

A dramatic landscape photograph of a coastal plain. The sky is filled with large, white, fluffy clouds. Sunbeams (crepuscular rays) are visible, shining down from the clouds onto the landscape below. The landscape is a vast, flat expanse of green and brown vegetation, likely coastal scrub or grassland. In the distance, a small cluster of buildings is visible on the horizon. The overall tone is serene and majestic.

Understory

NSW BCT Newsletter
Winter 2022

Biodiversity
Conservation
Trust



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FRONT COVER
Naree and Yantabulla Reserve
Alex Pike / DPE
PAGE 1 TOP
BCT all staff
Colin Elphick
PAGE 1 BOTTOM
BCT staff
Colin Elphick



Message from the CEO

The BCT is turning five on 25 August!

What an incredible five years it has been. We have grown from a small organisation to a family of 110 employees with a wide spread of experience and knowledge, and a shared passion for conservation. We would not be here without our landholders and partners, who support and uphold the BCT's vision of vibrant private land conservation areas protecting our unique and diverse plants and animals. So, thank you for supporting us for five years and I hope we continue to work together for many more!

The BCT has evolved significantly since our establishment. Even since our last issue of Understory, we have employed more staff to better support our landholders and partners. We have created a new and exciting branch, Partnerships and Investments, which will work hard to pursue new philanthropic and corporate partnerships.

You may have seen our recent announcement about a co-investment partnership with Telstra. In a ground-breaking public-private partnership, the BCT and will co-invest in both biodiversity conservation and carbon sequestration through a BCT conservation tender which will conserve, restore and connect endangered woodlands in the Murray-Riverina region.

The Restoring Murray Woodlands Biodiversity and Carbon conservation tender is one of three tenders we will be launching soon. Our Northern Inland Koala conservation tender, supported by the NSW Koala Strategy, will conserve koala habitat in the Armidale and Uralla LGAs. The strategy, released this April, is the biggest financial commitment by any government to secure the future of koalas in the wild. Our Darling Baaka conservation tender will protect critical wetlands and important vegetation communities along the Darling River (*Baaka* in Barkindji language).

The Darling Baaka tender is the newest of a series of exciting announcements for biodiversity in Western NSW. In May, we signed permanent conservation agreements with Bush Heritage Australia and South Endeavour Trust to protect over 30,000 hectares of arid land at Naree and Yantabulla Stations – one of our largest collective areas protected to date.

We are excited to see what the next five years of the BCT will bring. We're hoping it includes a suite of exciting new partnerships, an acceleration of investment in private land conservation, and an accelerating increase in new agreements with landholders across the state.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Alan L.', is positioned above the printed name.

Alan Goodwin,
A/ Chief Executive Officer





BCT News

Three conservation tenders announced for 2022

The BCT has now identified three new areas for conservation tenders that are a high priority for private land conservation in 2022. Eligible landholders in each of the targeted areas can apply for ongoing annual payments to establish a conservation agreement with the BCT and manage an area of their land for conservation. The upcoming conservation tenders are:

1 Northern Inland Koala:

This conservation tender will focus on protecting koala habitat in the Northern Inland region – namely the Armidale and Uralla local government areas. It will be funded through support from the new \$193.3 million NSW Koala Strategy. This strategy, released earlier this year, is the biggest financial commitment by any government to secure the future of koalas in the wild, and has identified this area as a climate resilient koala stronghold.

2 Restoring Murray Woodlands:

A first for the BCT. Along with establishing a conservation agreement and securing management payments, successful landholders will also generate carbon credits through additional environmental plantings. There is a great need for the existing patches of remnant woodlands in the Murray region to not only be protected, but also be reconnected through new woodland growth. The environmental plantings under this tender will be adjacent to remnant patches of threatened woodlands, thus

increasing the size, connectivity and movement of animals through and within important remnant patches. It will be a tremendous long-term benefit for many woodland animal species such as threatened woodland birds, arboreal mammals and bats.

3 Darling-Baaka:

The Darling Baaka conservation tender will protect critical wetlands and high conservation value vegetation communities along the Darling River on Barkindji Country (*Baaka* is the Barkindji name for the Darling). This unique boom-and-bust landscape provides important habitat for migratory birds and is a drought refuge to threatened species such as pink cockatoos and Australian bustards. It's also home to threatened ecological communities such as Coolibah-Blackbox Woodland.

TOP
Berridale Primary School
Alice McGrath



Landcare workshop success

Thirty community events have been held across NSW as part of the BCT's partnership project with Landcare NSW, *Partnering in Private Land Conservation*. The BCT's funding is shared across regional and local Landcare groups, enabling them to deliver workshops, field days and networking events focused on biodiversity and community conservation actions.

Landcare NSW Project Manager, Samantha Stratton, says the project has identified the need and appetite for learning about conservation actions and building a more connected community.

"In a time that has challenged our communities, the need to build and sustain networks in the fields of conservation and biodiversity is so important," said Ms Stratton.

Regional Landcare Coordinator for the North West, Craig Pullman, said their most recent event at Moonbi focusing on aquatic ecology drew more than 60 people.

"Landcare has a great way of bringing people together to learn and connect. The Partnering in Private Land Conservation Project has helped people interested and invested in conservation to share knowledge and help our wider community connect with the BCT."

So far, events have ranged from nest building workshops on the South Coast to knowledge sharing about boom-and-bust biodiversity at Yantabulla Station in the outback.



One workshop, held at Savernake Station in the Murray-Riverina region and run by Corowa District Landcare, was attended by more than 60 people. Along with knowledge sharing and networking, participants learnt about the history and conservation journey of Savernake Station from BCT agreement holder and third generation landholder at Savernake, Helen Huggins. BCT staff members Cassie Douglas and Nigel Jones led a guided walk through some of Savernake Station's high conservation woodlands and White Cyprus Pine forest areas, and the participants visited the Boat Rock, the largest known Aboriginal rock well in the region, where Bangerang Elder Darren (Dozer) Atkinson shared stories of the significance of the well for the Bangerang People. A performance by Dumanmu Bangerang Dance Group highlighted the area's rich indigenous heritage.

The diversity of both the landscapes and the range of topics covered at each event is a reminder that there is no one-size-fits all approach when it comes to community engagement in conservation. The valuable connections formed at these events will no-doubt continue beyond the partnership, encouraging new landholders to engage with the BCT and providing additional support for existing landholders.

TOP LEFT
Helen Huggins
Stuart Cohen

TOP RIGHT
Landholders at Savernake Station
Corowa Landcare



Conservation Champions still kicking goals

In a recent Conservation Champions field day, students from Berridale Public School visited a BCT agreement site at Woodhouse near Jindabyne, as well as the Gegedzerick Travelling Stock Reserve (TSR). Woodhouse owners, Liz and Marty Timmins, led a tour of students to learn about the biodiversity on their land and what they do to conserve it. At the TSR, students learnt from local Ngarigo artist and educator Gail Neuss about cultural biodiversity in Ngarigo Country. This successful field day was also supported by the Upper Snowy Landcare group.

Our Conservation Champions project, supported by our partner Petaurus Education Group, continues to leave positive impressions and biodiversity learnings with schools and communities across NSW. A total of 19 educational field days on BCT landholders' properties have now been completed, along with 56 in-class lessons about biodiversity on private land. This means that 3,600 school students have now been engaged in this project and nearly 300 teachers have been reached for professional development. This project is supported by a wide range of educational resources – animations, in-class games, Museum in a Box and more, many of which are accessible for free on the BCT's website. Visit www.bct.nsw.gov.au/biodiversity-conservation-education to explore these resources.

Koala Joey release

A rescued orphan koala joey, which was released on a BCT landholder's property in 2019, is now a proud mum!

The joey was rescued by Port Macquarie Koala Hospital, along with two other female and two male joeys, all orphaned in road strikes and dog attacks. All five of them were later released by the hospital on a BCT agreement site in the mid north coast, in collaboration with Koala Recovery Partnership – Mid North Coast Joint Organisation and the BCT. The site was a perfect koala habitat, full of their favourite food trees, swamp mahogany (*Eucalyptus robusta*) and tallowwood (*Eucalyptus microcorys*).

The landholders didn't see much of them after their release but would hear the occasional koala call. Then between June and August 2021, a remote sensor camera installed on the property captured one of the released females, all grown up and now carrying a joey! The mum and baby duo were caught on camera again in September, this time the joey attempting to climb the tree on its own.

The BCT recently coordinated the release of another group of five orphaned koala joeys in 2022. We'll keep you updated on them – fingers crossed we end up with multiple generations!

Have you checked our website recently?

The BCT website is regularly updated with news, new resources and outcomes.

We've recently created a space on our website for you to keep tab of upcoming free events and webinars, as well as past webinar recordings in case you miss out on the day of viewing. Visit www.bct.nsw.gov.au/info/events to learn more.

As our teams have been expanding and recruitment has been increasing, we're now updating our work with us page with all current career opportunities with the BCT. Visit www.bct.nsw.gov.au/info/work-us if you're interested in joining the BCT family.

TOP LEFT
Berridale Primary School
Alice McGrath

TOP RIGHT
Koala Joey release
Lisa & Peter Davison &
Scott Lindsay

Naree and Yantabulla bring a whopping 31,266 hectares under BCT protection

Every few years, the Australian outback witnesses a miracle. The parched and arid heart of Budjiti country starts to beat again as rains and floodwaters from up north turn this vast dry landscape into a breathtaking wetland. Water birds, frogs, insects, fish, small and big crustaceans all suddenly appear, as if by magic. Naree and Yantabulla Stations come to life!

The BCT has signed funded agreements under our fifth round of fixed price offers with Bush Heritage Australia and South Endeavour Trust to protect Naree and Yantabulla – two historical stations that lie in the red earthed north-western corner of NSW. Under these new permanent conservation agreements, the land in these stations, which include nationally significant migratory bird breeding sites, will now be protected forever. Annual payments will support ongoing conservation management to ensure the future of the unique biodiversity that call these stations home.

Naree and Yantabulla Station cover a huge swathe of native landscape: 31,266 hectares. They will form one of the largest areas of private land protected under private land conservation agreements to date. The two new agreements will increase the area protected under the BCT's funded agreements by a whopping 40 per cent.

Lying in the Murray-Darling Basin in north-western NSW, these stations are special. They sit in a floodplain where rainfall is very rare and erratic: average yearly rainfall is only 300mm but some years it's double that and some years it can be less than half. The region stays dry for extended periods at a time. But every five to 10 years, a major local rain event will occur, and backed up by big falls far away in Queensland, which inundates the floodplains, turning them into ephemeral wetlands. It is a typical

PAGE 7
Pictured from left is The Hon. James Griffin MP, with Budjiti Elder Phil Eulo, and Brenda Duffy from Bush Heritage Australia
Alex Pike / DPE

Australian ‘boom-and-bust’ landscape. Long, dry periods with summer temperatures touching high 40s, interrupted every few years by a wet phase when large flows from the Warrego River fill up Yantabulla Swamp. In this phase, the swamp is one of the 20 most important wetlands for waterbirds in Australia.

“This place in the Murray-Darling basin is extremely significant because it’s got all its original biodiversity,” says UNSW Professor Richard Kingsford, a river ecologist and conservation biologist who has worked extensively across the wetlands and rivers of the Murray-Darling Basin.

“When this place fills up there are thousands of birds breeding here. And this massive system connects with the free-flowing Paroo River system from Queensland. This area is amazing for its biodiversity.”

The Hon. James Griffin, NSW Minister for Environment and Heritage, was struck by the vastness of this land when he recently visited Naree station to celebrate the new agreements.

“Naree Station and Yantabulla Stations make up a massive swathe of land. It is a 31,200 hectare win for biodiversity in north-west NSW,” said Minister Griffin.

Budjiti Elder, Phil Eulo, also attended the celebration.

“It’s hard to put into words what it means for me and my people to be looking after the country where my ancestors were, and it’s so great to be doing it alongside Bush Heritage,” he said.

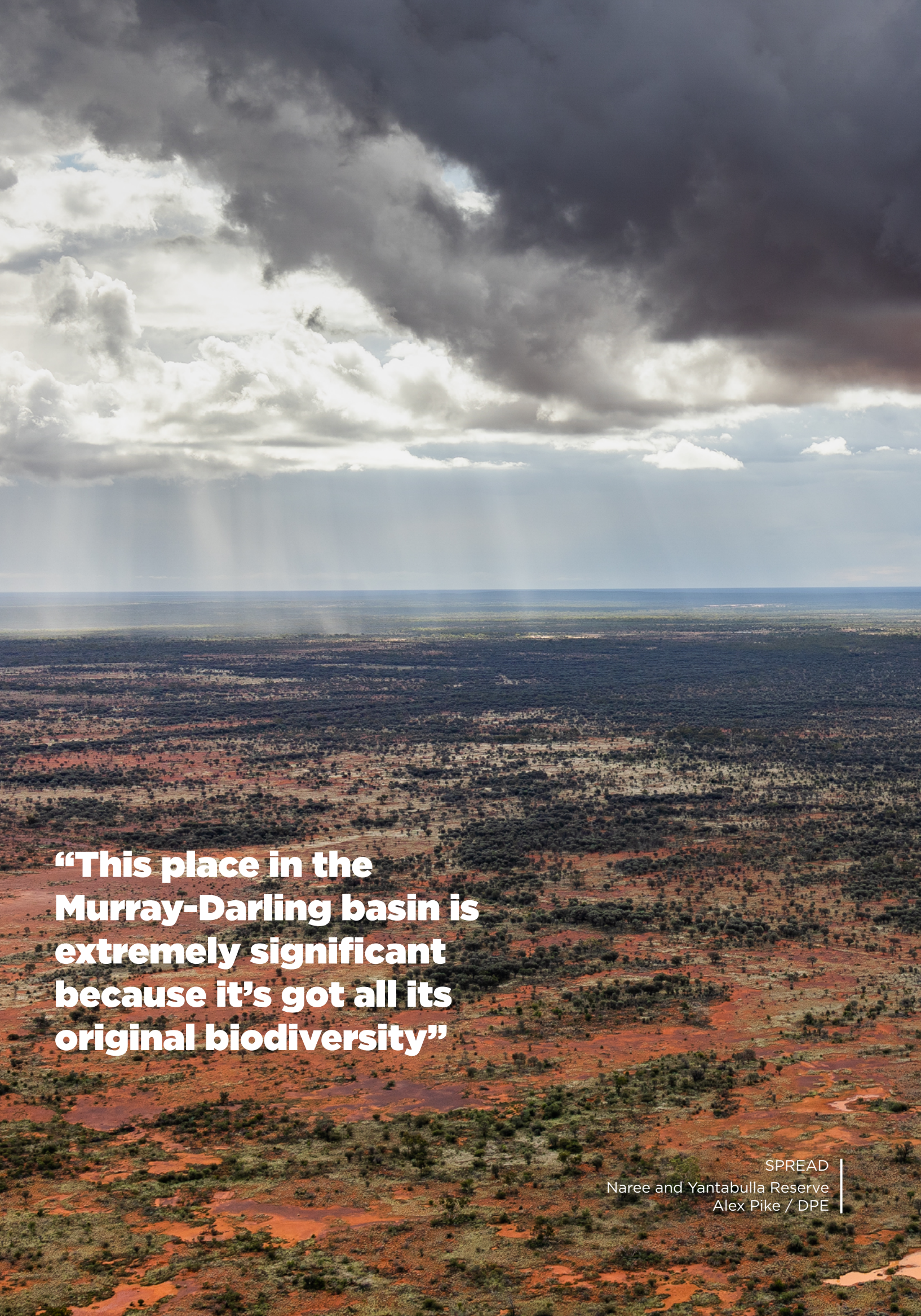
Ecologists like Professor Kingsford have recorded more than 187 water bird species in these wetlands, many of them threatened. At least 15 mammal species—including the vulnerable, striped-faced dunnart, sandy inland mouse, and little pied bat—and about 350 native plant species—pink cockatoos, budgies, emus, short-beaked echidnas, red kangaroos, and a variety of frogs and reptiles—have also been sighted in the area.

The area has seen habitat degradation and a reduction in the number of migratory and native species in the last few years, owing to stressors like prolonged droughts and feral animals like pigs, goats and rabbits. The new conservation agreements, therefore, mark a major win for biodiversity in the region. They are pivotal for the many species that rely on the protection of these unique ecosystems to breed, rest and survive.

“It is so good to have this kind of partnership between government and private organisations to conserve landscapes such as this one. It’s great to be involved in big picture landscape conservation which, to a large extent, we don’t often get right in Australia,” said Professor Kingsford.



TOP / CENTRE / BOTTOM
Snapshots of Naree / Yantabulla Reserve
Alex Pike / DPE



“This place in the Murray-Darling basin is extremely significant because it’s got all its original biodiversity”

SPREAD
Naree and Yantabulla Reserve
Alex Pike / DPE

Six-legged ground troops clear the weeds at Crookshanks

When it’s very dry, Narelle Moody and John Boyd’s property *Crookshanks* does not look ecologically rich at first glance. For all appearances the property is a series of dramatic hills covered in short dry grass, lichen-covered basalt rocks and the odd snow gum.

But appearances can be deceiving. Come rain, what looked like barren ground turns into lush, flower-covered grasslands.

Crookshanks sits on an undulating basalt plateau, and predominantly consists of critically endangered grassland, with snow grass, kangaroo grass and sheep’s burr in good measure, an array of flowering plants and other native grasses. A haven for declining woodland birds, it is regularly visited by vulnerable species like flame robins and dusky woodswallows, and a large local flock of threatened gang-gang cockatoos.

Narelle and John signed a conservation agreement for Crookshanks through the BCT Monaro Grasslands conservation tender in 2019. They already had a long-term conservation agreement in place for forested areas of their property, which was established in 2000.

The couple previously grazed their grassland paddocks with merinos, but once they were successful in the tender, Narelle and John decided to stop producing wool and focus on grassland management. The management payments that come with their new agreement provide a reliable income which they receive year in, year out, regardless of droughts or drops in the price of wool.

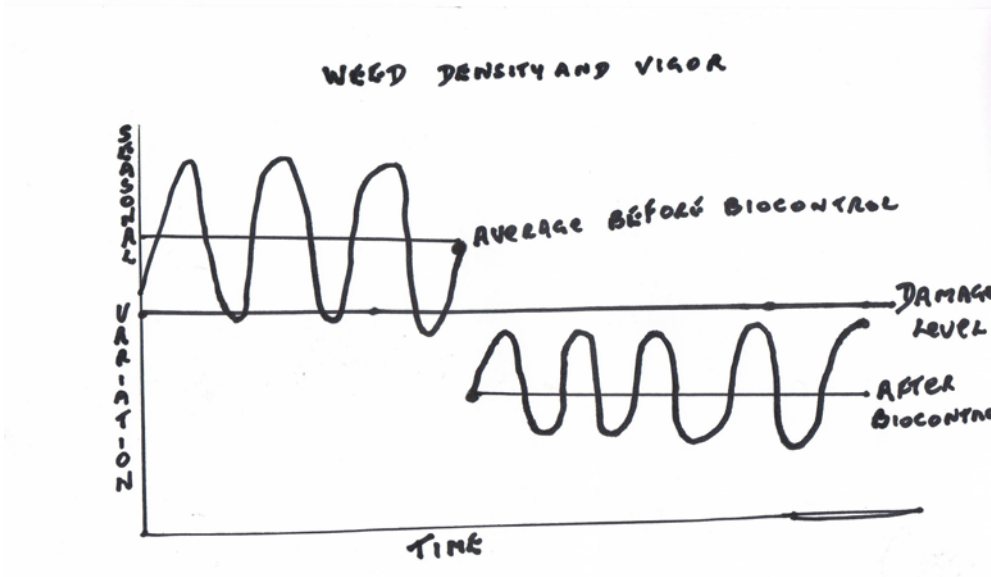
As a result of the removal of sheep and the end of drought in 2020, the Crookshanks’ grassland conservation area started to flourish. Species sensitive to grazing, such as kangaroo grass, started to flower and spread prolifically. There was an increase in non-woody, flowering herbs like rice flowers and native peas, along with uncommon, palatable grassland plants like barbed wire grass.

But along with the native grasses also returned the weeds!

For areas transitioning from a production to conservation focus, invasive plants are a major management concern, and a good weed season may be overwhelming.

To address this challenge, Narelle and John started taking a multipronged approach by integrating weed management strategies. Like many landholders, they pulled in assistance from contractors, friends, family and volunteers to help with weed control. They have used herbicide, chipping and bagging, and organic non-toxic sprays to tackle the invasive weeds on their property.

But they are also calling in the ground troops biocontrol agents that quietly go about their business without even needing a ‘thank you’ let alone a break for a cuppa and a homemade lemon slice.



Here’s the story of how Narelle and John are keeping their property free of pesky weeds, in Narelle’s own words.

“For years, I had been searching for a hidden wild block of land with a house to escape from my working life in the evenings and on weekends. Crookshanks was exactly that. Its peak towered over the surrounding 700 plus hectares of rocky, mountainous, and neglected lands. ‘Noxious weeds, rabbits, and a lot of work,’ said my well-wishers, friends, detractors, and the council weeds’ inspector. Daunted but determined, I donned a spot-spraying backpack and set to it.

After a few years of keeping fit spot-spraying on the mountains, now joined by my partner John Boyd, I jumped at the chance to attend the Landcare biocontrol of weeds workshop at Bredbo. There I met ex-agriculture, ex-CSIRO biocontrol expert Barry Sampson, from WeedBioControl (<http://www.weedbiocontrol.com.au>).

Our most urgent concern was Viper’s bugloss, a smaller species than Patterson’s curse, with a darker blue flower. It covered the non-forested areas of Crookshanks, wall-to-wall. Barry suggested a solution, to recruit the leaf mining moth which spread easily, the crown weevil larvae which left a black mush in the middle of each plant, usually killing it, along with root weevil and larvae, flea beetles and stem borer operatives.

I was somewhat sceptical ... were we wasting our money? I was curious enough to try and was thrilled with the outcome some years later. Our new recruits did their job! With the occasional Viper’s bugloss plant being retained to keep the insects on the job, I approached Barry once again, this time about our St John’s wort problem. Another box of material arrived for us to distribute at the end of autumn 2021, this time containing mites and Chrysolina beetles. By April 2022, we found that the mites were multiplying and would spread easily on the wind or on the fur of grazing animals. The mites caused stunting and twisting of the St John’s wort leaves and the Chrysolina beetles defoliates the wort.

Having bought an additional Murrumbidgee River block late in 2019 to continue our proposed wildlife corridor from Crookshanks’ Peak to the Murrumbidgee River, we inherited lots of blackberry, among many other noxious weeds. I have again asked Barry to supply us with biocontrol material for the blackberries, which he tells me will be available for distribution after Anzac Day next year. Other weeds that can be controlled using biocontrol include horehound, thistles, prickly pear, bridal creeper, dock and blue heliotrope, among others. Needless to say, John and I highly recommend biocontrol for weed management.”

PAGE 9
Flea beetles make excellent biocontrol agents
Barry Simpson

PAGE 10
A graph showing impact of biocontrol on weed density
Barry Simpson

Wildlife refuge outreach project

The BCT’s Kevin (Kev) Chaplin is a man on a mission. He has set out to visit the 53 private properties under wildlife refuge agreements across the expanse of the Western Land Holdings of NSW as part of the BCT’s wildlife refuge outreach project. The properties are littered across the state’s west, from Wentworth to Tibooburra in the far west to Cobar and Bourke in the east. The total area covered by wildlife refuge agreements in this region is over one million hectares, and Kev is covering around 110,000 square kilometres to visit them all, mostly alone.

“I am used to driving long distances,” Kev says.

“I take my breaks, of course, and the visits with the landholders break up the monotony. But I don’t mind the travel.”

Kev is making this trip as part of a BCT outreach project to check on the status of our wildlife refuge agreements. The majority of these agreements were established prior to the BCT under various historic legislative and government structures. The administrative responsibility for these agreements was handed over to the BCT in 2017, but many of the agreement records were out of date or incomplete. Wildlife refuge agreements are gazetted, but can be revoked by the landholder, and past errors have meant that older agreements were not listed on property titles, so searches may

fail to show that there is an agreement in place.

Unlike the agreements that the BCT now establishes, older wildlife refuge agreements cover the entirety of the property, potentially restricting business opportunities for landholders in areas where it was never intended.

“I only found out about it when I sought a cropping permit and was told that I couldn’t get it because of the agreement,” said one of the landholders Kev visited.

But why take all this time to do it in person? Why not organise this over the phone or a video conference, if it can be arranged?

“The overwhelming response we have had from landholders is that they never see anyone from government face to face, so we needed to do this in person,” says Kev.

“Many landholders understandably think that if we can’t find the time to come and see them, then they don’t have time for us. Even those who set up the agreement have not had any follow up since they signed decades ago. People have a long memory.”

And that is one of the main goals of this project: to establish an ongoing relationship with wildlife refuge landholders, even if it results in a few agreement revocations. In many instances, the

agreement isn’t functioning as it should, and it gives the BCT a false representation of what is under active conservation management out here.

“Currently we can look at the map and see all these wildlife refuges and think we have it covered. But if the reality is very different, it is better that we remove or modify them. That way we will get a better sense of what is truly under conservation and use the opportunity to provide viable conservation alternatives out this way,” says Kev.

At a property west of Wilcannia, right on the Darling River, Kev sits with the landholder to do just that. There are a number of BCT opportunities being offered in this region, including agreements with annual or grant funding options. The BCT’s fixed price offer includes a mapped area in western NSW, and the upcoming Darling Baaka conservation tender will target native vegetation along the Darling River. Providing an additional, stable income stream, these are attractive options for landholders in this area.

“Think of it like being a park ranger on your own property,” explains Kev.

The standard four-hour drive from Broken Hill to a landholder near Tibooburra close to the Queensland border, reveals classic red sands broken up with a surprising amount of green. The recent rains have brought a boom period to the

west, with many landholders remarking that this is the best it’s been for over 40 years, and in some places, ever! The decision of placing an area of their property under conservation in such a good season can be difficult to make.

“I manage for conservation and regeneration, and grazing is a part of that,” says Mog, who has grazed this country for 28 years.

“It is in much better condition now than what it was when I got here.”

Others think the same.

“We would argue that we manage the property for conservation. There is more scrub now than we have ever seen before,” says another landholder on their sheep grazing property near Packsaddle, north of Broken Hill.

There is a healthy scepticism, but with conservation-minded landholders like Mog, Kev is optimistic.

“Whether it is to get the legacy agreement revoked, upgrading the agreement, keeping landholders in the loop for upcoming programs in the region, or simply leaving the agreement as is, we see this project as just the beginning of, or sometimes repairing, our relationship with wildlife refuge landholders.”



Revolving Fund

Due to the overwhelming popularity of our revolving fund properties, we are almost sold out of our existing stock. We have some exciting potential property acquisitions in our pipeline that we hope to advertise for sale soon and we are always on the lookout to purchase suitable properties.

We select and purchase properties with significant conservation values along with attributes such as lifestyle uses or agricultural production. We then return them to the market, targeting buyers willing to sign a conservation agreement for all or part of the property.

In most cases the conservation agreement covers the high conservation value parts of the property, leaving the remainder of the property available for agriculture or lifestyle uses. The agreements are on the land title and are in-perpetuity, meaning they remain in place even when the property is passed on or sold to a new owner.

In terms of funding, the agreements on revolving fund properties vary depending on location and biodiversity values. Some have annual funding for conservation management in perpetuity while others are eligible to apply for grants under our Conservation Partners Program to assist with conservation management actions.

All revolving fund properties are purchased in line with the NSW Government's Biodiversity Conservation Investment Strategy and all proceeds from their sale are returned to the Biodiversity Conservation Fund for the purchase of more conservation properties across NSW.

In addition to high conservation values, and in order to on-sell (revolve) the property as soon as possible, we buy property with attributes that appeal to the broadest market. The style of property is typically conservation/lifestyle or conservation/agriculture. Here is what works and what doesn't when we assess a property for acquisition:

- | | |
|-----------------------------|--|
| ✓ Dwelling | ✗ Land-locked |
| ✓ Power | ✗ No dwelling (or entitlement) |
| ✓ Services | ✗ Poor Services |
| ✓ Good access | ✗ Poor access |
| ✓ Good infrastructure | ✗ Poor water resources |
| ✓ Good condition vegetation | ✗ Poor condition or highly modified vegetation |
| ✓ Good water resources | |

Thank You

The Biodiversity Conservation Trust gratefully acknowledges all those landholders who have shared their stories for this issue and for past communications.

Thank you to those who have supported the BCT through its start up, and to the many landholders who have told their neighbours, friends and family about us.

Together we can work to protect biodiversity on private land in New South Wales.

PAGE 13 LEFT
Ants
Colin Elphick

PAGE 13 RIGHT
BCT staf walking
Colin Elphick

PAGE 14
South East, NSW
Colin Elphick



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