

# PlainsFacts

## Events and announcements

- Lake Bolac Eel Festival

April 22<sup>nd</sup>, Lake Bolac

- Women on Farms

19<sup>th</sup> & 20<sup>th</sup> of May, Hamilton

- Greening Australia:  
Wetland ecology and  
management course

(13-16 June)

Warrambeen Landcare Centre,  
Shelford.

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](mailto:vvp@ccma.vic.gov.au)

## Edition 4 Autumn 2006

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## Plains Tender Update

Congratulations to all the landholders who were successful in the second round of PlainsTender. We look forward to working with you all over the next four years and improving the quality of your native vegetation.

With both rounds of the Tender completed we will now look to focus on the promotion of the Victorian Volcanic Plains and the ecosystems that live upon it. We want to involve the local communities and as PlainsTender landholders we hope to involve you all in learning about the native vegetation on the Plains, ways to identify native grasses and herbs and what we can do to ensure their survival.

The PlainsTender project team will be present at both the Eel Festival and Women on Farms with a display full of information on Grasslands and the Volcanic Plains. Please drop in and see us if you are looking for information on specific topics related to native vegetation or you may have some of your own personal experience you may like to share with us.

## Funding opportunities

The next round for National Landcare Program (NLP) Community Support applications for 2006/2007 is expected to open in May 2006, with an anticipated continued priority given to community and industry-driven productive, sustainable and on-ground focused agriculture, forestry and fisheries projects. Further NLP information can be found at [www.daff.gov.au/landcare](http://www.daff.gov.au/landcare).

Round 8 for the Envirofund opened on 23 February 2006. This is open to all community groups. The closing date for applications is 28 April 2006. For further information, please see the Natural Heritage Trust website at <http://www.nht.gov.au/envirofund/index.html>

# Volcano Facts: Geoconservation

Geoconservation focuses on the protection of the non-living (abiotic) aspects of the natural environment. The Victorian Volcanic Plains has numerous geological features in the form of extinct Volcanoes, these features are vital to the history of the region, provide tourism to the area and are scientifically unique landscapes that aren't found anywhere else in the world; therefore protection of these landforms is vital.

Geological features come under threat from activities like development, mining and inappropriate land use just like our flora and fauna do, unfortunately we sometimes assume these features are indestructible. They too can degrade over time, but unlike the living environment they can't be replaced. Without the diversity and high quality of geological landforms, biodiversity will be impacted upon because there is not the habitat and structure to sustain the living.



*Mt Leura, Camperdown*

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## Urban expansion destroying Melbourne's Native Grasslands

Melbourne has lost the equivalent of about 100 MCG playing fields of native grasslands a year for the past twenty years to industrial and housing development and weed invasion. We risk completely losing these biologically important sites unless governments take action.

A recent University of Melbourne study found that 44 per cent of Melbourne's native grasslands were lost in just fifteen years between 1985 and 2000. Approvals for further industrial and housing development since then ultimately means that, in the last 20 years (1985-2005), an area equivalent to the size of almost 2000 MCG playing fields has been destroyed (3540 hectares).

PHD student Nick Williams from the school of Botany has been researching the decline in remnant grasslands around Melbourne. Although the government has acknowledged the high importance of saving this ecosystem, many large patches of native grassland are still being cleared.

These findings are a real indication of what is happening in many cities of Australia and with various vegetation types. It seems the attempt at protection of significant sites through either public reserves or management agreements it still not stopping the decline. The sizes of these areas are also getting smaller and more fragmented. This affects the distribution of flora and fauna and will eventually lead

to the extinction of many species because they have little habitat in which to survive in.

The invasion of weeds is also a major concern for areas like roadside and railway reserves where the diversity of plants is usually quite high. Since there is usually no active management of many of these sites, weed invasion can severely degrade the quality of the grassland and if action is not taken the weeds will eventually take over from the natives.

It is hoped that this research will assist in prioritising areas of remnant vegetation in terms of their biological importance and their susceptibility to destruction and degradation. This will hopefully provide information to assist in the preservation and proper management of urban grasslands for the long term.

**For more information please contact:**

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# Biodiversity and Salinity

Biodiversity exists in many forms on farms even on those farms affected by salinity and often considered poor value as a result. The Sustainable Grazing for Saline Lands project run by DPI and DSE is examining the success of various pasture species at a saline farm near Dunkeld. As part of the project, biodiversity is also being monitored with some fascinating results.

Old trees at the site have been used by several bird species including Magpies, Crows, Wood Ducks and the Narkeen Kestrel. Trees are very important in the agriculture landscape and are used for shelter and food by birds, bats, mammals, reptiles and invertebrates.

Animal observations at the site included a small native carnivorous marsupial called a Fat-tailed Dunnart (*Sminthopsis crassicaudata*). The Fat-tailed Dunnart is nocturnal and shelters in grass and under logs and rocks. It feeds on insects and often stores fat in its tail, which helps during times of food shortages-hence the name *Fat-tailed*.

The Banded Plover (bird) has also been observed building a nest and raising chicks in open depressions on the ground. The Common Spade-foot Toad (*Neobatrachus sudelli*) was also observed at the site. The damp environment is ideal for the species as the female lays a large number of eggs in ponds, wheel ruts and dams.

Biodiversity is present in many forms in saline agricultural landscapes. It is vital, therefore, to consider conservation values of saline sites and well as production values.



*Fat-tailed Dunnart*

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## Heavier-soils Plains Grassland

Heavier-soils Plains Grassland refers to an area devoid of trees and made up of grasses and herbs mostly less than 1 metre. This Ecological Vegetation Class (EVC) contains a large diversity of plant life and thrives within fertile basalt soils.

These basalt soils tend to be prone to seasonal waterlogging and become very dry and cracked during the summer months. These conditions aren't ideal for trees to grow resulting in a landscape that is predominantly grasslands.

This EVC once covered most of the Plains, but due to land clearing for housing, introduced pasture and cropping there is very little left. Majority of the EVC is now only found on private land and public places like cemeteries, roadsides, railway lines and stock routes.

Due to overgrazing and mismanagement many of these areas are becoming overrun with weeds and many species are disappearing under the constant pressure of grazing. Some areas are still being managed well using fire or a strategic grazing regime and these do

seem to carry the greatest amount of species diversity.

This demonstrates that this EVC does require active management as opposed to being locked up and left untouched like many other vegetation types.



# Iramoo Sustainable Living Centre

Iramoo is a Woiwuring word used to describe the abundant grassy wildflower plains that once ringed Melbourne and then out west. To acknowledge the land's original occupants, Iramoo was chosen as the name for a 35 hectare reserve of native basalt grassland, next to the St Albans campus of Victoria University.

The discovery of the critically endangered Striped Legless Lizard (*Delma impar*) and several threatened plants like the Plains Rice Flower (*Pimelea spinescens*) saved this grassland remnant from industrial and residential development. Weeds such as Serrated Tussock and Chilean Needle Grass are ever growing threats to the native grasslands left in Melbourne's western suburbs.

The Iramoo Sustainable Community Centre, based at the St Albans campus, provides a hub of activity and information for people interested in native grasslands, and in living more sustainable lifestyles. A mix of research, threatened species conservation, revegetation, education and communication only happens due to the help of many people including VU staff, students, volunteers and several community groups, including the Friends of Iramoo. By engaging people in native grassland conservation, so the local community can come to appreciate the beauty of grasslands living below one's knees.

A Community Open Day will be held at Iramoo on Saturday 29 April, from 10.30am to 2.30pm.

Come all to enjoy free tours of Iramoo's facilities and fun activities, including:-

- The Green Lab community room to make some paper wildflowers,

- The Iramoo Nursery to transplant some rare grassland seedlings,

- The Discovery Centre education room to meet some local wildlife,



The Seed-bank to get a close-up look at seed under a microscope,

Visit the Water-watch trailer to learn about our waterways,

Think about how to conserve water, make compost, or create wildlife habitats with native gardens and frog ponds at home

Hear about the lands' history as you walk by Reconciliation Rocks, the seed orchard and to the wetland, and let Iramoo now what you think about ideas for the future,

Tour out to the wildlife reserve to experience the on-ground grassland issues of weeds, fire, wildflowers and the potentially "controversial" role of soil disturbance.

A simple BBQ fare will be provided for a gold coin donation in the outdoor community space. For more information about Iramoo or flyers about the Community Open Day to help spread the word, call the office on 9919 2815, or email [iramoo@vu.edu.au](mailto:iramoo@vu.edu.au).

## Chocolate Lily

Chocolate lilies (*Arthropodium strictum*) are one of the more well known plants of the Volcanic Plains.

This attractive purple wildflower can be found throughout the grasslands and grassy woodland regions of Victoria and Tasmania.

An easy flower to identify due to its distinct chocolate scent that would have any chocolate lover licking their lips.

This lily can grow to 1 metre tall with the flowers located on branched stems.

The flower is quite widespread and common on the Volcanic Plains in areas that still contain native vegetation. Chocolate lilies flower in late spring to early summer, they like well drained soils and are quite tolerant to disturbance and grazing pressure.



# The Dry Stone Walls of the Western Volcanic Plains of Victoria

The most numerous and impressive networks of dry stone walls in Australia are found on the western volcanic plains of Victoria. The walls, most of which are on private property, are beautifully crafted and have functional, aesthetic and heritage value. They provide a blend of the natural and cultural history of the region and contribute to its special look and atmosphere.

Few could pass through the region without realizing their impact on the landscape. In some places, in the Stony Rises at Pomborneit and at Kolora north west of Mount Noorat, they dominate it. In fact some of the walls look as though they have always been there; looking so natural and in harmony with the environment. The walls in the Stony Rises are of national significance in terms of quantity, style, heritage, skill and empathy with the landscape.

The western plains of Victoria comprise one of the world's great basalt plains. The volcanic activity which has shaped the landscape, that is generally flat except for the volcanic cones, occurred in the relatively recent past, between 20,000 and 4,000 years ago. These volcanic cones as well as crater lakes were the result of volcanic activity which provided the natural materials for the walls.

The eruption sites most visible are Mount Elephant, Mount Noorat, Mt Leura and Mt Porndon. Hollows in the basalt surface have resulted in the formation of numerous crater lakes including two particularly scenic lakes, Bullen Merri and Gnotuk near Camperdown. Other lakes found in the district were formed when lava flows blocked the valleys of streams and Lake Corangamite, the largest in Victoria, is one of these.

The natural landscape was given new form and function by the immigrants who began arriving in the region in the middle of the 19th century. Realizing the fertility of the volcanic plains, they set about clearing the land first of natural vegetation and then of surface

stone in order that they could introduce stock and grow crops. In the process of clearing the land and preparing for stock, first sheep and then cattle, fences had to be built. The stone cleared from the ground provided the earliest building material for fences. Building stone fences was an economic and practical way to utilise the stone cleared from the land.

Today the dry stone walls of the Plains are still performing the same functions for which they were built over 100 years ago. They create enclosures,



*The Rabbit Wall: Porborneit*

provide boundaries between public and private land, subdivide properties, protect cultivated paddocks, livestock, homesteads, crops and act as barriers against fires as well offering protection from the elements. They also provide an ideal habitat for small fauna and flora.

Although there is evidence of dry stone walling in the 1840s, most of the enduring stone fences in the region were built after the gold rush, in 1870s and 80's when many labourers returned from the diggings without a fortune. This coincided with the Land Acts of 1862, resulting in large holdings being divided up for closer settlement which needed to be fenced in a more permanent way. Around volcanic cones, dry stone walls were carefully constructed, so that paddocks could be enclosed and cleared of stone in one operation.

*(continued next page)*

## The Dry Stone Walls of the Western Volcanic Plains of Victoria *(from previous page)*

Up until this time the squatters employed shepherds and stockmen to watch their flocks and herds or used timber to build post and rail fences or simple brush fences. Stone fences were a sign of tenure, security and investment in the future.

From the 1870s many pastoralists began to rebuild earlier walls in an attempt to make their properties rabbit-proof. Several construction techniques were used: overhanging copestones, wooden slats projecting under the copestones, wire stretching out from the top of the wall, trenches about a metre deep, plugging of holes in the wall to prevent the rabbits colonizing the walls, and even asymmetrical walls with stepping stones up one side and a sheer wall on the other.



*Wall with flat copestones: Noorat*

The Rabbit Wall built by the Manifold brothers at Purrumbete in the 1880s is perhaps the most significant wall in the region standing up to two metres high and which originally ran continuously from Lake Corangamite to Lake Purrumbete.

Dry stone walling although back-breaking work is a skilful craft and in earlier times was handed down from one generation to the next, creating stone walling families. Each wall is in fact two walls because the craftsman or cowan would lay two rows of stone about a metre apart, filling in the centre with smaller stones. In fact a well built enduring wall is a work of art adding interest and character to the agricultural landscape.

Today the dry stone walls of the region are threatened by changes in the operation of commercial farms since they were built in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. We have seen gradual changes in land use from grazing to cropping and particularly the increased importance of dairying in the south of the region and more intensive agricultural enterprises. More recently, concerns have been raised about incursion of forest plantation into valuable agricultural land.

Technological advances and the greater mechanization of agriculture, has made many tasks easier and quicker

but has also necessitated large investment and changes to the internal layout of the farm thus putting walls at risk.

In 1997 Corangamite Arts installed the Corangamite Dry Stone Walls Heritage Trail which has become a popular tourist destination adding greater economic value to the walls' primary utilitarian function. The walls attract eco, geo and cultural tourists who want to learn about our past as they enjoy both the natural and built landscape. More recently the Dry Stone Walls Association of Australia was formed in order to ensure a future for dry stone walls and the craft of walling in this country.

At the same time more and more people want to learn the craft of dry stone walling not only so that they can mend and build walls but also so that they can experience working with a natural material. and create something of their own. And for this reason popular dry stone walling workshops are regularly conducted in the region at Glenormiston College near Terang.

Josie Black OAM  
27 March 2006

Deadline for PlainsFacts Winter Edition: 9th June 2006

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A JOINT INITIATIVE BY:

