

Kara Kara Conservation Management Network



2015
Year in review

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."



Cover pictures (left to right): Yam Daisy with pollinating Hoverfly, Lichen, and Shingleback (D Saxon-Campbell); and Red-rumped Parrot nestlings (B Proctor). **Above:** Echidna (D Saxon-Campbell).

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President's report

The Kara Kara CMN plays an important role in protecting and enhancing critical habitat within our region for the benefit of native fauna and flora. We do this by setting objectives and implementing the suite of supporting strategies outlined in our *Strategic Plan 2013-2018*. This, our annual *Year in Review*, is an opportunity to reflect on our progress, on what has worked and what hasn't, and identify what we should be doing more of and better.



Over the past year, we have been able to build on our achievements of 2014 in a number of key areas: from on-ground habitat protection and rehabilitation projects, to research and establishing monitoring programs for our various natural resource management programs. We have also worked towards building new, and strengthening existing, relationships with like-minded organisations within our region, and importantly, on building capacity to secure the Network's long-term viability.

Of course, the year has not been without its challenges. One of these was the need to secure ongoing funding for the Network's part-time Facilitator position which ended on 30 June. Funding for this position had been initiated through the former State Liberal Coalition Government, so its continuation under the Andrew's Labor Government was by no means assured. We were therefore delighted with the new Environment Minister's decision to continue funding for the position for a further four years.

"In 2015, we have been able to build on our achievements of the previous year in a number of key areas..."

Another continuing concern is the steadily reducing funding pool available for environmental projects, particularly from the public sector, which has hampered our efforts to initiate habitat rehabilitation and expansion works. This funding shortfall has placed the onus back on organisations to find alternate private funding, including from philanthropic sources. Securing such philanthropic funding is something that the Kara Kara CMN needs to get much better at and, as such, this will continue to be a focus during the year ahead.

Climate change is another challenge which is becoming increasingly manifest through substantially reduced but more sporadic rainfall across the region, coupled with longer, hotter summers; a climatic trend that has been occurring across much of south-eastern Australia in recent years (CSIRO/BOM 2014). There seems little point in undertaking direct seeding programs or mass tube stock plantings if they either fail to germinate or the seedlings wither and die for lack of moisture. However, with many of our native flora and fauna species in serious decline, doing nothing is simply not an option. Clearly, improving the success rate of our on-ground programs means that we need to be smarter in our species selection and placement, and the timing of plantings. We may also need to provide plants with additional support during their crucial germination and establishment phases.

On a personal note, I would like to thank the Kara Kara CMN Committee and Facilitator for your dedicated efforts during the year. Thanks also to our sponsors and partner organisations, particularly the St. Arnaud Field Naturalists Club for making available long-term data for our woodland bird project, but also VicRoads, DELWP, the NCCMA and Parks Victoria for your ongoing financial support and assistance.

Chris Campbell
President

2015 Scoreboard

Activity type	Corresponding Strategy*
Natural resource management	
● Erected grazing exclusion fencing at Carapooee Bushland Reserve and three additional areas on private land.	1,2
● Undertook revegetation works of a 4km section of the Wimmera Highway near Kooreh, Victoria.	2,3
● Adopted and maintained a section of the Wimmera Highway under the Adopt-A-Highway scheme.	1,3
Building partnerships	
● Worked with VicRoads to identify opportunities for, and manage, revegetation works along the East Wimmera Highway.	1,2,10
● Established relationships with:	
○ DELWP's South Western Bushfire Risk Landscape team.	7
○ Parks Victoria's new Aboriginal Ranger Team responsible for future management of Kara Kara National Park.	1,2,3,4,5,6,10
○ Project Platypus to facilitate the creation of biolinks through the Kara Kara CMN area to the Grampians.	1,2
○ Australian Network for Plant Conservation to protect and restore populations of Silver Banksia in the region.	1
○ DELWP's Biodiversity Officers to assist in protecting and restoring populations of threatened native orchids in the region.	5,6
Community engagement and education	
● Hosted woodland bird/wildlife photography workshop in St. Arnaud.	All
● Distributed regular newsletters to members and friends of the Kara Kara CMN.	All
● Expanded the Kara Kara CMN website to include extra features (e.g. Gallery and 'Out and About' page).	All
Public advocacy	
● Lobbied the Victorian Environment Minister for continuation of the annual fox baiting program in the Kara Kara National Park.	4
● Provided input into DELWP's South Western Strategic Bushfire Management Plan.	7
● Submission to the Inspector General for Emergency Management seeking adoption of a risk-based rather than hectare-based approach to bushfire management in Victoria.	7
● Submission to DELWP on fuel reduction burn planning in the Kara Kara CMN area.	2,6,7

Monitoring and evaluation	
● Established a framework for ongoing monitoring of woodland bird assemblages in the Kara Kara CMN area.	1,4,5
● Developed a monitoring calendar and established photo points at all Kara Kara CMN project sites.	1,2,3,5,6,7
Research	
● Completed baseline data for the woodland bird project.	1,2,4,5
● Commenced quarterly woodland bird surveys.	1,2,4,5
● Completed habitat assessments for 20 x 1ha study sites within the Kara Kara CMN area.	1,2,3,5,6,7
● Established trial plantings of Kangaroo Grass (<i>Themeda</i> sp.) as a potential competitor to <i>Oxalis</i> .	2,3
● Fenced two burnt areas to monitor/assess the impact of grazing pressure on understorey recovery.	2,5,7
Building capacity	
● Secured ongoing Facilitator funding through DELWP.	10
● Commenced photography library project.	2,3,4,5,10
● Commenced spatial mapping project.	1,2,3,4,5,10
● Member (3) data entry training for the Victorian Biodiversity Atlas.	All

*** Key to Network 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

"The Kara Kara CMN's website at www.karakaracmn.org.au... is a valuable interface... between the Network, our membership and the public at large."

What we achieved – the highlights

On-ground natural resource management

The number of new on-ground revegetation and habitat expansion projects initiated by the Kara Kara CMN ('the Network') was down slightly on previous years due to the continuing dry conditions and the dearth of available funding for large-scale programs. Despite this, we did manage to attract funding for some smaller projects.

One of these was a direct seeding program along a 4 km stretch of the East Wimmera Highway in collaboration with VicRoads. While small scale, this project nonetheless contributed to our broad objective of improving connectivity in the landscape by helping to create biolinks between patches of remnant woodland across central Victoria.

Another important aspect to our natural resource management and conservation activities is the protection and enhancement of existing quality habitat in the region. Using funding obtained under a Communities for Nature grant, we were able to target several areas for habitat protection programs during the year, including a remnant population of endangered (DEPI 2014) Blakely's Red Gum (*Eucalyptus blakelyi*) in the Carapooee Bushland Reserve and on nearby private land. To protect this important habitat, the Network erected approximately 1.7 km of exclusion fencing to relieve grazing pressure from both native and introduced herbivores, and promote natural recruitment.

In another ongoing habitat protection initiative, the Network adopted an additional 8.5 km section of the Wimmera Highway under the Adopt-A-Highway scheme. Extending east from the hamlet of Kooreh to the Avoca River, this area will be targeted for long-term maintenance and enhancement works.

Building partnerships

Expanding existing, and establishing new, relationships with both government and non-government organisations and agencies was a key focus of the Network's activities in 2015. This not only included looking for opportunities to fund our various projects but also identifying synergies between the Kara Kara CMN's objectives and those of like-minded conservation organisations; after all, by working together we can achieve much more than by going it alone.

During the year, the Network was able to provide input into the development of a new risk-based approach to fuel reduction burn planning for Victoria's South-West Region by the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning's (DELWP) Bushfire Risk Landscape Planning team. Bushfire risk planning can only ever be as good as the data on which it is based, particularly from an ecological standpoint. Thus, we welcomed the opportunity to be able to provide invaluable information on the location of populations of endangered orchids and other important flora; local knowledge that may not otherwise have been available to the planning team. It is hoped that this important dialogue can continue into the future and have a positive influence on bushfire risk planning and fire regimes within our region. See the 'Public advocacy' section of this Review for more information on bushfire risk planning in Victoria.

"...expanding existing and establishing new relationships... was a key focus of the Network's activities in 2015."

In June, several members of the Kara Kara CMN Committee had the opportunity to attend a Smoking Ceremony to mark the launch of a new partnership between Parks Victoria and the Dja Dja Wurrung Aboriginal Clans Corporation to jointly manage six national parks and reserves in North Central Victoria, including the Kara Kara National Park. Following on from the Dja Dja Wurrung native title settlement in 2013, this important partnership is additional recognition of the Dja Dja Wurrung clans' traditional ownership of the lands within the Kara Kara CMN's area of interest. While our relationship with the new Dja Dja Wurrung ranger team is in its formative stages, we look forward to developing a strong and productive working affiliation to protect and enhance the Kara Kara National Park's natural values into the future.



Pictured: Dja Dja Wurrung Ranger Team Leader, Trent Nelson, officiates at the Smoking Ceremony. (Photo: J Boadle)

During the year, the Network was also invited to participate in a project initiated by the Australian Network for Plant Conservation aimed at identifying populations of Silver Banksia (*Banksia marginata*) in the region. Once widespread across Victoria and south-western New South Wales, Silver Banksia has now largely disappeared due to the combined effects of bushfires and grazing. Under the project, seed from known *B. marginata* populations will be collected and their genetic material analysed and pooled into a network of seed production areas to ensure that this species not only survives but can be incorporated into future revegetation programs across south-eastern Australia (ANPC 2015).

Each year, DELWP's Biodiversity Officers rely on assistance from organisations such as the Network and St Arnaud Field Naturalists Inc to help in the protection and restoration of native orchid populations in the region. Despite the best of intentions, however, plantings proposed during 2015 had to be cancelled due to the ongoing dry conditions and poor germination prospects.

Community engagement and education

The Network's website at www.karakaracmn.org.au and *eNewsletters* have proven to be a valuable interface and link between the Kara Kara CMN, our membership and the public at large, providing an overview of our current research and projects. Several new features and resources have been added to the site since its launch in late 2014, including a photo gallery to showcase the region's flora and fauna.

In May, the Network hosted a digital photography workshop presented by wildlife ecologist and photographer, Chris Tzaros. Digital photography is becoming an increasingly popular pastime as shown by the strong level of community support for this event, with participants revelling in the opportunity to practice their new-found skills in the field despite the inclement weather.



Pictured: Chris Tzaros demonstrates a portable bird hide during his digital photography workshop. (Photo: D Saxon-Campbell)

Public advocacy

The Network continued its program of public advocacy during the year, with bushfire management and fire regimes key themes. Complex issues, both have been the subject of considerable public debate in Victoria over recent years. At primary issue is the current hectare-based target that currently underpins annual controlled burn programs and effectively aims to burn up to five percent of public land across the State each year.

The initial and overriding sentiment behind this target, which arose from Recommendation 56 of the 2009 Victorian Bushfire Royal Commission, was to protect human life and community infrastructure. For a variety of reasons, however, this hectare-based approach has proven less than satisfactory on a number of fronts – notably manifest through “too-frequent” controlled burns in some areas - with the result that, in 2015, the State Government commissioned the Inspector-General of Emergency Management (IGEM) to review this target in the context of Victoria’s overall management of bushfire risk (DJR 2015).

“...bushfire risk planning should... take into account the ecology and life cycles of our flora and fauna, and other natural and artificial impacts on our native woodlands.”

The Kara Kara CMN’s view of this blanket, hectare-based approach is that it represents a substantial threat to the long-term sustainability of natural ecosystems, not only in our region but across Victoria. We have long advocated a risk-based approach to bushfire management, a view that we have consistently put in our submissions to the Environment Minister, to DELWP when providing feedback on controlled burn plans, and ultimately, to the IGEM.

In essence, a risk-based approach means that bushfire risk planning should have a scientific basis that not only takes into account the ecology and life cycles of our flora and fauna, but also other natural and artificial disturbances on our native woodlands. For instance, large areas of our forests, particularly in the northern section of the St Arnaud Range, are devoid of understorey, in part due to high grazing pressure by over-abundant kangaroos and wallabies. In these areas in particular, too-frequent controlled burns represent an additional stressor that is compromising the long-term viability of these ecosystems. Further, both here and elsewhere, fire regimes should account for the needs of species that require resources associated with long-unburnt habitat in order to survive (Gill 2012).

The IGEM’s Report recommended that the Victorian Government replace the current hectare-based approach to bushfire management with a risk-based approach (DJR 2015), and foster improved partnerships between fire and land management agencies, and communities to reduce bushfire risk on both public and private land. The Victorian Government has now accepted all of the IGEM’s recommendations (DELWP³ 2015), a development we can only applaud.

“...fire regimes should account for the needs of species that require resources associated with long-unburnt habitat in order to survive...”

Research

Assessing the quality of our habitats

We often talk about the need to protect 'quality' habitat. But what is quality habitat, especially in the context of the changes that are projected to occur in a warming climate? To find out, we established a series of 20 x 1 hectare (100m x 100m) sites across a range of habitats or Ecological Vegetation Classes (EVCs) in remnant woodland within the Kara Kara CMN's area of interest. Eight of these sites are situated in the Kara Kara National Park, with the remainder in nearby Nature Conservation Reserves.

Vegetation at each site was then assessed using the Habitat Hectares Method (DELWP¹ 2015), a system that scores vegetation against an established benchmark for each EVC based on a variety of habitat characteristics, such as tree cover and canopy health, weediness, understorey extent and level of modification, whether or not species recruitment and coarse woody debris is

present, and how the habitat is situated in a landscape context. The resulting score reflects how vegetation on the site rates against the EVC benchmark. With assessments now complete, our long-term monitoring program can commence, and it is proposed that follow-up surveys will be undertaken at regular intervals to monitor changes in habitat quality at our various sites over time.

Pictured: Kara Kara CMN President, Chris Campbell, installs an identifier tag at a site in Gowar Nature Conservation Reserve.



"...at least 30 of our woodland bird species... are at moderate to high risk of local extinction."

Our declining woodland birds

Late 2014 saw the completion of two major components of our Woodland Birds Project.

The first was the collection of baseline data of woodland bird assemblages in our region. With completion of this phase, the focus has now shifted to long-term monitoring. To find out more, refer to the 'Monitoring and evaluation' section of this Review.

The second project component involved the analysis of 13 years (2002 to 2013) of bird survey data collected by our partner organisation, the St Arnaud Field Naturalists Club Inc, to examine the status of a selection of resident or sedentary woodland bird species and identify any 'at risk' species in the landscape. The long-term status of 34 common woodland bird species was analysed, with a focus on those identified in other studies as being in decline in southern Australia, species of conservation concern, and species identified by the researchers as having low occurrence in the field.

The results were disturbing, with at least 30 of our woodland bird species shown to be at moderate to high risk of local extinction. To summarise, 26 (76%) of the 34 species were either absent (4 spp.), present as isolated records only (4 spp.), in decline (8 spp.), or their occurrence rates had remained steady but at low levels (10 spp.). The remaining eight species (23%) had

increased in occurrence, although rates for all but two of these species were low. When occurrence rates were averaged to determine occupancy status, 88% of species were either absent (4 spp.) or had low occupancy (26 spp.), and the remaining 12% (4 spp.) had moderate occupancy, although in decline.

More information about these results is contained in a presentation which is available in pdf format from the 'Events & Resources' page of our website at www.karakaracmn.org.au.

Monitoring and evaluation

As alluded to in our 2014 *Year in Review*, establishing a monitoring framework and calendar for ongoing evaluation of our various on-ground projects was a central theme for the Network in 2015. Photo points were established at each of our existing and new project sites throughout the year and these will be revisited annually. From 2015 onwards, a monitoring framework will be a mandatory element of each new project, as only then can we evaluate our success and make any changes that may be required.

Our Woodland Birds Project is a prime example. With the collection of baseline data on woodland bird assemblages in the region now complete, the monitoring phase of this project has commenced. Quarterly surveys are being conducted at sites across the region to assess changes in woodland bird assemblages over time. Efforts are being coordinated with our partner organisation, the St Arnaud Field Naturalists Club Inc, to spread data collection efforts and maximise landscape coverage.

"From 2015 onwards, a monitoring framework will be a mandatory element of each new project..."

Building capacity

Facilitator funding

One of the challenges faced by the Committee this year was securing a continuation of funding for our Facilitator position. This role was one of 60 funded by the former Victorian Liberal Coalition Government under the Victorian Local Landcare Facilitator Initiative in 2012. Funding ended on 30 June 2015 and it was unclear whether tenure would be continued under the Andrew's Labor Government. For small, largely volunteer-run organisations like the Kara Kara CMN, this paid Facilitator position is a vital resource as it enables our volunteers to devote more time to on-ground conservation activities than would otherwise be possible. Fortunately we, along with the other recipient organisations, were able to demonstrate to the new Government that the services provided by the Facilitators represent good value for a relatively small investment of public funds. As such, the mid-year announcement that funding would continue for up to four years under the revamped Victorian Landcare Facilitator Program was most welcome, though we are mindful that this funding comes with strict conditions.

Other capacity-building initiatives

With our Facilitator assured, at least for the medium term, the Committee was able to proceed with two small projects designed to expand the organisation's capacity and the skills of our volunteers. Both have been made possible because of a small amount of funding made available by DELWP, for which we are most grateful.

First up was the development of a photographic library; a need that was becoming particularly pressing with the launch of our new website and *eNewsletters*. Under this project, hundreds of photographs of the region's flora and fauna are being sorted and catalogued so that they can be readily accessed when required.

Another project, as alluded to in our 2014 *Year in Review*, has been the development of a spatial mapping capability within the Kara Kara CMN. This involves retaining the services of a contractor to develop a series of maps using GIS (Geographic Information Systems) software to identify the locations of the Network's various research sites and other key information. QGIS software training is also being provided to our Facilitator and several Committee members so that additional mapping layers can be added as our various projects are progressed and completed. This technology will make planning and tracking our projects much easier and add a new dimension to Network communications.

In another training initiative, during the year our Facilitator and two Committee members received data entry training for the Victorian Biodiversity Atlas (VBA), the web-based repository of information on native flora and fauna for this State. Maintained by DELWP, this database contains information on the attributes, distribution and conservation status of all of Victoria's native species as well as over six million records arising from field studies and observations (DELWP² 2015). This important resource is used as the basis for much of the State Government's planning in natural resource management, such as planning for fuel reduction burn programs, so the entry of up-to-date field data into the database by organisations such as the Kara Kara CMN on an ongoing basis is vital.

"[Spatial mapping] technology will make planning and tracking our projects much easier and add a new dimension to Network communications."

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