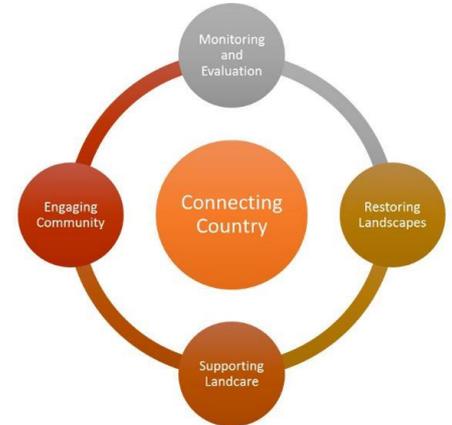


## Connecting Country's Bird Watch Workshop - 19 May 2019

Connecting Country is a community environmental organisation that aims to restore landscapes across the Mount Alexander region. We support Landcare, educate and engage the community in landscape restoration, conduct on ground restoration (such as revegetation, weed and pest control), and monitor the effects that these works are having on birds and mammals in the region.

In 2010, we began to survey woodland birds to monitor if our restoration efforts were influencing biodiversity. We approached Andrew Bennett, a university professor and bird expert, for advice on our study design. We selected 50 sites on private land in the region, stratified across 1) five geographic sub-regions; 2) three habitat types (paddocks, revegetation sites and intact forests); and 3) four treatments (revegetated paddocks, revegetated understorey with existing trees, and remnant vegetation on either slopes or gullies). Each site was surveyed twice each winter and twice each spring. Since beginning the project in 2010, we conducted over 1,200 surveys and collected over 24,000 bird records. In 2018, Birdlife Australia analysed our data.



Eastern Yellow Robin (photo by Jane Rusden)

Previously, monitoring was run by Connecting Country staff. To allow the project to continue during fluctuations in funding, and ensure community relevance, we are moving to a system where data is collected by 'citizen scientists' – volunteers from the local community with an interest in nature conservation and bird watching. In this system, we are collaborating with Birdlife Castlemaine District. As we transition to this new approach, it is important our bird monitoring program aligns with community objectives.

Fifteen people attended a community workshop on 19 May 2019 in Chewton. The purpose of the workshop was to clarify that the aims of our monitoring program – i.e., the questions we are asking about how our woodland birds are faring in the region – are in line with concerns and objectives of the local community.

Connecting Country asked participants what they most wanted to learn about our birds. These ideas were grouped into broad themes and participants 'voted' for their two most preferred themes for ongoing bird monitoring. These themes are summarised in the following tables.

Connecting Country would like to sincerely thank all participants in the workshop for their contributions. We will continue to keep you updated on the progress of our monitoring program.

**Table 1.** Key bird monitoring themes identified by participants during the workshop

| Key themes                         | What participants said  | Number of votes |
|------------------------------------|---|-----------------|
| <b>Tree hollows and nest boxes</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Many trees in the region are too young to have developed hollows.</li> <li>Does firewood removal reduce the amount of tree hollows?</li> <li>Can we retain natural hollows by altering timber harvesting techniques (i.e., ensuring a larger 'stump' is left behind)?</li> <li>Does the installation of nest boxes change species populations? Do these changes have positive or unintended outcomes (e.g., increases in mammalian predators or bees)?</li> <li>Are there ways we can target nest boxes for different species (e.g., setting nest boxes at certain heights, or with certain entrance sizes)?</li> <li>Do chainsaw hollows work?</li> </ul> | 3 votes         |
| <b>Species specific studies</b>    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Water birds are easy to survey and not currently surveyed systematically in the region.</li> <li>Document occurrence of common mynas in the region.</li> <li>How are nocturnal birds faring in the region? What are their habitat requirements?</li> </ul>   | 3 votes         |

**Table 1.** Key bird themes identified by participants during the workshop (continued)

| Key themes   | What participants said   | Number of votes   |
|--|--|---|
| <b>Cats</b>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Impact of cats on birds.</li> <li>Does introduction of a cat curfew help birds?</li> </ul>  | 2 votes   |
| <b>Birds in towns and housing developments</b>                     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Will an increase in housing density lead to an increase in feral cat numbers, and if so, how can we reduce impacts of feral cats on wildlife (e.g., introduction of a cat curfew) ?</li> <li>Does removing trees and habitat for housing developments impact birds?</li> <li>Does retaining large trees or habitat corridors in housing developments lead reduce impacts to wildlife and birds?</li> <li>Some existing Connecting Country bird survey sites are near housing developments.</li> <li>Do 'Gardens for Wildlife' affect birds? Consider preparation of a guide for gardens for wildlife specific to our region.</li> </ul> | 4 votes (birds in towns/ housing developments)<br><br>1 vote (corridors)<br><br>1 vote (reducing risks to wildlife) |
| <b>Climate change</b>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Does climate change lead to increases or decreases in population size of birds?</li> <li>Existing long-term monitoring may provide data on the effects of climate change on birds.</li> </ul>   | 4 votes   |
| <b>Continuing Connecting Country's existing monitoring program</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Does habitat restoration work?</li> <li>There are advantages to continuing this program.</li> <li>Connecting Country has access to many private properties that the broader community does not have access to.</li> <li>Long term, well-designed bird monitoring projects are few and far between.</li> </ul>   | 4 votes   |
| <b>Frequency of monitoring</b>                                     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How often do we need to monitor? Monthly or quarterly?</li> <li>Analysis of existing long-term monitoring data may provide insight into how frequently monitoring should occur.</li> <li>Frequency of monitoring may be determined by capacity of volunteers, or purpose of monitoring program.</li> </ul>  | 1 vote  |
| <b>Coordinated approach</b>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>We need a coordinated approach to providing data to BirdLife's Birdata. It is important to maintain continuity of monitoring.</li> <li>We could use 'shared site' option in Birdata for commonly surveyed sites.</li> </ul>   |   |
| <b>Planned burns</b>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Do planned burns affect birds? Some community groups already collecting data on this.</li> </ul>  | 2 votes   |
| <b>Invertebrates</b>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Insects are declining internationally. Is this influencing bird abundance?</li> <li>Analysis of existing data of population changes in insectivorous bird species may provide insight into changes in insect populations.</li> </ul>  | 1 vote  |

Participants also raised concerns about other important themes not directly related to Connecting Country's bird monitoring program. However, we will document and share these concerns and key themes for future reference for Connecting Country and other groups in the region.

**Table 2.** Important themes raised during the meeting that are beyond the scope of our bird monitoring program

| Key themes                                 | What participants said  |
|--|---|
| <b>Housing developments</b>                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Participants are concerned about the effects of housing developments on birds.</li> <li>Housing developments may lead to the removal or alteration of habitat and an increase in cats.</li> <li>Participants suggested putting a submission to council (e.g., introduction of a cat curfew). Although this is beyond the scope of Connecting Country it may be relevant to other groups.</li> <li>Participants stressed the importance of collecting baseline data on wildlife before housing developments occur.</li> </ul> |
| <b>Education</b>                           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>It is important to engage children and schools with nature, as children are our future.</li> <li>There is potential to collaborate with or learn from birdlife Australia's Birds in Backyard program or run bird walks targeted at children.</li> <li>We need to educate adults about key issues (e.g., habitat impacts of firewood removal).</li> <li>Four participants voted for 'education' although it was not identified as a broad theme, highlighting its importance.</li> </ul>                                      |
| <b>Ongoing monitoring of existing data</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>There are several long-term monitoring projects in the region. Participants stressed the importance of analysing and learning from these data sets.</li> </ul>   |