PlainsFacts

Edition 3 Spring 2005

Events and announcements

- 2006 RIRDC Rural Womens Award

  Applications are open contact Patti Wenn at DPI on (03) 9658 4819

  Website: www.ruralwomensaward.gov.au

- EVC Restoration Forum

  Feb 1st Port Phillip Region
  Contact Rebecca Passlow from Greening Australia on (03) 9450 5328

- Habitat Conservation and Management course

  Feb 8 - May 31 Port Phillip Region
  15 evening sessions + field days
  Contact Rebecca Passlow from Greening Australia on (03) 9450 5328

If you would like to contribute an article for the next edition of PlainsFacts, please call PlainsTender on 52329115 or 52329117 or email us at vvp@ccma.vic.gov.au

Update on Round Two

Expressions of Interest for the PlainsTender have now closed and we would like thank everyone for their participation in the project. There was a great range of sites assessed and the landholders were wonderful with their co-operation and enthusiasm for the project. Site assessments have also concluded and those involved in Round Two should have received their management plans and prepared their tenders. Evaluation of the tenders should take place mid-January.

Monitoring of Round 1 sites has also commenced and we are thrilled to see the progress of the management and improvement of the sites. Monitoring visits will be conducted by a VVP staff member looking at the actions being taken so far in accordance with the management plan to improve their native vegetation. Botanical monitoring surveys of several properties with grassy vegetation under the PlainsTender scheme were completed in November and early December.

Maar Volcanoes

Marr volcanoes (also known as tuff rings) are landforms that are caused by volcanic explosions that form a shallow, wide crater surrounded by material ejected from the crater. The word Maar comes from a German word used to describe lakes formed from volcanoes in the Eifel District.

There is approximately 40 Maar volcanoes on the Victorian volcanic plains, the main ones being the Red Rock complex near Colac and Tower Hill in Koroit.

Red Rock began erupting 12,000 years ago and continued till about 6,000 years ago making it one of the youngest Volcanoes in Australia. Scoria cones and small lava flows have also been found at this site contributing to a total of forty eruption points.

From these eruptions points basalt lava, ash and scoria was thrown into the atmosphere.

The craters created by the Maar volcanoes have resulted in the large number of lakes present around the region. Lake Bullen Merri, Lake Gnotuk and Lake Purrembete are just some examples of crater lakes in the region that have been formed by Maar Volcanoes. These lakes are now habitat for bird and reptile life, provide a water source for farmers, attract tourists to the area and have significant geological, historical and cultural value. Many of these lakes are filled by underground table water leaking into the crater and run off from the crater walls. The lakes can become very saline due to evaporation and no run off.

Grassy Ecosystem Research and Development Forum

Mount Rothwell in Little River was the location for the first Grassy Ecosystem Research and Development Forum run by PlainsTender and Arthur Rylah Institute on the 27th of October. This day brought together representatives from the major projects research and production over the Victorian Volcanic Plains.

The day provided a great opportunity for everyone to get together, discuss collaboration and cross-over between projects and to discuss options for distributing this information to interested parties and especially the landholders.

The day proved to be a real success with some really exciting research and great discussion about where to go next in terms of protecting, managing and promoting native grasslands. We are looking forward to including some of this new information within PlainsFacts to keep you all up to date with the latest research and projects happening on the Volcanic Plains.

Growling Grass Frog

The Growling Grass Frog (also known as the Southern Bell Frog) occurs throughout the Victorian Volcanic Plains. You will find them living in swamps, ponds and wetlands in lowland woodlands and grasslands.

It is a large green or green and brown frog with a warty back and a black line running from its nostril, around its eye to its shoulder. It's most distinctive feature is the low growl it makes as its calling. It's very different to any other frog call and is described as 'crawark-crawark crok crok'. They make this call in the warmer months whilst floating in the water. They prefer still permanent water sites and enjoy lying exposed in the sun.

Growling Grass frogs are carnivorous and will eat anything smaller than themselves, even other frogs.

Growling Grass Frogs like to breed in the warmer months starting from August to about April, laying their eggs in about October. They can lay about 1800-3800 eggs in shallow water. Their eggs are pigmented and covered in a floating jelly substance, this later breaks up and the eggs sink. The tadpoles are a pinkish grey colour with yellow fins, this stage can last about 4-15 months.

This breed was once the most common frog species on the Plains. Today is a different story, like many other fauna it has declined in numbers due to loss of habitat and water quality. Other factors which may have affected the sustainability of the species is the introduction of mosquito fish, exposure to UV radiation and the Chytrid Fungus.

If you think you may have the Growling Grass Frog on your property let us know at PlainsTender on 52329115 or 52329117.

Research on the Plains

The spring plant species data collection was completed in November at each of the 3 experimental plots on the Volcanic Plains, marking three years of consecutive data collected. The native wildflowers were out in force, displaying their full beauty with an increase in Yam Daisies (*Microseris sp 1.*) observed at one of the experimental sites.

It is clear that some of the treatments being examined in the experimental grazing trials are resulting in different impacts on the grassland.

This can be illustrated by the no grazing treatment (stock omitted for 3 years to date) which has declined in species number and increased in litter cover. By preventing any type of biomass removal, the Kangaroo Grass (*Themeda triandra*) has dominated these plots and has resulted in a decline in native species diversity and an increase in some weedy species such as Squirrel-tailed fescue (*Vulpia bromoides*). A dense layer of litter also forms, blocking light and preventing plant species establishment and survival.

Field Day

Thursday November the 9th, PlainsTender in conjunction with Department of Sustainability and Environment and Grain and Graze held a Grazing Native Grasslands Field Day at a property in Darlington.

The property, named Terrinallum South is owned by Tom and Kate Calvert and has been the site of grazing plot trials for the past 2 years. The day was a big success with around 70 people participating.

Jaimie Mavromihalis for the Arthur Rylah Institute has been working on the trials since 2003 and was on hand to talk about her results so far (updates of these trials have been published in previous editions of PlainsFacts). The grazing plots are open and shut to grazing at various times of the year and each spring the vegetation in each plot is assessed on a number of different aspects, such as species diversity, sward height and bare ground.

Property owner Tom Calvert demonstrated how he has implemented strategic grazing throughout his property using rotational grazing. Managing his native grasslands has become a vital component of his whole farm planning.

The day also featured Paul Horne and Amanda Kobelt talking about the benefits of native invertebrates. There was also a brief talk from DSE staff about the endangered Fragrant Leek Orchid which is found on the property and the results of monitoring endangered reptiles such as the Striped Legless Lizard by placing roofing tiles in grids across the site.

We are pleased to see the interest in native grasslands and hope that people walked away from the day with better knowledge and ideas about how native pasture can be useful for both biodiversity and production.

Native Vegetation Management ~ Summer

Summer is the time of peak environmental stress for many plants due to reduced rainfall and higher temperatures. However many native summer-active grasses are well adapted to the harsh Australian summer climate and are often characterised by specialised adaptations such as thickened stems for food storage, integument covering the root system to reduce heat stress and thickened leaves to aid in moisture retention.

Although summer-active native grasses grow during the summer and respond well to rainfall events, care should be taken not to overgraze pastures during this sensitive period.

Stocking rates should be reduced and if extensive areas of bare ground appear, particularly in late summer, stock should be removed altogether.

Overgrazing during the summer months may lead to considerable amounts of bare ground in the pasture - the result can be an increase in exotic annual species filling in the gaps. Autumn rains trigger germination of exotic annual species and over time, can degrade perennial-based pastures.

Several native grasses extend their flowering into the summer months so look out for the distinctive seed heads of Kangaroo Grass (*Themeda triandra*), Windmill Grass (Chloris truncata) and Spider Grass (*Enteropogon acicularis*). Few of the native perennial herbs flower in the summer months however you may see some Lemon-Beauty-heads (*Calocephalus citreus*) and some members of the Daisy family (*Brachyscome spp.*) along grassy roadsides.

Stony Knoll Shrubland

Stony Knoll Shrubland is described as having a variety of shrubs with a grassy understorey and rocky basalt soils. These days the rocky soils still remain in many places but the variety of shrubs have been lost and much of the grassy understorey is affected by grazing.

Historically these areas were developed from areas of fractured basalt from the more recent Volcanoes, usually in close proximity to a volcano eruption point.

This EVC now is usually found on rocky escarpments surrounding lakes and wetlands that were once part of the volcano system.

Common flora you will still find in this EVC is Hedge Wattle, Sweet Bursaria, Tree Voilet, Prickly Moses and the grassy flora such as

Kangaroo Grass, Kidneyweed, Wallaby Grass, Weeping Grass and Pink Bindweed. This EVC has no eucalypts and the shrubs grow up to 3m tall.

Unfortunately now with the technology and machinery to remove rocks and crush them, this EVC is under threat and so are the homes of many reptiles and other invertebrates that lived there.

These areas are now being cleared and used for cropping whereas before farmers just tended graze the area and saw it as land that wasn't particularly usable.

Nationally Threatened Ecological Communities and the VVP

How do I find out about them?

Did you know that the Australian Government protects ecological communities and species threatened with extinction?

Threatened ecological communities and species are recognised as Matters of National Environmental Significance under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 (the EPBC Act).

Currently, three ecological communities found on the Plains are nominated for listing Western (Basalt) Plains Natural Temperate Grassland, Victorian Western Basalt Plains Grassy Woodland and Temperate Lowland Plains Grassy Wetland. All three nominations are being assessed as to their eligibility for listing.

To keep landholders, community groups and the general public informed about ecological communities nominated or listed under the EPBC Act, as well as the implications of listing for conservation and possible effects on landholders, the Australian Government Department of the Environment and Heritage has developed a new e- newsletter, *Communities for Communities*.

Communities for Communities is targeted at community groups and natural resource management bodies, and the articles and pictures can be used by them for their own publications, to help spread awareness about threatened ecological communities.

The e-newsletter will provide updates about nominations, listings and useful information on other matters relating to the conservation of ecological communities. In future editions, it is hoped that recovery plans, threat abatement plans, and information about where to find documents available for public comment and fact sheets about new listings will be included.

The first edition of Communities for Communities is available at:
www.deh.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/publications/communities-newsletter/
You will also find information about how to become a subscriber.

VVP Tender Funds Conservation of the Budj Bim National Heritage Landscape

Winda Mara Aboriginal Corporation based in Heywood was one of the successful applicants for the first round of VVP PlainsTender funding earlier this year. Winda Mara manages land on the Mt Eccles lava flow, this consists of six properties comprising of 1200 Ha in total.

Three of these properties obtained funding through the VVP PlainsTender to carry out conservation activities to protect the remnant vegetation with fencing and the removal of pest plants and animals from these areas.

Vegetation on these properties comprises of stony rises, grassy woodlands, forests dominated by Mana gums and ten kilometres of riverside vegetation on Darlots Creek. In 2004 these three properties were included in the area declared as part of the Budj Bim National Heritage Landscape.

Prior to European arrival the Mt Eccles lava flow was the home to the Gunditjmara people. They engineered the extensive eel aquiculture system and lived in villages of stone huts for thousands of years on the lava flow.

Many archaeological sites from this pre European period remain in the area.

Since the arrival of Europeans who began to farm the area in the mid 1800s the introduction of

non indigenous species of plants and animals has had serious consequences for the native flora and fauna. Many local species which were once widespread now only exist on areas of the lava flow which were considered to be unsuitable for intensive grazing.

The Winda Mara Land Management team will carry out weed and pest control activities over a large area of Aboriginal owned property on the Mt Eccles lava flow. Major activities undertaken this year include spotlight shooting of foxes and rabbits, baiting of rabbits and weed control programs targeting Sweet Briar and Hawthorn which are major problems along Darlots Creek.

Over the next six months a large scale fencing project will begin on the northern property "Allambie". The aim of this will be to protect a large area of high value remnant bush and an area of wetland from grazing.

Further information:

Contact Matthew Butt at the Winda-Mara Aboriginal Corporation

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Deadline for PlainsFacts Autumn Edition: 15th February 2006

VVP PlainsTender

For further information: T: (03) 5232 9117 E: vvp@ccma.vic.gov.au W: www.ccma.vic.gov.au

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