



Annual Report 2015

Background



Background

The Christmas Hills Landcare Group

The Christmas Hills Landcare Group in its current form came into being following a community gathering in October 2005 designed to assess the level of interest in forming a group.

The good turnout and a couple of trial 'property visit' based events late in 2005 made it clear that the level of interest was strong and at the CHLG event in March 2006, a number of people put their hand up to help run the group. Other than a Treasurer, specific 'office bearer' roles were not defined and an informal committee of Rob Shackleton (Treasurer), Mark Gardner, Wayne O'Donovan, Margo Heeley, Phil Styles, Bridget Bainbridge and Doug Evans was formed.

Probably as a consequence of the informality of this committee, they rarely met, yet over time the Landcare group continued to grow in profile and membership, projects became increasingly ambitious in scale and complexity, and multiple projects were on the go at once.

In December 2010 the group held its first official AGM to elect a management committee for the group, with Doug Evans, Rob Shackleton, Nicole Noy, Ross Coupar, Mark Gardner, Kylie Moppert and Tina Keene duly elected onto the inaugural committee for 2011.

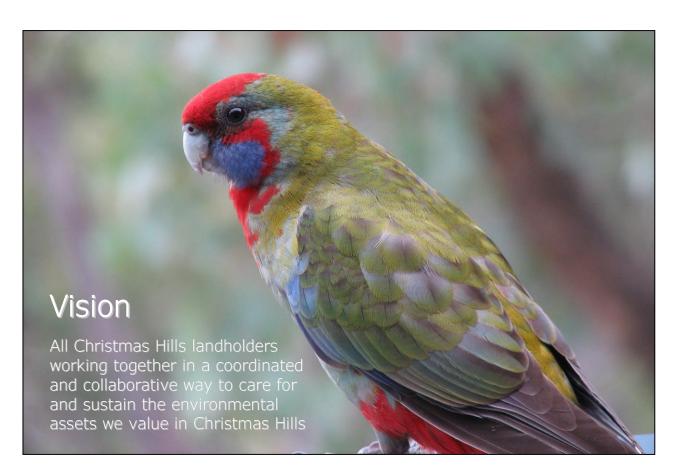
Each year the CHLG seeks to deliver a series of events and projects that aim to engage landholders in Christmas Hills, connect them to our local natural environmental values, develop their understanding and skills to manage these values, remove obstacles to action, and connect them to each other socially.

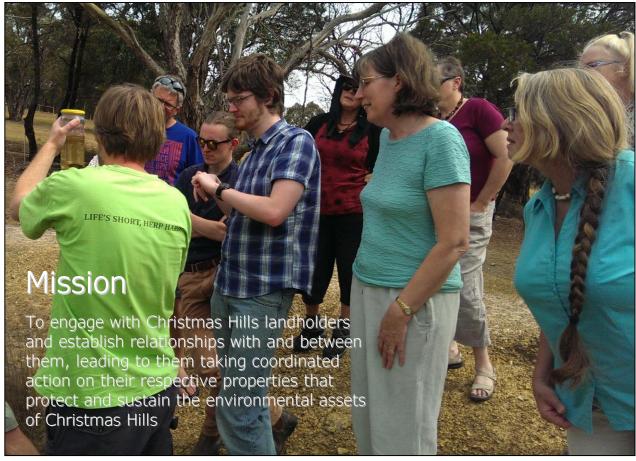
Through partnerships of various types, the CHLG is also developing its relationships with other Landcare groups, the shire and other agencies to extend its influence and leverage.

We do all this to help Christmas Hills landholders protect and enhance the rich diversity of natural environmental values we are custodians of here in Christmas Hills.



Strategic direction





Strategic pathways

To fulfil our mission effectively we need to:

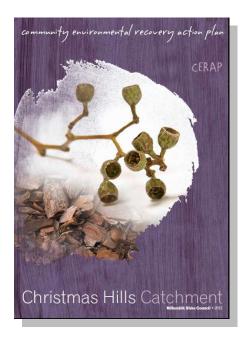
- 1. Understand what our environmental assets are, why we value them, what threatens them, and what needs to be done where to protect and sustain them. How?
- Access existing information on environmental assets of Christmas Hills
- Access existing expertise on environmental assets of Christmas Hills
- Conduct community-based research to fill information gaps as required
- Document in a map-based plan
- 2. Engage all the landholders that have a role to play in protecting and sustaining these assets. How?
- Build the profile, respect and trust of the group in the community
- Regular promotion and communications with clear and consistent messages
- Recruit new and retain existing members
- Establish and strengthen personal connections through social activities
- Be inclusive hold events that appeal to members and non-members alike

3. Help each landholder understand what needs to be done and work out how they can integrate this with their own aspirations for their property. How?

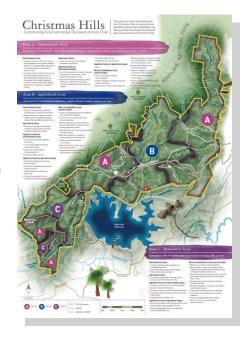
- Communicate the map-based plan of Christmas Hills environmental assets, threats and required action to landholders
- Translate and interpret the group's objectives and action priorities from the plan to property scale
- 4. Coordinate and support landholders to take action on their property. How?
- Develop landholder knowledge and skills through guest speakers, demonstrations, training, etc.
- Develop and deliver projects to remove obstacles that prevent landholders taking action (such as insufficient time, skills, funds, etc.)

5. Integrate our efforts, and collaborate with others who have a shared interest in the environmental assets of Christmas Hills. How?

- Communicate the map-based plan of Christmas Hills environmental assets, threats and required action to potential partners (eg Parks Victoria, Melbourne Water, Nillumbik Shire, Yarra Ranges Shire, Wurundjeri, university researchers, prospective sponsors)
- Establish mutually beneficial partnerships with those that can help us



The Christmas Hills
Community Environmental
Action Plan
consolidates information on
the environmental assets of
Christmas Hills and also
guides landholder action in a
map-based format.



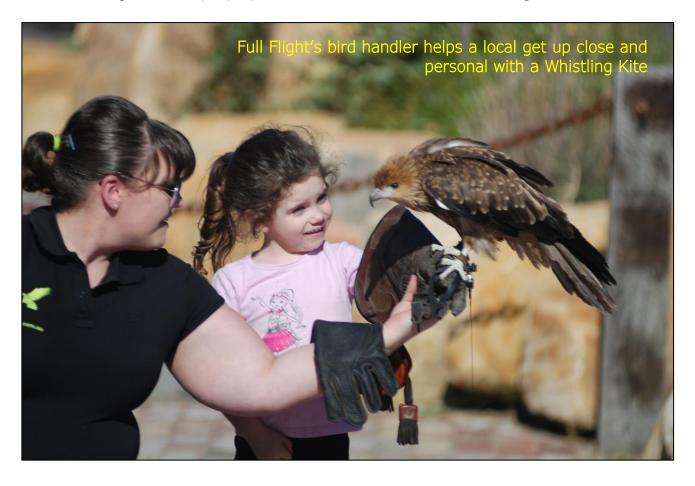
Local birds of prey (and AGM)

We kicked off 2015 with a bumper event at the Christmas Hills Hall in February.

First up we heard from David Baker-Gabb, founding President of the Australasian Raptor Association, who presented on "Local birds of prey and how you can help". David supplemented his illustrated presentation with some wonderful impersonations of raptor flight and calls.

The AGM followed, beginning with circulation of the 2014 Annual Report to help the group reflect on its 2014 achievements. After the annual group 'health check' and election of the management committee for 2015, we moved outside where the Full Flight Conservation Centre provided a live display of birds of prey to an audience of almost 100 people.

A few lucky people were selected from the audience and had the experience of having a bird of prey fly to them and land on their leather-gloved hand.



Firescape demonstration burn

Firescape is a pilot program developed by the CFA designed to assist private landholders consider the use of fire in management of their property. CHLG saw this program as an ideal opportunity to build knowledge and skills in ecological burning, and to develop a program of planned ecological burns for the Christmas Hills landscape.

The Firescape program involves three key elements - two community workshops and a demonstration burn. With the Christmas Hills Fire Brigade (CHFB) a key partner in the local rollout of the program, and interest from the Bend of Islands community, the focal area of the program encompassed the whole brigade area, bringing together Christmas Hills and the Bend of Islands in the planning and delivery.

The two workshops were held in 2014, and the Firescape planning group conducted a selection process to assess 13 nominated properties as a suitable candidate for the demonstration burn. Pip and Doug's place was selected and a comprehensive burn plan was prepared leading into the burn itself in April 2015. In addition to the 20 or so CHFB volunteers who turned out, 12 people watched on from the opposite side of the road and benefited from the expert commentary from Dave van Bockel from Parks Victoria.

Time-lapse videos of the burn and subsequent photo point monitoring can be viewed on the Friends of Christmas Hills Landcare Facebook page.



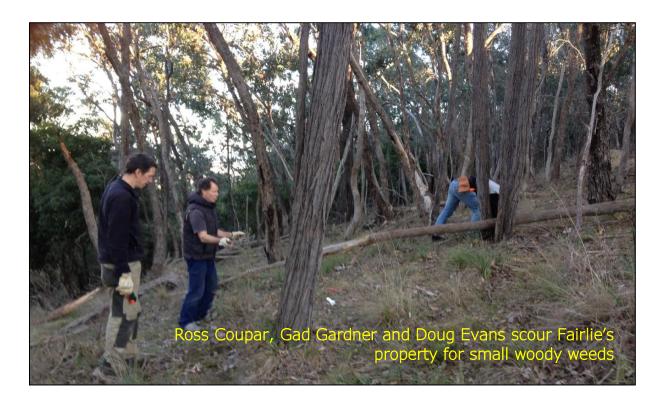
Helping a neighbour with weed control

With weeds considered by the group as one of the major threats to the natural environmental values of Christmas Hills, helping our neighbours in a practical way to manage weeds on their property through weeding working bees has become a regular feature on our annual calendar of events.

These events are designed to help members to recognise key weed species, and learn how to treat them, often using tools from the Christmas Hills Tool Trailer. This approach, in conjunction with the woody weed control project, aims to build the capacity of landholders to be able to better manage weeds on their own properties.

In June 2015 we went to Fairlie Tabart's place on Skyline Road. 12 people braved the cold weather and cleared over a hectare of the property of small seedlings of a range of woody weeds. The infestation of large Sweet Pittosporum plants on the property will be the subject of a funding application for a contractor to do the 'heavy lifting'. Fairlie is a new member who joined as a result of attending the birds of prey event earlier in the year

Afterwards we retreated inside where we marvelled at the view over the valley, and were regaled by some of Fairlie's stories of her past.



So what have the foxes been eating?

In conjunction with the fox trapping project (see more details on page 15) we wanted to find out more about what the local foxes were eating to get a better understanding of the extent of the threat they pose.

Following the first round of fox trapping in July/August, 29 people turned up to this event where the stomach contents of the foxes trapped (along with several that were shot or picked up as road kill) were washed and dried.

The following day these were then sent to Barbara Triggs (author of Tracks, Scats and Other Traces) in Genoa. After the washing was complete, and while things were drying, Peter Voutier gave a demonstration of the art of fox trap laying.

Barbara's analysis found the following:

- European Rabbit found in 4 fox and 1 cat stomachs
- Common Ringtail Possum found in 2 fox stomachs
- Short-beaked Echidna found in 1 fox stomach
- Deer species (probably Fallow Deer) found in 1 fox stomach
- Feathers found in 5 fox stomachs
- Insect remains found in 1 fox stomach
- Crustacean remains found in 1 fox stomach
- Plant material found in 6 fox stomachs
- European Rabbit, Common Ringtail Possum, Swamp Wallaby, and sheep remains were found in the fox scats



Protecting orchids from weeds and herbivores

Two of the key threats impacting on native orchids in Christmas Hills are competition from grassy weeds such as Sweet Vernal Grass and Quaking Grass, and heavy grazing from native and introduced herbivores.

Peter and Sonja's place on Buttermans Track was identified by Dr Dean Rouse during the Rare Orchid Search project as having very good orchid diversity, with good numbers of spider orchids (*Caladenia phaeclavia* and *C. tentaculata*), but he also noted that Quaking Grass (*Briza maxima*) was starting to take over.

So the nine people who attended this event set out to provide some protection for some of these orchids.

Firstly, the location of orchids was marked with flagging tape to help us choose a suitable patch of orchids to protect. The intrepid crew then set about erecting a herbivore exclusion fence to keep out rabbits and wombats, and deter wallabies, kangaroos and deer. Drawing on observations of the fence erected following the Firescape demonstration burn, and the experience of Rob Shackleton, a 12m x 12m area was successfully fenced. This area was also hand weeded to remove Quaking Grass and other grassy weeds.

After admiring the finished product, we rewarded ourselves with some delicious afternoon tea.



The Frogs of Christmas Hills

19 people gathered at Rob Shackleton and Linda Joyce's place in December to learn about the frogs that can be found in Christmas Hills.

Michael Scroggie, a senior scientist at the Arthur Rylah Institute for Environmental Research, gave a presentation on the frogs of Christmas Hills including how to recognise them and what their habitat requirements are.

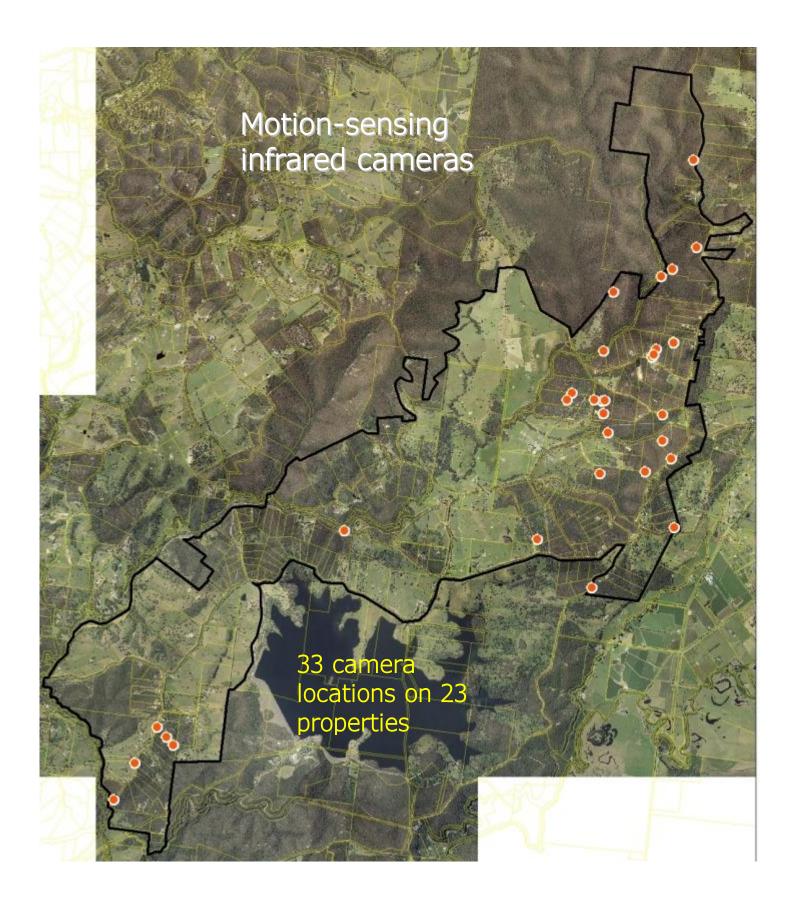
As a resident of the Bend of Islands, and with 20 years of involvement in research on the conservation and ecology of Victorian frogs and other wildlife, Michael brought a great combination of expertise and local knowledge.

After Michael's presentation we headed outside to one of Rob and Linda's dams to see what we could find. Michael soon found some young Southern Brown Tree Frogs under a log, and the dip netting revealed tadpoles of two different species.

Doug followed this up with a selection of short videos that summarised what the CHLG motion-sensing cameras had captured on private properties during 2015, with 50 different fauna species recorded - 15 mammals (9 native), 29 birds (28 native), 5 reptiles and 1 amphibian.

Following this we dined on French-themed fare for afternoon tea.





Community fauna monitoring

Central to the Christmas Hills Landcare Group's Community Fauna Monitoring program are the 20 motion-sensing infrared trail cameras we own. These, along with scent lures to attract fauna, are provided to participating landholders to help them find out more about the fauna that occurs on their properties.

In 2015 their use by landholders was locally coordinated by Nev Ragg, Kevin Heeley, Kay Armstrong, Sally Corrigan, and Doug Evans, with cameras used on 23 different properties in 33 different locations.

All up the cameras detected 42 different fauna species - 15 mammals (9 native), 29 birds (28 native), 5 reptiles and 1 amphibian.

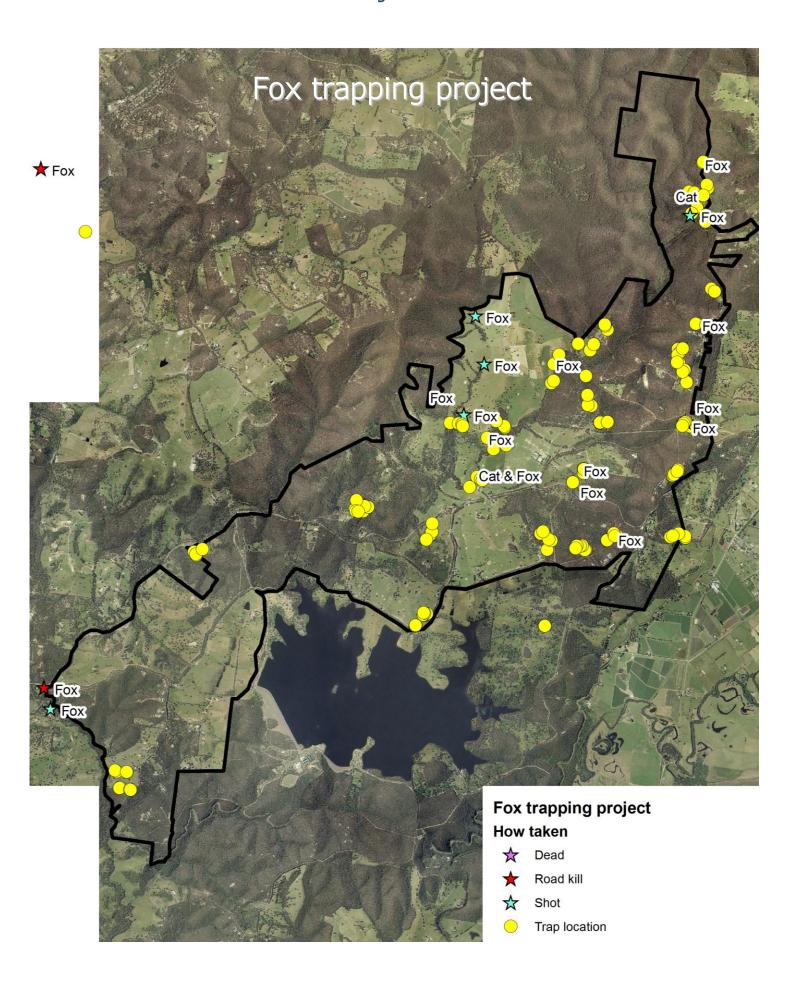
Notable 'captures' include the Powerful Owl (*Ninox strenua*) and the Eastern Whipbird (*Psophodes olivaceus*).

Kay Armstrong continued to coordinate the use by landholders of a megaphone geared to play the calls of six owl species, to see what response they can get – either a return call or attracting an owl close enough to identify it. In 2015 one landholder used the equipment on several occasions and reported hearing calls of Southern Boobook Owls, as well as a Barking Owl independent of use of the equipment.

The following grainy pictures are stills taken from actual videos captured by the cameras.







Fox trapping program

Many species of local fauna, including the Brush-tailed Phascogale, and Common Dunnart, and ground-nesting birds such as the Brown Quail, fall within the 'critical weight range' for foxes, so fox predation on these species is assumed to be a serious threat in Christmas Hills.

In order to better understand the nature of this threat, in 2015 CHLG engaged the services of Peter Voutier of Feralex to undertake a program of fox trapping on properties of willing landholders.

24 properties were involved, with trapping planned for two key periods in the fox lifecycle. The first round of trapping was conducted in July/August when foxes are pairing off and establishing dens, with the second round planned for late 2015/early 2016 when young foxes are dispersing from the dens.

Each round was split into two trapping pulses to ensure all traps could be checked daily. The contractor was also required to collect the stomachs from all foxes and feral cats he caught, to enable examination of what they have been feeding on (see more on this on page 9)

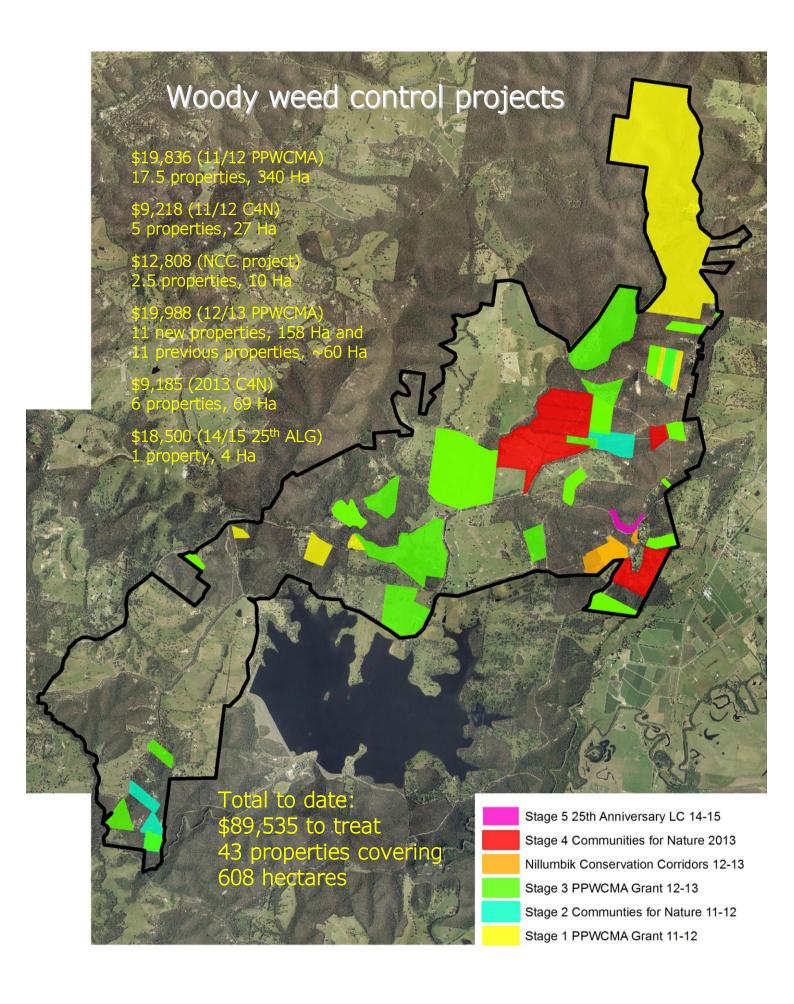
Between 28th July and 26th August, 138 soft-jaw leg-hold traps were set and checked daily over two trapping pulses on the 24 participating properties for a total of 987 'trap nights'. The results were:

- 9 foxes
- 2 cats one possible pet sent to pound, one feral
- 9 rabbits and 1 Blackbird all euthenased
- 6 ravens, 2 dogs, 1 duck, 1 possum, and 1 unidentified bird all released unharmed
- 139 'snaps' where the trap was triggered but nothing caught –typically caused by wombats

The number of foxes caught was lower than anticipated, and with the weather during that period was notably cold and wet, it was thought that this had foxes 'hunkering down' rather than out hunting and foraging.

This project was funded by the National Landcare Programme through the Port Phillip and Westernport CMA Community Grants.





Woody weed control

The invasion of native vegetation by woody weeds is one of the major threats to the quality of native forest and woodland habitat in Christmas Hills. Species such as Blackberry, Boneseed, Sweet Pittosporum, Cootamundra Wattle, Sallow Wattle and Radiata Pine can form dense infestations preventing natural regeneration of native species thereby altering habitat and reducing its suitability for fauna.

The Christmas Hills Landcare Group helps landholders tackle these weeds in several ways – seeking funds to engage a skilled contractor to do larger scale weed control works, holding weeding working bees with the Christmas Hills Tool Trailer to help neighbours, and developing landholder skills in weed identification and simple control methods.

This is an ongoing program that leading into the year had undertaken weed control work on 42 properties covering 604 hectares. During 2015 Indigenous Design Environmental Services were engaged to do weed control work on 1 additional property treating another 4.2 hectares. This was funded through a grant secured through the Australian Government's 25th Anniversary Grants Program.

The involvement of additional properties to help fill the gaps is typically sought through an expression of interest process.



Management committee

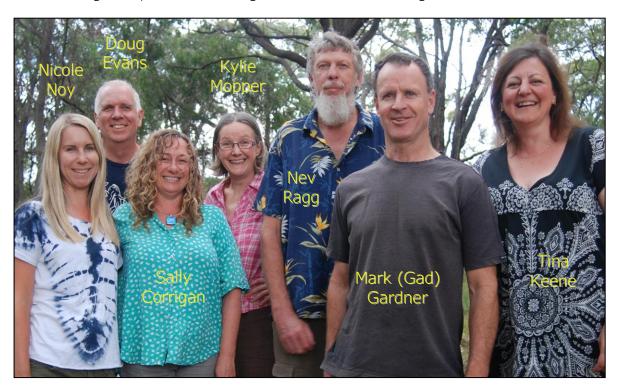
At the AGM held on the 8th February 2015, the 40 or so members in attendance voted in 7 people to the Management Committee for 2015:

Doug Evans - Chair
Nicole Noy - Secretary
Kylie Moppert - Treasurer
Mark Gardner - Vice Chair
Tina Keene - Membership Officer
Nev Ragg and Sally Corrigan - ordinary Committee Members

The committee met six times during the year and its decisions are guided by the group's vision, mission and strategic pathways established in August 2011.

In 2015 the committee focussed on:

- organising the 2015 program of events
- assessing funding opportunities and determining projects to pursue funding for
- financial management
- strategies for recruiting new members
- working closely with the Nillumbik Landcare Network and its Conservation Action Planning work
- working closely with the Nillumbik Conservation Corridor project
- having a say on the Nillumbik ESO review
- having a say on the management of roadside vegetation in Nillumbik



Membership

Despite introduction of the offer of a free membership for a year for introducing a new member, we still had a drop in memberships compared to 2014. One new member joined, but several 2014 members had not renewed by the end of 2015. The following are the financial members for 2015:

Bridget Bainbridge
Chris & Tina Keene
Colin & Denise Berry
Darren Bennet & Vanessa Reid
Deb Wadsworth
Diane & Ray Marsh
Doug Evans & Pip Charlton
Douglas & Helen Bell
Fairlie Tabart
Fran & Graham Jennings
Garry & Mandy Lovell
Helen Richards
Jackie Hamlet

Jan Cranwell & Phil Styles
Jane & Peter Russ
Joan Stephens
John Devling
John & Moira Robertson
Judith Ellerton
Kay & Rod Armstrong
Kaye and Hugh McRae
Kevin & Margo Heeley
Kylie Moppert & Mark Gardner
Liz & Peter Laver
Lucy Canavan & Danny Macminn
Mick & Suzanne Craine

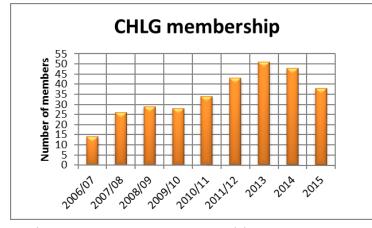
Neroli Merridew
Nev Ragg & Janet Meade
Nicole Noy & Ross Coupar
Paul & Jenny Mitchell
Peter Benda & Sonja Pedell
Rob Shackleton & Linda Joyce
Robyn Adams & Dianne Simmons
Sally Corrigan
Shellie Drysdale & family
Tony & Brigid Bell
Veronica Holland
Warwick & Carol Leeson

Joining the Christmas Hills Landcare Group means meeting neighbours, building relationships, gaining knowledge and skills, helping each other, working together, and showing your support for what we do.

Joining the Christmas Hills Landcare Group gives you:

- access to local events designed to improve your understanding and develop your skills
- regular opportunities to meet and socialise with neighbours
- access to projects designed to assist you to take action

If you own or manage land in Christmas Hills, we would love you to join us! It only costs \$20 for your first year -you get a member's gate sign, a community benefit card, and are added to the email list to get you in the communication loop - then it is only a \$10 annual renewal fee.



Following a community gathering in October 2005 at the Christmas Hills Primary School organised to gauge interest in Landcare, membership of the Christmas Hills Landcare Group steadily grew to a peak of 50 in 2013.

Please encourage your neighbours to join, and don't forget to renew your membership!

Group management

Group Health

Each year the Christmas Hills Landcare Group undertakes a group 'health check'. This is a self-assessment based on feedback from members, typically conducted at the AGM.

Rating scores are based on a 5-point scale where 1 = "Very poor", 3 = "OK", and 5 = "Excellent"

Group health element	05/06	06/07	07/08	08/09	10/11	2012	2013	2014
1. Vision / direction – How clear is your group about where it is going and what it is trying to achieve in the longer term?	4	4	4	4	4	5	5	5
2. Purpose / role - How clear is your group about its purpose and the role it plays in achieving its goals?	4	4	5	5	4	4	5	5
3. Action Planning – How good is your group at planning, designing and delivering activities that help it achieve its goals?	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5
4. Leadership – How good is your group at attracting, inducting and changing over people in leadership roles?	4	4	4	4	3	3	4	3
5. Management structure and systems – How effective is your group's management structure and its internal systems? (such as decision-making, managing finances, communicating to the rest of the group)	5	5	5	5	4	5	5	5
6. External profile – How well known and respected is your group and its goals by your local landholders and wider community?	2	2	3	3	4	3	4	4
7. Financial resources – How strong is your group's financial base and how good is your group at attracting financial support when required?	3	3	3	3	5	5	5	5
8. People resources – How good is your group at attracting and retaining members?	4	3	4	4	3	5	5	4
9. Information resources – How good is your group at accessing the information it needs, either its own knowledge base or finding it out from external sources?	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5
10. Networks – How well-connected (eg partnerships, regular contact, etc.) is your group to other groups and organisations that can help it to achieve its goals?	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	5
11. Confidence – How confident is your group to try new approaches or methods, and/or tackle new issues?	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5
12. Human capital – How good is your group at using and developing the skills and experience of its members?	5	5	5	5	5	4	5	4
13. Social capital – How strong are the social relationships between members of your group, and how good is your group at building and maintaining these relationships?	3	3	4	5	4	4	5	5
14. External support – How easy is it for your group to access external support when it needs it?	3	3	4	3	4	5	5	5

Partnerships

The CHLG aims to form mutually-beneficial partnerships with others who share our objectives.

Nillumbik Conservation Corridor (NCC) project

This four-year project involves nine Landcare groups and a Friends group and aims to improve habitat for threatened species in Nillumbik. Now in its final year, in 2015 we saw the production of an orchid flowering calendar and online orchid guide for Nillumbik, and herbivore exclusion fencing to protect both *Pomaderris vaccinifolia* on Tom Browning's property and the Firescape burn site on Pip and Doug's property.

Sally Corrigan is our representative on the project committee.

Nillumbik Landcare Network (NLN)

CHLG is a member of the Nillumbik Landcare Network which is supported by a part-time Landcare Facilitator, Colin Broughton. In 2015, the main focus has been on finalising and moving into implementation of a Conservation Action Plan (CAP) for the network, including a joint funding proposal with Trust for Nature. A Landholder Expo was also held that showcased our and other groups, agencies and contractors to over 300 people.

Doug Evans is our representative on the Network Board.



Nillumbik Shire Council

Nillumbik is the host employer of Meg Cullen, NCC Project Coordinator, and Colin Broughton, NLN Facilitator.

Christmas Hills Fire Brigade

In 2015 CHLG worked with the brigade, CFA, the Shire and the Bend of Islands community to plan and deliver the Firescape demonstration burn.

Christmas Hills Community Group Network

This network is comprised of the Christmas Hills Mechanics Institute, the Butterfly Studio, the Christmas Hills Fire Brigade, and the Christmas Hills Landcare Group. 2015 was a quiet year for this network. Rhys Morgan and Kylie Moppert are our representatives.

Group management

Promotion

The Christmas Hills Landcare Group maintains its profile through five main means:

Website - where we post newsletters and project and event details: http://portphillipwesternport.landcarevic.net.au/Christmashills

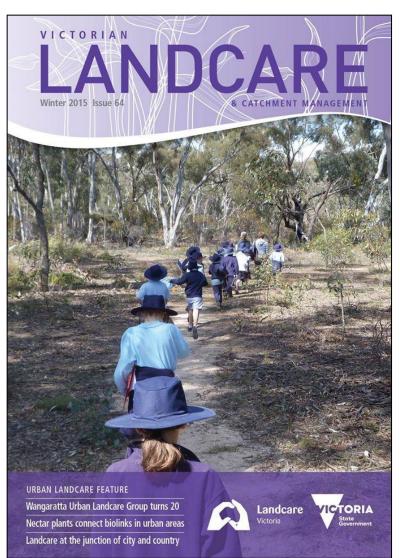
Facebook – where we post items of interest and reach out to a new audience. At the end of 2015 we had 60 page likes:

http://www.facebook.com/pages/Friends-of-Christmas-Hills-Landcare/151667101570175?sfrm

Newsletters - occasional emails to all members to keep them informed of upcoming events, project opportunities and other news of relevance.

Gate signs – for each member to illustrate their support and to show the extent of our membership in the community.

Sandwich board – to show passers by that an event is on and demonstrating we are an active group.



During 2015 we had an article published in the Winter edition of the Victorian Catchment and Landcare Magazine that showcased our community fauna monitoring program.

Group management

Finances

	Opening balance 1 st January 2015	Plus receipts	Less expenses	Transfers*	Closing balance 31 st December 2015
Group funds					
Memberships and donations	1,281.30	730.00	-243.29	-1,053.10 ⁴	714.91
Ritchies	101.87	110.25			212.12
Admin	500.00	418.00	-428.75		489.25
Events	0.00	2,649.40 ¹	-1,454.00		1195.40
Group funds total	1,883.17	3,407.65	-1,626.04 ²	-1,053.10	2,611.68
Project grant funds					
Rabbit control	2,133.54				2,133.54
Fauna monitoring	2,384.43	3,250.00	-3,873.00		1,761.43
ACUP 1080 subsidies	454.00				454.00
Orchid project ³	1,470.91		-3,174.61	1,703.704	0.00
Orchid Calendar ³	2,371.00	848.10	-2,568.50	-650.60 ⁴	0.00
Woody weeds stage 5		20,350.00	-18,548.32		1,801.68
Firescape		2,437.60	-1,691.36		746.24
Fox project		27,250.00	-13,488.73		13,761.27
Grant funds total	8,813.88	54,135.70	-43,344.52	1053.10	20,658.16
TOTAL	10,697.05	57,543.35	-44,970.56	0.00	23,269.84
		Cash book ba	23,269.84 23,269.84		

^{*} Transfers represent minor over/underspend on projects transferred between similar projects or Group funds.

- Tool trailer registration
- Insurance, postage, and memberships of the VFF FTLA and VLN
- Full Flight Birds of Prey display

¹ Includes \$1,254 of grant funds for birds of prey display and \$500 hall hire bond refund

² Group funds expenses include:

³ 'Flora Monitoring' project and its opening balance has been split into 'Orchid project' and 'Orchid calendar'

⁴ Funds were transferred from 'Orchid Calendar' and 'Memberships' to cover overspend in 'Orchid project'



Neighbours caring for our place.....



http://portphillipwesternport.landcarevic.net.au/Christmashills