

Revegetating the entrance to Balcanoona Headquarters in the Vulkathunha-Gammon Ranges National Park.

In 1982, the lease of Balcanoona sheep station (part of the Arid Rangelands Public Estate), was purchased by National Parks and Wildlife, South Australia. This area added significantly to the Gammon Ranges National Park which was proclaimed in 1970.

The station environment had been seriously degraded by land clearing and historic grazing and the Park staff set about controlling feral animals and over time, beginning the process of revegetating the area around the new Park headquarters.

STEEPED IN HISTORY

Balcanoona headquarters comprises a cluster of historic stone buildings including the original homestead which has been beautifully restored as has the shearing shed and wool press. A bygone era is recorded in a self-guided trail with signage that includes historical photographs and stories from Uncle Gill Coulthard, who was employed in significant roles assisting the senior ranger at Balcanoona, the Park headquarters, in the early days after Balcanoona station was added to the then Gammon Ranges National Park. Forty years on senior ranger Sian Johnson, shares her rich Adnyamathnha cultural and environmental knowledge with visitors.

PRESERVING CULTURE

Dreamtime stories that abound in the surrounding red rock walls, gorges and open plains are recorded on plaques at the headquarters car park. Likewise, settler bush mythology is steeped in the mulga, gum-barked coolabah, black oak and river red gum country.

A REQUEST FROM THE DISTRICT RANGER

Although some planting and irrigation had previously been undertaken by Park rangers, in 2017 Friends of Vulkathunha-Gammon Ranges National Park (FoV-GRNP) were asked by the district ranger to revegetate the entry to the Park headquarters, hence making it more attractive to visitors (see figs 1a and 1b).

ROLLING OUT THE IRRIGATION

Led by Roger Mathers, the Friends group mapped out four areas and soon had a new irrigation system in progress. Over time, a series of taps were installed to improve water delivery. Salinity build up that blocked water flow to the drippers was overcome by flushing the lines regularly and clearing drippers. We were rescued from our early attempts at digging the necessary holes in parched clay using picks and shovels, by Sian and her backhoe.

SEEDS TO SEEDLINGS

From 2017 to now, a core group of members of the FoV-GRNP have planted around 650 seedlings supported by guards, mulch mats, fertiliser, mounding and irrigation.

In 2019 Friends were granted a permit to collect seed from across the National Park and since then most plants have been propagated by Friends from seed collected by Sian and Friends members. More recently, we have also received support from Ron Johnson at the Copley Community Garden with collaborative propagation, seed sharing and donations of seedlings.

Some of us had no propagation experience, but guided by one of the Revegetation team's botanical advisers, Nicki De Preu and the Trees for Life propagation manual, were soon contributing seedlings to the twice-yearly planting expeditions.

ADNYAMATHANHA names and plant labels.

With the support of the VGRNP Co-management Board and with Sian's guidance, we are developing an approach to labelling plants of interest at the headquarters. This will complement interpretive signage already in place in Weetootla Gorge.

Each label will identify plant species firstly by its Adnyamathanha name followed by common and then scientific name. The Revegetation group of VGRNP now makes a point of referring to plants using Adnyamathanha names. We are particularly pleased with our propagation efforts with Iga (native orange), Uti (quandong) and Narapana (Sturt's desert pea) as well as our most prolific propagation species, the beautiful grey heart shape leaved Manduwarra (curly mallee).

GRANTS

From time to time, the Friends group have been successful in securing DEW (Department of Environment and Water) grants necessary to cover costs associated with our revegetation work.

DROUGHT

In 2018, the harsh drought decimated the native flora and native fauna relying on it. With irrigation and guarding in place, the survival rate of Friends plants was impressive. Seven years on, the entrance to the park headquarters is populated with endemic species of a variety of Eucalypts, Acacias, Callitris, Eremophilas, Sennas and other plant groups that are advancing well. The Park entrance also has an area of new bush tucker plants including Matu (native apricot), Manawarra (bush plum), Uti (quandong), Iga (native orange) and Mayaka (native pear).

SPIN OFF

There are signs that the evolving arid garden is increasing the habitat for a variety of native creatures including a community of zebra finches. Friend's member Chris Kirby has recorded photographically the rich bird life of Balcanoona and the wider Park in a beautiful new brochure that is accessible on the FoV-GRNP website. There are also signs of regeneration of native plants in areas around the

revegetation plantings that will support future recovery of previously degraded vegetation (see Figs 2a and 2b).

Chris and the Friend's committee are also developing a plant identification brochure to increase knowledge of the diverse range of native plants that occur across the northern Flinders Ranges.

NEW WALK

Sian has created a new walk taking visitors past a concrete slab, the remnant floor of the original shearing shed where former Labor MP Clyde Cameron once sheared. The trail then meanders through new plantings and up to a nearby range which affords breathtaking views over Balcanoona Gorge. Graeme Oats of the Friends group, has instigated, in cooperation with Parks, a directional dial to be installed in 2024. As well as the 360° scenic views, the dial will reward those who make it to the hilltop.

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

To learn more about these and other initiatives undertaken by the Friends group or to make contact, go to the Friends of Vulkathunha-Gammon Ranges National Park website

<https://friendsofgammons.org.au/>



Figure 1a: Aerial view of Balcanoona headquarters from February 2017



Figure 1b: Aerial view of Balcanoona in April 2023 showing the new plantings as dots on either side of the entrance road



Figure 2a: The view from the entrance to the Shearer's Quarters carpark before 2019



Figure 2b: The view from the entrance to the Shearer's Quarters carpark after 2022

Marg Easson and Richard Smith, February 2024