

Hamilton Field Naturalists Club – President’s Report for 2023

Diane Luhrs

Dear HFNC Members,

I present the President’s Report for 2023.

The annual program

As in recent years, the annual program was published at our first special meeting in March and was available on the HFNC website and at the Hamilton Visitor Information Centre. In keeping with previous years, the HFNC program of monthly excursions and bi-monthly special presentations was open to the public. The program also included the Club’s annual working bees at our reserves of interest: Fulham Streamside Res., Wannon Flora Res., Nigretta Flora Res. and Kanawalla Rail Flora Res.

Environmental action

This year HFNC members contributed to the work in the Fulham SR, Wannon FR and Nigretta FR. Peter Hocking also worked on the Four Posts SR, Roger Thompson on the Nigretta Falls Scenic Res. and Rod Bird and Diane Luhrs on the Kanawalla Rail FR.

We remain indebted to Rod Bird for maintaining our commitment to the environmental works program for the Club, for organizing the materials for the works and for keeping thorough ongoing records of the outcomes of the works. And this year, after successful grant applications in 2022 by Reto Zollinger and Rod to cover new equipment and labour costs, HFNC was able to tackle the major issue of the invasive *Acacia paradoxa* at the Wannon FR.

Wannon FR: This was our major focus for 2023. We were very grateful to receive two grants to help us in our conservation projects:

Southern Grampians Shire Council Greater Grants Program for 2022/23, Project 00019 ‘*Acacia paradoxa* Control at Wannon Flora Reserve’ for \$2480.

Victoria Landcare Grant for 2022-23, Project VLG042 ‘Enhanced biodiversity through invasive woody weed control at Wannon Flora Reserve’ for \$18,266.

After accepting the grants, there was much preliminary work to ensure HFNC could manage this project – contacting potential groups to participate in the work and then completing documents to send to the Glenelg Hopkins CMA, Victorian Landcare Inc. (our incorporating body), Baimbridge College (for students and staff in the Year 9 Score program), Landmates Crew (residents and staff from Ararat), Woodrowe (wood-chippers from Heywood), Andrew Levings (Levos Forestry Services) and to HFNC to ensure that HFNC members followed the correct protocols in engaging with non-members participating in this project. Furthermore, purchasing new items to be used in removing the advanced invasive plants was also required: electric chainsaws, tree-loppers and personal protective clothing (helmets, leggings, gloves and glasses). This preparation took the first four months of the year. I thank Steve Martinich for drawing our attention to the documentation and record-keeping needed as stipulated by Landcare Victoria Inc.

Weed removal began in early May with Baimbridge College students (supervised by Diane) and Landmates participants (supervised by Rod) working in different sections. Woodrowe chipping contractors followed up on the work by Landmates. After realizing that that Landmates and Woodrowe were not going to be able to complete as much of the weed-removal as we had hoped for, Andrew Levings and his workers (Levos Forestry Services) were engaged to do a full week’s work to cut down as much of the interior weeds as funding would allow. By the end of June, the grant money was spent and much of the weedy *Acacia paradoxa* had been either chopped, chipped and removed or chopped and dropped on site. Indeed, after the work of Levos Forestry Services we were well-pleased with the amount of work that had been done to improve the biodiversity of this Reserve.

Baimbridge College students and their teachers Rhett Beattie and Mallory Holmes are to be commended on their work using loppers to cut larger shrubs and by hand-pulling emergent weeds in the Reserve over six consecutive Tuesdays in their Term Two. Rhett Beattie indicated that he would be willing to include this project in their 2024 program to follow-up on their work so far.

HFNC members helped in working alongside Landmates and on HFNC working-bees to tidy up the site after the contractors had been at work to remove more mature *A. paradoxa* and to pull out emergent seedlings from the interior of the Wannan FR over a number of days in late autumn and during winter. Thank you to all who helped in this project.

Fulham SR: HFNC held two working bees weed to continue the weed-wiping activities (September-October), but with only three members each time this year. African Weed Orchid, *Gladiolus*, *Sparaxis*, Cape Tulip, Lavender and Box Thorn are the main weeds we attend to in the section we manage. This area of the reserve looks so good with a great diversity of native plants, especially when contrasted with the rest of the reserve which has no weed-control.

Nigretta FR: Two working bees with three members over October and November continued the annual program work of wiping the African Weed Orchids that emerge each spring. Interesting this year was the small number of African Weed Orchids *Disa bracteata* (AWO) seen and wiped – 835 in total for 2023 where in 2022 4,720 were wiped. *Galium aperine* and *Phalaris* were also treated.

Kanawalla RFR: Although no planned working bees were conducted this year Rod, with some help from Diane, removed grasses from around the trees planted in recent years, cleared timber from the track cut by Powercor contractors and sprayed the centre of the track to keep it open for walkers and cyclists. Rod gave further time in late winter and over spring to spray out the invasive *Galium*, *Fumaria*, *Oxalis*, *Phalaris* and other weeds popping up in this reserve that we have developed and managed since 2003.

Four Posts SR and Nigretta Falls Scenic Res: Thanks also to Peter Hocking for his weed control at Four Posts (437 AWO wiped over four separate visits in October) and to Roger Thompson for his attention to AWO at Nigretta Falls.

Fauna surveys

The February water bird surveys in the **Lake Linlithgow complex** contribute to national data on the occurrence of water birds and also contribute data to argue for the cessation of duck hunting on particular water reserves. Lake Linlithgow was at about 85% full cover. Of particular note this year was the lack of variety of birds – possibly because many wetlands were wet, offering many places for waterbirds. Birds seen in the greatest numbers were Shelduck (5,300) and Grey Teal (5,500).

HFNC continues to monitor the 10 nest boxes put up by HFNC for small mammals at five sites in the **Bear State Forest**. Reto, Rod, Peter Hocking and Diane were joined by neighbouring property owners Colin and Mary King. Of the nine boxes still on the trees (one was taken away last year for repair), two had live Sugar Gliders, others had leaves and two had evidence of bees (bees and/or honeycomb) and one fell down while being inspected. This will be repaired for replacement next year. The nest box removed last year had been repaired and was secured to its former place.

This year, after many of us had completed the ten-week bird identification course run by Greg Kerr in previous years, members participated in the newly set-up Western Woodlands Bush Birds survey in November. After completing a refresher morning on how to install and manage the Avenza maps that detailed the survey sites and how to upload bird data on the Bird Data website, members joined many others in this weekend survey. Members followed the 20-minute survey method and recorded species seen or heard in the allotted area of particular habitats. Greg hopes that the survey will continue in following years to build up a large data base that reflects the biodiversity of each of the 250+ selected Ecological Vegetation Classes.

Special Presentations

This year HFNC members enjoyed a diverse range of presentations:

First up, Dr Trevor Whiffin presented on Australia's tropical rainforest plants and their national and international significance – integral to the development of tropical rainforests worldwide.

In May, Dr Greg Kerr described a citizen science project he developed for World Vision that was implemented in Ethiopia and had award-winning environmental, social and economic outcomes.

Doug Ward and Pam Lehmann were our presenters for July. They described their six-day walking experience on Flinders Island and showed many fine photographs of the general topography and of particular geological features and plants.

In September, Bruce McInnes of the Wimmera CMA gave a detailed account of the variety of fresh-water fish and other organisms that may be seen in our waterways.

Our final presentation for the year was given by Dr Greg Kerr on the ecology of River Red-gums and how to assess their condition. He outlined a number of criteria by which that could be assessed.

Excursions

HFNC members enjoyed a varied program of excursions this year. In February, members participated in the annual wetlands bird survey at Lake Linlithgow and nearby Krause Swamp. Rod also followed up by surveying Lake Kennedy, Lake Bulrush, Harnath Swamp and Soldiers Swamp.

In March, members headed to Nelson to meet Steve who had mapped out a new area for HFNC to visit – Dry Creek Native Forest Reserve, with its limestone base, interesting vegetation, a number of deep open shafts into the limestone and connection to the Glenelg River.

In April, we joined our Portland members to walk part of the Great South West Walk east of the Cape Nelson lighthouse. Our last stop for the day was at the Point Danger to view the Gannet colony.

In May, Rod and Diane led members over a section of the Grampians Peaks Trail from the Yarram Gap Road to the Wannon River crossing across many peaks overlooking the Serra Range to the west and farmland to the east. Some members stopped at the Dunkeld-Halls Gap Road while others walked through to the Griffin Trail Head. Car shuffles were used to facilitate member transport on both these walks.

Rod and Diane led the June excursion to Wild Mans Cave in Burrunj/Black Range. A morning tea in the nearby Yellow Gum woodland preceded the walk. We parked on the Muirfoot Track and walked the 400 m to the steep track up to the cave from where we gained superb views of the steep sandstone stacks and across to the Gariwerd Ranges.

In July we headed south again to join with our Portland members to visit the Loreto Reserve, Picnic Hill and to revisit Cape Nelson. It is thanks entirely to the Loreto Nuns of Portland that this land remained as a reserve and was not sold for development.

The August excursion along the Hamilton Coleraine Rail Reserve from the Old Wannon Station Ground to the Parkwood Station Ground was led by Peter Hocking. Along this section of the Reserve, new plantings, natural regeneration of native species (some flowering) and some good bird sightings.

The September excursion took members to the Wilkin Flora Reserve and Weecurra State Forest with Diane as the leader for the day. Members enjoyed the display of spring flowers along the track behind the old Wilkin School, in the heathland in the East Wilkin Reserve and along the Rocky Den Road at Weecurra. However, no Brownbeak Orchids were seen. Brolgas seen on the Pieracle Swamp was a highlight.

The October excursion to the farm property 'Brie Brie' led by Ross Simpson was a delight. Here we got to see how owners of private farming property can be instrumental in conserving important remnant environments. Ross led us to four sites representing different EVCs on Scrubby Hill. The three sites fenced off from stock showed a great variety of plants – with some different plants seen in each site. The fourth site was open on one side to grazing stock and more weed incursion but still had interesting native vegetation, including some Messmate Stringybark not seen on the other sites.

Our last excursion for the year to the Wannon River at the Nigretta Falls and Wannon Falls Reserves was led by Bruce McInnes (our September presenter on native Freshwater Fish). Under Bruce's guidance, we used dip nets to collect freshwater macro-invertebrates and observed the great variety of invertebrates in the river. No native fish were collected, the only fish seen was the invasive *Gambusia* sp./Mosquito Fish that was first introduced into NSW waterways in the 1920s and is now spreading through our waterways.

Involvements with other environmental groups

Members continue to be supportive of Nature Glenelg Trust (NGT) and attend many of the workshops and programs this organization hosts.

This year Rod and Diane attended the Cavendish PS to help staff and students recognize birds in their local environment.

Peter Hocking has been a member of the Hamilton Coleraine Rail Reserve Committee of Management serving to uphold the stipulated aims of conservation of remnant native species along this reserve. He is also a member of The Forgotten Woodlands group and helps with their planting program.

HFNC is very grateful to HIRL for the continuing support given to our Club for our meetings.

Successes

HFNC enjoyed good patronage at most of its excursions and special presentations with a number of visitors to the activities and new members swelling our numbers. Our membership in 2023 reached over 40 – the first time for many years. We look forward to the active support of our new members.

HFNC was successful in administering the grants received at the end of last year and the start of this year so that all funds were expended, and the conservation works at the Wannan Flora Reserve exceeded initial expectations. That it was successful depended on the dedicated oversight and management by Rod and Diane with help from Steve and Wendy McDonald, requiring many hours of behind-the-scenes work to ensure all the legal requirements were met before the actual physical work could be done. This was followed up by the end of project reporting submitted by Rod and Steve on 11 November. The project required a withholding of about 20% of the funds until the final report was delivered and 6 weeks after for Glenelg Hopkins CMA to deal with all projects/issues. That meant some financial manipulation was required by the Club. The last of the grant money was sent through to our Club's bank account yesterday. Job done!

Ongoing Issues for the HFNC

As in recent years, the issue of engaging sufficient people to undertake the ongoing work needed to maintain weed-free places in our floristically rich reserves remains. Even with the success of this year's grant money to employ contractors at the Wannan FR, we do face a shortage of volunteers for most of the listed conservation activities we like to continue – especially at Fulham, Nigretta, Kanawalla and next year again at the Wannan Reserve.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank all members who in many and various ways have contributed to the successful functioning of the HFNC this year whether by way of attending meetings and excursions, delivering presentations to the Club's Special Presentation nights, writing excursion reports, organizing HFNC events (working bees and excursions), and/or sharing data and images that can be used in HFNC reports, submissions, newsletters, and to the HFNC website and Facebook page.

In particular, I thank Rod for the mountain of work he completes in managing the correspondence and in organizing and managing the working bees; Wendy for stepping in when required as President; Steve for providing bi-monthly reports on the Club's financial activity and status and for preparing the annual Treasurer's report (forthcoming), and for providing background material on a number of issues that have arisen as part of the Club's business through the year. Thank you to Janeen for taking accurate and thorough minutes and for maintaining the sightings reports at each meeting. Thank you to Peter in his role of Quartermaster for maintaining an accurate inventory of HFNC items and intellectual property, and for managing the website so that it remains up-to-date with annual and monthly reports.

Thank you everyone and best wishes for 2024.

Diane Luhrs (HFNC President), 14-12-2023