

# The origins of Land for Wildlife

by Stephen Platt

OVER the last 20 years there has been a substantial shift in the way landholders manage their land and in their relationship with government. *Land for Wildlife* was spawned during this period of change which also saw the evolution of Landcare and much wider community involvement in the task of nature conservation, previously seen as the role of government agencies, a role which is now widely accepted as critical to our chances of success. It was also a time in which the importance of managing the whole landscape was recognised. Salinity, soil erosion and acidification, tree dieback and dramatic declines in native plants and animals told us something was going wrong - new techniques of managing the land were needed. Private land was recognised as being different to public land, not just in the wildlife habitats present, or the extent of the problems (95% had been cleared in Victoria) but also in the means of dealing with them. The burden on ordinary landholders was also increasing during this period, They didn't need more problems but solutions and help.

The Victorian *Land for Wildlife* scheme originated in 1981 at one of the regular meetings held between the Bird Observers Club of Australia and the Fisheries and Wildlife Service (now Department of Natural Resources and Environment). It was recognised that many landholders were trying to provide habitat for wildlife on their own land and that this should be recognised and supported by government. It seems a simple enough idea now but in 1981 it was a ground-breaking innovation.

The first property to join was 'Brickmakers', a 425 ha sheep and fat lamb business, owned by Noel and Wendy Fowler and family, and situated at Bambra in the south west. The Fowlers have revegetated about 8% of their property with over 10 000 plants and created large dams

designed for wildlife. Buff-banded Rails, Plumed Whistling Ducks and Royal Spoonbills inhabit these wetlands while Blue-winged Parrots and Sacred Kingfishers move along the 3.2 km of creek frontage which they have fenced.

Between 1981 and 1990 some 800 properties were registered. Then, in 1990, *Land for Wildlife* entered a second phase. The registration scheme would continue with considerably increased resources. A coordinator and extension officers were appointed and a quarterly newsletter and more detailed 'Notes' series began publication. Dedicated staff allowed the scheme to offer on-site advice to landholders and to expand its horizons to look beyond those who had already decided to join. If so many landholders were interested in managing their properties in an ecologically healthy way - why weren't others? So *Land for Wildlife* began providing help to the wider community of landholders, began looking for ways, which also benefited the environment, in which to relieve landholders of burdens. Extension staff allowed the scheme to look for innovations of farmers and circulate them through its ever-widening network.

Today, the registration scheme includes over 3,800 properties covering 437,000 ha of which landholders have nominated some 106,000 ha as being managed for wildlife. The scheme's distinctive diamond-shaped sign is proudly displayed in most areas of the State. Some landholders have even taken to manufacturing their own signs in imitation including variations such as 'Land for Wild Women' and 'Land for Agriculture'. A huge diversity of people and properties are represented including small and large farms and bush blocks, over 75 schools, 17 golf courses and many council parks each making their own contribution to nature conservation. The latest trend is for large corporate enterprises to voluntarily join the scheme. For

example, BHP have registered properties with important native grasslands and Hazelwood Power Corporation have registered wetlands in the LaTrobe Valley.

Many landholders, in discrete areas, have had direct contact by an extension officer often resulting in improved management for some of the wildlife species dependant on private land and for the properties contacted. In my personal experience, most of the people joining the *Land for Wildlife* scheme are overflowing with enthusiasm and looking for good advice and ideas. They want to improve the management of their property and leave it in better condition than they received it.

Various approaches to nature conservation on private land have existed in other States and Territories. Queensland has legislated for a 'Land for Nature' scheme and Tasmania has proposed for a *Land for Wildlife* scheme with many landholders already expressing interest in participating. In New South Wales, Wildlife Refuges have existed for many years. The NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service is currently reviewing schemes for private landholders.

Overseas there are comparable schemes as well. For example, in the USA, there is 'Partners for Wildlife' involving 13,800 landholders and some States have a programme called 'Acres for Wildlife'. In Alberta, Canada, "Bucks for Wildlife" exists. Each scheme has its own characteristics but in common they recognise the importance of private land to wildlife and of working with landholders in a positive way to help protect the environment.

I wish all Western Australians well with their *Land for Wildlife* activities.

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