

Phillip Island (Milawul) Wildlife Plan

PROJECT UPDATE No.7 (April 2026)



Background:

Phillip Island (Milawul) lies at the entrance to the bay of Western Port, approximately 140 km south east of Melbourne. The marine and coastal environment of Phillip Island is home to a diverse array of native species. These include high profile species, such as Little Penguins, which attract thousands of visitors to the Island annually, to the lesser known but equally important species such as Short-Tailed Shearwaters and Hooded Plovers. As a result, Phillip Island's wildlife has become an important part of the community's identity and economy with wildlife encounters contributing significantly to the Island's economy generating revenue, reputation and employment. Phillip Island is also home to important research and biodiversity conservation projects, led by Phillip Island Nature Parks.

Milawul is the Bunurong name for Phillip Island. It is part of the Country recognised as being the 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 and present.

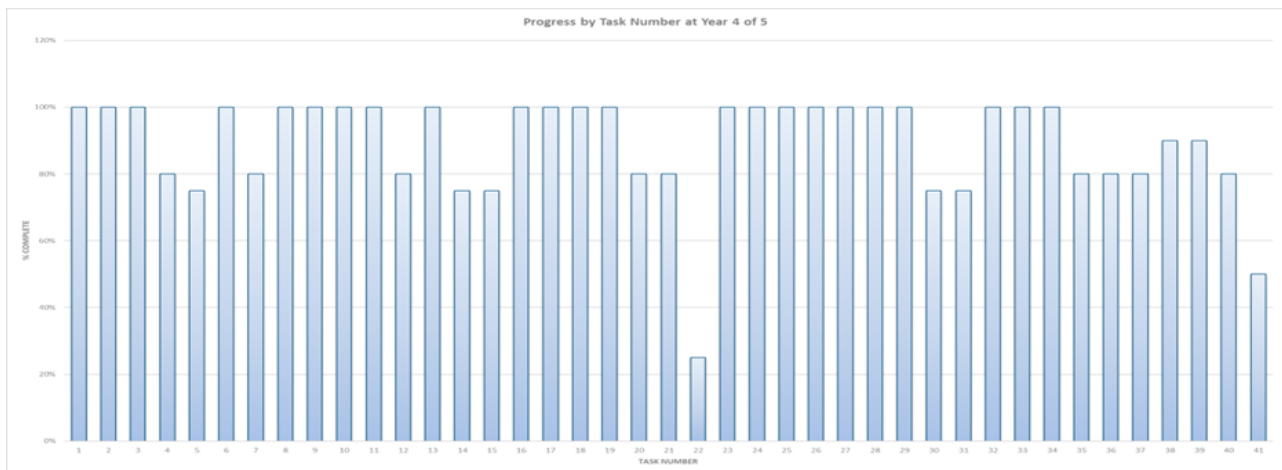
Following a successful fox eradication project, and benefiting from improved farming practices, some species have increased in numbers to the extent that they now negatively impacting on agriculture and biodiversity.

The Phillip Island (Milawul) Wildlife Plan was released in December 2021 following public feedback and community consultation. The full plan and a summary can be found at: [Phillip Island \(Milawul\) Wildlife Plan](#). The Plan is now entering the final year of its implementation phase, though it is important to recognise that the collaboration, education and management actions established during this time will need to continue into the future.

It is critical to understand that the factors driving wildlife abundance to the point of imbalance are complex. The plan will continue to consider the most current ecological, ethical, cultural, regulatory and operational understanding to address negative impacts – these cannot be resolved quickly without causing further unintended impacts.

Cover image: Cape Barren Goose pair (Phillip Island Nature Parks).

Progress at a glance:



- 23 of 41 tasks are complete or fully established.
- A further 17 tasks are at or above 50% complete.
- 1 task remains below 50% complete.

Progression scores for each year of the implementation phase have been calculated as the average progress across the 41 tasks. With one year of implementation remaining, tasking is assessed as 89% complete.



Image: Cape Barren Goose tracking program (Phillip Island Nature Parks)

Public education and communication:

Wildlife awareness and education remain a priority, with ongoing efforts to provide guidance and foster meaningful community engagement.

Ongoing community engagement campaigns aim to promote coexistence with wildlife, inspiring both visitors and residents to respect and protect Phillip Island (Milawul).

Sharing Our Shores campaign promotes responsible and safe beach behaviour to safeguard coastal flora and fauna, with a particular focus on the threatened hooded plover, which relies on our shores for nesting and foraging.

The Dark Sky So Shearwaters Fly campaign encourages residents to reduce light pollution and switch off outdoor lighting during the fledging period, helping young shearwater chicks safely navigate their departure from the island as they begin their migration from Phillip Island (Milawul) to Alaska.

The Water for Wildlife initiative urges the community to protect local fauna by recognising heat events and reducing vehicle speeds to prevent roadkill incidents.

Future campaigns such as Rebuild the Wild will highlight the importance of preserving and restoring balance to natural habitats to support native wildlife populations. This will be achieved by promoting sustainable land use and encouraging community led habitat enhancement projects, the initiative aims to create safe, thriving environments where local species can nest, forage, and flourish.

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 2025. Read the latest via the Phillip Island Nature Parks website www.penguins.org.au

The [Phillip Island \(Milawul\) Wildlife Plan](#) website has undergone a major upgrade!

You can now find:

- **Information on significant and unique conservation values on Phillip Island/Milawul**
- **Links to “Living with Wildlife” resources that provide an understanding of the underlying reasons for wildlife visitation and provide information on real actions that can manage impacts around homes and gardens**
- **Summaries of non-lethal wildlife management trials**
- **Links to reports and research that underpin the evidence-based approach to wildlife management under the plan**

Building an understanding based on evidence:

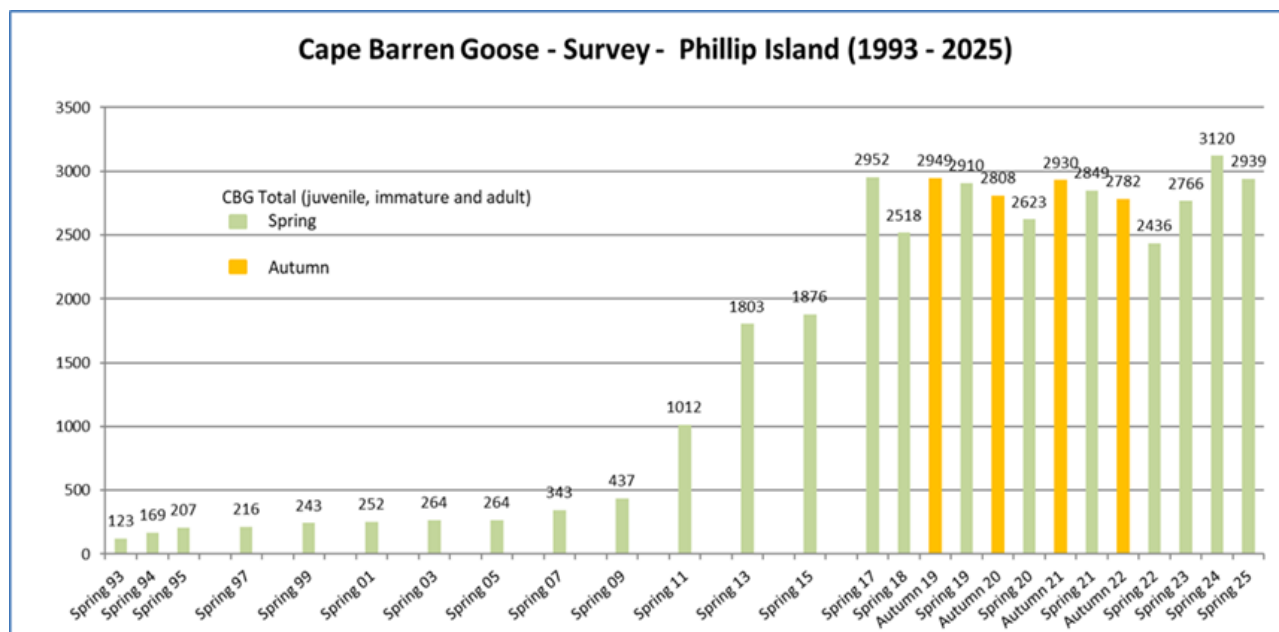
Key factors resulting in sick, injured and orphaned wildlife on Phillip Island.

From November 2024 – November 2025 the Nature Parks Wildlife Rehabilitation Centre responded to 1271 wildlife related concerns with 575 rescued and/or euthanised. Of these, 239 involved Swamp Wallabies, 68 Common Brushtail Possums, 32 Common Ringtail Possums and 81 Cape Barren Geese with the primary cause of injury being road trauma

Cape Barren Geese survey results.

The 22nd Spring Cape Barren Goose survey for Phillip Island (Milawul) was undertaken in early November 2025 by a team consisting of interns, Melbourne University PhD candidate, local landholder, Bunurong Land Council and Nature Parks staff. The team counted a total of 2939 geese which is 181 fewer than the 2024 survey. There were 131 juveniles, 153 immature and 2655 adults. The number of adults (2655) in 2025 survey was similar to the 2024 survey total of 2650

Surveys of Cape Barren Geese were also undertaken on French Island, with 626 geese count-ed. 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.



Understanding the Cape Barren Goose population.

A PhD project from the University of Melbourne continued throughout 2025 tracking dispersal patterns and movements of Cape Barren Geese.

GPS tracking data continued to be collected from Cape Barren Geese, showing their variable and sometimes long-range movement patterns. Many of the geese tracked were true migrants, moving from their breeding territories on the Summerlands Peninsula of Phillip Island (Milawul), up to 100km away to Yanakie in South Gippsland. Other geese made migrations to the Westernport Bay area, including to Jam Jerrup, Tyabb and Tooradin. Other individual geese were strict residents of Milawul and did not leave their breeding territories at all - throughout the entire year we have tracked them at the Summerlands, Churchill Island and Fishers Wetland. Many tracked juveniles left Milawul, but all subsequently returned in September where they have remained to date.

More fieldwork took place to band adult geese with plastic neckbands in March and April 2025 in collaboration with rangers from the Bunurong Land Council Aboriginal Corporation. These tagged pairs, along with other tagged pairs in 2024, were then followed during the breeding season and data were collected on their nests, clutches and goslings. We found interesting phenomena, such as the renesting by multiple pairs and one case of gosling adoption by a family, adding to our understanding of breeding ecology of the Milawul Cape Barren Goose populations. We will continue to follow the breeding of these individuals over the next 2 years to understand how breeding varies between habitats and years, and what may drive this variation.

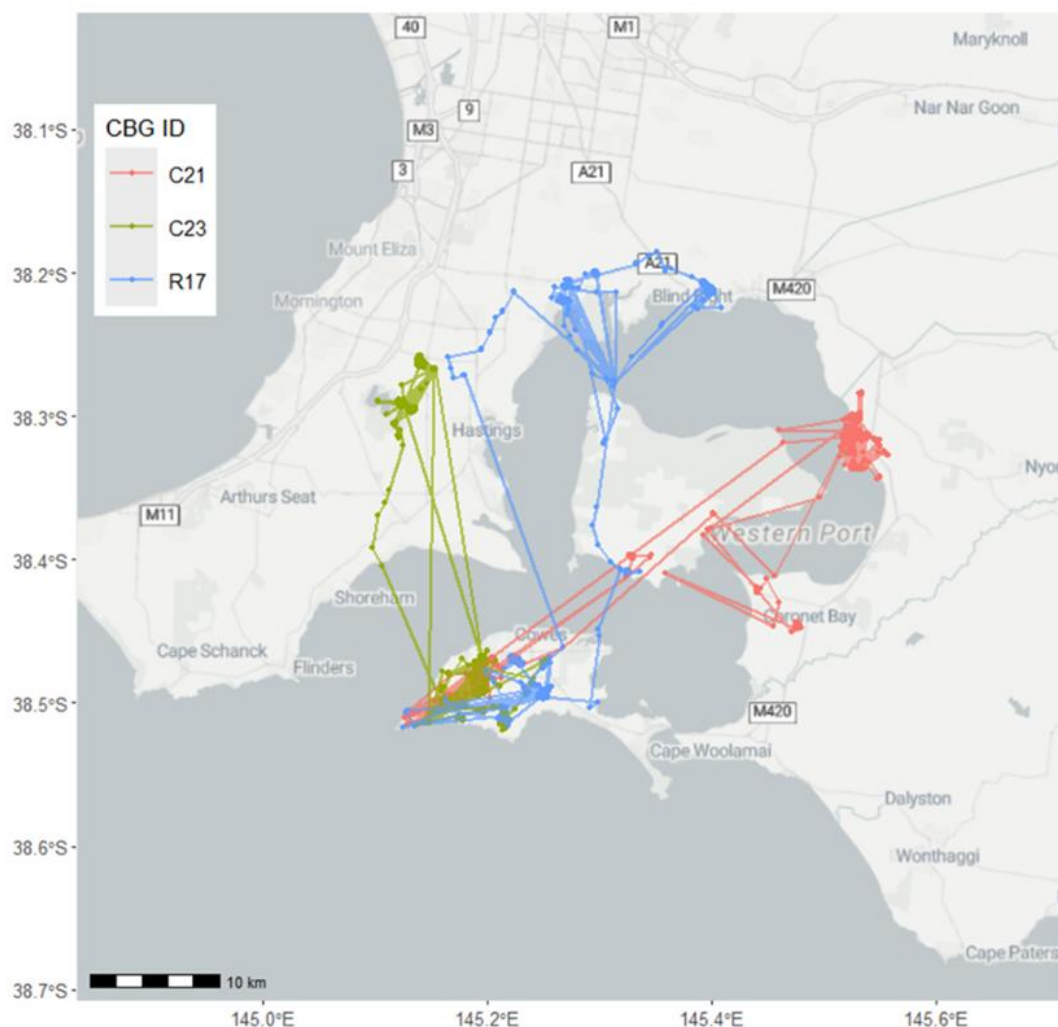


Figure 1. GPS tracking of 3 Cape Barren Geese from starting location of Phillip Island (Milawul) to offshore locations. C21 (red) travelled to the Jam Jerrup. C23 (green) travelled to Tyabb. R17 (blue) travelled to Blind Bight and Tooradin.

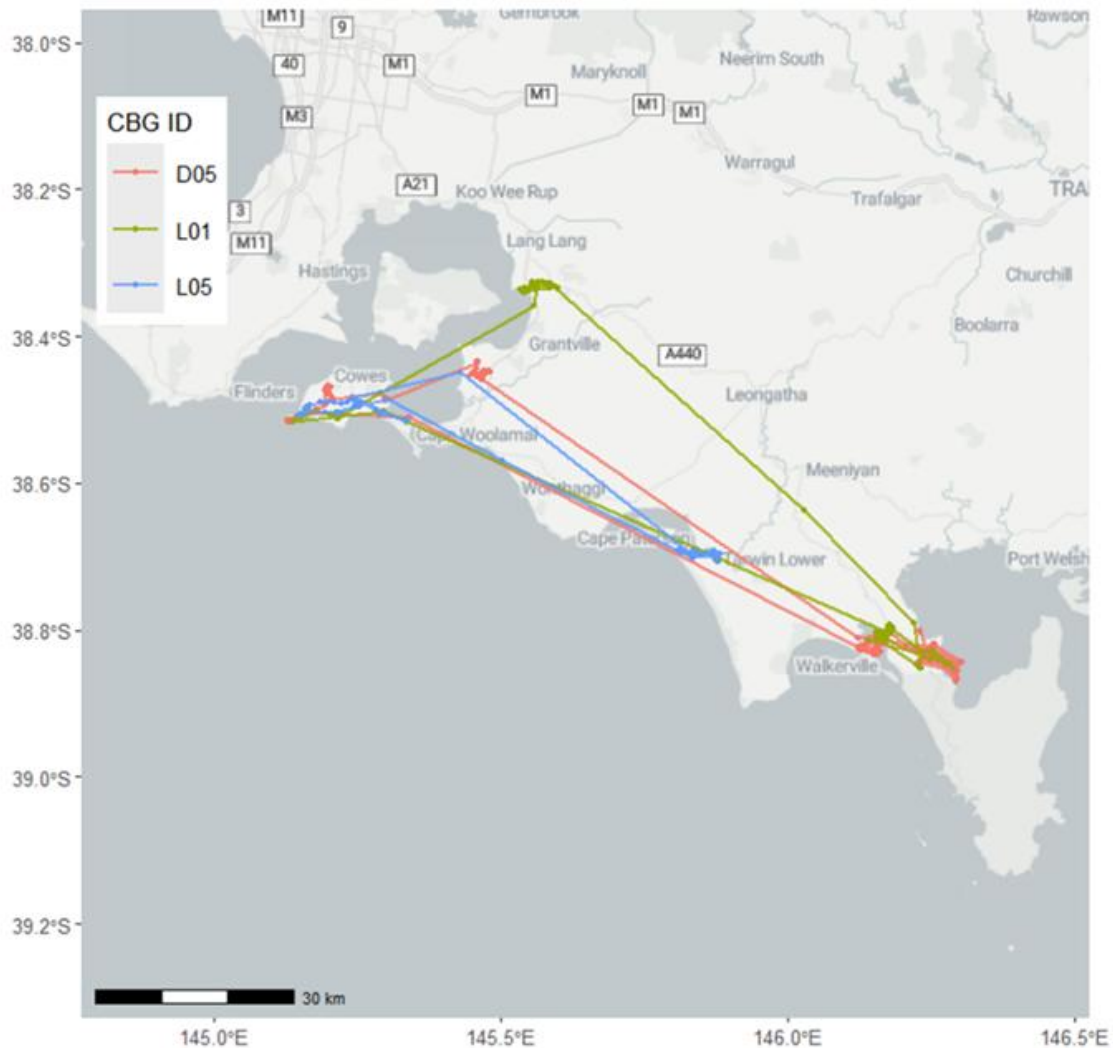


Figure 2. GPS tracking of 3 Cape Barren Geese from starting location of Phillip Island (Milawul) to offshore locations. D05 (red) travelled to Yanakie, South Gippsland. L01 (green) travelled to Yanakie, South Gippsland. L05 (blue) travelled to Tarwin Lower.

Understanding leading to more effective approaches to Cape Barren Goose management

The Cape Barren Goose metapopulation model and associated report (completed as part of the plan in 2024) is being used to inform decisions on appropriate management of Cape Barren Geese.

A key finding in the report was the importance of population monitoring on French Island in addition to the work conducted on Phillip Island (Milawul). Monitoring of the French Island population is critical to refine current population estimates, establish baselines for any control measures, and assess the effectiveness of any implemented control actions. It is also noted that French Island is also a significant breeding site for Cape Barren Geese and has the potential to contribute significant numbers of Cape Barren Geese to the wider metapopulation in coming years. Engagement by members of the PIWP working group has been extended to include landowners and managers on French Island.

Consideration of wildlife over-browsing on the Summerlands Peninsula conservation area

Over winter 2025, a short, focused study was undertaken on the Summerland Peninsula to better understand how Swamp Wallabies use open habitats during the day and what this means for vegetation. Using structured behavioural observations over one month (June–August), researchers recorded wallaby activity at regular intervals across more than 16 hours of field sampling. The work provides one of the first systematic, comparable datasets on diurnal foraging behaviour for this species on Phillip Island (Milawul).

The findings show that browsing is a dominant part of wallaby activity during daylight hours, making up more than half of their observed behaviour, with peak foraging occurring at dusk. Wallabies showed a clear preference for more succulent, softer vegetation, and this pattern was further influenced by weather conditions. Importantly, the study establishes a repeatable method that can be used in future years to track changes in wallaby behaviour and their impacts on vegetation, helping to inform balanced management of wallaby populations alongside ecosystem health.

Browsing impacts on vegetation at Rhyll Swamp

Vegetation responses to browsing pressure at Rhyll Swamp were assessed using a replicated experimental design implemented at two locations situated at opposite ends of the swamp. At each location, plots were established across the elevation gradient and randomly assigned to one of four treatments: fully fenced exclosures to prevent browsing, unfenced control plots exposed to browsing, procedural controls to account for any fencing artefacts, and temporary exclosures that transition between fenced and procedural control conditions. This design allows robust comparison of vegetation responses under different levels of browsing pressure while accounting for potential installation effects and spatial variation across the wetland.

Preliminary results show that browsing has a clear suppressive effect on vegetation. Exclosure plots generally exhibit higher plant cover and, more consistently, greater plant height compared to unfenced controls, indicating that herbivory is limiting vegetation development. Procedural controls typically show intermediate responses, suggesting that fencing installation itself has only minor influence on vegetation outcomes. Differences between the two locations highlight additional spatial variability in vegetation condition, although the overall pattern of stronger vegetation growth in the absence of browsing remains consistent. Plant height appears to be a particularly sensitive indicator of browsing pressure, showing stronger and more consistent responses than percentage cover, reinforcing the conclusion that browsing pressure is an important factor shaping vegetation structure at Rhyll Swamp.



Image: Swamp Wallabies (Phillip Island Nature Parks)

The Future Proofing Little Penguins Project

The three-year Future Proofing Little Penguins project is drawing to a close, and spring saw the completion of the third planting season on Summerland Peninsula. In total, over the three years, 34,000 plants have been planted including 27,500 plants on the firebreaks established during the first year of the project, and 6,500 plants in target areas penguin habitat. This was achieved through combined effort of Nature Parks staff and volunteers, Bunurong Land Council Aboriginal Corporation staff, Penguin Foundation staff and volunteer groups, and planting contractors.

Browsing pressure is high across the whole of the peninsula. Native herbivores including wallabies and cape barren geese have significant impact on native vegetation as well as conservation plantings. Herbivory has helped maintain firebreaks by stopping melaleuca from regenerating from where it was slashed and mulched and minimizing the establishment of some annual weeds, but they suppress natural recruitment of native plant species including trees and shrubs and have significant negative impact on survival and growth of plantings.

Unguarded plantings have almost no chance of survival because of the impact of browsing with less than 5% of unguarded plants surviving after two years with only two species showing any sort of resistance to browsing (ruby saltbush and shiny swamp mat). Guarding provides significant protection to plantings from browsing but does not guarantee protection. Almost all surviving plants (of species other than ruby saltbush and shiny swamp mat) showed signs of having been browsed. Browsing clearly suppressed the growth of guarded plantings and caused or contributed to the death of a significant proportion plantings, but the actual percentages are unclear due to limitations in monitoring design and data collected.

Browsing exclusion trials undertaken during this project indicated that after six months browsing was the greatest cause of mortality, accounting for 50% of all mortality of guarded plantings at that time. After 2 years browsing continues to be an important influence on mortality, accounting for 30-40% of all mortality, but appears to be secondary to environmental and climatic variables that have exercised greater influence over time and the fuller experience of seasonal change.

Exploring the current and potential role native predators play in the management of wildlife on Phillip Island

Powerful Owls

Nocturnal bird surveys are planned for 2026 to determine the presence, distribution, and extent of powerful owl territories on Phillip Island. This work will inform management actions to support this native predator and its potential role in helping reduce possum browsing pressure and associated canopy impacts.



Image: Browsing impacts on tree canopy, Oswin Roberts Reserve (DEECA)

Trialling non-lethal management approaches

Browsing exclusion trials established in Rhyll

The successful natural regeneration of an area excluded from rabbits and swamp wallabies in 2022 inspired the Reserves team to create another similar zone within the currant-wood (*Monotoca glauca*) habitat of Rhyll wetland in early 2025. The team constructed a 750 sqm coop that includes several mature currant-wood, stinkwood (*Zieria arborescens*) thicket and a coast manna-gum (*Eucalyptus viminalis* subsp *pryoriana*). As with the original exclusion zone however, the ground and small shrub layers were largely absent due to heavy browsing pressure.

After just six months, there has been evidence of currant-wood recruitment occurring, along with coast manna -gum, grass trigger-plant (*Stylidium graminifolium*), prickly guinea-flower (*Hibbertia acicularis*), common aotus (*Aotus ericoides*), grey parrot-pea (*Dillwynia cinerascens*), common heath (*Epacris impressa*) and many other small shrub and herb species. Spring monitoring revealed several orchid species occurring. There were large numbers of musk-hood orchids (*Caladenia moschata*), a significant number of slender sun orchids (*Thelymitra pauciflora*), a small patch of nodding greenhoods (*Pterostylis nutans*) and a single specimen of a new record for Milawul, tiny pink-fingers (*Caladenia pusilla*).

Opportunities for viable farms that also support wildlife and conservation

Biolinks 2025 -2028

In 2025 Phillip Island Land Alliance (PILA) entered into a partnership with the Bass Coast Shire Council (BCSC) to deliver its biolinks “Connecting Landscapes and Communities” project. This project, funded over a three-year period, will support and enhance sustainable Biolinks throughout Phillip Island. Through partnerships, PILA is committed to achieving improved environmental connectivity and creating lasting positive outcomes for the Island’s Biolinks Project.

Project aims:

- to establish and improve coordinated ongoing vegetation management on Phillip Island through collaboration with the Bunurong Nation, agencies, land managers and PILA member groups.
- to assist PILA member groups and partners in establishing a cohesive Island-wide Vegetation Management Plan with accessible interactive mapping.
- to facilitate six co-design workshops commencing November 2025, over three years, two per year, to manage the project and establish cohesive actions and planning using the developed interactive data base

Land owners and managers on Phillip Island (Milawul) are encouraged to visit <https://www.phillipislandlandalliance.org.au/biolinks> for more information, and to take part in workshops as this project progresses.

Continuing considerations

Avian Influenza

Across June and July 2026 highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) H5N1 was detected in wild seabirds in several Australian states, representing the first confirmed occurrence of this globally significant strain in Australia. At the time of release of this report, H5N1 has not been detected in Victoria and there have been no detections in Australian poultry; however, the virus remains a consideration.

All agencies associated with the plan are implementing preparedness measures, including enhanced wildlife surveillance, staff training, response planning and biosecurity protocols to support early detection and rapid response should the disease be detected locally. Information on reporting suspected cases, surveillance activities and preparedness measures is being provided to staff, volunteers, wildlife carers and the community.

Further information is available from the DEECA webpage: [high-pathogenic-avian-influenza](#)

What's next?

Our focus for the next 6 months:

- While there are currently no HPAI H5N1 detections in Victoria, DEECA and partner agencies are closely monitoring the situation and following national biosecurity and wildlife disease response arrangements. If necessary, actions under the Wildlife Plan may be adjusted to support surveillance, preparedness and protection of wildlife populations. Adaptive management is a core principle of the Plan.
- The implementation phase of the plan concludes in December 2026, however management actions, monitoring and update of information via the webpage will continue. A framework for continued collaboration will be determined by the steering committee over the coming months.
- The working group has received guidance from the Conservation Regulator regarding permissions for egg control as a means of limiting recruitment. A Wildlife Management Plan (as identified under the Wildlife Act 1975, and distinct from the Phillip Island (Milawul) Wildlife Plan) will be required to support applications. The Conservation Regulator may request such a plan where they deem that a strategic plan be developed to address a complex wildlife issue.
- Task 22: Evaluate the economic value and importance of wildlife to Phillip Island's community. The value of wildlife itself has been difficult to isolate from broader tourism. A more general statement will be developed prior to December to reflect quantifiable value.