

BUSHTRACKS

Bush Heritage Magazine — Autumn 2023



Features — Where the fish flow, Green Thumbs,
Lessons from the Midlands, The Galapagos of the Kimberley



Bush Heritage Australia

Bush Heritage acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the places in which we live, work and play. We recognise the enduring relationships they have with their lands and waters, and we pay our respects to Elders, past and present.

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A diverse discovery has been made on islands off the coast of Wunambal Gaambera Country, Western Australia.



Last November, I attended the 10-year celebration of the Midlands Conservation Partnership. Together we walked through paddocks where the collective efforts of landholders, the Tasmanian Land Conservancy and ourselves had delivered impact: helping to protect approximately 7500 hectares of critically endangered lowland native grasslands and woodlands on privately owned land.

It was a joy to reflect on an incredible decade with stakeholders who have contributed to the partnership and those who will carry it forward. The day celebrated the collective knowledge and skills we have acquired, learnings we will take into the partnership’s future and other areas of our work.

I returned, moved once again by the power of collaboration. The stories in this edition of *Bushtracks* shed light on some of the incredible outcomes we can achieve when we work together.

In ‘The Galapagos of the Kimberley’ we are transported to Wunambal Gaambera Country, far north-west Western Australia, where we have been working with the Wunambal Gaambera Aboriginal Corporation to deliver their Healthy Country Plan. In recent years, 120 new land snail species have been recorded and named on islands just off the coast and throughout patches of inland rainforest. This is an inspiring discovery and one of many reasons we

are so thrilled to be involved with the delivery of their new Healthy Country Plan.

These days Scottsdale Reserve near Canberra on Ngunnawal and Ngarigo Country is a bustling hub of collective effort. Over the last seven years, passionate volunteers have helped plant close to 42,000 trees and allowed us to restore a previously cleared landscape at a remarkable speed. Green plant guards now dot the landscape, a visual reminder that none of our work can be done alone and of how grateful we are for our volunteers.

And, to begin, we start in the springs at Edgbaston Reserve, Bidjara Country, Queensland, where the survival of one very precious fish species rest on the efforts of multiple partners, individuals and suppliers who have come together to work smarter and not harder.

As a critical part of our collaborative journey, we thank you for your support. It allows us to carry out the work needed to adapt to our environment’s growing threats and keep *Healthy Country, protected forever.*



Enjoy,

Heather Campbell
Chief Executive Officer

Photo The precious grasslands and woodlands of the Tasmanian Midlands, palawa Country. *By* Amelia Caddy

Where the fish flow

Words by Amelia Caddy
Location Bidjara Country, Queensland

The fight to save a tiny fish from extinction could hang on efforts to halt the upstream spread of its invasive foe.

Photo An aerial of the springs at Edgbaston Reserve, Bidjara Country, Queensland. *By* Peter Wallis

It rained a lot on Edgbaston Reserve, Bidjara Country, in early January: 100 millimetres – about a quarter of the reserve’s average annual rainfall. Most ecologists would be ecstatic to see so much rain fall in an arid region. But Dean Gilligan is not most ecologists, and though the rain was good news for the landscape, it made Dean concerned about one species.

“The water is great for the environment,” says Dean, Bush Heritage’s Freshwater & Wetlands Ecologist, “however when you want to eradicate a pest fish that occupies almost every puddle, you really want it to be dry.”

Dean is talking about the invasive *Gambusia* or Mosquitofish. Native to freshwaters of the south-eastern United States, *Gambusia* were shipped around the world in the early 1900s as a mosquito control. In Australia, as in most countries where they were introduced, *Gambusia* have caused widespread harm to native aquatic species. At Edgbaston, an 8100-hectare Bush Heritage reserve in central Queensland, they’re placing immense pressure on one fish, the Red-Finned Blue-eye. This species only inhabits the springs at Edgbaston and without Bush Heritage’s active management would cease to exist.

Gambusia can persist everywhere from near-freezing alpine tarns to brackish marshes and even the shallow, freshwater springs that dominate the eastern third of Edgbaston. Of the 50 springs occurring at Edgbaston that can support fish species, only 12 are *Gambusia*-free and these contain the last remaining populations of Red-finned Blue-eye fish. When it’s dry, the springs are isolated from one another and naturally protected from the advances of *Gambusia*. But after decent rains, the flood gates open.

“Edgbaston is a very flat landscape. When it rains more than 20 millimetres in a day, the whole place goes under

a sheet of water and *Gambusia* can go wherever they like – between springs and along waterways to find new vacant habitats that they can colonise,” says Dean.

To protect the Red-finned Blue-eye from *Gambusia* invasion, Bush Heritage have installed forty-centimetre-high shade-cloth barriers. The flip side is that they also pen Red-finned Blue-eye in – hindering immigration, emigration and gene sharing. As a result, Dean and his colleagues must conduct regular genetic testing on top of the already resource-intensive task of constructing and maintaining hundred of metres of barriers. The current work at Edgbaston adds to a long legacy of contributions made by many dedicated scientists, volunteers, staff and partners to bolster the population and improve habitat

for the Red-finned Blue-eye. The latest addition comes in the unlikeliest of forms: laser beams from the sky.

Edgbaston might be flat to the naked eye, but the ground is in fact etched with almost imperceptible runnels and folds. Like miniature river valleys, these features form

drainage lines between the spring mounds, and it’s by swimming upstream along those lines during floods that *Gambusia* are able to move across the landscape. Figure out where those drainage lines converge, and you can potentially protect multiple springs in one fell swoop.

“To fence one individual spring, we might need 400 metres of fencing, but with this approach we might be able to protect a cluster of six springs with a 50-metre fence in a strategic location,” explains Dean.

To map the drainage lines, Dean and his colleagues have turned to LiDAR (Light Detection and Ranging) a remote sensing method that uses hundred of laser beams per square metre to take measurements from the air. The resulting point clouds can be used to generate 3D topographic maps accurate to two-centimetre vertical increments.

“To fence one individual spring, we might need 400 metres of fencing, but with this approach we might be able to protect a cluster of six springs with a 50-metre fence in a strategic location,” explains Dean.



Photo Sunset as the moon rises over Edgbaston Reserve, Bidjara Country, Queensland. *By* Anthony Darlington



Photo Dean Gilligan surveys fauna amongst Edgbaston’s grasslands, Bidjara Country, Queensland. *By* Stephen Kearney

“Using modern GIS spatial analysis, we can then generate a flow-path analysis to understand the path taken by a drop of rain falling anywhere on the reserve. And by doing that you can map out all the separate micro-catchment areas on the reserve and understand the pathway that Gambusia are going to follow if they move against the flow to get from one spring to another,” says Dean.

It’s no small task. Edgbaston’s spring complex spans six kilometres from north to south and two kilometres across. The springs themselves range in size from small puddles to reservoirs the size of a football field, and new springs are popping up all the time. A paper published last year found that the Edgbaston springs have trebled in size over the last decade as water pressure in the Great Artesian Basin rises due to the Queensland government’s bore-capping scheme. This has added another layer of not just complexity, but also urgency to Bush Heritage’s work.

With the LiDAR mapping already complete, Dean hopes to begin construction on the new barriers in early 2024. When that happens, it won’t just be the

“I can envisage the great Gambusia wall,” he says. “It might take a decade, two decades or even fifty years, but if we keep pushing them south, eventually we’ll have none left on the reserve.”

Red-finned Blue-eye that see the benefits. Many other endemic species call the Edgbaston springs home, too: the Edgbaston Goby, a dozen snails, a flatworm, a shrimp, an amphipod, a dragonfly and many plants. All are impacted by the presence of Gambusia, which occupy the ‘Goldilocks zone’ of life in the the springs. This is the area between the spring vents that

milliennia-old, deoxygenated water from the Great Artesian Basin bubbles to the surface and the outer periphery, which is oxygenated, and also more exposed to the extreme temperature fluctuations of the arid environment.

Long-term, Bush Heritage’s vision is to remove Gambusia from Edgbaston entirely. Starting in the northern, ‘upstream’ cluster of springs, Dean and the team will slowly work their way downstream – eradicating Gambusia and constructing barriers as they go until Gambusia are pushed off the reserve’s southern boundary.

“I can envisage the great Gambusia wall,” he says. “It might take a decade, two decades or even fifty years, but if we keep pushing them south, eventually we’ll have none left on the reserve.” •

Bush Heritage gratefully acknowledges funding from WIRES National Grants Program which has made LiDAR mapping at Edgbaston Reserve possible.



Photo Red-finned Blue-eye can only be found in the springs at Edgbaston Reserve, Bidjara Country, Queensland. By Peter Wallis

Green Thumbs

Words by Coco McGrath

Location Ngunnawal and Ngarigo Country, New South Wales



A weekend of tree planting at Scottsdale Reserve restores the land and soul.

The sound of constant hammering is not what most people would call beautiful, but it's a sound that brings joy to Phil Palmer, Reserve Manager of Scottsdale Reserve on Ngunnawal and Ngarigo Country, NSW.

"I love it when the hammering gets so intense that it sounds like rain. It's a beautiful thing," he says as he looks out over the green hills where twenty volunteers are hammering stakes into the ground during one of Scottsdale's regular volunteer weekends. The stakes support recyclable green tree guards, and within the tree guards are native seedlings that will one day form a thriving woodland.

Scottsdale Reserve, 45 minutes south of Canberra, was once farming land. Around 600 hectares of the 1,328-hectare reserve was felled, which resulted in soil erosion, habitat disturbance and species loss.

Since Bush Heritage purchased the land in 2006, the site has been a hub of activity. Land managers, ecologists and volunteers have all worked hard to bring life back to the land, doing everything from survey work along the Murrumbidgee River to removing fences, tackling invasive weeds and, importantly, planting native grasses, shrubs and trees.

"To try and rebuild the ecological function and integrity, and maintain the cultural importance of this place ... it all starts with putting a tree in the ground," says Phil.

"Every plant is not only going to turn into habitat for wildlife, but will support carbon sequestration, soil health, and reintroduce genetic material – all helping to send this reserve on a trajectory of recovery."

Affectionately known as the 'People's Reserve,' Scottsdale is a testament to people power. Volunteers from the nearby towns such as Bredbo and Cooma come to regular volunteer days, while others travel from far and wide.

Oota, a keen bush walker and nature-lover, has travelled from Sydney. Clad in high-vis with a sun safe broad-brimmed hat, Oota works her way along the rows, prising seedlings from their pots and gently lowering them into the soil.

"We know that the country has deteriorated since land has been cleared," she says. "We need to plant trees to restore the country to some extent."



Photo Volunteers get stuck in at Scottsdale Reserve, Ngunnawal and Ngarigo Country, NSW. *By* Bee Stephens

But it's not just the country that is restored. The volunteers all agree that they benefit as well. "It's hard to explain ... to me it's so obvious that it's much better to be outside in nature than in the city," says Oota.

Yi Qing, a regular Scottsdale volunteer along with her daughter Abbie and partner Justin, agrees. "It makes me feel grounded and connected to nature. I feel good about myself when I volunteer in this beautiful environment."

Tessa is a paramedic who, like Oota, has travelled from Sydney. "You get a bit overwhelmed with all of that [city life], watching the news and everything that is going wrong, but then there's just this group of people giving up their time to volunteer."

The efforts of Scottsdale's dedicated volunteers took a hit in the 2019/2020 Summer bushfires. Around 73 percent of the reserve was impacted, including important habitat trees, culturally significant trees and thousands of the seedlings planted by volunteers.

"For those who had poured their heart and soul into this place there was a huge sense of loss," says Phil. "But the support we got after the fires was life changing. It was a nice reminder that Bush Heritage isn't just a reserve that we operate within. We work across the landscape, and we work within the communities."

"There's a sense of absolute satisfaction this afternoon," says Dennis, Tessa's partner. "We've contributed not only to Scottsdale, but in a small way to the planet."

Tessa looks out at row upon row that she, Dennis, Oota, Yi Qing, Phil and the other volunteers have planted in one weekend. "It's just beautiful. They're actually glowing in the light right now, which is insane. It's like they're all thanking us." •

This project has been supported by the New South Wales Government's Saving our Species program. Subscribe to Bush Heritage's Big Sky Country podcast to be the first to hear the episode, 'People have the power', featuring Scottsdale's volunteers: BushHeritage.org.au/BigSkyCountry

BUSHTRACKS

Lessons from the Midlands

Words by Mandy McKeesick
Location palawa Country, Tasmania



A decade of collaboration between landholders, the Tasmanian Land Conservancy and Bush Heritage.

Photo Ecologist Matt Appleby completes monitoring in the Midlands, palawa Country. By Amelia Caddy

It is night in the Tasmanian Midlands, palawa Country, as a Spotted-tail Quoll emerges from a hollow log to hunt and an Eastern Bettong scurries between grass tussocks where sheep lie sleeping. Their habitat and home are kept safe, supported by an innovative partnership between landholders, the Tasmanian Land Conservancy (TLC) and Bush Heritage. The collaboration was initiated a decade ago by three farmers who care deeply for this unique part of the world and understood the importance of having healthy natural systems to support their operations. For Bush Heritage and the TLC this was the perfect opportunity to help protect one of Australia's 15 national biodiversity hotspots. Ten years on, the partnership flourishes and has proven a successful alliance.

The Midlands Conservation Partnership (formerly the Midlands Conservation Fund) gives farmers the opportunity to receive reliable income, in the form of stewardship payments, in return for management that protects and restores the Midland's woodlands and grassy lower plains. Working alongside Bush Heritage ecologists, farmers use a combination of rotational grazing, fencing, weed and feral animal control to conserve approximately 7500 hectares of land. This is good news for species such as the vulnerable Eastern Barred Bandicoot, the 32 other nationally threatened species and the 180 plants and animals threatened in Tasmania who call the Midlands home.

Pierre Defourny from TLC is the partnership coordinator. "In the Midlands, 95 percent of the land is in private hands and these ecosystems have been shaped by human intervention for millennia. As such, these areas thrive using tools such as strategic grazing and fire." The Midlands Conservation Partnership recognises the value of having people actively managing these precious landscapes and incentivises nature positive practices. "From a business point of view, it puts conservation on the farmer's balance sheet."

"The monitoring is showing that we are heading in the right direction, that we are getting positive outcomes. And that feeds back to the landholders, so they're better able to manage the areas of the land that they have under these agreements."

Working with nature has proved to be a win-win situation for the 14 farmers involved, most of who signed original agreements for ten years and are now renewing them. "We're working the animal management with the grasslands management so it's a neat fit," farmer Simon Cameron says. "It is fantastic to be able to produce fine wool from this country and, quite honestly, the sheep actually do better. They have a more diverse range of grass species and they just seem healthier running in the bush than they do on paddocks."

For Bush Heritage ecologist Matt Appleby there have been on-ground challenges, such as management of invasive species, however, the successes have far outshone the hurdles. "The highlights of the partnership are the return of threatened species: plants such as Tunbridge Buttercup and Lanky Buttons, which are appearing in new occurrences with increasing populations."

He adds, "The monitoring is showing that we are heading in the right direction, that we are getting positive outcomes. And that feeds back to the landholders, so they're better able to manage the areas of the land that they have under these agreements."

From success comes learning. Matt acknowledges the importance of careful monitoring and adaptive management, but he feels one of the most critical lessons was navigating how to engage and communicate with landholders. "We can achieve a lot more by partnering with landholders and to do that well you need to get people involved from the beginning of the planning process. You need time for trust to build and you start by having a presence in the area and helping people."

Pierre agrees: "Although ten years ago it would have seemed odd to have partnerships with farmers, this program has shown we can work together to achieve conservation outcomes. We all care about the Midlands and our partnership allows us to increase our resilience to climate change and protect our native species." •

Bush Heritage gratefully acknowledges the support for the Midlands Conservation Partnership from the Sidney Myer Fund, the Myer Foundation, the Vincent Fairfax Family Foundation, the John T Reid Charitable Trust, the Elsie Cameron Foundation and a number of private supporters.

The Galapagos of the Kimberley

Words by Kate Sutton

Location Wunambal Gaambera Country, Western Australia



A diverse discovery has been made on islands off the coast of Wunambal Gaambera Country, Western Australia.

Photo Uunguu Ranger Desmond Williams caring for sea Country,
Wunambal Gaambera Country, Western Australia.
By Wunambal Gaambera Aboriginal Corporation

Amongst the wulo (rainforest) on islands and throughout inland rainforest patches in the North Kimberley, Wunambal Gaambera Country, lives an unassuming group of animals. The species slime their way along the forest floor eating decaying leaf litter and are part of why this extraordinary archipelago is listed as an area of national heritage significance. They are an incredibly diverse group of land snails from the *Cameanidae* family.

Like Charles Darwin observed how finches speciated on the Galapagos Islands, the snails evolved through geographic separation. Rainforest patches and offshore islands have expanded and contracted over time from the early Miocene, 20 million years ago when the climate was warmer and wetter, followed by the ice ages when the climate became cooler and drier and sea levels fell. Throughout all these changes, the *Cameanidae* snails survived and evolved into their present-day forms.

Snails play an important support role in the wider ecosystem. They contribute to the natural world by decomposing leaf litter, renourishing the soil and are called upon to complete rainy-day pollination when other species opt to stay dry. Also, snails' hypersensitivity to their environment makes them an important indicator species for monitoring ecosystem health.

The land snails of Wunambal Gaambera Country were first brought to scientists' attention after two surveys were conducted: a survey in the late eighties on Kimberley rainforests and another survey between 2006–2010 on Kimberley islands.

During the surveys, Traditional Owners worked with scientists Norman McKenzie, Frank Köhler, Roy Teale and Vince Kessner to collect the snails. The Wunambal Gaambera names for land snails are *yabuli* and *nyaliga*.

Traditional Owners and Uunguu Rangers Jeremy Kowan and Desmond Williams remember collecting the snails on Wunambal Gaambera islands.

“I remember doing the surveys with the scientists on the islands. We were turning over the rocks, looking for the snails. We used a stick to move the leaves and our hands to move the rocks and find the snails. They hide under there where it is cool and moist. It is good to see we can now describe them and that they are so important for our Country,” Jeremy Kowan, Uunguu Ranger and Wunambal Gaambera Traditional Owner.

“We used a stick to move the leaves and our hands to move the rocks and find the snails. They under there where it is cool and moist. It is good to see we can now describe them and that they are so important for our Country.”

Norman McKenzie, one of the scientists who went on both surveys, remembers working alongside the late Geoffrey Mangolamara, Wunambal Gaambera Traditional Owner, in the late 1980s.

“Geoffrey made sure we were doing everything correctly when we were on Wunambal Gaambera Country. We were told where the best spot to land our helicopter was. He made sure we were across all the right cultural protocols and best practice to respect the Country and their culture.”

He adds: “This is an example of how very diverse the plants and animals which live in this unique ecosystem in the north Kimberley are, and why it is so important to protect. The Wunambal Gaambera Traditional Owners and their healthy country team, have an important job to protect this extremely unique and biodiverse environment.”

Most of the snails are found within the rainforest patches of the Kimberley islands. On Boongaree Island, one of the larger islands, there are 13 species of *Camaenids*, including the *Globorrhagada wunandarra*, which is also the Wunambal name for Boongaree Island. •



Photo Kimberleydiscus fasciatus one of the species discovered on Bigge Island, Wunambal Gaambera Country, Western Australia.
By Vince Kessner



Photo Tom Vigilante, Healthy Country Coordinator, and Jazzlyn Phillips, Uunguu Ranger and Wunambal Gaambera Traditional Owner complete fauna monitoring. By Mark Jones

While some *Camaenid* snails are found in woodlands, around half the species are restricted to rainforests and many species of snails are restricted to just one or two patches. Several rainforest patches are so diverse in Wunambal Gaambera Country, they have 18–19 species. With over 6300 rainforest patches in Wunambal Gaambera Country, it raises questions as to whether there could be more undescribed species?

Bush Heritage has worked alongside Uunguu Rangers and Wunambal Gaambera Traditional Owners to keep their Country healthy and intact for the past ten years. It was with the Wunambal Gaambera Aboriginal Corporation and other partners that Bush Heritage implemented the first Healthy Country Plan. An approach to the management of Indigenous Protected Areas that has since been adopted by other Aboriginal Groups in the Kimberley and across the country.

“The presence of these snails on Wunambal Gaambera Country is another example of how unique the ecosystem is and how important it is to protect it.”

“Wunambal Gaambera Aboriginal Corporation and Bush Heritage Australia have a strong partnership. Bush Heritage support Traditional Owner groups to look after their Country and the Healthy Country Plan provides a framework for them to do this. The presence of these snails on Wunambal Gaambera Country is another example of how unique the ecosystem is and how important it is to protect it,” says Tom Vigilante, Healthy Country Manager.

Developed together through a series of workshops and field trips, the plan set a roadmap for how Country was to be managed including fire management, weed and feral animal control, visitor management, conservation of cultural heritage and monitoring the health of plants and animals. Now, Bush Heritage is supporting Wunambal Gaambera’s development of the next Healthy Country Plan. A plan that will continue to keep Country healthy including the lives and homes of the diverse *Camaenid* gastropods (snails). •

Subscribe to Bush Heritage’s Big Sky Country podcast to be the first to hear the episode featuring Wunambal Gaambera Traditional Owners and leading scientists as they share their experiences developing plans to protect Country and the Camaenids: [BushHeritage.org.au/BigSkyCountry](https://www.bushheritage.org.au/BigSkyCountry)

My happy place

*Words by Phil Doring, long time Bush Heritage supporter
Location Koreng, Menang and Wudjari Country, Western Australia*

Photo Whale song can be heard from the shore in the bays of the Fitzgerald River National Park, Koreng, Menang and Wudjari Country, Western Australia. By Tourism Western Australia

The drive takes roughly six hours. The world around me seems to decompress as Fremantle's buildings and traffic transition into quieter eucalypt lined roads. My destination is the Fitzgerald River National Park, Koreng, Menang and Wudjari Country. Tucked in the continent's south-west corner and facing the Great Australian Bight is my happy place.

The park is also the happy place for many of our native plant and animal species. There are more plants found here than in the entire United Kingdom and as a self-proclaimed 'tree nerd', observing this level of diversity is an absolute treat.

My day begins early with birdsong, a ritual of mine whether I'm in the city or the bush. When visiting between

July and November I'll spend time on the white sandy shore listening to whale song as Southern Right Whales teach their eager calves the ways of the world. If my energy allows, a walk up one of the Barren mountains might be on the cards. Elevated from coastal mallee-scrub, it's humbling to take in these age-old granite boulders. My nights are slow – taking in the peaceful surrounds as the campfire crackles.

Leaving is hard, but on the drive back I feel refreshed and alive, inspired by nature's power and beauty. I'm also reminded of the need for its protection and my time in the bush affirms the decision I made to leave a gift in my Will to Bush Heritage. This is a legacy I'm deeply proud of and one that ensures our natural spaces can continue to thrive and be enjoyed.

Phil Doring is a lifelong Bush Heritage supporter. Read more about his story and why he has generously chosen to leave a gift in his Will to the organisation here: BushHeritage.org.au/phil-doring

Can you help protect
the springs at
Edgbaston Reserve,
Bidjara Country,
Queensland?



Donate today.

Bush Heritage is a unified force for nature, grounded in science and culture to nurture all land for life. The organisation works across millions of hectares and 42 reserves, protecting and building resilience in our landscapes for the almost 2000 animals and plants on Australia's threatened species list.

Bush Heritage respects, listens and learns from working side-by-side with Traditional Owners, and by working in partnerships with pastoralists and other organisations to have the most impact.

Our work would not be possible without the support of people like you. We gratefully acknowledge the estates of Susan Haggard, Edmund Charles Belcher, Janice Hillyard, Gweneth Mossman, Stephen McCarthy, Kevin Robson, Beverly McIntyre, William Finighan, Christine Perrers and Wallis Jenkyn, as well as the many other people who have recently donated to our work.

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Cover photo Volunteer Yi Quing at Scottsdale Reserve, Ngunnawal and Ngarigo Country, NSW. *By* Bee Stephens