

Phillip Island (Millowl) Wildlife Plan

PROJECT UPDATE NO.5

(February 2024)

BACKGROUND

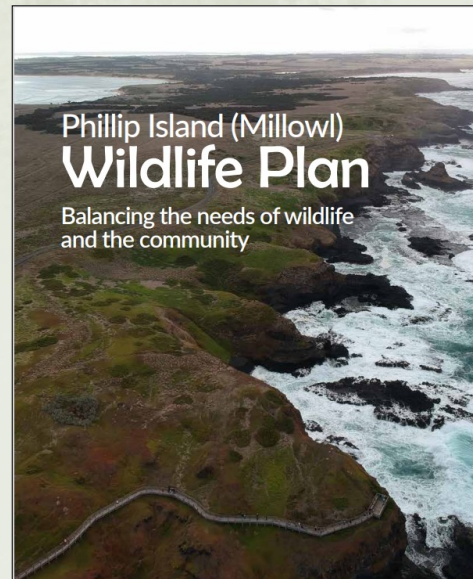
The Phillip Island (Millowl) Wildlife Plan was released in December 2021 following public feedback and community consultation. The full plan and a summary can be found at:

www.wildlife.vic.gov.au.

The aim of the plan over the next five years is to:

- Ensure the community values wildlife and contributes to its management
- Improve animal welfare
- Reduce the negative impacts of wildlife
- Maintain a viable agricultural industry
- Establish partnerships, including with the Bunurong Land Council
- To deliver effective wildlife management

Millowl is the Bunurong name for Phillip Island. It is part of the Country recognised as being the traditional land and waters of the Bunurong and is steeped in cultural history dating back tens of thousands of years. We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land on which we live, work and learn, the Bunurong. We pay our respects to their Elders past, present and emerging.



COLLABORATIVE PROCESS

The working group reports to the steering committee, which continues to guide the development of the Phillip Island (Millowl) Wildlife Plan. The working group includes representatives from:

- Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action (DEECA)
- Phillip Island Nature Parks (Nature Parks)
- Bass Coast Shire Council (BCSC)
- Bunurong Land Council Aboriginal Corporation (BLCAC)
- Local farming land holders



Energy,
Environment
and Climate Action

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(STRATEGY 1)

PUBLIC EDUCATION & COMMUNICATION

The range of educational resources available to the community continues to grow. These resources aim to empower landowners by fostering a better understanding of the underlying reasons for wildlife visitation, and providing information on real actions that can be undertaken on their own properties to manage impacts.



Landowners and/or managers are responsible for managing risks caused by wildlife on their land and must ensure any management actions are lawful. Options are available to assist with managing wildlife impacts around the home and garden, on farms and on public land. These often require effort and commitment to be effective.

Task 3. Partner agencies have continued to deliver education and communication resources and programs:

- Building the range of resources available to assist residential property owners to understand and manage impacts around their homes and gardens – for example “Living with Possums”
- Sharing Our Shores campaign continued highlighting the importance of providing safe nesting habitat for seabirds
- Dark Sky So Shearwaters Fly annual campaign (Apr-May 2023) continued to encourage local businesses to reduce light pollution during short-tailed shearwater migration to Northern Hemisphere
- Know Your Nature Parks newsletter (quarterly e-newsletter and media release)
- Conservation News newsletter (quarterly e-newsletter)
- Regular updates provided at Community and Environment Advisory Committee meetings
- Conservation stories shared through media channels

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(STRATEGY 2)

BUILDING UNDERSTANDING BASED ON EVIDENCE

Further research has been undertaken to better understand key wildlife populations, informing evidence-based decision making and wildlife management practices.

Task 5. In order to measure the effectiveness of management actions, objectives need to be clearly defined.

A range of monitoring parameters such as the recruitment of indigenous vegetation and the abundance of wildlife populations will allow success indicators and trigger points to be set in an adaptive management approach. Discussions between stakeholders and ecologists have commenced to finalise the monitoring requirements in early 2024.

Task 6. In 2022/23, the Nature Parks Wildlife Clinic responded to 1368 calls for wildlife-related concerns with 455 of those occasions where wildlife was either rescued or euthanised. www.basscoast.vic.gov.au

Of these, 77 were related to Swamp Wallabies, 43 Common Brushtail Possums and 27 Cape Barren Geese. Road trauma was the primary cause of injured wildlife responded to by Nature Parks.

Adaptive management involves an ongoing program of management and monitoring that may be adjusted over time, as our understanding of an ecological system's response to management improves.

Tasks 10 – 13. These tasks are focused on better understanding Cape Barren Goose population dynamics through ongoing monitoring, research and modelling. This is crucial for informed decision making about why, when and how to intervene to prevent undesirable impacts or changes.

Island-wide surveys of Cape Barren Geese have been undertaken since 1993. The 20th Spring survey was conducted in October 2023 and resulted in a total count of 2,766 geese. This count appears to indicate some stabilisation in the population since 2019, after seeing a sharp increase of 600% on Phillip Island in the 10 years prior to that. Further studies are now required to determine annual recruitment, dispersal and extent of emigration.

A PhD study focussing on Cape Barren Goose ecology will start in 2024 to address the main uncertainties of the population model; this will involve collaboration with University of Melbourne and La Trobe University researchers and on-site co-supervision by a Nature Parks scientist. This work is due to commence in May 2024 – its scope will depend on the available funding (the research team is currently investigating grant opportunities).

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Tasks 10 – 13 continued. In April 2023, the Phillip Island Wildlife Plan working group engaged a population specialist from the Arthur Rylah Institute to commence work on a metapopulation model.

This model is a critical step towards developing an adaptive management framework for managing Cape Barren Goose populations on Phillip Island and will account for the key elements of the life history such as nesting, flocking and migration. It will include uncertainties in the dynamics of the system and effects of management actions.

The model allows for the consideration of multiple management options and provides scientifically robust predictions that indicate the levels of effort required for effective management.

Preliminary results of this modelling are expected in the first half of 2024, with the delivery of a comprehensive report in mid-June 2024.



Tasks 14. Surveys of possums using mark-recapture distance sampling methods were undertaken at key sites in 2023. Oswin Roberts Reserve had estimated densities of 7.98 possums/hectare for Common Brushtail possums and 7.59 possums/hectare for Common Ringtail Possums, which are significantly higher than other parts of Victoria.

Possum surveys will continue in 2024, building a robust database that will be used to inform future management decisions.

Tasks 16. A collaborative study designed to measure the efficacy of virtual fencing involving Bass Coast Shire, Phillip Island Nature Parks, Victoria University, Regional Roads Victoria, and citizen scientists has concluded.

Results from the data analysis indicate that the presence of virtual fences did not reduce roadkill rates of the most frequently encountered species, Swamp Wallaby and Common Brushtail Possum, nor for all species combined. It was concluded that virtual fences are unlikely to provide a long-term reduction in roadkill rates.

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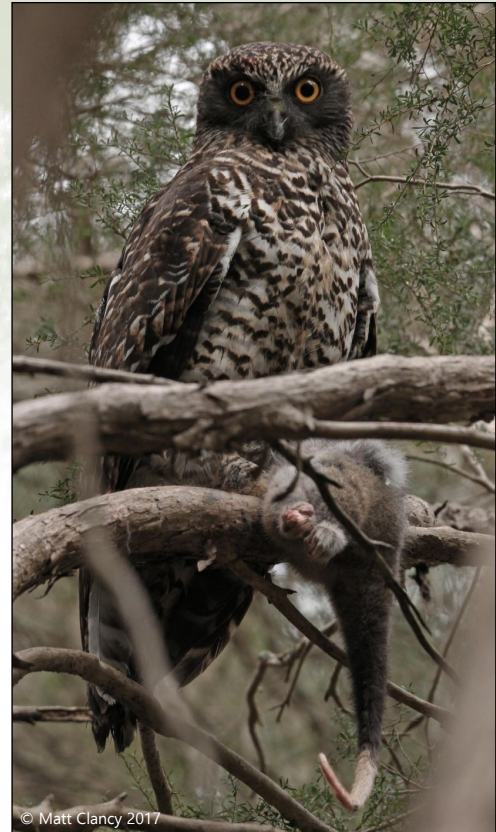
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Abundant browsing wildlife can impact on conservation works. Tasks 17, 18 & 33 relate to assessment of these impacts and trialling of exclusion and deterrent options.

Task 17. A review into the effectiveness of exclusion coops at sites including Oswin Roberts Reserve, Ventnor Koala Reserve and Rhyll Wetland has commenced with the monitoring of vegetation continuing in the Spring. To date, regularly maintained coops have been effective in preventing the browsing by wallabies and reducing browsing by possums. The island-wide review will continue in 2024.

Task 18. Following on from the investigation on the impacts of Cape Barren Geese on agricultural production (Task 8), further studies are underway to examine the impacts wildlife has on conservation works such as revegetation.

Task 33. The effectiveness of the browsing deterrent Sen-Tree is planned to occur during the Autumn and Spring planting seasons of 2024.



Exploring the role of native predators

Task 19. Due to the complexities of re-introducing native land-based predators into an ecosystem supporting ground-nesting seabirds and threatened species, focus has been placed on supporting the population of Powerful Owls as the main apex predator for possums on Phillip Island.

To date, surveys have not identified any roost sites to facilitate further research. Discussions with ecologists at Deakin University suggest that Phillip Island offers limited habitat which can support no more than three pairs.

However, several incidental sightings and vocalisations have been recorded at night in woodland reserves on Phillip Island.

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(STRATEGY 3)

COLLABORATION & INNOVATIVE MANAGEMENT

Task 29. The Phillip Island Speed Limit Review is progressing with a focus on unsealed rural roads. Bass Coast Shire Council is implementing a plan for warning and information signs as an alternative to regulatory signs and are working collaboratively with the Department of Transport and Planning on this project. Key messaging relating to the consideration of wildlife has been incorporated into the Speed Review Communications and Engagement Plan.

Wildlife Victoria, Phillip Island Nature Parks, Bass Coast Shire Council and Department of Transport and Planning, have partnered to reduce the wildlife road toll on Phillip Island through a range of communication activities. Increased wildlife road signage was installed during Summer 2023/24 to increase public awareness and the effect will be evaluated.



These signs will encourage road users to be aware of wildlife, as well as providing details for Wildlife Victoria's 24/7 Emergency Response Service. If regulatory signage is required, this will be considered later in the year.

Tasks 30. In the early 2000s, the management of Cape Barren Geese through egg collection was trialled on Flinders Island, Tasmania. This method was found to be ineffective, as most of the nests were required to be located over multiple years to be effective.

Opportunities to undertake a research trial into the effectiveness of egg management on Phillip Island are being explored, starting with an analysis of the effort required to be effective (via the Cape Barren Goose meta-population model).

Tasks 31. Bass Coast Shire Council is trialling the establishment of alternative fresh water sources for wildlife away from roadsides – the first step being the restoration of Gap Road wetland and the headwaters of Saltwater Creek with 40,000 wetland and indigenous plants. This area has been set aside as refuge habitat for local wildlife.

Over 200 birds were counted from 17 species in the first bird count conducted in January 2024. The area is an ideal refuge for Swamp Wallabies, Cape Barren Geese and possums as it has permanent freshwater and a range of habitats for both aquatic and terrestrial animals.

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(STRATEGY 4)

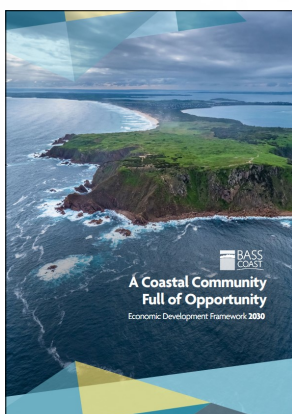
SUPPORTING & VALUING VIALE AGRICULTURE

Task 34. The Bass Coast Distinctive Areas and Landscapes Plan is a State Government initiative aimed at providing long term protection in the Planning Scheme to recognise Bass Coast as a significant landscape. Public Hearings were held in 2023 for the draft plan and final endorsement is due early 2024.

Additionally, the Bass Coast Shire Council Economic Development Framework was endorsed by Council in November 2023. The framework sets out actions to deliver economic growth to the region and recognise the role of the natural environment in underpinning our economy.

The framework outlines regenerative agriculture as one of the key elements of the plan, with actions including educating and upskilling farming community on regenerative agriculture and commencing a study to identify the agricultural opportunity and competitive advantage of Bass Coast.

www.basscoast.vic.gov.au



Tasks 35. Bass Coast Shire Council received funding from the Victorian Department of Heath's Agriculture Dependent Community Resilience Building initiative to deliver a Resilient Farming Communities Project. The main objective of the project is to improve the resilience, mental health, and wellbeing of the local farming community.

By providing agribusinesses with the knowledge and tools they need to develop more commercially sustainable operations, the program aims to empower them to better manage their businesses and become more prepared for future challenges.

The program is made up of three core elements that aim to complement each other:

- Small Agribusiness and Farming Diversity and Resilience Program
- Mental Health First Aid course tailored to farming communities - approximately 40 agricultural sector and associated support workers have completed this now
- Program in partnership with Food & Fibre Gippsland to better support existing health and agribusiness support networks

This links to Council's Economic Development Framework with an action to actively support on-farm diversification and sustainable business practices through programs and workshops.

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(STRATEGY 5)

BUNURONG CONNECTION TO COUNTRY

Millowl is the Bunurong name for Phillip Island. Bunurong connection to country underpins many aspects of the plan.

Task 38. A process exists for permissions to be issued under the *Wildlife Act 1975* allowing for the acquisition and possession of wildlife for indigenous cultural purposes. Wildlife Act permissions are administered by the Conservation Regulator and the specifics of any application are subject to privacy legislation.

Task 39. The Bunurong Land Council Aboriginal Corporation (BLCAC) continue to build capacity and seek opportunities to strengthen connection to country. BLCAC are currently undertaking a recruitment process for three Tarbuk Biik Ranger positions: Tarbuk Biik means "Strong Country". These positions will focus on a range of natural resource management activities, collaborating with other stakeholders on issues like control of pests and wildlife management.

PROGRESS & PRIORITIES SUMMARY

2024 PREVIEW & PRIORITIES

Tasks 12. Understanding dispersal and movements of Cape Barren Geese: establish a research project and seek funding support from multiple avenues. Results of this research will feed into the Cape Barren Goose Population Model, improving the accuracy of outputs. Commencing early 2024.

Task 13. The Cape Barren Goose population model and associated report will be completed mid-2024. This is a significant milestone for the Plan and will be used to inform decisions on appropriate management of Cape Barren Geese.

Task 17, 18 and 33. Assessment of over-browsing impacts caused by wildlife on conservation areas. Trials will commence mid-2024 to evaluate exclusion and deterrent options.

Task 31. The establishment and restoration of wetlands as an alternative water source for wildlife away from roadsides – works will be progressed at the Gap Road wetlands site.

