

Wildlife Plan

PROJECT UPDATE NO.6

(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 Plan is now 3 years into its 5 year implementation phase.
- 38 tasks out of 41 have reached their halfway completion mark. That is a 36% increase in the past year.

THE AIM

- 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 people
- 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 landholders



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(STRATEGY 1)

PUBLIC EDUCATION & COMMUNICATION

Educating the community on wildlife is a continuous effort and under this strategy we continued to share advice and engage with the community.

Task 3 and 4. These tasks are ongoing and Community engagement campaigns are ongoing and aim to educate and share messages about living with wildlife, encouraging visitors and the local community to share and respect Phillip Island (Millowl).

The *Sharing our Shores* campaign educates people on responsible beach behaviour to protect wildlife, including the threatened hooded plover which nests and forages on our shores.

Dark Sky So Shearwaters Fly encourages locals to turn off outside lights to help fledged shearwater chicks to leave the island safely during the 'take-off' period as they commence their migration back to Alaska.

Water for Wildlife messaging calls on the community to help safeguard local wildlife by being mindful of when animals are most active and slowing down as we travel around the island to minimise the occurrence of roadkill.

Community communications continued to inform the local, scientific, and broader community about the conservation and research outcomes through the following Phillip Island Nature Parks publications: Conservation News, Know your Nature Parks and the Threatened Species Report 2024. Read the latest on [Know Your Nature Parks](#) and [Conservation News](#).

(STRATEGY 2)

BUILDING UNDERSTANDING BASED ON EVIDENCE

Strategy 2 of the Plan aims to build understanding of key wildlife populations through research to inform evidence-based decision making and wildlife management practices where required.

Task 10. The 21st Spring Cape Barren Goose survey for Phillip Island (Millowl) was undertaken in early November 2024 by a team consisting of volunteers, interns, local landholders, Bunurong Land Council and Nature Parks staff. The team counted a total of 3120 geese which is 354 more since the 2023 survey. Surveys of Cape Barren Geese were also undertaken on French Island, with 990 geese counted. The results of these surveys will help inform the meta-population model (see Task 11 and 13) allowing more accurate predictions of population response across both islands.

“Evidence based decision making” refers to a process for making decisions about a program, practice, or policy that is based on the best available research evidence and is informed by practical experience from the field, along with relevant contextual information.

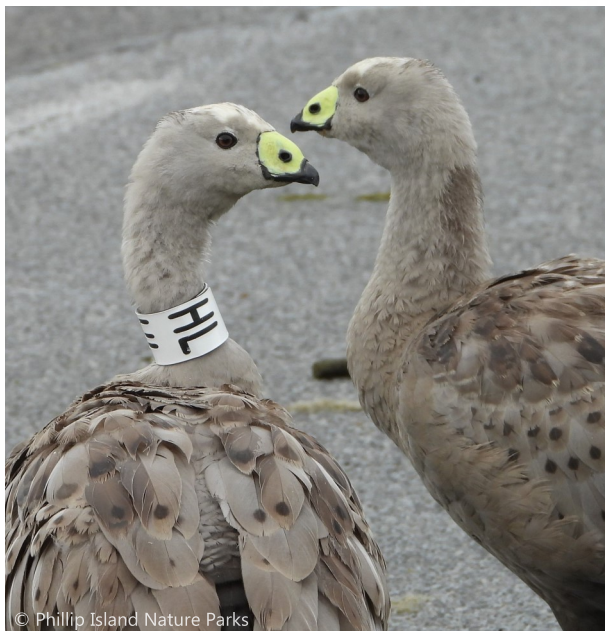
Research will be promoted and solutions to wildlife management issues developed to benefit the environmental and social needs on Phillip Island (Millowl).

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Task 12. In order to better understand the dispersal patterns and movements of Cape Barren Geese and how they utilise the landscape, a PhD project from the University of Melbourne commenced in August 2024. 100 GPS loggers were fitted to track the movements of geese with another 200 numbered plastic collars planned to be attached over the next year. To date, extensive movements have been recorded. Some geese have travelled almost 100 kilometres from Rhyll to a reservoir near Morwell, while others reached Yanakie near Wilsons Promontory, about 95 km from Phillip Island (Millowl).. Most movements off Phillip Island (Millowl) occur along the Bass Coast, between Lang Lang and San Remo with 6 geese visiting French Island regularly. One goose has been tracked visiting the Mornington Peninsula near Tyabb.



© Phillip Island Nature Parks



Figure 1. GPS tracking of 6 Cape Barren Geese from starting location of Phillip Island (Millowl) to offshore locations. C05 (red) travelled to Yanakie. C22 (orange) travelled to Tarwin Lower. C23 (yellow) travelled to Tyabb. D01 (blue) travelled to French Island and Jam Jerrup. L01 (green) travelled to Yanakie. R10 (pink) travelled to Moe.

Task 12 continued. In addition, many geese have shown a preference for specific paddocks, often returning to the same locations on multiple occasions. Flocks on Summerland Peninsula and Fishers Wetland have dispersed and moved to paddocks off the island highlighting the significant dispersal during the non-breeding season, and suggesting that geese from Phillip Island (Millowl) are connecting with other regional populations.

Further investigation over the next 2 years into their migratory and territorial behaviours will help clarify their seasonal use of breeding and feeding grounds.

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Task 13. A major piece of work was delivered under this strategy in September 2024 – the **Metapopulation Model to Assess Control Options for Cape Barren Geese on Phillip Island (Millowl)**.

A metapopulation construct was used with a Cape Barren Geese population modelled on Phillip Island (Millowl), French Island and the Bass Coast.

‘Metapopulation’ describes the spatially separated populations of the same species that interact with each other at some level.

Model parameters were based on current knowledge of the species and its life history, with input from managers and species experts. The model was built using the best available data. This model was used to assess 13 different control strategies focused on various combinations of culling and fertility reduction (management of eggs), as well as a baseline, “no control” scenario.

Models for an uncontrolled Cape Barren Geese metapopulation show that it would continue to increase.

The model indicates that a mix of currently available control interventions, applied consistently across Phillip and French Islands will be effective in returning the population (and impacts on ecological and agricultural values) to sustainable levels, albeit over time.

The Working Group will continue to engage stakeholders to ensure to promote understanding of the metapopulation model report findings, and establish adaptive management processes that are consistent with the principles of the Plan.

Task 14. Surveys of Swamp Wallabies were conducted in April on the Summerland Peninsula revealed an increase in Swamp Wallaby numbers. The population has risen from 749 recorded in the last census ten years ago to 1,227, with densities increasing from 2 to 3 individuals per hectare.

Surveys of Common Brushtail Possums on the Summerland Peninsula in June 2024 revealed a density of 2.3 per hectare, indicating that they are highly abundant even in open habitats without eucalypt woodland. This suggests their spread to a wider range of habitats on Phillip Island (Millowl).

Task 16. In update 5 of the Wildlife Plan, this task was reported on, stating the use of virtual fencing was ineffective in reducing wildlife road kill numbers.

Since then, a presentation by Christine Connelly describing the recent study on Phillip Island (Millowl) has become available which you can access through the link below.

Phillip Island Virtual Fencing Study.



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Abundant browsing wildlife can impact on conservation works. Tasks 17 and 18 relate to assessment of these impacts and trialling of exclusion techniques.

Task 17. A 12-month study on the impacts of possum browsing on the canopy health of eucalypts concluded in August 2024. Collars were placed on 16 Swamp Gums to exclude possums from accessing the canopy, while uncollared trees remained open to possum browsing for comparison. Remote cameras captured daily images of the canopy, which were processed and analysed to assess canopy cover through foliage cover, crown cover, and leaf area.

Findings from the study indicate the majority of collared trees (10 out of 16) showed canopy growth compared to the uncollared ones, suggesting that mitigating possum browsing could help improve tree health.

Task 18. The Future-Proofing Little Penguins Project is a strategic initiative aimed at enhancing the resilience of the Little Penguin colony and other wildlife on the Summerland Peninsula against climate change-induced threats like bushfires and heatwaves. The project focuses on establishing 'green firebreaks' by replacing flammable vegetation with fire-retardant species and increasing canopy cover in degraded penguin habitats to provide cooler environments.



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Task 18 continued. In 2024, key efforts included clearing of the 5.5 hectares of fire-breaks and the planting of 12,415 plants across 7 hectares, focusing on expanding tree canopy and shade coverage in penguin habitats.

As part of the project studies to quantify the impact of browsing pressure of revegetation outcomes were undertaken. Results to date demonstrate the impact of browsing on plant survival and growth with average survival rates in unguarded plots being 1% after 12 months, compared to survival rates of guarded plants averaging 44% after 12 months. The findings emphasise the profound impact of browsing on conservation plantings and the importance of protective measures, such as exclusion coops or tree guards to safeguard new plantings from herbivore pressure.

Wildlife Management is...

...managing wildlife populations and their habitats for the benefit of the community and the wildlife.

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(STRATEGY 3)

COLLABORATION & INNOVATIVE MANAGEMENT

Using research results, education and incorporating cultural practices to deliver improved ways of balancing the needs of wildlife with the needs of the community.

Task 31. The restoration of Gap Road wetland has involved planting an additional 2,000 plants across the 8-hectare site to enhance wildlife habitat and provide a refuge. Ongoing maintenance has been carried out to ensure the health of the plants and to control weed growth. While specific survival rates are not available, the overall success of the plantings has been high.

This project has benefited from the support of various organisations, including Phillip Island Landcare, local and Melbourne-based primary and secondary schools, Wildlife Coast Cruises, orienteering groups, and contractors. On World Environment Day last year the entire San Remo Primary School visited the site to plant a section of the wetland. Volunteer assistance is very important to ensure the site is planted and maintained to a high standard.'

The project is ongoing and the next stage of the wetland restoration will depend on the next reiteration of the masterplan for the site.

Tasks 32. Investigations into the use of decoy crops to relieve pressure on surrounding agriculture indicate that this would not be an effective strategy used on its own, but would be better suited as part of an integrated approach in conjunction with other management approaches. The Steering Committee have deferred this initiative but will reconsider in year 5.

Task 33. Several sites on Phillip Island (Millowl) have been exposed to high levels of browsing pressure leading to degradation of seabird habitat including erosion and collapse of burrows.

Trials to evaluate commercially-available deterrents (Sen-Tree and D-Ter) and exclusion strategies to reduce browsing pressure on native vegetation were undertaken. Preliminary results indicate that both deterrent products were ineffective at reducing the impacts of browsing from Cape Barren Geese and wallabies, while the use of raised lattice panels to exclude large herbivores showed signs of vegetation recovery at degraded sites.

Exclusion fencing to protect over 6 hectares of eucalypt plantations on Phillip Island (Millowl) has proven extremely effective at safe-guarding koala browse against the impacts of possums and wallabies. The fence includes a "floppy top" overhang design and "hot-wires" to prevent possums from gaining access. While extremely effective at protecting vegetation, the high costs associated with fence construction may exclude this strategy from broader applications.



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(STRATEGY 4)

SUPPORTING & VALUING VIABLE AGRICULTURE

Including conservation into viable farming practices is an alternative way to manage impacts from abundant wildlife on agricultural land.

Task 36. Landholders are actively engaging in discussions with a range of community groups to highlight trends, discuss challenges and share their own experiences.

These groups include

- Local Landcare Networks
- Local Better Beef Group



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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 23. This task has been highly successful and has supported Strategy 5 by facilitating the use of possum carcasses for Aboriginal cultural use.

A Bunurong Land Council Aboriginal Corporation representative says “Assessing Bunurong possums for cultural practices marks an amazing step forward for the Bunurong Community. Sourcing possum skins directly from Bunurong Country will restore cultural connections and traditions” and “Over time, we hope to be able to integrate more traditional methods into the process.”

“Assessing Bunurong possums for cultural practices marks an amazing step forward for Bunurong Community.”

Creating a possum skin cloak is not an easy task and requires many skins in good condition and dedicated work to complete. Possums are harvested sustainably and humanely, and skins are tanned before being incorporated into cloaks and other uses as part of a millennia long practice. Bunurong Land Council will continue to access possums for cultural use by Bunurong community with the support of DEECA and Nature Parks.



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PROGRESS & PRIORITIES SUMMARY

2025 PREVIEW & PRIORITIES

Task 17, 18 and 33. The release of a detailed summary of the non-regulatory trial results from the past three years, as part of Phillip Island (Millowl) Wildlife Plan, highlighting the efforts of DEECA, Nature Parks, BCSC, BLCAC, and our landholders/managers.

Task 19. Powerful Owls are major predators of possums with a single owl preying on up to 300 possums each year. Surveys are planned to assess the Powerful Owl population on Phillip Island and improve our understanding of home range size which will provide crucial insights into the population dynamics of this important yet elusive species. Outcomes of surveys will guide management efforts to support population growth of Powerful Owls.

Keep an eye out...

...DEECA Phillip Island (Millowl) Wildlife Plan webpage will undergo some updates in 2025

What's changing?

- Previous updates and reports will be in one place, so you can keep up with the progress of the plan.
- Links to educational materials including our living with wildlife flyers.
- Research reporting and monitoring data of studies to date
- FAQ section addressing common questions and concerns.

Task 28 and 30. DEECA, Nature Parks and BLCAC are currently in discussion with new ideas of novel trials on Cape Barren Geese egg management. If trials were to proceed, engagement with our land holders and managers will commence.

Progress by Task Number at Year 3 of 5

