



News of Friends of Grasslands

Supporting native grassy ecosystems

ISSN18326315

January & February 2025

Activities

Work Parties

Gurubung Dhaura

Mid-Jan (check website)

Mid-Feb (check website)

Register: [Jamie Pittock](#)

Budjan Galindji (Franklin Reserve)

Wed 22 Jan 9-11:30am

Wed 5 Feb 9-11:30am

Wed 26 Feb 9-11:30am

Register: [Margaret Ning](#)

Excursions

Theodore axe grooves

Thurs 23 Jan, 5pm to 6pm

A delightful grassland area with a handful of species we don't normally see on our activities.

Register: [Margaret Ning](#)

Shoalhaven river

Sat-Sun (14) 15-16 Feb.

A weekend visit to two Shoalhaven River properties. (Anyone for a dip!!). We'll be on the edge of the Deua escarpment with some non-camping accommodation available, in addition to being able to camp, and a couple of community meals too. There has been lots of rain lately so hopefully that will set up a good late summer.

Register: [Margaret Ning](#)

New members

Three new members joined in November and December

President's report

Prof Jamie Pittock, President, Friends of Grasslands

It's time to fully protect the ACT's orphan grasslands and zombie parks.

Since 2009, Friends of Grasslands (FOG) has held 175 work parties and devoted nearly 8,500 volunteer hours to restoring the grassy ecosystems on national lands at Gurubung Dhaura (Stirling Park) in Yarralumla and Yarramundi Reach in Acton.

There is no question that these environmentally and culturally significant sites should be protected from the kinds of development that the 'national capital purposes' zoning of Gurubung Dhaura allows. These lands have sites of cultural importance to the Traditional Owners, are designated as a National Heritage site, and are habitat to flora and fauna that are matters of national environmental significance under the Commonwealth Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act.

FOG has asked many of our federal members of parliament to act. Recently, Senator Pocock participated in one of our work parties and sought action to protect these sites by the Commonwealth Government. It was disappointing to read that Senator Pocock's effort was scuppered at the last minute. The Canberra Times reported on 3rd December 2024:

"Plan to protect endangered ACT grasslands a casualty of tanked environment deal ... after Prime Minister Anthony Albanese nixed an agreement to pass his government's environment laws in the Senate in the final sitting week of the year. Under the abandoned deal, which Environment Minister Tanya Plibersek was close to finalising with the Greens and crossbench last week, the federal government would have committed to consulting early on whether to declare Yarralumla's Stirling Park Park and Yarramundi Reach nature reserves."

The full article is available [here](#) (Canberra Times subscription required).

At FOG we are deeply disappointed that this important conservation initiative has stalled. We thank Senator Pocock for his welcome initiative and call on the Commonwealth Government to reconsider their position in the new year.

This case highlights the lackadaisical approach that our governments are taking to the protection of the generally smaller but high conservation value grassy ecosystem remnants. Grassy ecosystems have often survived on orphan sites: land designated for another purpose that have accidentally retained high biodiversity values. Our governments now need to protect these places. And it is not only the Commonwealth Government that is dragging its chain, the ACT Government can also do much more.

Sadly, in the last term the ACT Government's reticence has denied legal protection to important places. For example, The Ainslie Volcanics site is being well managed by the eponymous community Weeders. This small site is contiguous with the Mt Ainslie section of Canberra Nature Park. Yet then minister Mick Gentleman gave a contradictory response to a request to reserve this unleased land in 2023. His letter to the Weeders is reported (Riot Act article available [here](#)) to have agreed the site had "important ecological and cultural values that require ongoing protection and care" and that "adding this section into the protected areas of Canberra Nature Park could assist to secure ecological improvements". However, he stated such a move would require "significant additional resourcing" and argued the government's current land management arrangements to control pest plants and animals were "adequate". So, this is public land managed by the ACT Government, who are arguing that it is too expensive to manage in a nature reserve?

Even stranger are the many parcels of unleased ACT land designated "EPSDD other" on the ACT Government's ACTmapi land tenure maps. These lands are managed by the Parks and Conservation Service, but which do not have full legal protection as part of Canberra Nature Park. Further, members of FOG have assessed 18 former travelling stock reserves (TSRs) in the ACT and identified that 10 of these areas still retain a high diversity of native species and habitat. However, all require considerable weed control.

And there is more. The ACT Government's Parks and Conservation Service (PCS) manages 25 sites in the ACT (and one in NSW) that are approved under the Commonwealth Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act to offset ACT developments (details [here](#)). The offset sites are often grassy woodlands and range in size from 7.2 hectares to 822.8 hectares and cover a total of 2,301.4 hectares.

Pleasingly, many of the larger offsets have been designated following the Gungahlin, Molonglo Valley and West Belconnen strategic assessments of proposed suburban development. This has ensured that higher quality and connected habitats will not be developed. Further, FOG volunteers are assisting PCS to restore the 20 hectare Budjan Galindji offset area in Franklin. However, many of these offset areas appear to be zombie parks. For reasons that are unclear, Budjan Galindji will not formally be added to Canberra Nature Park until 2034. Even weirder, the Isaacs Ridge offset area is only scheduled to receive legal protection in 2060.

It is time that the Commonwealth and ACT governments gave full legal protection to remnants of natural temperate grasslands and box-gum grassy woodlands, ecosystems that they designate as endangered under their environmental laws. It is time that the governments reserve the high conservation value sites that they own. It is time that the ACT Government had a process to actively incorporate their orphan grasslands and zombie parks into Canberra Nature Park. It is also time that adequate resources are provided by the Commonwealth and ACT Governments to manage not only those sites that are in the reserve system, but all unreserved remnants of critically endangered ecosystems as well.

See you in our grasslands,

Jamie

FOG's 30th birthday party

Paul Archer

St Mark's 12:30pm, 16 November 2024. Celebrations started with a barbeque lunch in a magnificent setting overlooking St Mark's grassland with Lake Burley Griffin and Mt Ainslie in the background. The forty-five participants had lots of time to catch up with friends and partake of the spread on offer including three choices of gourmet sausage, sushi, Turkish bread and dips, quiche, other snacks and, of course, a celebratory cake.



Back in the function room President Jamie Pittock opened official proceedings with an Acknowledgement of Country and recognition of the work of past Presidents, including the six present (photo below).



Past presidents L to R: Roger Farrow, Sarah Sharp, Kim Pullen, Jamie Pittock, Geoff Robertson and John Fitz Gerald.

Sarah Sharp, Jamie said, deserves particular recognition for her 1994 initiative proposing the establishment of a friends of grasslands group to foster community involvement in caring for the ACT's grasslands (Canberra Times 29 January 1994). In responding, Sarah pointed to a substantial Commonwealth grant that helped her to get the ball rolling. Other sources of inspiration came from the work of the Friends of Merri Creek group in Melbourne

and her work-colleagues in the ACT government's Kukolic Wildlife Research Unit including Keith Williams, Will Osborne and Kruno Kukolic. She also wished to acknowledge some of the early grassland warriors, including Laurie Adams, Roger Good, Graeme Evans, Geoff Hope and Dave Mallinson, and some of the early members of FOG (see page 5).

Jamie added that there are many people to thank for the celebration and for the amazing range and diversity of activities undertaken by FOG over the last 30 years, including:

- On-ground work at orphan sites across the ACT and NSW such as the Top Hut Travelling Stock Reserve (TSR) near Adaminaby NSW (Margaret Ning); the Hall Cemetery grassland (John Fitz Gerald); national land sites Gurubung Dhaura (Stirling Park) (Jamie Pittock) and Yarramundi Reach (John Fitz Gerald); and Budjan Galindji Grasslands Nature Reserve in Franklin (Margaret Ning).
- Excursions to key sites across the ACT, NSW, Victoria and Tasmania (Margaret Ning) including visits to more than 22 cemeteries, 37 TSRs and 20 nature reserves (see Page 15).
- FOG's strategic engagement with government at all levels – an exemplar for work of this kind. Particular recognition is due to Sarah Sharp for her tireless advocacy and to Matt Whitting for his ongoing work 'wading through the swamp' of government documents that require constant attention.
- Sarah Sharp for her ground-breaking work of 'keeping ahead of the bulldozers' by proposing and establishing the Biodiversity Network ACT.
- Andrew Zelnik for his work on the Supported Projects program in which FOG offers 'catalytic' grants to promote the understanding, conservation and management of native grassy ecosystems.
- The many people and teams involved in organisational activities such as the FOG newsletter (Paul Archer), monthly news updates (Eleanor Galvin) as well as the all-important management committee and office bearers such as Secretary Helen Sims and Treasurer David Johnson.
- Ann Milligan for her wonderful display today of documents, publications and maps illustrating FOG's history and achievements.
- Andrew Zelnik for his outstanding photos from the field that ran continuously on-screen throughout the afternoon.
- And finally the organisers and helpers at today's event including Margaret Ning, Sarah Sharp, Andrew Zelnik and many others.

The formal proceedings concluded with a toast to all members past and present, without which there would be no Friends of Grasslands.



Margaret Ning then invited participants to join her on a guided tour of the grassland.

Although it's only two hectares the area seemed much larger. It had undergone two cool burns earlier in the year (April and May) and it looked beautiful (photo left).

Bush regeneration sprayer Matt Kent, Margaret and others had done a lot of work over the last few weeks

and months and we could certainly see the results. Although the weather had been dry the grassland had a good season, which should help it again next year...hopefully!

We were thrilled to see a male golden sun moth taking a break on a blade of grass (below left, circled) and several Button Wrinklewort (*Rutidosis leptorhynchoides*) in full flower near the barbeque area (below right).



All photos: Paul Archer

The beginning of FOG

Ann Milligan

These current FOG members are among the people who began FOG!

Twenty-four of the names on the 2024 membership list joined FOG either before its *launch* on 12 November 1994 and its first meeting two weeks later, or were at FOG's *first conference* in November 1996!

Edwina Barton, Rosemary Blemings, Ian Fraser, Patricia Gardner, Frank Geurts, Jan Gough-Watson, Naarilla Hirsch, David Hogg, Sue McIntyre, Rainer Rehwinkel, Alison Rowell, Lucinda Royston, Sarah Sharp, Christopher Watson, *and* Greening Australia Ltd. (Source: 'Profile of new FOG members (23 November 1994 to 22 March 1995)', listing 116 names.)

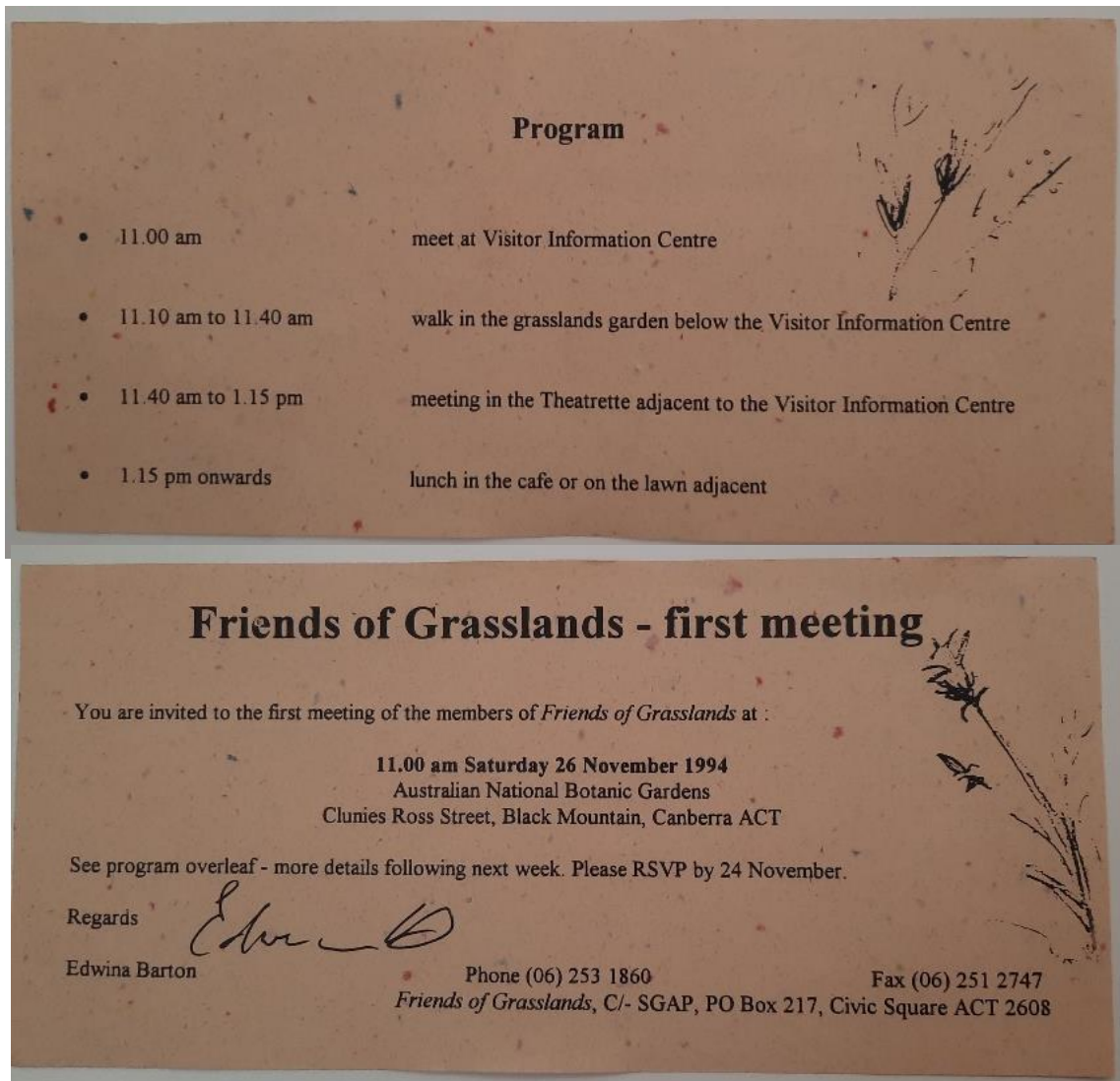
Michael Bedingfield, Isobel Crawford, Ken Hodgkinson, John Morgan, Kim Pullen. (Source: 179 membership application forms held in the FOG archive; 1994 to late 1995.)

David Eddy, Maggie Nightingale, Margaret Ning and Geoff Robertson. (Source: attendance list for FOG's first conference, 'Living Grasslands of Canberra and the South-East region', 9–10 November 1996.)

Did you know that the idea for FOG came from Sarah Sharp? A *Canberra Times* article on Saturday 29 January 1994 reported: 'Ms Sharp wants to see a Friends of Grasslands group established

to foster community involvement in caring for the ACT's grasslands'. A photocopy of that half-page article is stored in the FOG archive (and was on display at the 30-year party on 16 November).

FOG was *launched* on 12 November 1994 in Canberra at the (then) Museum of Australia at Yarramundi Reach. The first FOG newsletter reports that 70–80 people attended the launch and later took 'a tour of degraded grasslands in the museum grounds', noting 'a number of conservation issues'. Those grasslands are the Yarramundi area that FOG now helps care for, led by John Fitz Gerald. FOG's first *meeting* was on Saturday 26 November 1994 at the Australian National Botanic Gardens.



Scottsdale Monitoring

Linda Spinaze

Thursday 21st November 2024. We planned an early start for this year's annual monitoring of vegetation, so the keen volunteers had arrived at Bush Heritage Australia (BHA)'s Scottsdale property near Bredbo by 8.30am.

Volunteers comprised the invaluable Margaret Ning, Andrew Zelnik, Paul Jennings, Margaret Strong, Lisa Bradley, and Linda Spinaze. We were welcomed by Scottsdale field officer Kim Jarvis, and new Bush Heritage ecologist Justin McCann. The weather was perfect, sunny but not hot, at least to begin with.

After some freshly brewed coffee, a briefing, and signatures to say that we accepted the risks of monitoring (rules and regs!!) we headed out onto the property in two vehicles. Fortunately, the method of monitoring was the same this year as it has been for the past few years, so most of us were familiar with the process. Some of the sites were hard to find due to the kangaroos having knocked down the marking posts in the 12 months since we last monitored.



*Kim's group busy setting up their 1st survey transect using the tree as their marker in lieu of a missing marker post. L-R Linda, Kim and Paul.
Photo: Andrew Zelnik*



Late Mauve Doubletail Orchid found near Kim's group's first monitoring site. Photo: Andrew Zelnik

The two groups met in the field to enjoy the morning tea and lunch which were provided by Bush Heritage, and we admired the sweeping views of Scottsdale as we munched. During the day we did see a flowering Late Mauve Doubletail Orchid (*Diuris dendrobioides*), and also a couple of flowering Nodding Chocolate Lillies (*Arthropodium fimbriatum*) and threatened Silky Swainson-pea (*Swainsona sericea*). A mystery sedge turned out to be Common Fringe-sedge (*Fimbristylis dichotoma*), which ironically is not often seen by us.

I had to leave early but I believe that by the time both groups got back to the shed and wrapped up, it was close to 5.30pm. A very full day's work! We look forward to another excellent day at Scottsdale next year.

Perunga Grasshopper (*Perunga ochracea*) one of a kind but endangered

Michael Bedingfield

At the height of summer, when insects are at their most active, Perunga Grasshoppers are not to be seen. But they are active during the winter when other insects are dormant. These grasshoppers have an annual lifecycle that begins in autumn with the hatching of the eggs from the previous generation. The tiny nymphs grow slowly during the winter, feeding on native forbs and grasses. The winter weather means that it is essential for these youngsters to take shelter during extreme cold, so grassy tussocks are important for them. Rather than hopping away from harm they tend to keep still under vegetation, so they can be hard to spot. They reach maturity during spring. It is during the period of spring to early summer that they will be most active and noticed. Breeding occurs at this time, and eggs are laid in the soil to lie hidden and dormant during the heat of summer. The adults do not survive the summer, but when autumn arrives again the eggs hatch and the cycle starts anew.

The Perunga Grasshopper is known by the scientific name of *Perunga ochracea*. It is the only described species of this genus. It is variable in its overall colouring from bright green to brown or grey with combinations of these colours as well. The colour tends to be greener during years of good rain and brown/grey in dry times. The tarsi or 'feet' are blue and the spines on the back legs are yellow. On the back of the thorax is a large distinctive cross in a paler colour. The wings are tiny and ineffectual but the hind legs are strong, so it is a good jumper able to leap more than a metre. It is stoutly built with the adult female being much larger than the male. The size is in the range 26–35 mm for females and 15–20 mm for males.

The primary habitat for the Perunga is relatively undisturbed native grassland and grassy woodland. In the past the population was widespread with the first described specimens found in the Wagga Wagga district. Over time the population has declined significantly and the species has been declared vulnerable. The remaining population is centred in the Canberra region and its range extends about 180 km east-west and 150 km north-south.

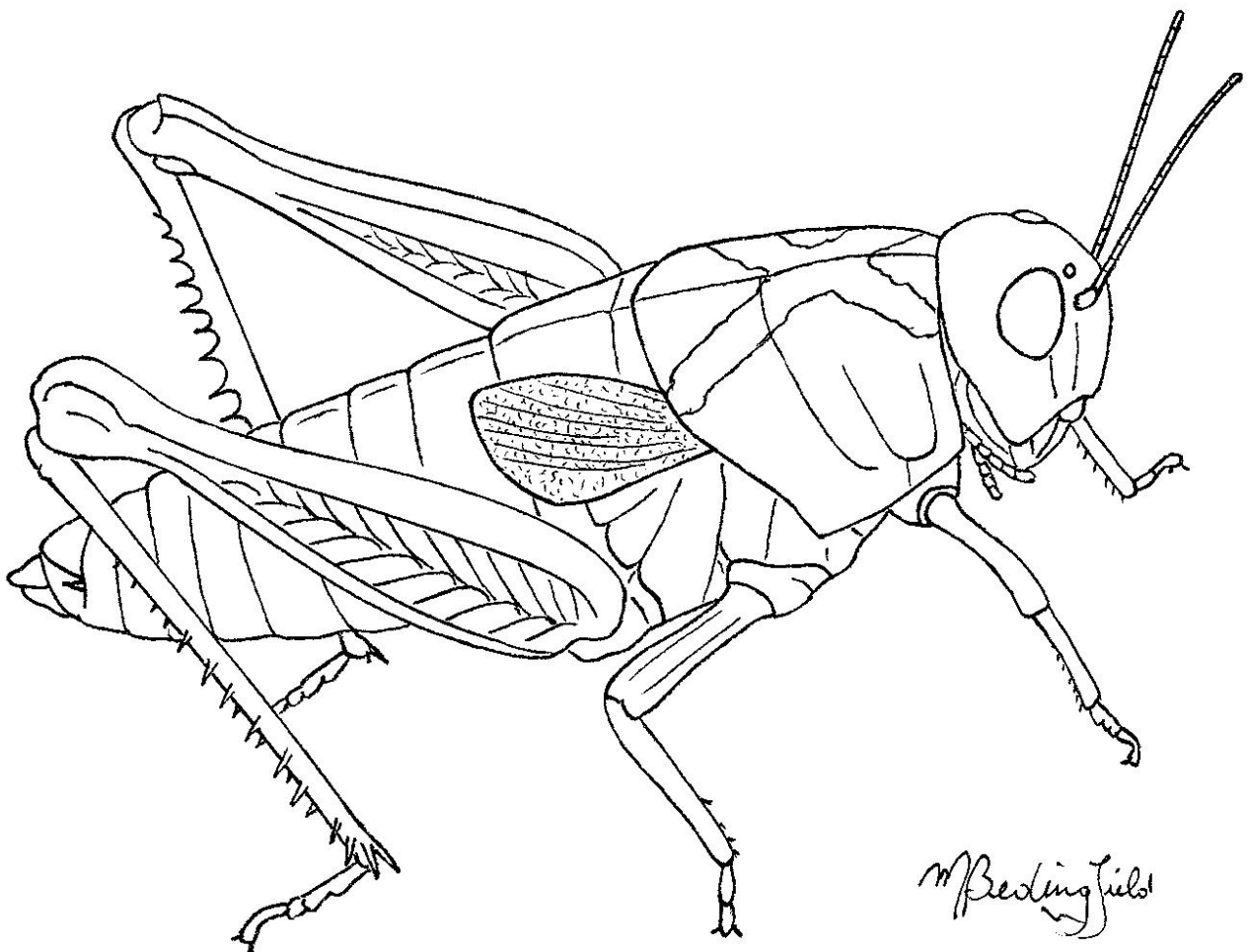
Much of this insect's grassy habitat and the natural ground cover plants on which it feeds have been lost to urban development, agriculture and 'improvement' of pastures sown with exotic grasses. Habitat degradation or loss, and weed invasion especially by African Love Grass, continue to threaten the insect's future. Since our grassy ecosystems have been fragmented into many small or large patches without connectivity it is more than a challenge for a flightless grasshopper to travel from one patch to another. If during hard times the population of one patch is extinguished then it is unlikely to come back. Major ecological disturbances such as fire or drought, which can wipe out a small isolated population, are therefore an issue. Climate change is also regarded as a possible threat with warmer average temperatures being predicted year-round. The ability of this winter-active species to adapt to the warmer weather is uncertain.

Since the Perunga Grasshopper has been classified as endangered the ACT government has developed an Action Plan to help save it. The Action Plan (see first of the references given below) includes: more research into the grasshopper's requirements; recording of sightings of the species; and community engagement. It aims to protect, manage and enhance existing habitat and improve habitat connectivity, not only to ensure the survival of the species but also to provide for its needs as circumstances change in the future.

I have provided a drawing of an adult female Perunga Grasshopper (below), and a photograph of a juvenile (right) that I found in October 2017 on the northern slopes of Tuggeranong Hill. It is still present at that location and was recorded there by FOG member Vera Kurz this past spring. There is a good article by Roger Farrow on this grasshopper in the FOG newsletter for May-June 2007, see reference below.



This essay is presented to keep this precious insect in our awareness and to hopefully contribute to its preservation.



Main references:

- https://www.act.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/2545970/perunga-grasshopper-action-plan-2017.pdf
- <https://www.act.gov.au/environment/animals-and-plants/act-threatened-species/perunga-grasshopper-perunga-ochracea>
- <https://www.fog.org.au/Newsletters/2007-05newsletter.pdf> (article on page 13)

(Not) Kowen Travelling Stock Reserve

Margaret Ning and Ann Milligan ('NingMilli')

Saturday 26 October 2024. Kowen Travelling Stock Reserve – or rather the woody grassland that we thought was the TSR* – is worth visiting in spring to find grassland flora.

Our FOG party (13 people at first; eight at the end) spotted and photographed numerous species as we wandered across the well-grazed slightly sloping area on a warm sun-filled afternoon. Poor fencing and no hoofmarks, cowpats or sheep droppings suggest the grazing is all by kangaroos. We saw several bounding through.

At least five of our group can identify forbs and shrubs easily, compared to most of the rest of us, and they were in high demand, responding to calls of 'What's this?'. Margaret noted around 30 species of forbs and shrubs in flower. Dots of yellow were obvious from the very start: Spur Goodenia (*Velleia paradoxa*) and Scaly Buttons (*Leptorhynchos squamatus*) near the entry; and Sticky Everlasting (*Xerochrysum bracteatum*), a few Billy Buttons (*Craspedia variabilis*), many Clustered Everlasting (*Chrysocephalum semipapposum*) and some Common Everlasting (*C. apiculatum*) further on.

Very spiky *Daviesia* already had pale green triangular fruits. There were extensive patches of orangey-red Showy Parrot-pea (*Dillwynia sericea*) here and there, and well as large patches of Bitter Cryptandra (*Cryptandra amara*), and many patches of native plantains showing leaves only.



A sign of it being a fairly dry year was the scarcity of orchids and lilies: a few Onion Orchid leaves (*Microtis* sp.); a handful of spent Early Nancy (*Wurmbea dioica*) and some Small Vanilla Lily (*Arthropodium minus*) - flowering!

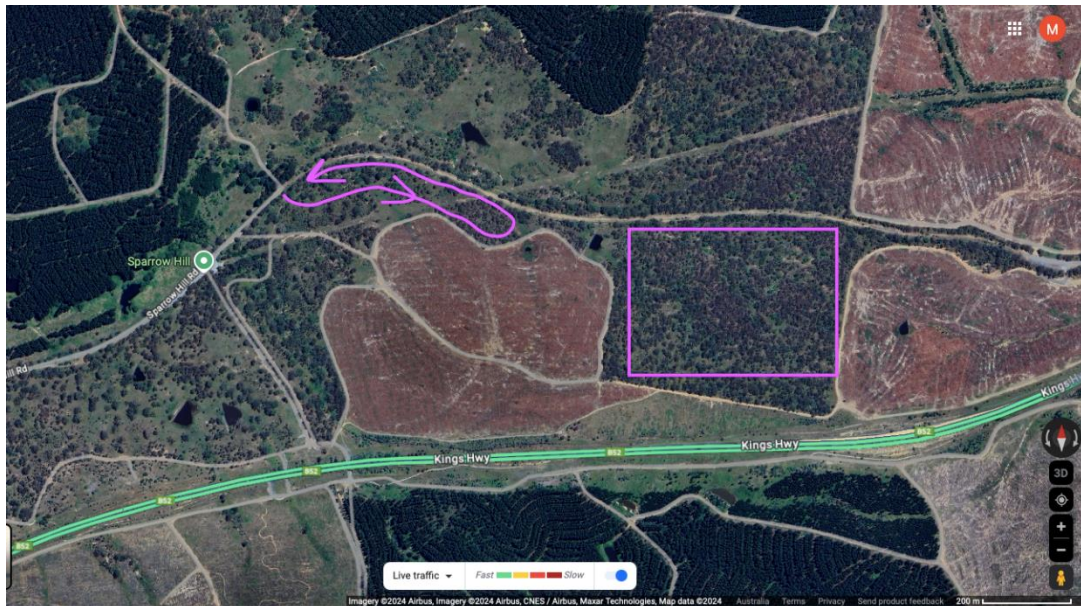
Our plant highlight was the delightful tiny Dwarf Milkwort (*Polygala japonica*) (Photo left: Brigitta Wimmer) at the very beginning of the walk, and a few Sundew (*Drosera* sp.) in a relatively open damp drainage line.

Most of our group were busy with cameras throughout the scheduled two-hour ramble (that lasted almost three hours), some using very long (perhaps heavy) lenses. There were moths, including one looking like a Fringed Heath-blue, and magpies, at least one Scarlet Robin, and a Rufous Whistler that welcomed us to the site with its call.

This woodland, at the end of the blocked-off Sparrow Hill Road, next to Sparrow Hill Cycle Park, is bordered mainly by mature pine forest and acres of recently replanted pines, rather than by open pasture. That situation may be helping to exclude weeds. However, young St John's Wort were popping up everywhere, and Blackberry, young Briar Rose (*Rosa rubiginosa*), Hawthorn (*Crataegus* sp.), Firethorn (*Pyracantha* sp.) and pine wildings all threaten the area's integrity in the future.

As usual, this FOG activity was a pleasant and relaxing experience. Thank you for organising it, Margaret, and for your patience in responding to ‘What’s this?’ so many times.

**The route we took is marked with the pink arrows. Apparently, Kowen TSR (also worth a look) is actually the pink-rectangled area, which is now best approached from Hibernian Rd with a bit of a walk (thanks to Kris Nash for the correction).*



Advocacy Report

Matt Whitting

Submission on an outline of the first ‘Method’ to be made under the Nature Repair Act ... by which land managers will ‘replant Native Forest and Woodland Ecosystems’ (30/10).

In a joint FOG/Council submission, we expressed our appreciation that nature repair projects applying this Method will have to identify the regional ecosystem type they are aiming to rehabilitate and restore. We suggested improvements such as including the habitat elements in the project area under repair, e.g. fallen timber, rocky outcrops and even nesting-box density ([the submission](#)).

Submission on an outline of the first ‘Biodiversity Assessment Instrument’ (BAI) setting out how to assess the gains from projects applying the above Method (30/10)

In a joint FOG/Council submission, we noted that the BAI would require that methods include provisions that “identify and describe reference ecosystem(s) for the project area”. We suggested replacing the word “describe” with the phrase “determine from published or expert sources” ([the submission](#)).

Meeting with EPSDD staff over Bluett’s Block (12/11)

Rainer Rehwinkel attended on behalf of FOG. Environment, Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate (EPSDD) staff described progress toward the establishment of a nature reserve at Bluett’s Block, which could take place as early as the end of 2024. The staff discussed the process for managing tracks and trails, which ties into fire-risk management. The next meeting (early 2025) will hear Planning address the fragility apparent in the proposed declaration; for example, for the foreseeable future the nature reserve will remain a ‘Future Urban Area’ in the Territory Plan.

Grasslands Effectiveness Review Workshop (13/11)

Individuals with particular on-ground experience of working in grasslands were invited to a meeting to review whether, after five years of Grassland Strategy, stated goals and outcomes are being achieved. From FOG, Geoff Robertson, Rainer Rehwinkel and Sarah Sharp attended. The meeting addressed achievements in meeting targets for Natural Temperate Grasslands Critically Endangered Ecological Communities (CEEC) in lowland ACT. For many targets there has been a degradation in condition, identified as a result of: inconsistent management, extreme seasons, drainage issues, impacts from adjacent land uses, high weed infestation and limitations on the application of planned management. Members expressed interest in the idea of a Bush Regeneration Team to oversee/implement/advise on ecological management across tenures, a concept FOG has been pushing for many years.

315 Stockdill Drive, Belconnen (DA 202342503) (15/11)

John Fitz Gerald tackled >1400 pages to prepare a great [submission](#) expressing concern about the loss of 6.2 ha of the 'Derived Native Grassland' form of Box-gum woodland (BGW), and some invaluable mature trees. If it must be approved, then the offset looks a lot better than when FOG commented on this proposal as an Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act (EPBC Act) referral back in early 2021. This 'Big Battery' was approved at the Federal level in March 2024.

Biodiversity Conservation Forum (21/11)

New ACT Landcare CEO Dr Michael Robinson co-chaired the meeting. The Conservator provided an overview of the [Administrative Arrangements](#), noting that EPSDD answers to three Ministers. However that could change if government machinery changes (e.g. with one less Minister overall, each would have more roles and so less time per role). The split between Minister Cheyne (pests, weeds, PCS, TCCS) and Minister Orr (eg biodiversity policy, environment, water, climate change and energy, First Nations People and the NDIS) was noted; the third is Minister Steele (Planning & Treasurer). Minister Orr's Shadow is Peter Caine. The Conservator discussed the possibility of: amending the function of the Biodiversity Conservation Fund (BCF) into a consultative committee; and publishing (in effect) an implementation schedule showing what comment will be sought and when. The Meeting discussed Bluett's Block (see above); Avian Bird Flu in the context of the *Biosecurity Act 2023* (ACT); and the Catchment Group Stewardship Initiative. The next meeting will be on 20 February 2025.

Meeting: Council & Nature Conservation Policy (NCP) on Strategy development (21/11)

Sarah Sharp and Matt Whitting attended for FOG and Council respectively, with Simon Copland plus the Nature Conservation Policy team. NCP explained the theory they are implementing (on p. 6 of an overview document that was circulated) to ensure progress and pre-empt unanticipated barriers to achievement of the Strategy's aims and deliverables. There was a broad-ranging chat with much focus on the meaning of terms. Workshops are expected to take place in February or March, before consultation on the Draft Strategy prior to its release in June/July 2025.

Conservation Council AGM (21/11)

New office bearers are: President Stephanie Booker (Friends of Aranda Bushland); Vice Presidents (2) Danny Jowers Blain (SEE Change) & Jess Fordyce (Rising Tide); Secretary Maisie Walker Stelling (NPA); Board Members (6) Clare de Castella (Pedal Power), Damian Haas (Public Transport Association), Correa Driscoll (SEE Change & COG), Louise Crossman (SEE Change), Annika Reynolds (ACF Community Canberra), Kathy Ehmann (SEE Change).

CSIRO Divestment of Rural Blocks (EPBC 2024/09953) – submission on referral (21/11)

FOG and the Conservation Council called jointly for the divestment of >700 ha of Commonwealth Land at Ginninderra, to be regarded as a controlled action that should be assessed in detail before approval can be granted. While the referral made some good commitments, e.g., to include Box-gum woodland (BGW) in 'Conservation Areas' and to consult stakeholders, the terms used do not correspond with terms used in ACT statutes and hence it was legally vague. As a result, if found to be 'Not a Controlled Action', the commitments would be legally un-enforceable (our [submission](#)). Note that a decision has been made and the action has been found to be 'Not a controlled action'.

Comment on draft conservation strategies for threatened species (27/11)

FOG commented on draft conservation strategies for four threatened species in NSW ([submission](#)).

Linarias and fire - close up

John Fitz Gerald

This time let's look at two species of *Linaria*, annual herbs growing up to 15cm high, and think about responses to fire. Downey in his 2023 list ranks these as weeds of low priority across ACT lands. I was recently disappointed to find them growing thickly and in large numbers in a local native grassland after an ecological burn.



The first species is *Linaria pelisseriana*, a plant with a fetching purple flower with a long basal spur. It is native to southern Europe. Canberra Nature Map (CNM) has over 140 sightings and the Atlas of Living Australia (ALA) lists around 1400 records, from Victoria, through NSW, into South East Queensland. My image of seeds shows them to be small, dark, very thin and dish-shaped. Each seed has a narrow but complete fringe and I managed, with one seed I've arrowed near the centre of my image, to arrange it to stand on an edge. This shows how delicate and thin the dished seed is; all seeds are similar.

The second species is *Linaria arvensis*, this one with a small pale blue flower. It is native to Europe and North Africa. CNM has 50 sightings and ALA lists around 1000 records, dominantly in NSW and ACT. These seeds are also dark, thin and small, just a little larger than those of *L. pelisseriana*. In this species seeds are flat discs, thinnest around their edge and a little thicker and slightly domed in their centre.



I collected these seeds from the Blue Devil grassland in Umbagog District Park in Latham. That site was burned by the Rural Fire Service in late April 2024 to reduce biomass, though the burn was generally relatively hot and not very patchy. These small herbs have been able to take advantage of the lack of competition since and grow actively in the open spaces between the native grass tussocks. As the Themedra content is high to dominant in parts of this grassland, the inter-tussock spaces remained very open during the prime *Linaria*-growing period in early spring.

Several times in recent close-ups I have been mystified about the ease with which annual plants can grow after fire. I am particularly puzzled with these *Linarias* which have such small and thin seed that would be expected to burn, or at least cook, in hot fire. Seeds could of course be protected by burial, but this grassland has effectively zero agents of disturbance that would bury seed - there are no machines such as mowers, no passage of other vehicles or recreational wheels, no hooved grazers, no digging pests though possibly a few itinerant birds. I have been told that soil cracking in dry times can effectively move seeds into the soil profile, but I see little evidence for that being at all widespread here. In addition to the *Linarias* above, I have seen this spring in this grassland other patches of small annual herbs which have similarly small and fire-sensitive seeds - *Cerastium glomeratum*, *Tolpis barbata*, *Silene gallica* and *Cardamine hirsuta*.

Another grassland site burnt this year by the RFS was at Yarramundi Reach with one large area burned hot in early September. In late October I was fortunate to photograph what I think might partially or totally answer my annual growth mystery. My image shows bare soil surface after the burn which is clearly quite churned up at the centimeter scale.



Also showing are new leaves of Themeda growing back from root bases. While this grassland similarly has none of the agents of disturbance mentioned above it is, like others in the ACT and Southern Tablelands, subject to quite severe frosts in late winter. This year the soils would have been quite wet even though bare, so frost-heave could have been very active as a disturbing, soil-turning process.

So readers, is it frosts that bury small seeds of annual exotic herbs in our grasslands, taking them out of reach of the heat from fires which we hope will control weeds whenever we conduct controlled burning? What do you think?

Seed images were taken using the microscope at the National Seedbank in the Australian National Botanic Gardens. Images can be reproduced freely with reference to the Creative Commons licence CC BY. Scale bars in images are 0.5 mm and 1 mm respectively for *L. pelisseriana* and *L. arvensis*.

Information above was gathered from websites, principally:

ALA - www.ala.org.au; Kew Plants of the World Online - powo.science.kew.org and CNM - Canberra Nature Map

FOG's 'been everywhere, man!'

Ann Milligan

Immediately following FOG's launch on 12 November 1994, and every year since except 1997, FOG member groups have been visiting grasslands and native vegetation sites across ACT, NSW, Victoria and Tasmania. In the ACT, FOG has visited between 60 and 70 sites (around 35 visited once; the rest twice or more often), later adopting several for restoration work (Yarramundi, Hall Cemetery woodland, Stirling Park area (Gurubung Dhaura, Bullan Mara, Blue Gum Point), Franklin (Budjan Galindji), and St Marks. FOG's first arranged visit a few weeks after the launch date was in December 1994, to Lawson, formerly Belconnen Naval Station, and we have been visiting and supporting efforts to prevent housing development there ever since.

After no visits recorded in the (single) 1997 newsletter, FOG re-awoke in 1998, and the newsletters that year record 8 sites visited in ACT and 5 sites in NSW. The NSW sites were Radio Hill (Old Cooma Common) in Cooma, Collector Travelling Stock Reserve, Gundary Travelling Stock Reserve (Goulburn), and Sweeney's and Turallo Nature Reserves (Bungendore). Since then, FOG groups have been to numerous (uncountable) NSW sites, all over the state – south, west, east, and north as far as Armidale. In NSW, FOG trips often visit clusters of grassland sites, many of which are old cemeteries and travelling stock reserves and nature reserves, such as those listed in the box [TSRs, cems, NRs].

Expeditions to Victoria are reported in the years 2000 (Mt Beauty, Mt Buffalo and Chiltern), and in 2007, 2017 and 2020 to areas around Portland, Hamilton and Camperdown, with Terrick Terrick on the way. In 2014 the FOG group toured Victorian native grasslands north and north-east of Melbourne.

In Tasmania FOG groups have visited the Midlands region – in 2004 and early 2024. The 2024 group also explored grasslands in the north-western area (as mentioned in Newsletter 2024-9 (Sept/Oct)). Overall, not bad! *NOTE: The song titled 'I've been everywhere' was written by Geoff Mack in 1959.*

Some of the NSW sites FOG has visited in 30 years:

<i>Travelling Stock Reserves</i>	<i>Cemeteries</i>	<i>Nature Reserves</i>
3 on Newell Highway	Binda Binda	6-mile
Back Creek	Bookham	Badja swamp
Bells	Bowning	Brooks Hill
Bobundara	Candelo	Dananbilla
Bombala	Cemeteries inland of Eden	Dangelong
Boorowa	Dalton	Days Hill
Bredbo	Gundillion	Doughboy
Coleambally	Kyeamba	Duck Flat
Collector	Majors Creek	Gidleigh
Gegedzerick (Berridale)	Monteagle	Henty Dam
Gillenhah	Morongla	Ingalba
Gundry	Murrumbateman	Kuma
Halfway	Rocky Hall	Mcleods Creek
Kowen Forest	Rye Park	Narrawallee Creek
Maffra Lake	S. Gundagai	Queanbeyan
Milthorpes	Stockinbingal	Reedy Creek
Murrumbucca	Taralga cemeteries	Scabby Range
Pevensey	Tarcutta	Sweeney's
Pudman Creek	Towamba	The Rock
Ravensworth	Wallendbeen	Turallo
Reedy Creek	Woodstock	
Rhine Falls	Wyndham	
Ryans		
Smiths Gap		
Souths		
Tarengo		
The Gums		
Top Hut		
Wire Yards		
Yorkies Plain		
Ryans		
Smiths Gap		
Souths		
Tarengo		
The Gums		
Top Hut		
Wire Yards		
Yorkies Plain		

Inspiring Conservation of Box Gum Grassy Woodlands

Leah Samson, Coordinator, Gunning District Landcare

On Saturday, 5 August 2023, Gunning District Landcare hosted a seminar and foray to inspire wise conservation of Box Gum Grassy Woodlands in the Gunning region. Held at the Gunning Shire Hall and made possible by a grant from Friends of Grasslands, the event brought together local landholders, community members, and representatives from the Upper Lachlan Shire Council.

The morning seminar featured two compelling speakers. Margot Oorebeek, from BirdLife Australia, shared her expertise on woodland bird species, including the Superb Parrot and Hooded Robin, both of which depend on Box Gum Grassy Woodlands. Margot explained how features such as hollow-bearing trees provide essential habitat for these species and outlined the critical role of woodland conservation in maintaining native bird populations.

Jacqui Stohl, from CSIRO and Murrumbateman Landcare, delivered a comprehensive overview of Box Gum Grassy Woodlands, explaining their historical range, extent of their decline, and the dependence on these ecosystems of a plethora of native flora and fauna. Jacqui's scientific insights underpinned the ecological importance of the woodlands and provided a strong case for immediate action to prevent further decline.

Following the seminar, attendees participated in a field tour of the Gunning Showgrounds Bushland Park, where they explored an example of a degraded woodland undergoing active restoration. This area, with its majestic old eucalypts but heavily-impacted understorey, is the focus of significant work by Gunning District Landcare. Supported by a significant investment from the NSW Government's Stronger Country Communities Fund, their efforts include weed removal, educational signage, pathway construction, and the establishment of a bush-care group to encourage community stewardship.

It was heartening to see representatives from the Upper Lachlan Shire Council at the event. Their presence was especially encouraging given the Council's responsibility for overseeing over 7,000 square kilometres of predominantly grazing land, much of which holds the potential for conservation and connectivity.

Despite the successes of the day, challenges remain for the conservation of Box Gum Grassy Woodlands in the Gunning area, particularly the impact of invasive weeds and the limited resources available to many landholders who wish to start the undertaking of regeneration.

A follow-up field day with Dr Sue McIntyre, originally planned for 30 November, had to be postponed due to rain. This event, which will be rescheduled in 2025, will provide landholders with practical advice on managing grassy woodlands on their properties.

Gunning District Landcare extends its thanks to Friends of Grasslands for their vital support in making this event possible. With continued effort and collaboration, the community is well-positioned to conserve this iconic ecosystem for future generations.

Our Grassy Landscapes book launch

Geoff Robertson

Our Grassy Landscapes - a Celebration of the People who Care About Them by Jenny Horsfield was launched by Dr Charles "Charlie" Massy at the National Library on 11 December. This book, with its text complemented by many photographs and a few of Michael Bedingfield's wonderful drawings, is a great exploration of our grassy landscapes in the Canberra region and on the Monaro, telling the story of their importance and management by first nations people and settlers, strongly interwoven with FOG's story. Available for \$40 at the National Library and ANBG bookshops or at the Paperchain Bookstore at 34 Franklin St, Manuka.



Jenny speaking to the large crowd, the splendour of the foyer space and its artworks adding to the occasion. Photo: Andrew Zelnik



Jenny speaking with Cynthia Burton (MC) looking on. Photo: Andrew Zelnik



Charles Massy at the podium. Photo: Andrew Zelnik

Guest speaker's address

Charles Massy

An abridged copy of the address follows with permission

“Jenny Horsfield, through penning this excellent book has brought together – and high-lighted - an interesting, eclectic and big-hearted group of people. These are people who, like moths attracted to a light, seem to gather around our grassy ecosystems in the Southern Tablelands region.

Concerning these grassy ecosystems and the generous and diverse people seeking to regenerate and save them, I thought I'd quickly set the context with a few brief facts concerning our grassy ecosystems. First, 25% of Earth's surface is grassland biome.

But, second, if talking Planet Earth's land area, grasslands account for 40% of that land area. However, if we then talk temperate grasslands – which ours are here on the Southern Tablelands – then these comprise more likely 20% of Earth's surface.

This is hugely significant – because well-managed grasslands can sequester huge amounts of carbon, plus sustain rich biodiversity, whilst also preventing ongoing soil erosion, general landscape degradation and exotic weed invasion: factors so vital in stabilizing Earth's Anthropocene dilemma.

I've been privileged to walk among prized Themeda grasslands in the USA (where they call it 'Red Oat Grass'); in the Karoo and Little Karoo in southern Africa, and here in Australia – where we call it 'Kangaroo Grass'. And walking a climax Themeda grassland IS a magical experience – But we have to continue working hard so that this experience isn't lost but instead can be enjoyed by future generations. Unfortunately, however, our native temperate grasslands are one of Australia's most threatened ecosystems - and are now declared 'Critically Endangered'.

It's estimated that, on the Southern Tablelands, there was originally (before European settlement) around 450,000 hectares (or about a million acres) of temperate grassland. However, the estimate today is that only 1.5% (that is, only approximately 6,750 hectares) is in moderate to good condition – and estimated also that another 5% (or 22,000 hectares or so) is in poor condition. So, for the likes of we landholders, scientists, botanists and volunteer land-carers, this places a huge responsibility on our shoulders.

Importantly, it's vital for we landholders and managers that we partner with our grassland ecologists and with other scientists; and with knowledgeable land-carers and indigenous elders so as to learn and soak-up their knowledge and enthusiasm in regenerating our native grasslands.

Fortunately, Canberra and the Southern Tablelands are blessed in having a number of excellent native grass and shrub botanists and ecologists – many of whom are here tonight – and who collectively have made a huge contribution to grassland regeneration and the spread of 'how-to-do' knowledge to achieve that regeneration. And which Jenny covers in her excellent book. You can add to this a plethora of knowledgeable lay people and volunteers equally passionate about our grasslands: and thus comprising a formidable volunteer army.

Crucially, Jenny reveals much of this contribution in her generous and well-researched book. Most aptly, Jenny cites in her prologue the words of Ian Fraser, that: 'The grassy ecosystems of the Southern Tablelands...help to define those of us who live there.'

So tonight, in a plethora of ways, we are celebrating the SOCIAL aspect. Jenny tells a very positive story about many people present tonight, and many more not present - but who collectively have a vision to regenerate and preserve as much as we can of these wonderful ecosystems, while at the same time enjoying camaraderie, actively learning, and having a good time doing so.

But I must also recognize that, before Europeans arrived, we had some extraordinary landscape managers for over tens of millennia: managers and carers who skillfully worked in our grasslands and woodlands: the First Nations Aboriginal people of the Canberra region and Monaro. And Jenny covers this vital aspect also.

I haven't spent time with First Nations leaders of the Ngunnawal and Ngambri people of Canberra and region, but have become friends with senior law-man Rod Mason of the Ngarigo nation. And It's constantly challenging to watch his burning techniques, and his understanding of the impact of different types of flame and heat, not to mention the 20-plus different chemicals in smoke, that all help stimulate propagation and regeneration in our long-adapted fire landscapes.

Jenny then tells the story of European settlement, and of early scientists venturing into the mountains – and the summer grazing lands becoming quickly degraded by livestock. And I confess that our own family up to the 1950s, also took sheep up onto those mountain leases. Jenny aptly quotes Baldur Byles in regards to mountain graziers: 'That their stock of fundamental knowledge concerning the grasslands, from which they get their living, is practically nil.' Treading carefully, I could add that the same comments may well also still apply to some grassland managers on the southern tablelands, where such native grasslands still tend to be regarded as 'inferior'.

But it is not for me tonight to cover the excellent terrain that Jenny traverses in her book: and particularly in regards to the enormous range of contributors to Landcare and the regeneration of our grassy landscapes around Canberra and the southern tablelands. The names in her book are too many; the efforts too voluminous for me to pick and choose. Nor for me to pursue the important histories of Friends of Grasslands and Stipa that are so well-covered by Jenny – for these are important contributions nevertheless.

But most definitely I can say this: Jenny writes engagingly, clearly and succinctly. And that her book is illustrated with interesting and informative case-studies and lovely photos. In short, 'Our Grassy Landscapes' and its 'Celebration of the people who care for them' records both history and achievements that are too easily lost and forgotten.

I can also say that this book is a testimony to much heroic, selfless and diligent work over many decades by a large range of big-hearted volunteers of all backgrounds, skills and education levels. So, I feel this book is a wonderful form of 'Thank you', and a recognition of such heroic sacrifice and generosity: where much was achieved; where many landscapes and catchment areas were healed; and where life-long friendships were made.

In conclusion, Jenny, I can only say this: very well done on this invaluable contribution, and may your book sell like hot-cakes".

Contributions welcome

Do you have a story from your favourite grassland or grassy woodland that you would like to share?

If so, please contact the Editor: newsletter@fog.org.au

News Roundup

Paul Archer

Floral abundance in Victoria

Link provided by Jamie Pittock

An article in The Guardian on 24 Nov 2024 describes how careful management including weed control and a burn laid the groundwork for floral abundance in Boorhaman reserve, North of Wangaratta, Victoria: “Thousands of native daisies, aromatic lilies, milkmaids, billy buttons and rare orchids have blossomed in a pocket of north-east Victorian grassland in one of the best wildflower displays in years. Glen Johnson, an ecologist at Wild Research, said Boorhaman reserve was “an amazingly diverse environment from the knees down”. The full article can be accessed [here](#).

Federal ministers take part in a cultural burn

Link provided by Sarah Sharp

An article in The Conversation on 24 October 2024 by Bhiemie Williamson describes how Australia’s newly appointed Minister for Emergency Management, Senator Jenny McAllister, and Senator Tony Sheldon, Special Envoy for Disaster Recovery, took part in a cultural burn outside Lismore in New South Wales in September 2024 as part of the [National Gathering on Indigenous Disaster Resilience](#): “It was significant to see members of the federal government listening to and taking direction from a cultural burn expert, Oliver Costello of Jagun Alliance, before undertaking a burn”. The full article can be accessed [here](#)

Victoria's grasslands disappearing

Link provided by several members

A report from ABC News Ballarat on 2 November 2024 describes how Victoria's grasslands are disappearing and that volunteers are needed to halt the extinction:

“Some of Victoria's most spectacular grasslands exist on nondescript roadsides in the heart of the state's western sheep country. Known as the Volcanic Plains grasslands, this endangered ecosystem once stretched from Melbourne to South Australia. Senior biodiversity officer at the Glenelg Hopkins Catchment Management Authority (CMA), Ben Zeeman, says less than one per cent of these native grasslands remain today, clinging to the country roadsides and small patches of private farmland. It's believed much of what's left has been accidentally saved by the Country Fire Authority (CFA)”. The full article can be accessed [here](#)

The Snowies Alpine Walk is Complete

Link provided by Helen Sims

The NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service announced on 3 December 2024 that the Snowies Alpine Walk project in Kosciuszko National Park, which commenced in early 2019 is now complete and ready for exploration. This was a joint state and Commonwealth-funded project, with \$17 million from the NSW Government and \$10 million from the Australian Government. You can find everything you need to know about the [Snowies Alpine Walk on the NPWS website](#), including the walk’s highlights, maps, spectacular photos, a self-guided itinerary and external tour providers for those that prefer a guided experience.

Sheep farmers helping save Tasmania’s native grasslands

Link provided by Jamie Pittock

An article in the Rural Network Newsletter on 22 December 2024 describes how sheep farmers are helping save Tasmania’s native grasslands: “Critically endangered grasslands in Tasmania’s Midlands were being destroyed by agriculture, but an innovative partnership has protected the remaining ecosystem – and local farmers’ profits. The full article is available [here](#).

Note: This article relates to The Midlands Conservation Partnership (MCP), a joint initiative of the Tasmanian Land Conservancy (TLC), Bush Heritage Australia (BHA), and farmers from the Tasmanian Midlands. FOG members visited the MCP in Tasmania in January 2024 as reported in the March & April 2024 edition of this newsletter (available [here](#)). The MCP’s Pierre Defourny followed up with a presentation

at FOG’s workshop ‘Conserving Grasslands of the South Eastern Highlands of New South Wales’ held in Canberra on 31 May 2024 (proceedings available [here](#)).

Federal Parliament Wrap for 2024, EDO

The December 11 2024 edition of the Environmental Defenders Office newsletter INSIGHT included a ‘Federal Parliament wrap for 2024: the good, the bad, and the unfinished business for climate and nature law’:

“2024 has been a big year in the Federal Parliament for the environment and climate. Moves towards ‘nature positive’ and transitioning Australia to net zero have been high on the agenda, with a flurry of legislative change in the final days of the December sitting weeks resulting in some good wins for the climate. And yet the reform of Australia’s nature laws remains seemingly on a knife’s edge”. The full article is available [here](#).

A \$13 billion, 30-year flop: landmark study reveals stark failure to halt Murray-Darling River decline

An article by Jamie Pittock in The Conversation on 2 December 2024 summarised new research showing how some A\$13 billion in taxpayer dollars and 30 years of policy reform have failed to arrest the devastating decline in the health of Australia’s most important river system, the Murray-Darling Basin. The [four-year study](#) involved 12 scientists from Australia’s leading universities and draws on data from 1980 to 2023. It is the most comprehensive report card to date on government policies to protect the Murray-Darling. It found that expensive and contentious reforms, including the once-vaunted Murray-Darling Basin Plan, have mostly failed to improve outcomes for people and nature along the river system. The full article is available [here](#).

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Photo by Andrew Zelnik: From a Feb 2024 visit to the high quality grassy woodland and open forest areas of Hall Horse Paddocks, ACT. Their conservation values are at ongoing risk from horse agistment (see May-Jun 2024 Newsletter, pp 8-10)
