

## Conference Proceedings – Speaker Transcript

### Reintroducing fire to critically endangered grassland ecosystems on Trust for Nature owned properties

**Justine Leahy**

Victorian Country Fire Authority

[Link to slides](#)

Trust for Nature has been involved with the Country Fire Authority over the last two years, planning for the introduction of fire back into the native grasslands in northern Victoria along the plains. The background was that Trust for Nature approached CFA in relation to management of about 2300 hectares of Trust for Nature owned property scattered across three different areas of northern Victoria. As you can imagine, it has been long unburned since the Trust purchased the lands. Most of the properties were historically grazed at some point, either crash grazed or the intensely grazed. Some went under the plough with some improvement, some of these were the properties that were intercepted by the Trust and purchased due to the inability of landholders to undertake the cropping works they were wanting to do, or improvement works.

Most of the properties are long unburnt at least 10 years, some of them close to 20, some may be longer and in native grasslands (slide 2). Most of them are high conservation grasslands and this period of time is a very long time without biomass removal as Paul Gibson-Roy pointed out. Each of the properties has nationally threatened flora, fauna and communities throughout them. Trust for Nature obviously manages their land for conservation management and not solely for production. But also they recognise that they have a balance that needs to be undertaken in regards to fuel reduction as well to reduce fire risk. Next to these properties are landholders that are agricultural production. If you've got a million dollar crop or property right next door and you've got a landholder who isn't managing their land as far as you've seen you can imagine that there would be some discontent in the community with that occurring.

Trust for Nature manage their properties for a wide range of these threatened species and communities. What they have actually found through their research is that one that they're focusing on in particular is the Plains Wanderer, which is a small bird, probably about 10 cm big, mostly flightless. When it does try to fly it's a little bit difficult, sort of less than a chook, I'd suggest. If you've seen a chook fly or try to fly, consider something this small trying to do that - it can be quite amusing. But this means that they can't really escape too well from predators and also in the event of fires that come as bushfires.

In managing for the Plains Wanderer we've also managed to bring in a fire regime that will suit the other flora and fauna species as well. Good Plains Wanderer habitat is what we're aiming for across the Trust

for Nature properties. The properties are surrounded largely by grazing or cropping, therefore most of the private land is actually unsuitable for the Plains Wanderer habitat. So we're looking at Trust for Nature and Parks Victoria land as priority habitat. This photo (slide 3) is an example of good habitat whereby we have about 50% bare ground, 10% litter, plants that have inter-tussock spaces between them and the majority of vegetation is less than 5 cm tall and there are some taller shrubs to about 30 cm throughout there, or taller plants to about 30 cm. It's pretty specific in what it's after and being a little bird they tend to go around, stick their head up, have a poke around, run around. They forage after insects and seeds so they need to be able to see what's actually on the ground.

Here we have some poor habitat (slide 4). The sheep were left a little bit too long on this paddock. That is actually native pasture but it's a little bit under the weather. Even the sheep didn't have anything to eat in there. On the other end of the extreme is two Trust for Nature properties which we were looking at burning under the project. As you can, the grasses are so high our Plains Wanderers are really going to struggle in there and they just will not occur in those areas. It's too dense and they've now moved on to somewhere else that might be a little bit more appropriate.

Trust for Nature, did actually start doing some habitat management on their own (slide 5). They were putting a containment line in here and then doing some small area burning of an evening where they could. Obviously if they've got close on two and a half thousand hectares, that's going to take some years to actually get through.

So with the partnership between CFA and Trust for Nature, we've developed a 15-year fire management plan. In autumn 2014 over the three main blocks, which are broken up into separate paddocks, we burnt 340 hectares of native grasslands through there in an area that has the habitat structure for the Plains Wanderer. As you can see, we've burnt off the slash break there (slide 6). On the right hand side is the 2014 burn and on the left hand side of that photo is the area that we burnt last Friday. In autumn 2015, so last Friday, we managed to burn 155 hectares in two different blocks. Now we've got some longer term protocols and processes put in place whereby we've got a good partnership between Trust for Nature and CFA. With 15-year management plan, we're using a mosaic approach across the landscape and most of the paddocks are broken down into about 60 hectares each. We're breaking those up across the landscape to ensure that we don't actually remove everything all at once.

We've also incorporated into that CFA brigade training whereby we can introduce new members or just refresh people on the application of fire and the exposure to fire where they haven't had that exposure before. CFA is getting benefit out of this as well, not solely Trust for Nature. Also the community barriers have been broken down as well. As I mentioned, we have landholders with agricultural productive property and then Trust for Nature land which is managed for conservation with grass that is high through the summer season. You can imagine that there is a little bit of difficulty and a bit of antagonism between the two. So on bringing these two groups together, we've created a bit more of a community approach with multiple objectives rather than just solely being for one purpose.

You can see some examples (slide 7) of the work here, nine months post-burn at one property and 12 months post-burn on the other. I have included just the raw summer or autumn photos there rather than pretty pictures of spring properties and grasslands because that you can easily get distracted by the pretty flowers and how green and lush they look in spring and you're not actually looking at the structure, which is what the aim of today is. So it's pretty raw but that's how they're looking. The habitat is in its correct form and proper structure that we need for the Plains Wanderer plus all of the threatened species that have actually benefited from that during the spring in the burns.

## Questions from the audience

**Q** - Justine, a question was asked earlier about the difficulty in getting regulatory approval for burns. What sort of a process have you got in Victoria?

**JL** - With Trust for Nature, because we're working closely with Trust for Nature on these properties, Trust for Nature have actually got arrangements with the local Department of Environment Land, Water and Planning whereby Trust for Nature are the experts in this area. All of the Trust for Nature people used to work at DSE doing the threatened species work. They've now changed ship and work for the Trust. So the information's actually gone across to the Trust. We have arrangements also with the Commonwealth Department of Environment relying on EPBC approvals. The process is generally that the applicant, in this case the Trust, would go to and liaise with the local DELWP agency. They would then go to the commonwealth. The commonwealth would then come back down to DELWP, have a bit of a chat with them, which are the local guys which have already moved over to Trust for Nature. Then it goes back up to the commonwealth with the recommendations which have already been agreed between the two and then it comes back that all's okay.

So it all sounds very complicated but ultimately it's one big loop and one big circle whereby all of the experts are liaising on these things. The commonwealth Department of Environment, they're happy for ecological improvement, whatever is considered as for ecological improvement, to go ahead with the burns so long as protocols are put in place whereby the timing of the burn is appropriate and the extent of the burn is appropriate. So we're not burning the whole lot. We're actually doing them in autumn rather than in spring or summer. Even the lighting patterns that we're applying, they also come into it as well because we're not going to just put in an edge and then light her up on one end and let it rip because if we do happen to have some of our flightless Plains Wanderers in there, they're not really going to escape too well in that sort of a scenario. So a lot does go into it but the approvals are all sought and go through both the state and the commonwealth.

**Q (comment)** - Hi, Justine. Your response there is absolutely valid. It just highlights the complexities and the difference between the modern day world and our strict formulaic, structures and processes as opposed to the early cultural sort of practices.

I was in WA recently with an Aboriginal gentleman who worked on a property - it was his property. Essentially we walked around one evening with a box of matches just lighting fires, and that was the process. He'd been reading the country, and he deemed it a suitable time. That was the process - he managed the landscape in that way. I'm not suggesting that in a country of 22 million we're going to be able to do that but we are at polar opposites in terms of how it's managed in the cultural sense and this crazy line of ticks, and boxes, and checks and it's got to have every expert in the whole world involved otherwise we don't feel happy. That's not a criticism of anyone but, again, I just don't know how we resolve that or how we can make sense of it.

**Q** - I have a question about the Plains Wanderers. Are there efforts being expended to detect whether there are positive trends in their population or whether it's too early to tell?

**JL** - Yeah, they are being monitored regularly each year by Trust for Nature and also by another consultant who we remain in contact with. At the moment the properties which we have burnt to date, so the ones that are 12 months old, have been surveyed. There haven't been any Plains Wanderers

found to have re-established in there. However, it is only 12 months and we've only really had one seed season. Things are still working their way back in because the Plains Wanderer lives on little invertebrates as well. At this point we're not really expecting anything for a couple of years to come back into those properties. But over time, yes, and the monitoring is definitely there in place. The fire regime will also be adapted based on what's happening onsite and what the research is actually finding and the monitoring is telling us.