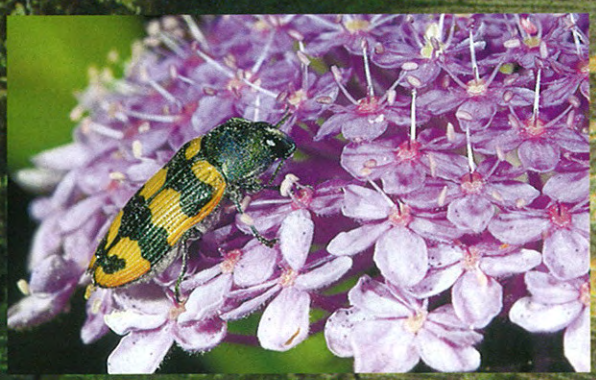
Bushland management with friends

The Department of Environment and Conservation's *Land for Wildlife* program has recently celebrated its 2,000th property being registered. Registered *Land for Wildlife* sites are parcels of privately owned land, of which parts are managed for conservation. But how does the program work and what differences has it made since its inception in 1997?



by Penny Hussey

Fly over the south-west of Western Australia and you will see a patchwork of farms, roads, towns and bush. Part of this living quilt is blocks and strips of the native vegetation that originally covered the whole of WA before European settlement. Smooth, rounded granite rocks, jagged orange breakaways, creeklines and patches of forest, they contain the diverse suite of flora, fauna and fungi that make the southern half of WA a world biodiversity hotspot. Some of these patches of bushland are nature reserves, being managed specifically for conservation, but many are on private land. If our biodiversity is to survive, all these remnants must be managed as if wildlife matters.

Most landholders are proud of the biodiversity they look after and want to know more about it while also making sure that their management actions are the most appropriate for their particular site. To provide this on-site ecological advice, the Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM) started *Land for Wildlife* (LFW) in 1997. Since then, more than 2,000 property owners have registered with the free program which is now run by CALM's successor the Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC).

How does *Land for Wildlife* work?

The most important part of the program is a property visit, where landholders and a LFW officer move around the property to discuss any matters concerning landscape management that may arise, from the position of an eagle's nest to the cause of an acid saline seep, or the best location for a sandalwood plantation. There may also be questions about the names of plants or animals, the control of weeds or the use of fire. The exchange of information is two-way, as often the landholder has noticed something—the trigger for a regeneration event perhaps, or an insect pollinating a flower—that fills in a previously blank bit of the highly complex jigsaw that is our knowledge of the bushland ecosystem.

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Main A farm with jarrah forest corridors.
Inset A jewel beetle feeding on a blue lace flower (*Trachymene coerulea*).
Photos – Jiri Lochman

Above A *Land for Wildlife* officer with a landowner in Wheatbelt bushland.
Photo – Avril Baxter

Below Wedge-tailed eagles are among those species offered better protection on *Land for Wildlife* properties.
Photo – Dave Watts/Lochman Transparencies

All this is written up in a report for the landholder. The report documents the nature conservation features of the property and suggests management actions that could be considered to improve their conservation value, integrated with whatever else is happening on the property. The decision of whether to undertake the actions rests entirely with the landholder, but the report provides the ecological background to help inform their choice (in bushland management, even 'doing nothing' will have an ecological consequence). Revisits after several years have shown that landholders undertake about 80 per cent of the actions suggested, and those that are not adopted often have an extraneous factor acting against them—for example, the inability to access a wide diversity of understorey plants for a revegetation project.

Although the property visit is the core of LFW, the LFW officers also provide general advice when asked, give talks and run workshops. In addition, there is a publications program, including the quarterly magazine *Western Wildlife* which has won the Sigma Landcare Media Award (WA Section) for excellence in environmental reporting.

Currently, the program employs 12 staff, 10 of them part-time field officers located across the south-west, and two full-time staff at DEC's State operations headquarters in Kensington.

Photopoint monitoring

Photopoint monitoring reveals the changes to a landscape over time. These photos show a gravelly ridge on Bill White's property at Dumbleyung. The top photograph shows the land in October 2001 during the *Land for Wildlife* visit with palatable shrubs in the foreground heavily grazed. The other photograph was taken in July 2009, after a fence was erected to exclude stock in 2002. It shows how the low shrubs have regrown once grazing pressure was removed. *Photos – Avril Baxter*

Land for Wildlife in action

What sort of actions are commonly undertaken? One of the most obvious is to control grazing by installing stock-proof fences. In addition, landholders may put programs in place to control feral grazers such as rabbits or pigs, or predators such as foxes and cats. Weed management is also essential, especially if bushland rehabilitation or regeneration is to occur. It is also important to know what is a weed and what is native, so bushwalks, workshops and identification texts become vital. The landholder may embark on detailed work, such as erecting nest boxes or modifying a dam to create habitat for specific fauna—and this might lead to translocations onto the site of animals that once occurred there but have since gone locally extinct. It may also be necessary to consider actions to mitigate threats from wind or water erosion, rising water tables or salinity. Finally, the careful use of fire for regeneration needs to be considered. From this suite of possible actions, the LFW officers discuss with the landholder those that could be valuable at any specific site, and whether there are grants to kick-start the management.

Only if the community as a whole wants native flora and fauna to survive will there be enough effort for it to really happen. LFW members show goodwill and enthusiasm exists. They are looking after their piece of bushland because they genuinely want to. All the LFW team agrees, it is both a pleasure and a privilege to work with such dedicated people.

Making a difference

So what have these landholders achieved since LFW started? For a start, collectively they have designated 306,498 hectares of their properties as 'LFW sites'. These are areas of the property where wildlife conservation is a principal aim of management, though there may also be other aims, such as 'management of secondary salinity'. Thus, these sites are effectively

private nature reserves, and are a very important adjunct to the formal nature reserve system. This is an amazing contribution that ordinary people are making to the conservation of our biodiversity—something that benefits, not just themselves, but all Australians.

Each of the 2,000 landholders has a great story to tell, but just a few have been selected to illustrate specific nature conservation management actions. Many use 'before and after photos', a technique called 'photopoint monitoring' which involves taking a photograph at some recognisable point and rephotographing again at regular intervals to note change. It is especially useful at the time of doing some management action, like fencing or weed control, because one does forget what a place originally looked like.

Revegetation of saline seep

When LFW officers first visited Sarah and Geoff Mason and Caroline Goodden's Victoria Plains property in June 2002, much of the bushland was in excellent condition, and there was only one really difficult site—a hillside saline seep. The LFW officer recommended methods of treatment and potential flora for planting, with the twin aims of halting the expansion of the seep and the expression of surface salinity and creating habitat for native fauna.

Seven years later, in 2009, the perimeter is held by dense banks of shrubs, and frogs and small birds have returned. Although erosion still continues on the exceptionally harsh centre area, the site is now much more environmentally valuable.

After the second visit, Sarah wrote in an email to LFW:

> "We have benefited so much from being a LFW member. I knew nothing when we first joined and was overwhelmed by the task of owning a patch of remnant vegetation. However, due to the many things I have learnt through workshops and the brilliantly accessible, though scientific, *Western Wildlife*, I now have the capacity to manage our bushland in a way which will maintain its biodiversity and condition. I also know that if I have an issue or question I can call upon the services of the LFW officers, who are always so helpful. As an aside we don't keep magazines that we subscribe to... except *Western Wildlife* of which we have every issue since we became members. I am always promoting the organisation to other landholders as a great way to learn how to care for their patches of remnant vegetation."

Keeping feral predators at bay

When they joined LFW in 1999, Joy and Simon Ensor were delighted to have it confirmed from the presence of soil diggings that quendas (*Isoodon obesulus*) were using their property, Yelverton Brook Eco Retreat Chalets and Conservation Sanctuary near Margaret River. But they had also seen foxes. To give the native fauna the best possible chance, they made the difficult and expensive decision to enclose the whole property in an electrified feral-proof fence. The fauna responded positively. Most exciting, perhaps, are the woylies (*Bettongia penicillata*). Three animals that had been in care, but were considered too damaged to go back into the wild, were released here, and they have now increased to 30. The whole property is a shining example of management to enhance conservation value, as well as providing a memorable bush retreat experience for visitors.

Creating corridors and buffers

Tim and Leanne Murray own a 713-hectare property in the Shire of Goomalling. The shire has been extensively cleared for agriculture and has on average only 4.6 per cent of the

Creating an animal sanctuary

Woylies (top) thrive at Yelverton Brook because the landowners have installed a feral-proof fence (above) to keep predators out. *Photos – Joy Ensor, Cherie Kemp*

Right A male stone curlew warns the photographer away from its nest in a farmyard corner at Highbury in the Wheatbelt.
Photo – Bill Warren

Below right The Shire of Murray registered land at Coolup Gun Club with *Land for Wildlife*, including this ephemeral wetland.
Photo – Heather Adamson

original native vegetation remaining. But the Murray property had only 0.56 per cent of its original vegetation. As the Murrays were interested in wildlife and the property includes a couple of freshwater lakes, the LFW visit in 2003 concentrated on ways of improving the biodiversity. As a result, bush corridors and buffers have been planted and so increased the area of land under native vegetation from four hectares to approximately 35 hectares. There has been a noted increase in bird life on the farm. The revegetation has also had benefits in that wind and water erosion has been contained and there has also been a reduction in the threat of salinity to the freshwater lakes. Tim and Leanne have made a real difference on their property and have been a catalyst to others in the shire due to their dedication and enthusiasm.

Hard work reaps positive result

In 1997, Barry Fowler, with his late wife Joy, registered their Coorow property, Glen Waddi, with LFW and in 2002 they also registered a property they leased. The leasehold contained 27 per cent remnant vegetation, mostly on upper slopes and rocky watersheds. The valley floors, which originally supported woodlands, are largely cleared and affected by secondary salinity. At the time of the LFW visit in 2002, the aims for the leased property were identified as 'reinstating salt-affected areas' and 'fencing remnant vegetation to maintain it in natural state'. LFW provided advice on how to go about this, as well as where to look for funds.

The leased property was revisited in January 2008. By this time the Fowlers had erected eight kilometres of fencing around remnants and revegetated areas, and planted 3,000 seedlings along salt-affected creeklines. The seedlings were grown from a range of local provenance seed collected by local women known as the 'gumnut ladies'. The salt creek planting creates a link between the upper landscape and the valley floor and connects with a 40-kilometre bush corridor passing through properties in the adjoining Marchagee Catchment. They also planted 7,000 melaleuca seedlings as part of a DEC project.

By the time of the LFW revisit, the salt creek site had transformed from a bare and degraded area into one supporting healthy revegetation, natural regeneration and numerous echidna diggings. Despite drought in 2006 and 2007, the natural regeneration of native plant species was also occurring among remnants in the upper landscape.

Working with local government

As a technique for keeping out unwanted visitors, nothing beats signs that say, in effect: "Live ammunition in use—you could get shot"! Such is the case at the Coolup Gun Club reserve near Pinjarra, a superb bush island among mostly cleared agricultural land. It includes populations of rare flora and fauna and six hectares of excellent-quality seasonal wetland. The reserve is vested in the Shire of Murray, whose staff asked LFW to help develop a management plan, and to run a community bushwalk to assist with starting a 'friends' group. With plans in place and enthusiastic helpers, this little gem has a very bright future.

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