

MEDIA RELEASE

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Wildlife returns to farms, Deakin University research finds

Revegetation on farms in Victoria is bringing back wildlife, new research by Deakin University has found.

The findings of the three-year study into ways to help native wildlife survive and prosper in farmland will be presented at the Ecological Society of Australia's annual conference in Sydney next week.

The study identified positive trends for various species, but especially for woodland birds. On the flip side, the research has also confirmed for the first time that as native bushland declines in farm landscapes the populations of woodland birds decrease. Sixty species of woodland birds were recorded in the study but those farmland areas with little remaining bush often supported fewer than 20 of these species.

Revegetation and restoration of farm landscapes also provided benefits for other wildlife that was studied, such as frogs, native mammals and butterflies. Many of the detected species were making use of the revegetation, supporting the notion that farm landscapes can provide important habitat opportunities for local wildlife.

Deakin environmental science researchers Dr Rohan Clarke and Associate Professor Andrew Bennett looked at 43 farming areas, each eight kilometres in size, in the Glenelg Hopkins catchment in western Victoria where farms are predominantly sheep and wheat based.

"There is no doubt that birds that specialise in woodland habitats are in trouble, but revegetation is helping turn things around. The total amount of cover is the key driver for the recovery of woodland birds and any increase in the amount is of benefit," Dr Clarke said.

The study focused on ways to improve habitat for wildlife on working farms.

"It is not about bringing back the bush wholesale, rather it's about improving opportunities for wildlife while maintaining farm productivity," Dr Clarke said.

The researchers sampled areas which featured different stages of revegetation – some farms were recently revegetated and some were replanted over 50 years ago.

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Dr Clarke said it was positive to see that there had been a lot of revegetation undertaken in the region, through the hard work of many individuals and various community schemes.

“We found that as natural bush or remnants of natural bush declines in farms, the number of woodland birds decreases – this has never been demonstrated before,” he said.

“When revegetation is undertaken the number of woodland bird species occupying these areas rebounds.”

Birds returning to revegetated areas included the Superb Fairy-wren, the Red-capped Robin and the White-throated Treecreeper.

It was also found that the older the revegetation, the better the response of woodland birds.

“There are real time lags involved with revegetation and at least some of the effort needs to be viewed as an investment in the future– for example hollow production may take more than 100 years. However, there are also many immediate benefits and some animals do come back straight away; for example Blue Wren and many of the honeyeaters come back quickly,” Dr Clarke said.

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Media contact: Dr Rohan Clarke, Research Fellow, School of Life and Environmental Sciences, Deakin University, (03) 92517609 or 0408 947 001.

Issued by:

Mandi O’Garretty, Senior Media Officer
Phone 03 5227 2776 Mobile 0418 361 890