

SPRING /
SUMMER 2015
Newsletter No.45



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Newham & District Landcare Group



Working towards a
healthier environment

Address – PO Box 314, WOODEND, 3442

A photograph of a woman with brown hair in pigtails, wearing a black lace top and blue jeans. She has orange powder smeared on her face and is laughing joyfully. In the background, other people are visible, some wearing light blue shirts, suggesting a group event like a BBQ.

Cracking Christmas BBQ !

Photo: Sandy Scheltema

DIARY OF EVENTS

The summer period is generally quiet and 2015 – 2016 is no exception.
Coming up in early 2016.

JANUARY

Thursdays with Ryan at Hanging Rock Reserve. 9am start.

Ryan is one of the new part-time rangers, with bush crew experience. He will be undertaking environmental maintenance, starting in the areas NDLG has planted over the last 4 years.

Come for as long/little as you want/are able. Meet on the entry drive near the creek.

FEBRUARY

Thursday 18th. Launch of 'The little bit of bush' at Newham Primary school

Details tbc. Join the school, NDLG members and members of the general community for a BBQ to celebrate the new facilities near the court.

Autumn speaker events – all details tbc

Moths / butterflies.

Planting aquatics in farm dams.

Group contacts

President: Nick Massie. **Vice President:** Penny Roberts. **Treasurer:** Hilary Roberts.

Committee members: Howard Stirling, Karl Kny, Doug Dalglish, Jim Sansom and Luke Spielvogel.

Secretary: Helen Scott.

New members, general queries: Penny Roberts; 5427 0795.

Roadsides: Sue Massie; 5427 0065.

Newham Primary: Jenny Waugh; 5427 0408.

Animal pests: John Luckock; 5427 0909.

Wesley Park: Fran Spain; 5427 0661.

Flora, library, small tools, grants: Penny Roberts; 5427 0795.

Spray trailer: Doug Dalglish; 5427 2666.

Website: <http://www.newhamlandcare.info/>

The committee meets on the first Monday of the month (February to December) between 7.30 – 9pm in Newham. All members are welcome to attend the Committee meetings to become more involved or raise specific matters. Please advise a committee member if you wish to attend. Meetings start and finish on time... and we enjoy them!

Grand total of 7008 – WOW!

Three Communities of Nature funding grants, eight planting seasons since 2012 and the enthusiasm of a large group of volunteer planters has seen a grand total of 7,008 plants added to the area beside the creek in Hanging Rock Reserve.

The aim of all this planting is to stabilise the creek banks and limit further erosion, filter run-off from the surrounding areas and thus improve water quality, provide food sources and safe nesting sites for woodland birds and generally improve the aesthetic of the riparian zone.

Contractors have assisted with some of the more unpleasant aspects of creek rehabilitation (think Blackberry, Holly, Thistle) and the Friends group have assisted with the Broom in the south west corner of the reserve.

All the activities undertaken will need to be revisited, but the time needed should progressively diminish as past plantings become established and these native plants compete with and shade out the exotic interlopers.

A big thank you to all the volunteers who have assisted in the reserve and to DELWP (Dept. Environment, Land, Water and Planning) for the repeated funding support for this project

Making holes with a Hamilton planter was difficult along the creek due to compaction – resulting in a switch to augered holes for the 2nd planting season. No formal comparison has been made between the two techniques but it certainly seems that plants in augered holes have done better at this site. Remember, the Landcare auger is available for \$15 per day. *Volunteer a site for a trial of side by side Hamilton planter vs augered holes and the fee will be waived.*

A massed planting on the creek banks just east of the entry drive – not nearly wide enough given the erosion present, but a start. This planting is in an area where the previous management had been to spray the edges of the creek with herbicide to keep it looking 'neat and tidy' – an action which had resulted in accelerated erosion and regrowth of thistle and exotic grasses alone. Massed clumping species made up about half the numbers planted, with the rest being shrubs and understorey trees.



Adam Laurance Visit, August 2015



The students in grades 4, 5 and 6 at Newham Primary School enjoyed a presentation on soils by Adam Laurance last week. He might not have revealed any of his magic tricks, but he helped the students understand how busy the critters and bacteria in the soil beneath our feet are! The students enjoyed turning dirt into mud to get an idea of the sand/clay content before testing the pH of the compost pile, which will come in handy when they prepare another wicking box for blueberry bushes next term.

A very big thank you to Newham & District Landcare Group for their support and making these wonderful presentations possible.

Local rainfall trends

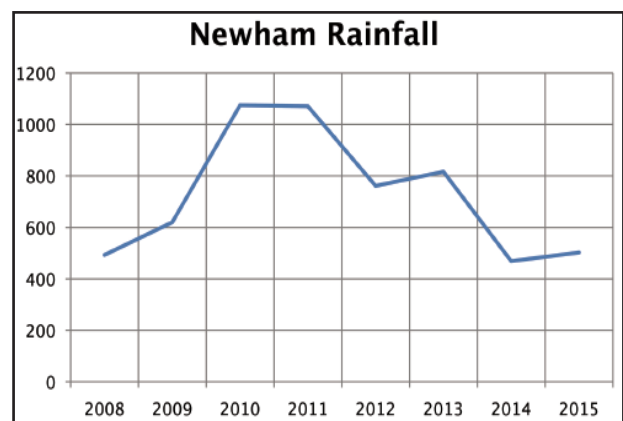
The graph below charts the rainfall totals for each calendar year from 2008. Examination shows that apart from 2010 and 2011 when the area had significant floods in late 2010 extending into early 2011, the trend has been for less and less rainfall.

Typically the average for this area is between 600mm and 700mm. It can be seen that since 2011 the totals have been trending lower.

This has significant potential adverse outcomes for this area if the trend continues in terms of recharging of aquifers, typical vegetation, the nature of farming and rural activities and increasing fire danger periods.

Is it statistically significant? – You be the judge.

Nick Massie



ALERT:

Chilean needle grass has been recently found at Newham

In October this year NDLG commissioned botanical surveys of significant roadside vegetation in the area– and an unexpected and most unwelcome discovery was Chilean needle grass at two sites. At both sites the seed appears to have been introduced by contaminated equipment – a culvert reconstruction in Whitebridge Rd and trenching for electrical supply on Three Chain Rd.

At both sites NDLG volunteers removed and bagged the seed heads and then manually removed the plants. Checks will be undertaken on a regular basis over the summer months. All material will get the 'summer heat treatment' and be burnt next Autumn. Adjacent landowners will be notified by DELWP of their responsibility to treat any infestation on their land and will also receive a visit from Landcare volunteers to reinforce the message and assist with identification.

Chilean needle grass (*Nassella neesiana*) is a declared noxious weed and classed as restricted in all of Victoria, where it is becoming a serious pasture and environmental weed in south-eastern Australia. It is very invasive and forms dense stands in pastures, bushland and roadsides. It tolerates drought and heavy grazing, giving it great potential to spread and over-run existing vegetation.

During the warmer months large amounts of unpalatable flower stalks are produced, with very little leaf material, resulting in a severe reduction of summer stock carrying capacity. The vigour of Chilean needle grass can be partly explained by its efficient system of seed production. Up to 15,000 seeds per square meter can be found in the seed bank beneath infestations. These seeds remain viable for many years. The seeds have very sharp points that have been reported to penetrate and damage the fleece, skin and eyes of livestock.

Description

Chilean needle grass is a tussocky perennial in the speargrass group of grasses, growing to about 1m high. (figure 1).

Flowers – the flowering head is a loose, sometimes interrupted panicle to 40cm long (figure 2).

Seeds – these are the best feature to use in identification. Two types of seeds are produced by Chilean needle grass: normal seeds, arising from the flowering heads (shown in figures 3–4) and stem seeds. **At the junction of the seed and the awn (tail of the seed) there is a raised crown (corona), a ridge of small teeth encircling the awn.** The seeds of native Australian speargrasses (*Austrostipa* sp.) appear similar except they don't have the corona (figure 5). The seeds of Chilean needle grass are pale brown when mature, warty in texture, and hairless except along the midrib and near the callus (the base of the seed). They are mostly 8 to 10 mm long, with a 1mm long corona and a 60–90mm long awn which is twice bent, with 15–30mm to the first bend. The awns do not readily detach from the seed and they often twist together at maturity. The seed is enclosed by two bracts (glumes) which are 16–25 mm long, purplish in colour and taper to a point.



Figure 1



Figure 2

The stem seeds are located at the nodes (swellings which give rise to leaves) of the flowering stem and are concealed by the leaf sheath which has been removed for the photo (figure 6). These seeds allow the plant to reproduce even if flowering has been prevented.

Dispersal

The sharp-pointed seeds readily become attached to the coats of animals, clothing and machinery. Floodwaters play a significant role in seed dispersal.

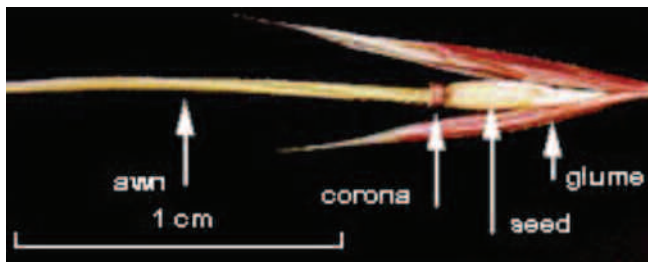


Figure 3. Seed with glumes still attached. Note the corona between the awn and the seed.



Figure 4. Seed without glumes – note corona.

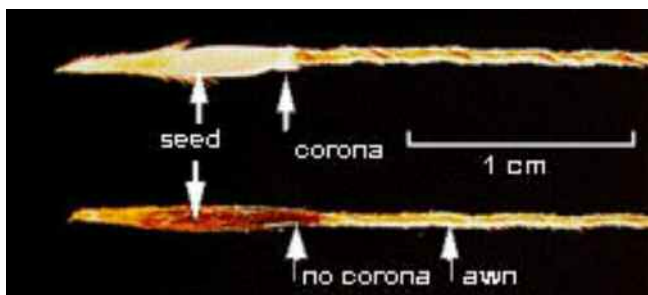


Figure 5. The normal seed (top – note the corona) compared to a seed of a native spear grass, *Austrostipa bigeniculata* (bottom – note the absence of a corona).



Figure 6. Stem seeds (above) and normal seeds (below).

Book review by Clare McKenna
of *Aesops Attic*, Kyneton

Little Platypus

Author: Nette Hilton

Illustrator: Nina Rycroft

Koala Books

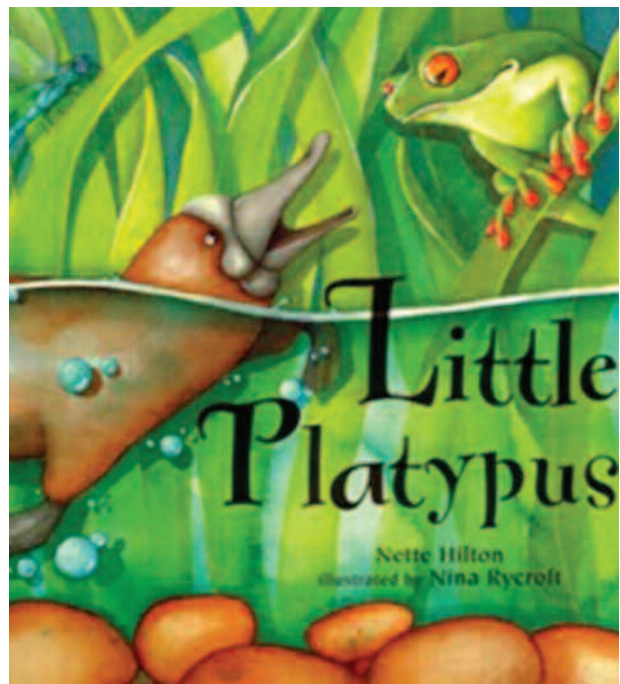
First published 2000, reprinted 2012

This sweet childrens book starts with the hatching of two eggs, one high in a tree and the other on the ground. The egg in the tree immediately knows what creature it is but the other creature doesn't know. The story follows the second little creature on it's journey to find out who it really is. Along the way we meet Kookaburra, Koala, Emu, Wombat and Frog.

Lively, repetitive text, wonderful descriptions of the Australia native animals and their habitat.

Bright, colourful, believable illustrations. I have read many childrens books where the illustrations of the Australian animals don't look anything like the real animal, but I am pleased to say that Nina Rycroft has created some very real looking animals.

The story is short enough for bedtime and there is a happy ending.



Connecting Country 2015 educational series

Connecting Country is a community-operated not-for-profit organisation working to restore and enhance biodiversity and improve the productive natural environment across the Mount Alexander region.

In 2015 this organisation ran an educational series aimed at landholders interested in improving the conservation and/or productive values of their properties. The sessions covered some basic theory and focussed on practical information, skills and resources. Our last newsletter featured an article on the 'Living with fire and wildlife' session. The final three sessions in the series were titled 'Biodiversity in the paddock', 'Conservation fencing' and 'Back from the brink'. All were well run with excellent presenters and lots of take home messages. Summaries of each of these sessions can be found on the Connecting Country website with links to further information relating to the topics. Listed below are some key messages I took away from the 'Back from the brink' session as weeds are a problem to us all!

1. Know your weeds and their habits and make a plan.

2 Start with the TRANSFORMERS– they should be the first priority in weed control.

These are environmental weeds that have an aggressive invasion front and are capable of dramatically changing the ecology of native vegetation. Common examples in our area are Gorse, Hawthorn, Broom, Blackberry and Canary grass (*Phalaris aquatica*). Chilean Needlegrass is another transformer that we now need to be on the look-out for at Newham since it has been present for four or five years at two recently discovered sites.



3. Let the bush fight back – the Bradley method of weed control in native vegetation

In the 1960s and 1970s the Bradley sisters developed a series of weed control and native vegetation recovery techniques through trial and error – their work was the beginning of bush regeneration in NSW. This method involves methodically clearing small areas in and around healthy native vegetation so that native plants can regenerate, replacing the weeds. Secure the best areas first – they are easiest to work with the best results. These core areas can then be expanded. Minimise soil disturbance and off-target damage.

Our 2015 Christmas BBQ

(see photos on page 14)

Once again the annual Newham Landcare Christmas BBQ was a resounding success. With a record attendance of 115 people.

The record numbers saw the egg toss run in a series of heats. Eggs were rigorously (or perhaps not so rigorously) inspected and the event was subject to some questioning of the umpire. Plenty of skin and hair-friendly egg masks were worn, much to the delight of onlookers. This year's biggest tossers were Stephen Mahon and Mark Grady.

Another highlight was watching small children dodge gumboots. Next year we are thinking of placing the swings directly in front to give contestants something to aim at. Dave Moore's gumboot throwing reign was brought to an end by Mark Grady.

A big thank you to the organisers for their fabulous efforts – the BBQ was delicious as always, and the gingerbread house was efficiently demolished.

The peace of the Jim Jim was disturbed recently by the screeching of cockatoos – for more than seven hours! The reason? A lone koala attempting to have a quiet feed in the same tree that the cockies were nesting in. Over the course of the day I was repeatedly drawn to the tree to see how things stood. Periods of stand-off with the cockies perched 1-2m away were interspersed with full-on attacks, feathers on end, wings spread, screeching, pecking. The koala tried to escape by descending... and was followed. The koala moved as high as it could go... and was followed. Eventually the cockies gave it away – and the koala was able to have a peaceful meal of leaves with the cockatoos nowhere in sight.



Rural Roadsides – a summary for 2015

It has been a significant year for Shire roadsides and the work being done by Newham & District Landcare Group.

NDLG has always been active on roadsides – for example the “Weedies”, aka Roadside Management Group sub-committee, have since 2005 liaised with MRSC about weed removal on roadsides. We mapped levels of weed infestation and entered results on Council’s database, in addition to having working-bees on specific roadsides, following up with Council on spraying programmes, and running information evenings and educational workshops, such as indigenous seed propagation.

2015 saw issues about roadsides conservation hot up significantly and embrace the idea of rural roadsides representing one of our greatest natural assets, part of a landscape web of indigenous flora and fauna. By their very nature they provide a permanent network of corridors across the landscape. They connect various habitats from hills to creeks, high rainfall to low rainfall, forests to woodlands and grasslands. This connectivity across the landscape is even more critical in these times of climate change – the connectivity allows for movement of species, which assists in enabling adaptation to changing conditions.



Many of our Shire’s roadsides are important remnants of rare native plant communities and habitat for many, sometimes threatened, animal species. They can often be a precious refuge within an otherwise cleared, ‘alien’ landscape.

We have witnessed with increasing dismay the neglect, damage and destruction of roadside vegetation and habitat.

Some of the many examples of unsuitable treatment of significant roadside vegetation include:

- Cutting back and removal of roadside native trees and shrubs, groundcovers and wildflowers which are important layers of the ecosystem, and provide a colourful display when in flower.

- Repeat mowing that prevents wildflowers from seeding, and favours exotic grasses over the much less flammable native species.
- Removal of dead or fallen timber that provides habitat for small native mammals, reptiles, frogs and invertebrates.
- Mowing and ripping of large stretches of biodiverse roadsides leaving only large eucalypts and preventing the growth of young trees to replace old ones.
- Planting of large non-native windbreak trees very close to the fence and even on the roadside reserve itself where they encroach on and compete with indigenous vegetation on the roadside, and require trimming by road authorities for safety purposes.
- Damage to plants and introduction of weed species by mowers, graders and horses. For example Landcare members are currently dealing with a Chilean Needle Grass infestation caused by culvert works on several sites.
- Regular dumping of large loads of road material by drainage and grading contractors on top of significant vegetation.



Two NDLG members, Alice Aird and Helen Scott, moved to despair by what they were observing, decided to act. Alice wrote an article which she presented to councillors at a "Meet Your Councillors" event in Woodend in April. It was well received, particularly by the Mayor at the time, Jennifer Anderson.

Alice and Helen, with the assistance of Bruce Hedge and Ian Scott, then made a Budget submission to Macedon Ranges Shire Council in June. The submission requested funding for roadside mapping and progression of the Roadsides Management Plan, drafted over 20 years ago but never progressed. Such a plan is needed to guide all works on roadsides, with the three priorities of road safety, fire risk reduction and biodiversity conservation well understood by all parties.

The submission also argued strongly for remedying the lack of public information and education, especially for new residents, and for guidelines explaining landowner responsibilities on their nature strips or adjacent roadsides. The submission was not successful in securing funds in the budget; we were notified that *"the development of a comprehensive Roadside Management Plan will form part of a future work program."* We'll wait and see.

Alice and Helen then organised a Landcare evening on 24 July in Newham called "Rural roadsides – Conserving shared treasure" (reported in NDLG Newsletter no.44, online), to kickstart what they see as an ongoing campaign. Michelle Patrick as Natural Resources Officer for MRSC outlined much useful information about who manages what on roadsides. Dr Steve Krstic argued for the

importance of roadside conservation in landscape conservation strategy, using scientific evidence from his Masters thesis on functional connectivity for forest and woodland birds in the Macedon Ranges-Cowbaw Biolink area. A large number (50+) attended from near and far, and the evening was very well received. An encouraging moment was when a local, who had with the best of intentions, mowed an area with significant remnant flora outside his place, spoke of how glad he was to now be informed about the importance of conservation of biodiversity on the roadsides, and the principles and regulations, and his determination to restore as far as possible what had been lost.

In August Alice and Helen and the NDLG committee met with Silvana Predebon who is drafting the new environment strategy for Macedon Ranges Shire, to argue for roadsides. It is due early in 2016.

We were thrilled when the September issue of *Shire Life* carried an excellent article front and centrefold titled *Roadsides: a delicate balance*, and a brochure called *Maintaining our roadsides – who does what?* became available at Shire information outlets. These publications were in the pipeline but we like to think we had some influence on the timing. It would be very useful if this information was also published on the MRSC website.

Following the July evening, many people expressed interest in doing conservation and renewal work on their roadsides, and three residents in Egans Lane in Newham started to discuss a pilot project there.

Egans Lane was considered an early starter, not because it's got such interesting flora, but because there are three households interested to participate in conservation and renewal already. Egans Lane has some remnant vegetation of interest, large areas that are mowed, powerlines on one side, cypresses encroaching on the few eucalypts on the other, and many weeds. It presents a wide range of the issues and threats that exist in roadsides around the shire, including a number of new residents who have not received any guidance from the Shire about how to manage their rural roadside. Michelle Patrick was at that meeting and gave a lot of encouragement and guidance about what the limits might be and what would be required in the way of permits. It was decided to get started and to document the steps with the view to creating a kit to guide others who might want to take on a similar project. It seems the only way that significant conservation work on our roadsides can be done is for Landcare to take the initiative, and engage with and facilitate residents' groups around the community.

This is now underway and known as the **Egans Lane Roadside Renewal Project (ELRRP or "the Roadrunners")**.

So far we have:

- studied the roadside along the Lane
- identified broadly ,with the help of Penny Roberts, the native species and weed species present, as well as the limits, such as powerlines etc.
- Started a management and revegetation plan, involving weed removal, care for existing species, and revegetation.
- Planting would initially include smaller grasses such as Wallaby grasses, and various easy to grow local wildflower species, such as Chocolate and Bulbine Lilies, Sticky Everlasting Daisy, Native Bluebell, Hardenbergia and Kennedia creeper.



Every step has been a learning experience and made the issues we face clearer. For instance, a patch of Chocolate lilies was cleared of weeds, and before we could mulch the area lightly to encourage reseeding, the Shire contractors came by and mowed off every flower! They mowed much further into the roadside than usual so we hadn't anticipated this happening.

The good thing was that it alerted us to the increased mowing being done all over the Shire. We spoke to Michelle Patrick and she has encouraged all roadside conservation-minded citizens to report any instances of mowing of areas of significant vegetation to mrsc@mrsc.vic.gov.au. This is a key action that we request you to take! Michelle will map these areas and pass them on to the Fire Protection Officer.

The tricky issue of fire and roadsides

Fire is our biggest headache. Michelle Patrick has explained the strategic approach to mowing certain roadsides for fire breaks, which is of course as it should be. The very dry season and the dreadful fire that escaped from the Cobaws and destroyed houses, has understandably made Shire officers and community members anxious to reduce fuel. Unfortunately, roadside vegetation has been blamed in some media, though the Inquiry did not point to roadsides as needing much greater clearance. The recent Shire roadside publications emphasise the evidence that residents clearing around their own houses provides the greatest protection, and the MRC website states:

"Council is responsible for 1,700km of roadsides in the Macedon Ranges...

Fires start on roadsides due to hot vehicle exhausts, mechanical failures and collisions. Council slashes high use roadsides to reduce the chances of these incidents resulting in a fire. Typically 80 per cent of traffic uses 20 per cent of our roads. It makes sense to limit the costs to ratepayers by slashing these roads as a priority.

Note: slashed roadsides are not effective firebreaks, particularly in extreme conditions and high winds. The best way to protect your home is to maintain your property and leave early, long before flames are visible.

Slashing your roadside is not an effective way to reduce fire risk to your property."

(http://www.mrsc.vic.gov.au/Roads_Drains_Paths/Roads_Traffic/Roadside_Slashing)

On 28 October Councillors passed a motion requesting, firstly, that the State Government fund a detailed roadside vegetation management plan for the Macedon Ranges by mid-2016 – good. However the second part, to request the State government to fund extended priority actions in the plan in relation to fire hazard reduction measures needs to be carefully monitored; the proposer – Cr Henry McLaughlin – said he thought slashing from fence to fence should be permitted, which would be a very retrograde step.

There are too many factors to discuss here, but this issue will be high on our agenda. The important thing, as we see it, is to map and study each location and make strategic and balanced decisions about roadside management. We need to find the areas that need protection, identify what needs protection, and then find a way to protect it. Some roadside fuel removal can serve both conservation and fire risk reduction. A great threat is that residents with high-powered equipment clear indiscriminately without permits. This illegal activity could spell the end of many areas of significant remnant vegetation. Education is a key and we will be doing our utmost to ensure that residents are informed and assisted to make sound decisions. Fire management need not necessarily trump Conservation

What next?

Community education is key, and can be done in various ways. The Egan's Road "Roadrunners project" demonstrates how a group of previously uninvolved people have become energised and keen to work on roadside conservation, starting on their patch.

The Roadsides Management Group continues to meet to discuss various approaches to increase awareness and encourage more roadside conservation work, including mapping, care of existing

species, weed removal and revegetation where appropriate, demonstration projects. A propagation workshop is planned for Autumn 2016. The Landcare committee continues to undertake surveys of roadsides and explore grant funding, and plans education programs such as grass identification in 2016.

We have a good relationship with the Shire Environmental officers and are optimistic about what could be achieved with cooperation between the community and the various departments that affect the roadsides. There is still a long way to go. A clear message from a recent meeting with Michelle Patrick was to email mrsc@mrsc.vic.gov.au with any issue and it would be sent to the appropriate person to deal with. All actions on roadsides require a permit from the Council, which should be getting easier and we need to encourage people to do it and to be positive about working with the Shire officers.

Combined Landcare groups are considering featuring roadsides as part of their work in a display or event at the Macedon Ranges Sustainability Festival on 27 February 2016.

Many of the previous issues of NDLG Newsletter have published articles on roadsides. The newsletters are on the website at <http://www.newhamlandcare.info/news.htm>, and Helen will be adding more roadside information and document links to the site.

The latest issue of *Earth Garden*, no 174, has a great article called Roadside Treasury by Newham photographer Bruce Hedge. He suggests that an idea for creating wider biolinks is to dedicate a strip of your land next to a biodiverse roadside, plant some larger local species and encourage the precious remnant endemic species to slowly extend inside the fence.

Bruce's conclusion is an apt one for this article:

"It's great discovering that you don't necessarily have to mow, slash and burn. Instead leave endemic species to do their thing, and plant more if you can. After all, I'd like to think that the ultimate goal of all Earth Gardeners is to leave your country in better shape than when you got it."

Helen Scott and **Alice Aird**. December 2015.





Photo: Sandy Scheltema



Photo: Sandy Scheltema



Photo: Sandy Scheltema



Photo: Sandy Scheltema

