant regrowth.

Photo: Sue Archer

Photo: Paul Archer

News Roundup

Paul Archer

Cultural burning is better for Australian soils than prescribed burning, or no burning at all

Link provided by Ann Milligan

In this article (The Conversation 8 March 2024), the authors (Anthony Dosseto, Katharine Haynes, Leanne Brook, and Victor Channell) describe their new research comparing cultural burning to agency-led prescribed burning or no burning including the effects of fire on soil properties such as moisture content, density and nutrient levels. The article includes a 20 minute 'mini-documentary' showing children being taught the basics of cultural burning by aboriginal elders.

A biological control agent for African Love Grass?

Jamie Pittock reported that at his grasslands talk at Numeralla in April, Jane Tracy from South East Local Land Services (SE LLS) talked about a new, exotic, parasitic wasp of African Lovegrass that has recently been recorded on the Monaro. SE LLS are starting a citizen science project to try and find out:

a) where the wasp is found?
b) is it impacting ALG?
c) is it impacting native grasses?

The relevant academic paper is available here Contact details for those interested in participating in the citizen science project are: Jane Tracy (janetracy@lls.nsw.gov.au) or you can register using the QR code opposite.

The Canberra Nature Map (CNM) advised they have only one sighting of *Tetramesa* sp. (genus) (Stem-galling wasp) on CNM and all of Australia (recorded on ALG): https://canberra.naturemapr.org/sightings/4567846.

Large old trees are vital for Australian birds. Their long branches and hollows can't be replaced by saplings

Link provided by Ann Milligan

In this article (The Conversation 14 March 2024) the authors (Alex Holland, Jason Thompson, Philip Gibbons and Stanislav Roudavski) describe their new research that "sheds light on the importance of such grand old trees for birds. We used lidar (scanning using lasers) to map small, medium and large tree crowns in unprecedented detail. On average, we found large old trees had 383 metres of the horizontal or dead branches preferred by birds, while medium trees had very little and young trees none. Some old trees had almost 2 kilometres of branches.

PCS Safety Alert Inkweed (*Phytolacca octandra*)

The ACT Parks and Conservation Service (PCS) has advised (Safety Alert 01/2024) that a large infestation of Inkweed (*Phytolacca octandra*) has been found in the ACT. The toxic nature of this plant presents a risk to PCS staff, contractors, members of the public as well as livestock and domestic pets. All parts of this plant are considered poisonous with symptoms ranging from nausea and vomiting to breathing difficulty and convulsions. See next page for details.

PARKS & CONSERVATION SERVICE (PCS)

SAFETY ALERT 01/2024

Issued 01/02/2024

FOR ACTION BY: PCS Managers and Supervisors
FOR ADVICE TO: All PCS/RL/ONC Workers

New Incursion: Inkweed

ISSUE:

A large infestation of inkweed (*Phytolacca octandra*) has recently been found in the ACT. The toxic nature of this plant presents a risk to PCS staff, contractors, members of the public as well as livestock and domestic pets. All parts of this plant are considered poisonous with symptoms ranging from nausea and vomiting to breathing difficulty and convulsions.

SAFETY CONSIDERATIONS:

- Alert your supervisor if you find inkweed.
- The area should be isolated and warning signs erected immediately if controls are not achievable.
- Gloves, disposable overalls and P2 masks should be worn if treating the plant with herbicide or hand pulling.
- If any part of the plant contacts skin, wash the area immediately with soap and water. Seek medical attention if any part of the plant is inhaled, ingested or enters the eyes.
- NEVER attempt to slash or brush cut infestations of inkweed.
- Map all locations found on the 2023-24 Field maps treated or untreated weeds map if no control is carried out.
- Contact actbiosecurity@act.gov.au for assistance or advice on inkweed.

ACTIONS REQUIRED:

- This Alert should be prominently posted on PCS Safety Notice Boards for 3 month and be discussed at the next staff meeting/toolbox talk.
- Persons in control of a workplace are required to maintain a register, recording name and signatures of staff reading and acknowledging the content and directions.
- On completion, please scan and e-mail a copy of the register to EPSDOWHS@act.gov.au for record purposes.

SAFETY ALERT RELEASE INFORMATION:

Released with the authority of Stephen Alegria, Executive Branch Manager, Parks & Conservation Service

1/2/24

This Alert will remain current unless it is withdrawn by the Executive Branch Manager or superseded by a PCS Safety Policy

Contact us

General inquiries, health and safety	info@fog.org.au
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News of Friends of Grasslands is published six times a year. It is sent by email free to members. The current issue and most prior issues are fully searchable. They are available here as text (no pictures or graphics) or in pdf format (1 to 4 MB files), including colour pictures and graphics. Acrobat Reader is required.

Orange everlastings (Xerochrysum subundulatum) at The Vale of The Belvoir from FOG Tassie trip January 2024. More floral delights and more from this trip will be presented at the mid-winter slide afternoon. Photo: Andrew Zelnik