Editorial

Hello covenantors and welcome to the fourth edition of Conservation Covenant News. The Nature Conservation Covenants Program (NCCP) team has had a few staff changes and a lot has happened in the past year, so we thought it was a good time to give you an update of what's been going on.

This issue of Conservation Covenant News includes our regular updates as well as information on setting up photo monitoring points, fauna in focus and a progress report on one of our covenant sites in the South West.

Message from the coordinator

Since joining the covenant program as the Coordinator in 2002, I’ve seen a lot of wonderful things happen, and as a team we’ve managed to achieve an enormous amount. This is thanks not only to the staff we have, but to the support we’ve received from our partners and covenantors. We have always worked closely with other conservation organisations, such as the World Wildlife Fund Australia, Wheatbelt Natural Resource Management, the Southwest Australia Ecoregion Initiative (SWAEI) project and the National Trust’s covenant program. I’ve been very fortunate to meet many of you, our covenantors, and I always enjoy your phone calls and visits.

This past year has been a particularly interesting one. We’ve had the success of the two Caring for our Country projects over the past two years which has given us the optimism and enthusiasm to tackle the next project.

Some of you may also be aware of the support we provided to two of our covenantors in relation to the coal exploration proposal in Margaret River. The covenant program was asked to support their objection to an application for an exploration license lodged by Western Coal. We did this on the grounds that the covenanted bushland on these two properties had important conservation values that would be significantly affected if exploration or mining was to proceed. In providing our advice we relied on the assessment reports, stewardship reports and expert testimonies of DEC staff. We have been advised recently that Western Coal has withdrawn their application for an exploration licence, and one of the main reasons that they cited was the information provided by DEC. It has been particularly rewarding to be able to provide effective support to our covenantors in this area.

We need your help!

One thing we have learnt from being involved in this process is the importance of having good records of the species that are present on our covenanted properties. In particular, we need records of the species with high conservation value, that is, those that are listed as threatened or priority species.

When we assess your property we record whether or not these species are present, and whether they are likely to occur. If you are able to confirm that they are present, either by observing them or taking a photograph, we would really appreciate receiving this information. You can complete a
Projects funded for wheatbelt covenants

In 2010 and 2011, the covenant program received a federal government Caring for our Country grant to promote covenants primarily in the wheatbelt of Western Australia. The wheatbelt is a target area because it has been heavily cleared for agriculture and it is below the federal target for protected areas.

Both of these projects were very successful, and have resulted in 13 new covenants with 1,472 hectares of bushland in the Avon Wheatbelt bioregion being placed under covenant.

The covenant program has recently been advised that we have received another grant to fund a similar project until June 2013. If you are in the wheatbelt and have bushland on your property that you would like to put under covenant or know someone who would, please get in touch with us.

Remote cameras for fauna monitoring

Remote or motion-sensing cameras help us monitor any fauna that may occur within your bushland non-invasively and enable us to photograph species that may normally be difficult to observe or are only active at night.

Cameras may be useful for those of you who have seen scats or droppings, but are not sure which species are present in your bushland or to check if introduced animals such as fowls, rabbits and feral cats you have been controlling are still present.

If you are due for a stewardship visit, and want to talk about management issues, we can set up a camera for you at the same time. It only takes a few minutes and you can keep the camera on site for up to four weeks. If you are interested in having a remote camera set up in your covenant site to monitor native fauna or introduced animals please contact Stewardship Officer Kimberley Oswald on 9334 0442.

Fauna in focus – Living with brush-tailed phascogales in the south-west

Brush-tailed phascogales or wambengers (Phascogale tapoatafa) are small squirrel-like marsupials which are mostly grey in colour with a cream to white underbelly and a black bushy tail. They have a narrow face, large eyes and large bulbous ears. They grow to about 40 centimetres long (including the tail) and weigh up to 300 grams. Their feet are very flexible, with long toes and sharp claws so they can climb trees.

Conservation status

In WA these small marsupials are declared threatened fauna under the Wildlife Conservation Act 1950 and as such are considered rare or likely to become extinct. These small native animals are sometimes sighted in urban and farmland areas in roof spaces and sheds, or in bushland areas of south-western Australia. They are nocturnal and can be seen at night foraging for food, or travelling to find habitat or partners during the mating season.

Distribution

Formerly widespread in eastern and south-western Australia, they are now only found in about 50 per cent of their former range. In the south-west they occur from Perth to south of Albany with the highest densities occurring in the Bunyeroo, Margaret River, Collie and Manjimup areas.

Diet

Phascogales are mostly carnivorous and forage at night. Their diet consists mostly of insects such as cockroaches, beetles, centipedes, spiders, moths and ants, however they have been known to occasionally eat small vertebrates and birds and even chickens in rural areas. They also love nectar.

Habitat

They are normally found in forest areas, high in the canopy at least 25 metres from the ground, but they will come down to the ground to travel between trees. Forests and woodlands of jarrah, marri and karri are preferred, especially if they have large, old, rough-barked trees with hollows. Where they nest varies throughout the year and sometimes individual animals will have up to 20 nest sites scattered throughout their home range, which can extend up to 70 hectares. Nest sites can include hollow tree limbs, rotten stumps and birds’ nests. Females show a preference for large hollows with small entrances so they can make comfortable, well-protected nests which they construct using bark, feathers and fur.

Threats

The greatest threat to this species is the loss, fragmentation or alteration of their habitat as a result of clearing, logging, development and extractive industries. The main issue is the reduced availability of large trees with hollows that they need for nesting and for protection from predators. Introduced predators such as cats and foxes are also a major threat to these species, and especially domestic cats from nearby farms and houses.

How to identify phascogale presence

As they are nocturnal, the best way to find them is using a spotlight. They are very small and elusive, and move quickly and hide high in the tree canopy. Look for bright pink eyes and the black bushy tail when spotlighting. You may have them in your roof spaces or in old sheds on the farm and you might catch a glimpse of them if you use a torch at night. You could also set up a night vision camera which can, if positioned correctly, photograph any nocturnal animals that pass by it. When feeling threatened, phascogales will tap their feet repeatedly against a tree so if you are not sure whether the animal in your roof is a rat or a phascogale, this may be one way to determine.

State NRM Program Community Grants

Community Grants provide funding for community-based projects that target on-ground natural resource management at a local level. They are a component of the State NRM program, an initiative of the Western Australian Government. A total of up to $3 million is available in 2012/13. Grants of between $10,000 and $50,000 (GST excluded) are available for any on-ground activity that will assist in the conservation, restoration, rehabilitation or enhancement of a local natural asset. This can include land, water, coastal, marine and biodiversity assets. Priority will be given to projects that benefit a public asset either directly or indirectly. Community groups, incorporated not-for-profit organisations, local government authorities and education institutions are eligible for these grants. Applications close Friday 29 June 2012. For more information or an application form please see the State NRM Office website www.nrm.wa.gov.au/grants/state-nrm-program.aspx.

Monitoring vegetation changes using photo points

Some changes in vegetation occur rapidly and are very easy to see in a short period of time. Others occur slowly and are not so easy to see, so having a photographic record to show and compare these changes over the long term can be very insightful.

By looking at photos taken at the same time of year, each year, it is possible to see how the vegetation has changed in your covenant whether it has been affected by disease or grazing, whether weed invasion has increased or decreased and, where relevant, the role that fire has played in the vegetation structure. If the bushland has been affected by a threatening process (such as fire) it should also be possible to see how effective management actions have been.

Photographic monitoring points require photos to be taken from the same location at set intervals over time using the same method each time. Photo points should be located where they can easily be found, for example, near a particular landmark or permanent track. The area should also be representative of the vegetation type in your covenant site. Several photo points should be set up for large or very diverse sites.

Each photo point site should be marked with a painted or flagged small post or fence post and a compass bearing recorded. Ideally, including the coordinates of the photo point marker with a GPS is the most efficient way to identify and find each photo point each year. An identifying number on a metal tag attached to the marker may also be useful. Alternatively this information could be painted on the side of the picket. Consider putting two pickets in the ground as a reference guide for the angle of the photo so that successive photos will be taken along the same line. Try
to take photos that contain distinguishable features such as background hills or an old, easily recognisable tree. Photos should be taken during the same season, at the same time of day (preferably midday when shadows are minimal) and at the same height (mounting the camera on top of an established star picket is useful for this) to ensure you capture exactly the same place with the same view in successive photos. Also use the same camera and camera settings where possible. Take additional photos after major events such as a fire or flood. Compare the photos you have taken at each photo site on a yearly basis to assess how successful the management of your site has been. You can also use the photos to determine whether any additional management activities may be needed, for example, to deal with a new weed that has just established in the bushland.

References

South West covenant progress
The NCCP program has been running in the South West since 1998. Over the past few years, stewardship visits have been carried out for many of our covenant property owners. One such example, the Carter family property in Metricup, was identified as having high importance for biodiversity conservation in the Busselton Shire’s Biodiversity Incentive Strategy, which gives landowners the opportunity to subdivide bushland from farmland, or obtain a rate rebate for their bushland. The Carter family chose to subdivide their property and place their bushland under a covenant for long-term conservation, retaining two lots and selling the third.

The properties under covenant have very important conservation values including poorly reserved vegetation communities, threatened and priority flora, western ringtail possums and southern brown bandicoots. Riverine vegetation along a brook provides habitat for a variety of wildlife, including the Dunsborough burrowing crayfish – its presence usually indicated by mud chimneys.

The vegetation on the property is in excellent condition, and the Carters are committed to keeping it that way. The main management issues are weeds, rabbits, foxes and dieback. The covenant program has been able to assist with providing chemicals and equipment to carry out dieback treatments, protective cages for threatened flora, undertaking kangaroo surveys, undertaking priority-listed flora surveys and providing ongoing support through the stewardship program.

The Carter family has also discovered a new way to contain their dog within their building envelope. Rather than expensive fencing, a canine invisible fence appears to be very effective at keeping the dog out of the bushland areas. For covenant property owners who are not able to put fences around their building envelopes, this system appears to work very effectively. Dogs in your bushland will still need to be kept on a leash to prevent them from chasing wildlife.

We’d like to extend our thanks to the Carter family for their continued efforts in protecting their bushland.

Covenant signs
Just a reminder that Nature Conservation Covenant signs are available for any landowners who would like to be sent them, or they can be provided at your next stewardship visit.

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Please contact us if you would like further information on any of the above topics or if we can assist you with anything in regard to your covenant. We are here to help and would love to hear from you.