



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.



Covenant staff

There have been a few more staff changes to the Covenants team since you last heard from us. Sophie Moller has returned as the Covenant Coordinator and Janine Kuehs has joined us as the Covenant Officer dealing with conditional covenants, along with Cherie Kemp who is based in the Busselton office.

Lei Zhang is also new to the team, and has taken on the role of Technical Officer. Kimberley Oswald has moved into the Stewardship Officer role and will be organising yearly stewardship phone calls and three to five-yearly site visits for all our registered covenants.

Assisting with stewardship visits around the Katanning area is Mal Graham. Mal has lived in the Katanning area for 31 years and was formerly employed by the Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM) and the Department of Fisheries and Wildlife. He started as a Temporary Seasonal Labourer and worked for 19 years, up until 2001. Since then Mal has worked on a contract basis for CALM and now DEC on a number of programs including Nature Conservation Covenants. His local knowledge and extensive field experience is a great asset to the program.

Avril Baxter is based in Narrogin, and will continue to work casually for the covenant program doing both new assessments and stewardship visits.

Mike Fitzgerald, who was formerly the Protected Areas on Private Lands Project Officer in Northam has relocated to the Narrogin District Office as the Covenant Officer and will mainly be doing assessments for new covenants.

If you need to contact Sophie, Janine, Lei, Kimberley, Avril, Mike or Cherie our details can be found at the end of this newsletter.



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

Rare Flora or Threatened Fauna Report Form available from www.dec.wa.gov.au/content/view/full/5388/2240/ or we can send one to you. These records go into the department's databases and become viewable through NatureMap (which you can read about in the next edition of *Conservation Covenant News*).

If you aren't sure whether you are looking at a threatened or priority species, you could consider setting up a remote camera (if it's an animal you don't see very often) or taking a photograph of the plant when it is in flower. Send the photograph in to us, and we can have the experts either in DEC, at the WA Herbarium, or at the WA Museum take a look at it. Likewise, if you have a plant and you're not sure whether it's a weed or not, take a photo when it's in flower and we can try and get it identified for you. We can then help with advice if it is a pest and needs controlling.

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 bald 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 Busselton, 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.

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.

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 through 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.

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 diggings, but are not sure which species are present in your bushland or to check if introduced animals such as foxes, 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 onsite 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.



Brush-tailed phascogale. Photo – Cherie Kemp/DEC

If you think you have a phascogale living in your roof space or shed, take a torch out at night to observe any nocturnal activity. The covenant program has remote cameras which we can set up for you, enabling you to observe their activities over a longer period. If you find phascogales in your bushland, we'd love to hear from you!

References

www.dec.wa.gov.au/component/option,com_docman/task,cat_view/gid,372/Itemid,99999999/

Van Dyck, Steve and Strahan, Ronald. 2008. *Mammals of Australia, Third Edition*. New Holland Publishers (Australia) Pty Ltd.

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.

Extract from: *Government of Western Australia, 2012.*

State NRM Program Community Grants Guidelines and Application Form 2012/13. State NRM Office, Western Australia.

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 the bushland 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 star picket or fence post and a compass bearing recorded. Ideally, recording 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 star 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

Hussey, B.M.J. 2001. *Photographic Monitoring of Vegetation*. *Wildlife Notes No. 9, Land for Wildlife Scheme*. Department of Conservation and Land Management, Western Australia.

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.



Dunsborough burrowing crayfish. Photo – Kellie Mantle/DEC



Burrowing crayfish chimney. Photo – Cherie Kemp/DEC

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.

Nature Conservation Covenant Program staff

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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.