



Kara Kara Conservation Management Network



Year in review **2014**



Our vision...

We are committed to protecting and enhancing habitat critical to the survival of woodland birds and other threatened fauna and flora, primarily through the creation and maintenance of well-managed bio-links.

The Kara Kara Conservation Management Network (ABN 54 518 202 935)



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Photo gallery:

Cover: Left - Eastern Yellow Robin, *Eopsaltria australis* (C Tzaros); Centre - Lichen (D Saxon-Campbell); Right - Golden Cowslip, *Diuris behrii* (A Hughes).

Above: Box-Ironbark forest (D Saxon-Campbell).

Page 5: Moss (D Saxon-Campbell).

Page 6: Red-rump Parrot (*Psephotus haematonotus*) fledglings (B. Proctor).

Page 7: Yam Daisy (*Microseris lanceolata*) with pollinating hoverfly (D Saxon-Campbell).

Page 8: Blue Caladenia Orchid (*Caladenia caerulea*), sometimes called Blue Fingers (D Saxon-Campbell).

Page 10: Shingleback (*Tiliqua rugosa*) (D. Saxon-Campbell).

Page 11: Heath Tea-tree (*Leptospermum mysinoides*) (D Saxon-Campbell).

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President's Report

Welcome to the first *Year in Review* for the Kara Kara CMN. Similar to an Annual Report and yet slightly different at the same time, this document reflects the Committee's belief that protecting and enhancing habitat to promote biodiversity is not just about undertaking projects and programs; it's also about occasionally pausing, reflecting on what we've achieved against the objectives and strategies outlined in our *Strategic Plan*, and importantly, identifying what we could be doing better. Essentially, that's what this *Year in Review* is all about and it's a process that we plan to undertake each year.



As you will see from the following pages, 2014 has been a year of significant achievements for the Network in which we were successful in completing a variety of projects across the region, from revegetation and habitat rehabilitation programs to community education seminars and on-ground research. Notable among these was a vegetation offset project in partnership with VicRoads which saw us coordinate plantings across private landholdings in the region. Involvement in collaborative projects such as this is what we are keen to do more of in future.

Recently, we also launched the new Kara Kara CMN website and Enewsletter which, collectively, represent a significant and exciting step forward in our ability to showcase our region's natural values, obtain funding for vital on-ground conservation programs, and engage with the community to empower conservation at a local level while attracting new members and volunteer involvement.

As with all volunteer-run not-for-profit conservation organisations, obtaining funding for NRM projects can be a challenge. A succession of cuts to government funding and services at both Federal and State level over the past few years has seen the pool of funds allocated for environmental programs shrink significantly. At the same time, competition for these limited financial resources has increased. To broaden our prospects, during the year the Kara Kara CMN applied to the Federal Government for Tax Deductibility Status and I am delighted to report that our application was recently granted. This change in status is important for our Network as it will enable us to attract philanthropic funding from non-government sources to undertake larger-scale habitat restoration projects.

Attracting funding for such projects will be our focus in the coming year, in addition to capitalising on our achievements in 2014 through stronger partnerships with our member organisations, improved monitoring and evaluation programs for all of our projects, and on building capacity within the Kara Kara CMN to ensure our long-term future.

In closing, I would like to thank our sponsors, including Parks Victoria, Victorian Landcare, the North Central CMA, DEPI and The R E Ross Trust for their valued financial support throughout the year. Thanks also to our Facilitator and the Kara Kara CMN Committee for their significant contribution to achieving the Network's objectives, not only through active participation at meetings, but also for the many voluntary hours they have freely given to ensuring the successful completion of a variety of on-ground projects.

Jane Holt
President

www.karakaracmn.org.au

2014 Scoreboard

Activity type	Corresponding Strategy*
On-ground NRM delivery	
● Grazing exclusion plots on public land near Stuart Mill and in the Kara Kara National Park.	2, 5, 6
● Revegetation project in partnership with VicRoads on private land at Carapooee West, St Arnaud East and Redbank.	1, 2
● Erosion mitigation works on private property at Emu.	1, 2
● Weed spraying along Middle and Carapooee Creeks.	2, 3
● Co-ordination of a fox control program with local landholders to coincide with the Parks Victoria baiting program.	4
● Assisted DEPI with native orchid plantings on public land.	2
● Submissions to, and onsite discussions with, DEPI in relation to their controlled burns program.	2, 7
Building partnerships/relationships	
● Ongoing networking/relationship building with neighbouring CMNs and conservation organisations.	1, 2, 10
● Managed vegetation offset plantings on behalf of VicRoads.	1, 2
Community engagement/education	
● Developed Common Myna information flyer and trap usage guidelines.	9
● Distributed regular newsletters on conservation issues and Kara Kara CMN programs.	All
● Hosted regular community seminars and a wildflower tour to raise public awareness of natural values in the Kara Kara CMN area.	All
● Involved school children in a planting day in Kara Kara National Park.	2
Monitoring and evaluation	
● Established two post-fire monitoring plots in the Stuart Mill NCR.	2, 7
Research	
● Conducted on-ground surveys to establish baseline data on woodland bird assemblages within the Kara Kara CMN region.	1, 2
Building capacity	
● Launched the Kara Kara CMN website and eNewsletter.	10
● Applied for and achieved Tax Deductibility Status.	10

*** Key to strategies (as specified in the Kara Kara CMN Strategic Plan 2013-2018):**

- 1: Maintain and increase landscape connectivity
- 2: Protect, maintain and increase quality habitat
- 3: Manage invasive weeds
- 4: Coordinate control of introduced predators
- 5: Manage total grazing pressure
- 6: Protect native orchids
- 7: Influence appropriate fire regimes
- 8: Firewood management
- 9: Reduce impacts from inter-specific competition
- 10: Secure the ongoing viability of the Kara Kara CMN

Who we are

The Kara Kara CMN brings together individuals and organisations who share a common vision - to protect and enhance habitat critical to the survival of our woodland birds, and other threatened fauna and flora.

Our area of interest spans 1,950 km² of Victoria's western goldfields; from St Arnaud in the north to Moonambel in the south, and from Morrl Morrl in the west to the Avoca River in the east. Central to this area is the Kara Kara National Park which contains one of the most intact areas of remnant Box-Ironbark forest remaining in Victoria.

To protect this important habitat, we work with both public and private landholders on a variety of programs, from revegetation and restoration projects to weed and feral pest control. We also host regular public seminars and field trips to raise awareness within the community about our unique fauna and flora, which rely on our temperate eucalypt woodlands for their ongoing survival.



Our achievements

Strategies 1 & 2: Maintain and increase quality habitat and landscape connectivity

The link between habitat loss, fragmentation and degradation and declines in biodiversity has been well documented (Ford *et al.* 2001; Olsen *et al.* 2005; MacNally *et al.* 2009; Ford 2011 Szabo *et al.* 2011; Watson 2011) and is fundamental to why habitat improvement and expansion programs were a key focus of Kara Kara CMN activities in 2014.

During the year, we successfully tendered to undertake revegetation works for VicRoads to offset the removal of native vegetation during recent realignment works along the Sunraysia Highway. By networking with local landholders, three sites were identified as suitable for revegetation plantings on private land; one each at Redbank, Carapooee West and St Arnaud East. Over 100 tube stock seedlings – mostly acacias and

Strategy objectives

Protect, enhance and increase habitat critical to the survival of woodland birds, and other threatened flora and fauna, in particular in Box-Ironbark woodland;

*Improve spatial connectivity within the landscape for highly mobile species, such as the endangered Swift Parrot (*Lathamus discolor*) through restoration and revegetation projects at a landscape level; and*

Maintain and increase the network of “protected areas” within the Kara Kara CMN.

eucalypts – were planted at St Arnaud East, while the properties at Redbank and Carapooee West were direct seeded with a variety of native species. This project was a highlight for the year in that it demonstrated what can be achieved through strategic partnerships and also because it provided the Kara Kara CMN with valuable experience that will stand us in good stead for attracting similar project work in the future.

In another initiative funded by and undertaken in consultation with Parks Victoria, the Kara Kara CMN organised a planting day within a series of grazing exclusion plots along Carapooee Creek in the St Arnaud Range involving Year 9 students from the St Arnaud Secondary College. The students enthusiastically pitched in to help plant over 1,000 assorted native trees and understorey plants, including *Acacia*, *Banksia*, *Dodonaea* and *Hakea* species. About 100 Kangaroo Grass (*Themeda triandra*) seedlings were also planted along Carapooee Creek as part of a trial to see if native grasses can effectively suppress infestations of *Oxalis* sp., a weed capable of spreading quickly along creek lines.

Another important element of improving degraded habitat is erosion control. Using funding provided under a Victorian Landcare grant, the Kara Kara CMN undertook mitigation works to help correct severe tunnel erosion at “The Granites”, a 120 ha private landholding at Emu, Victoria. This erosion occurred over decades and had led to a substantial loss of topsoil along a gully that drains through the property into Strathfillan Creek and, eventually, the Avoca River. The works used spall rock to slow water flow and stabilise the gully floor, in the process providing conditions suitable for the natural regeneration of native vegetation from surrounding woodland. These works are already producing results and have helped to reduce silt flow into the Avoca River.



Woodland birds are one of the Kara Kara CMN's major conservation targets. However, little specific knowledge exists about the conservation status of woodland avifauna in our region, despite local Box-Ironbark forests being included in some broader woodland bird studies within central Victoria. Data such as this is critical to informing and prioritising habitat protection and restoration efforts within our region. So, in 2014 we commenced our Woodland Birds Project, which has two objectives: firstly, to collect baseline data on woodland bird assemblages within our area of interest; and secondly, by analysing long-term bird survey data collected by a member organisation, the St Arnaud Field Naturalists Club Inc (SAFNC), to identify woodland species that are declining or at risk of disappearing from the landscape. The initial phase of this project is nearing completion although the monitoring of woodland bird populations in our area of interest will be ongoing.

Strategy 3: Manage invasive weeds

The Kara Kara CMN recently completed phase 2 of an ongoing weed control program on private and public land within our region. Funded by a Victorian Landcare grant and using the services of a licensed contractor, this program specifically targeted weeds along four creek lines that had been identified as heavily infested with weeds after flood events in 2011 and 2012. Creek and drainage lines are particularly susceptible to weed invasion after flood events when seeds have been carried downstream to potentially colonise new areas.

Strategy objectives

Identify emerging weed problems within the Kara Kara CMN area;

Eradicate environmental weeds where possible; and

Where not possible, suppress the spread of weeds by minimising seed set and seed bank expansion.

Infestations of Blackberries, Horehound, St. John's Wort, Boneseed and Bridal Creeper, along with several species of Thistles and Nightshade, were sprayed along drainage lines in the St Arnaud State Forest, the Kara Kara National Park, and in the Stuart Mill and Stoney Creek Nature Conservation Reserves (NCRs). An additional four properties on the upper reaches of Middle Creek were also treated in co-operation with private landholders.

So far, the program has been successful in eradicating the targeted weed infestations; however, sites are being continually monitored so that follow-up spraying can be initiated should weed re-emergence occur.



Strategy 4: Co-ordinate control of introduced predators

Introduced predators such as the European fox (*Vulpes vulpes*) and to a lesser extent, feral cats, pose a threat to biodiversity within the Kara Kara CMN area, particularly to ground-dwelling birds and mammals. To reduce this threat and help keep fox populations under control, Parks Victoria undertakes an annual baiting program on public land along the St Arnaud Range, including in the Kara Kara National Park and adjacent NCRs.

Strategy objective

Reduce populations of introduced predators, specifically foxes and cats, and ensure they remain at low levels.

Studies have shown that foxes typically site their dens along forest edges close to quality food sources; however, they feed mostly on private land. So, control programs need to target foxes in all of their habitats. So, each year the Kara Kara CMN provides financial support to encourage local landholders to synchronise their fox control efforts with those of Parks Victoria to maximise the impact on populations of this feral pest on both public and private land. So far, this ongoing program has been successful in keeping fox numbers at manageable levels.

Strategy 5: Manage total grazing pressure

One of the challenges to improving habitat quality within our region is the lack of understorey in selected areas, particularly along drainage lines within the St Arnaud Range which is related to overgrazing by macropods, hares and rabbits.

During the year, three exclusion plots were established along Carapooee Creek in the Stuart Mill NCR to monitor natural regeneration and vegetation succession over time without the impact of grazing. Results will help to inform the design of larger-scale projects planned for 2015 and beyond, including one that aims to improve habitat connectivity between Kooreh and the Stuart Mill NCR.

Strategy objectives

Manage total grazing pressure by both native and introduced herbivores, in particular domestic stock, rabbits, hares, kangaroos and wallabies, to allow ecosystem recovery through the natural regeneration of vegetation on both public and private land.



Strategy 6: Protect native orchids

For many years a member and partner organisation to the Kara Kara CMN, the St Arnaud Field Naturalists Club Inc (SAFNC), has worked tirelessly to assist the Department of Environment and Primary Industries (DEPI) to identify, document and protect native orchid species in the region as part of DEPI's Threatened Native Orchid Recovery Program. For a time, funding cuts substantially reduced the resourcing available to this important program; however, activities are gradually regaining momentum.

Strategy objectives

Assist the Department of Environment and Primary Industries with implementation of its Threatened Native Orchid Recovery Program within the Kara Kara CMN area.

In June, we provided assistance to DEPI and the SAFNC with a program to bolster the population of Brilliant Sun Orchid (*Thelymitra mackibbinii*). Endemic to Victoria, this native orchid is listed as Vulnerable nationally and Endangered in Victoria. It is also listed as Threatened under Victoria's Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act (1988) (DEPI 2014). Seventeen plants were placed into a specially-erected grazing exclusion plot on public land to the west of St Arnaud, in the process effectively almost doubling the known population of this species in Victoria.

Strategy 7: Influence appropriate fire regimes

Fire is an important tool in natural resource management and is an essential element in the ecology of many of Australia's unique species. However, a drying climate and increasingly intense wildfire events, as experienced during the Black Saturday bushfires of 2009, has led to large areas of native woodland becoming the target for "too-frequent" controlled fuel reduction burns.

The blanket fuel reduction target of five percent specified by the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission was an ambitious one, with the result that prescribed burning programs, at least initially, tended to focus more on achieving annual area targets than asset protection.

Since this area target was established, the Kara Kara CMN and SAFNC have continued to lobby State government agencies, through both public fora and private meetings, to protect areas of priority habitat from being burned too frequently and/or too intensely.

Small fenced plots have also been established in areas where fuel reduction burning has occurred to monitor post-fire vegetation recovery. This includes two new plots established during the year within the Stuart Mill NCR.

Strategy objectives

Reduce the adverse impacts of inappropriate fire regimes by influencing public policy regarding the location, frequency and intensity of prescribed fuel reduction burns;

Influence planning for fuel reduction burning, promoting cool mosaic burns rather than large-scale hot burns to protect biodiversity; and

Promote the key principle that prescribed burning should focus on asset protection rather than just an area target.

Strategy 8: Influence firewood management

Fallen timber and coarse woody debris are essential elements in the ecology of many woodland species and its indiscriminate and often illegal removal from woodlands and roadsides for use in home wood heating is just one of many threats to their ongoing survival.

During the year, the Kara Kara CMN continued its program to educate the public about the importance of fallen timber to our woodland birds, mammals and reptiles, whether as a source of food, for breeding sites or for shelter from the weather and predators. However, making headway with promoting alternative energy options is difficult due to the general lack of political will for environmental action and the recent reduction in renewable energy rebates by State and Federal Governments. Nonetheless, we will continue our efforts in the coming year.

Strategy objectives

Reduce indiscriminate and illegal logging, thinning and removal of native vegetation for firewood within State forests, along roadsides and in other public land;

Influence public policy at both a state and local government level on the most appropriate locations for firewood collection; and

Lobby for, and promote, the use of alternative energy sources to reduce the demand for firewood and by extension, habitat degradation within remnant vegetation in the Kara Kara CMN area.

Strategy 9: Reduce impacts from inter-specific competition

Concerned at the steady increase in Common (Indian) Myna (*Sturnus tristis*) sightings in the region, during the year the Kara Kara CMN developed a package of resources to help stop this feral pest from gaining a foothold in the region. The focal point of the package is an information flyer which was designed to educate the public on how to identify Common Mynas, why they are a threat to woodland birds in the region and what can be done at a household level to limit access to their preferred food sources. A specially-built Myna trap was also purchased and is available to the public for loan, together with a Fact Sheet to instruct users in how to use the trap and access information on the humane disposal of trapped birds.

The public has also been encouraged to report sightings of Mynas to us to help us keep track of their movement through the landscape.

Strategy objective

Reduce the impact of aggressive native and feral species on declining woodland birds.



Strategy 10: Secure the ongoing viability of the Kara Kara CMN

The Kara Kara CMN is fortunate to be able to count various State Government agencies and NGOs among our members; however, we are essentially an organisation of volunteers that relies on public funding to achieve our conservation objectives.

Back in 2012, we managed to obtain funding under the Victorian Local Landcare Facilitator Initiative (VLLFI) to employ a part-time Facilitator for three years. Administered through DEPI and ending on 30 June 2015, this funding has been vital in enabling us to engage with the community to build local networks and relationships, identify potential small and large-scale projects, and secure vital funding for their implementation. The VFFLI initiative has also helped us to build capacity within our Network through access to training and other programs that have helped to broaden the skills base of our Committee.

We hope that the State Government will see fit to extend this important initiative; however, this cannot be taken for granted and we need to attract alternative funding. To help us do this, during the year we applied for and were granted Tax Deductibility Status by the Federal Government. This change in status will provide us with a foundation from which we can attract philanthropic funding to help us implement landscape-scale connectivity projects.

Strategy objective

Provide for the ongoing capacity needs of the Network to ensure that the organisation can continue and that the activities outlined in this Strategic Plan can be implemented.

A highlight for the year has been the development and launch of the new Kara Kara CMN website – at **www.karakaracmn.org.au** – and eNewsletter, which was funded by The R E Ross Trust. Prior to this, our primary method of communication with the community was via a quarterly pdf newsletter circulated to a mailing list, so an internet presence represents a substantial and important step forward in being able to establish our credentials as a regional conservation organisation. As well as disseminating educational resources and information to the community, our website will also provide us with a platform from which to expand our membership and attract volunteers to our various projects and programs.

Community engagement

The western goldfields region of central Victoria has some extraordinary natural values and we are happy to share these with anyone who will listen. So, with funding from Parks Victoria, we host regular free seminars to raise awareness of the region's unique flora and fauna. Past topics have ranged from woodland birds and frogs, to mammals and plants. In 2014, we added some more topics to our growing list, hosting seminars on butterflies, reptiles, the small but important world of lichens and mosses and, in partnership with the Wimmera Library, a talk by author, Sean Dooley, who entertained the audience with anecdotes of his quest, in 2002, to achieve the record for spotting the most Australian bird species in a single year.



Looking ahead

As ever, habitat protection and expansion, as encapsulated in our Vision Statement, will remain our key priority for the year ahead.

As a starting point, we were successful in securing funding through a Communities for Nature grant to undertake revegetation and exclusion fencing works to improve landscape connectivity between Carapooee and Stuart Mill. This project will see works undertaken across three sites including the 7.8 ha Carapooee Bushland Reserve, which is important floristically because of its stand of remnant Blakely's Red Gum (*Eucalyptus blakelyi*). We hope that this project will be the first of many to be undertaken in 2015.

Our program of free community seminars and events will continue in 2015, a task that will be made much easier now that we are able to promote them via our new website and eNewsletter. The website will also provide a channel for the distribution of a range of educational resources that are being developed to inform the community about conservation-related issues and empower action at a local level.

Of course, there are always things we can be doing more of or better.

One opportunity for the year ahead will be to strengthen relationships with our member organisations, neighbouring conservation groups and networks, and local government. We know that by working together and sharing our experiences we can achieve a lot more than if

we go it alone. So we will be actively seeking out opportunities to form partnerships with like-minded organisations to undertake joint projects to benefit biodiversity in the region.

Continuing to build capacity within our Network will be another priority for the coming year. One particular need is to develop spatial mapping capability within our organisation – technology that will make planning and tracking our projects so much easier.

Another goal for 2015 is to establish a program and calendar for evaluating the success of our various projects using tools such as photo points and on-ground assessments. We believe that this is an essential element of natural resource management, not only to ensure that funds are being allocated efficiently but also to help improve our success rate, particularly in the context of a changing climate.

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