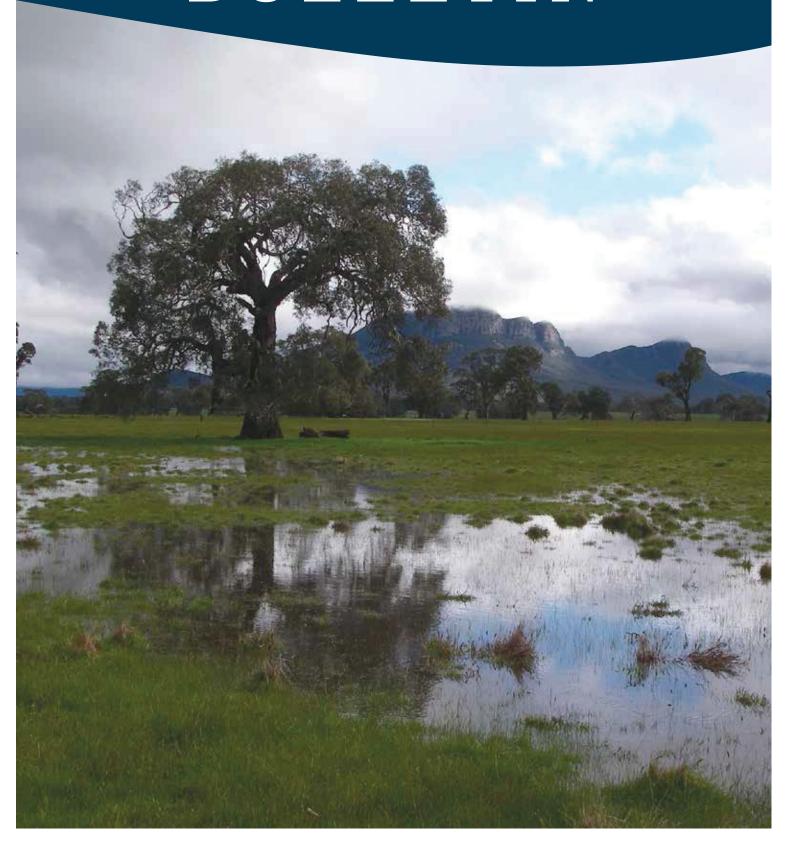


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BULLETIN





By working across a large area of agricultural land, in partnership with landowners and the community, Trust for Nature is working to restore threatened species on the Gippsland Plains. BandiLink is a great example of where practical, on the ground management techniques have been shared with landowners, coordinated and are now being evaluated to determine their success.

Across the Gippsland Plains, as across the rest of Victoria, small and medium-sized ground-dwelling mammals have generally declined. The causes of their declines are many but include: habitat loss; habitat fragmentation; predation by foxes and cats; changed fire regimes and habitat degradation. As a result of all of these impacts on the Gippsland Plains, some species have become extinct, such as the Brush-tailed Bettong and White-footed Rabbitrat. Other mammal species, such as the Long-nosed Bandicoot and Southern Brown Bandicoot, were once known to have been found in the area but have appeared to have become regionally extinct, while some other species such as the nationally threatened New Holland Mouse and the Flora and Fauna Guarantee-listed White-footed Dunnart, and Eastern Pygmy Possum, are only just hanging on.

In 2014 the BandiLink project was established to address this decline and improve biodiversity in the region. The project objectives were to recover threatened Bandicoots and other small mammals; increase threatened orchid populations; restore endangered Gippsland Plains Grassy Woodland habitat; reduce pest plants and animals; improve linkages and increase the community's capacity to manage biodiversity.

Inspired by the success of the long-running Southern Ark fox control program in far East Gippsland, Trust for Nature included within the BandiLink project a landscape-scale fox control program as part of the strategy to recover mammal populations. This was done with support from Southern Ark and other key partners. The focus of this article is this landscape control program and mammal recovery aspects.

The Gippsland Plain and Gippsland Lakes Catchment focal landscape is located in western Gippsland between Yarram, Rosedale and Bairnsdale and contains 81,000 ha of private land. Its main vegetation types comprise Plains Woodlands, Herb-rich Woodlands, Heathy Woodland and Wetlands. The BandiLink project area was established around the Perry River, which contains a significant corridor of vegetation that links the foothills of the Great Dividing Range to the Gippsland Lakes. This corridor has a number of protected sites, including Providence Ponds Flora & Fauna Reserve and over 2,000 hectares of covenanted land, which was one of the main reasons the project focussed on this important stretch of land.

One of the major objectives of BandiLink was to replicate Southern Ark's model^{1, 2} of fox control that has achieved success in far East Gippsland, and trial it in a predominantly farming landscape. The Southern Ark program run by the Victorian Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP) is a long-term, landscapescale, fox-baiting program, focussed on public land and parks. Over the past 16 years since it began, it has been shown to have a dramatic effect on the abundance of target species of threatened mammals known to be impacted by fox predation, especially bandicoots and potoroos. Building on the demonstrated success of this program, Trust for Nature, Southern Ark and DELWP were keen to see if the approach could be transferred to an agricultural landscape and rolled out in partnership with landowners.

For the past two years, Trust for Nature's East Gippsland staff and partners have successfully delivered an ongoing, roadside, fox-baiting program over 15,000 hectares of agricultural land. The project partners installed fox-baiting stations along roads and on private land known to be important to small and medium-sized native mammals. At the core of this project has been strong collaboration with the community. Wellington Shire as land mangers responsible for roadsides, were crucial partners in supporting the project and permitting roadside baiting. To increase the effectiveness of the fox baiting on roadsides, incentives were provided to landowners within the project area to carry out fox control on their land at the same time.

In addition, a thorough community engagement program was run that has consisted of: a series of information nights; letters to all landowners in the project area; phone calls to all landowners next to bait stations to seek their approval, and if approval was not obtained then the station was either moved or installed as free feed only; on-site meetings; a calendar and fridge magnet was sent to all landowners showing baiting dates; SMS text messages were sent every month on the day prior to baiting to landowners next to bait stations; free dog muzzles were offered and supplied to all landowners upon request; a landowner project evaluation survey was carried out at the end of the first year by email with a follow up phone call; regular media articles were placed in local newspapers and project updates were mailed out to landowners regularly.

Model derived from the Southern Ark program

Providing oversight to this community work has been a steering committee comprised of many partners: Trust for Nature, Wellington Shire, Southern Ark, DELWP, East Gippsland Landcare Network, Wildlife Unlimited, Meerlieu Reserves Committee, covenantors, landowners and community members. They have provided invaluable help in guiding the project, providing formal approvals, spreading the word about the fox baiting program and supporting the overall outcome to improve biodiversity of the Gippsland Plains.

Two years on, what has the project achieved? What we know is that over a 14 month period, 1,292 baits were laid, and of those, 126 fox baits had been taken by foxes, certainly contributing to a decline in fox numbers.

Even so, feedback from farmers suggests that there are still a large numbers of foxes seen and/ or removed on farms within the project area. This reinforces the need for concurrent fox control across farms, at least initially to crash the population. We have also successfully demonstrated 'proof of concept', that it is possible to undertake a long-term, large-scale fox control program in a farming landscape in a way that minimises risks to domestic dogs and is implemented through one land manager (Wellington Shire), which has many benefits in contrast to coordinating many landowners. During the project, the bait take reduced but with foxes still being seen we introduced a change in the fox baiting methodology, the duration of poison bait laid and the type of bait used. This led to a significant increase in the percentage of baits taken by foxes.

What this project could not do with the resources available was demonstrate responses from the species it aimed to protect. The next task is to seek funding to continue the control program but this time build in a structured monitoring program so that we can assess if it helped to increase the numbers of native fauna in a traditional farming landscape.







² Roadside baiting recommended by Carter et al, (2011)