



VICTORIAN BLACKBERRY TASKFORCE
TACKLING BLACKBERRY / 4
TRANSFORMING LANDSCAPES

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The Victorian Blackberry Taskforce (VBT) is committed to working with communities and partner agencies to reduce the growth and spread of blackberry in Victoria. The objectives of the Victorian Blackberry Strategy are very clear and identify education, collaboration and innovation as the basis for achieving a sustained reduction in the areas of productive land and natural areas affected by blackberry.

The Case Studies featured here demonstrate the determination of communities and individual landholders, in a range of circumstances, to find a way of tackling blackberry to reclaim and restore land.

The collaborative approach highlighted in the study demonstrates the value of the support offered by the VBT through various avenues. This enables people to access and use best practice information in order to implement the most appropriate management plan for their particular situation.

This Case Study is an inspiration to those who have yet to start their journey to bring blackberry under control and use the recovered land for productive or conservation purposes. The participants demonstrate that no matter how difficult or daunting the task, having a goal and support is the key to success.



This project is funded through the Established Pest Animals and Weeds initiative, part of the Australian Government's Agricultural Competitiveness White Paper, the government's plan for stronger farmers and a stronger economy.



Australian Government
Department of Agriculture





TERRY O'KEEFE

WALWA LANDHOLDER

GLADYS FARRELL

CUDGEWA LANDHOLDER

CHRISTINA & JAMES ASTON

NARIEL VALLEY LANDHOLDERS

MATTHEW VOGEL

CUDGEWA LANDHOLDER



TRANSFORMING LANDSCAPES
VIDEO COLLECTION

The VBT Case Studies featured in this publication are also presented in a series of four videos on the USB drive attached to the back cover. The videos can also be viewed on the Victorian Blackberry Taskforce YouTube channel.

Walwa Landholder

Terry O'Keefe

“ You need to have a plan to have less every year and eventually you will have very few, which is where I am at now. But you've really got to plan what you're doing. ”



Terry lives in Walwa on his 600-acre property, set in the hills. Though he has owned the property since the late 1980s, it wasn't until 2000 when Terry built a house on the property and made the move from Albury to the Upper Murray region.

He runs Angus cattle on the property, typically holding between 80 to 90 cattle at any time. It's steep country with a permanent creek running through and about a third of the land is native bush.

A CHANGING LANDSCAPE

When Terry first purchased the property, non-native vegetation was scattered around the property and weeds were a particularly large concern. The property was badly infested with blackberry, especially around the creek areas and towards the back fence line.

‘Out the back of the property, which joins national park and state forest, there was 90% solid blackberry. It was a huge problem. You couldn’t drive through it. It was so thick.’

Terry reflects that one of his favourite spots on the property – a creek area with a steep, rock faced waterfall – wasn’t even visible when they first purchased the land.

‘When we first bought the property, we didn’t even know that waterfall was there because this creek area was completely infested with blackberries.’



When Terry first started going to the property in the 80’s, he made attempts to get the blackberry in control, typically targeting the easier blackberries on weekends when he had time to make trips up to the farm. After moving to live on the property on a full-time basis in 2000, Terry began hitting the blackberry hard by strategically targeting areas and following a long-term management plan.

‘Because it was such a big problem you had to choose an area and get rid of all the blackberries in that place and then choose another area the next year. You have to do it year, after year, after year.’

The first few years Terry spent two and a half months each year putting out around 15,000 litres of herbicide. His time and herbicide use decreased year by year after that, and he can now get around the property in a couple of days each year. This requires 100 to 200 litres only and he uses his backpack sprayer to target the small, manageable blackberries.

‘You need to have a plan to have less every year and eventually you will have very few, which is where I am at now. But you’ve really got to plan what you’re doing.’

Compared to when Terry first purchased the land, the landscape has undergone a transformation. Terry is proud to say he doesn’t have any blackberry on his property now and has replaced it with natives, which is a big attraction for bird life.

‘Since I’ve been here, I’ve identified about 80 species of birds that have come and gone. To bring birds all you have to do is provide the habitat.’

GOOD NEIGHBOURS MAKE ALL THE DIFFERENCE

While neighbouring landholders may be a challenge for some, this is not at all the case for Terry. In fact, Terry and his neighbours are part of a new trial program to carry out coordinated blackberry control on crown land, the ‘Good neighbour pilot program’.

Terry sticks by the motto ‘you can’t control the weed, until you control the seed’. Recognising that the crown land behind his property was a hotspot for blackberry, Terry and his neighbours took the initiative to do something about it and prevent the weeds spreading into their land.

Initially, the group requested that the government put in access tracks on the crown land bordering their properties to assist with blackberry control efforts. For the past three years, the state government has provided herbicide and each year Terry and his neighbours go out spraying blackberry on the crown land together.

‘There’s about 200 acres of crown forest, and we’ve controlled about 90% of it.’

Terry notes that he and his neighbours all share their blackberry issues and experiences. Each have their own blackberry management plan and have signed a management agreement through the North East Blackberry Action Group.



BLACKBERRIES DON'T BELONG HERE

Terry has been a member of the North East Black Berry Action Group for over 15 years. He recognises the need to be persistent in tackling blackberry as well as the value of working as part of a community group.

'The Blackberry Taskforce (North East Blackberry Action Group) has done an amazing job up here, giving people an incentive to actually do the work and providing money to provide tracks. Spending on the tracks was a good use of that money and it has been very successful – they're put in once and they are always there. Without that support, it would have been more difficult to do.'

Supported by this group, Terry's motivation has remained strong over time. He is driven by the desire to keep the environment in a healthy state by keeping the blackberries at bay, stopping them spreading and allowing native vegetation to grow and flourish.

'I hated the thought of [blackberries] over taking everything else. It's a beautiful place and it's not made better by being covered in blackberries. They are not supposed to be here. It makes for a better environment without them.'

A SENSE OF ACHIEVEMENT

Terry explains that spraying blackberries is physically hard work, which he undertakes during the hot months of Summer in the bush and over steep and rocky terrain. However, he sees that the key benefits in carrying out this difficult work is in the productivity of his land, the environment, and for his own well-being. Getting rid of the blackberry infestation on his property allows space for productive land to run cattle, it makes it easier for the planting and growth of native vegetation and improves the health of the creek on his property.

'Mentally for your own wellbeing it makes you feel better when you're driving around and seeing the place is not overrun with blackberries. It's important that you feel like you're achieving something and the landscape is like it should be.'



Cudgewa Landholder
Gladys Farrell

“ It’s uplifting to drive through the farm and find new growth, new flowers and new birds, it’s like driving through a garden. ”



Gladys and her husband Grieg have been living on their 570-acre property in Cudgewa for the last 15 years, here they run beef cattle and sell the weaners each year. Gladys has also done significant regeneration work on the land, fencing off creeks and gullies and planting native trees to restore the environment.

WEEDS ARE THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE

Gladys admitted that weeds were the biggest challenge that she faced on her property. When she initially purchased the property, it had been used for dairy farming. Although the blackberry wasn't very prevalent at this time, its persistence over the years has been the key issue, with Gladys admitting that the blackberries 'have been a problem forever'.

When Gladys first moved to the farm, each year she would go out and spray the Blackberries herself. However, as Gladys began fencing off the creeks and gullies and undertaking regeneration works on the property the task became much more difficult to manage on her own. Gladys started hiring a contractor each year to spray blackberries. Now the contractor manages the blackberries that grow on the hills, the creeks and the fenced off regeneration areas, using a hose to spray these harder to access areas. Though Gladys still tackles the smaller blackberries in the paddocks using a slip-on sprayer unit on the back of her four-wheeler. She reflects:

'It's a battle every year to keep them under control. But to let them get out of control would be an even bigger battle.'

Gladys has a passion for native vegetation and has been putting in substantial effort to regenerate the land through planting natives. She noted the significance of this and the care that needs to be taken to control blackberries in this situation. Since Gladys has been undertaking work to regenerate the land on her property, it has made her even more motivated to keep the blackberries in check.

'Because we have done a lot of regeneration if we don't keep the blackberries under control, they would take over... It's certainly nice to see all of the shrubs and trees coming up without any blackberries, and the blackberries not over taking the shrubs.'

RECOVERING FROM THE BLACK SUMMER BUSHFIRES

In January 2020, the Black Summer bushfires swept through Gladys' property. Although Gladys' home was untouched by the blaze, the fires burnt the land, destroyed critical infrastructure, including fencing and a shed full of equipment, and some of Gladys' livestock did not survive.

The fires resulted in more work for Gladys, in clearing and rebuilding burnt and lost infrastructure. The fires also led to more work due to the vast regrowth of blackberries. Gladys describes how the fires impacted the weeds on her property commenting:

'The fires were pretty horrendous. They came down through those hills and swooped over everything on the place. The blackberries have been worse this year because there is no competition.'

Following the fires Gladys was very thankful to receive support from local community groups, including the North East Blackberry Action Group and the Upper Murray Landcare network. This support included a grant to replace some of the fencing that was lost in the fires, and a grant to assist with contract spraying, after the blackberries grew back with a vengeance. Gladys reflects that 'the grants from bushfires were tremendous', and that it was very encouraging to receive this assistance and get support from others when 'you're at your wits end'.



CONNECTING WITH THE LIKE-MINDED

Gladys has been an active member of Landcare for many years and, over time, has attended a range of blackberry field days and expos. Gladys appreciated that the support from local community groups was a great benefit. For Gladys, the physical assistance has helped her to control the blackberry on her property, as well as undertaking a range of planting activities. However, another key benefit that Gladys noted was the emotional and social support of connecting with others. She comments:

‘The support of other Landcare members is a great thing because you feel like you’re not the only person growing trees and clearing blackberries out and trying to leave the place in a better condition than what it would be.’

For Gladys, being connected with community groups, such as the Upper Murray Landcare Network, allows her to link up with like-minded people. Without that support Gladys acknowledged that the problem can become daunting to manage on your own.

IT’S ALL IN THE ATMOSPHERE

Controlling the blackberries has made it easier for Gladys to move her stock around the property. However, for Gladys, the benefits of controlling blackberries are not just about increasing the productivity of her business. A key element she describes is about the atmosphere of the property. Though there are costs each year to get contractors in to spray, the blackberry control improves the regeneration areas, bringing in different species of birds and vegetation. When the blackberries are under control, Gladys says:

‘It’s uplifting to drive through the farm and find new growth, new flowers and new birds, it’s like driving through a garden.’



Nariel Valley Landholders

Christina and James Aston

“ We are hoping we can set this place up for ornithologists. We will set up some bird monitoring sites so not having blackberries around and having all of our native plants and animals will be a real asset to our country. ”



Christina and James purchased their property in Nariel Valley just over four years ago. Their property borders National Park and has a variety of environmental features that drew them to the land, such as a wetland, a permanent creek and diverse terrain.

The couple saw deep value in the land and bought with the intentions of setting it up as a conservation area. Christina and James also have a hazelnut orchid on the property, with plans to expand their horticulture in the future.

Christina and James have a key goal of increasing biodiversity and they are eager to demonstrate to other landholders that you can use your land productively while still improving biodiversity.

A CHANCE TO HIT THEM HARD

On the 4th of January 2020, the Black Summer bushfires hit Christina and James' property hard. They lost everything in the fires, including their home. In the aftermath, they also observed and had to contend with changes in the vegetation on the property.

After the fires, Christina and James experienced an invasion of a range of different species of weeds that the pair hadn't seen before. While they would clear the weeds from a section of land, within three months the weeds would grow back, something they found 'pretty demoralising'.

However, Christina and James also noticed that the fires had a different impact on the blackberries and commented that this was one of the positive effects of the fires.

'Everything is denuded and that's really depressing but it got rid of quite a bit of those awful blackberries. When they were growing back and they were small we hit them hard and it made it more manageable. It also burnt the dead canes where we had a large infestation – that was impenetrable – but it cleared all of that out for us.'

TAKING ADVANTAGE OF OTHER'S EXPERTISE

One of the key things that helped Christina and James in controlling blackberry was reaching out for support and expertise. When the couple first purchased their land, they walked around the property with good friends who were experienced in conservation. At that time, blackberry was clearly the biggest problem on their property. From there, Christina and James were quick in picking up the Weeds of National Significance Blackberry Control Manual and joining Landcare groups, including the Mitta Valley Landcare group and the Upper Murray Landcare group.

'We've been involved in both Landcare groups just so we had access to direct knowledge through the active blackberry taskforce (North East Blackberry Action Group), particularly in the Mitta Valley. They have been an enormous help and motivation for us.'

One of the key steps was developing a blackberry plan for their property. This gave them a roadmap for systematically targeting problem areas using a mix of techniques. Christina and James have relied on the knowledge from blackberry control manual and continue to learn and adapt their approach as they go.



'When we saw new growth come up, we would just go and pull it out. We used a mix of chemical and physical strategies. We used machinery for really big infestations. The way we applied the spray didn't work sometimes, for example, when it was dewy, but we kept going back and it worked with time. We had the manual and used it when we were doing up our plan.'

Part of Christina and James' planning is also about what they will do once they remove a blackberry – and what they want to plant there instead. This is important in helping to avoid regrowth of the blackberry.



A LITTLE SUPPORT GOES A LONG WAY

Following the fires has been a challenging period, but Christina and James say that they are even more motivated to control the blackberries. Getting support from community groups such as Landcare and the North East Blackberry action group has been an important part of this.

‘Before the fires if you thought you were busy, multiply that be three and then you really are busy [when you’re] trying to rebuild. Having this support, it gives us hope and the motivation to keep going and not give up.’

Christina and James have received grants from the North East Blackberry Action Group for contract sprayers. However, what they have found most helpful is the information and knowledge sharing. This support has been critical for Christina and James to take prompt, direct action to hit the blackberries in the most effective way.

‘One thing that’s really good is they have people who come and talk to you about blackberry management. If we didn’t have this support, we would just bumble along using trial and error and things take longer and longer. Having that knowledge, seeing what’s being done and reading about all of their research and strategies has really helped us beeline.’



Christina and James acknowledge that tackling blackberry is not something that can be achieved by one person, or on just one property and comment that it requires a comprehensive approach, involving the whole community and the government.

‘We are just one little unit, but we are surrounded by infestations... We’re pleased that the neighbours are involved, we share a bond with them so if they don’t do their bit then it makes it harder for us to do our bit.’

THE TRUE VALUE

While Christina and James noted they haven’t had any economic benefits from controlling the blackberry, they see the true value of controlling the blackberry in the positive environmental and community outcomes. They hope in the future their property can be a place for people to enjoy, and for native plants and animals to flourish.

‘We are hoping we can set this place up for ornithologists. We will set up some bird monitoring sites so not having blackberries around and having all of our native plants and animals will be a real asset to our country.’



Cudgewa Landholder
Matthew Vogel

“ You don’t want to be known as someone who has a paddock infested with blackberries ... You want to make your property look and function as good as it can be. ”



Matthew has owned his property in the Cudgewa area since 1997. It's a 160-acre block, on which he runs a small beef operation breeding Murray grey cattle. Matthew lives in Albury running a second business, but he loves his land in the Upper Murray region and says the 'hardest part is getting up here when you can'.

Over the past 10 years Matthew has put a lot of labour into the property, both to enhance the aesthetics of the land and make his business more economically viable.

FIGHTING BLACKBERRIES WITH NATIVES

When Matthew first purchased the property, blackberry was scattered widely, particularly along the fence lines and in the steeper and deeper gullies. He notes that there has always been sporadic and spotty growth of blackberries on the property.

Matthew's general approach to controlling the blackberries is walking over the property, particularly in the gully areas, spot spraying with herbicide. In the open areas, which are more accessible, Mathew is able to drive out and spray the blackberries from the vehicle.

Initially Matthew was using thousands of litres of herbicide and spending up to a week spraying each year. However, the task has become easier over the years and his time and herbicide use have reduced significantly.

'These days you can get over the property in about half a day using about 500 litres of chemical.'

Matthew reflected that there was one year early on when he missed the blackberry spraying season. The next year, he felt the consequences when confronted with larger and abundant blackberries to manage. His key piece of advice on spraying blackberries was to make sure that you get out and 'do it every year and don't take a year off'.

Major planting efforts mean that blackberries are no longer a problem in the gullies on Matthew's property. Although the gullies on his property have historically been a refuge for blackberry thickets, persistent effort has gradually cleared them out, providing open space for native vegetation. Matthew has done four large-scale plantings in the gullies – weeks on end planting thousands of trees.

'We've had to be controlling the blackberry inside the gully so there were places to plant.'

This has been an important step, however, as it has cemented the gains in blackberry removal, shading the soil and preventing their re-emergence.

Despite the effort, Matthew now enjoys his time on the property taking in the views of the native trees and knowing that his work has brought in more birds, insects and other wildlife.

LOOKING AFTER THE PLACE

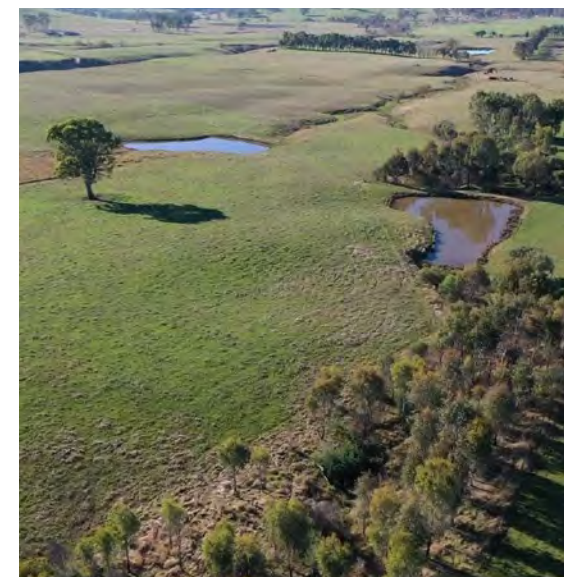
In tackling the blackberries, Matthew was motivated by the aesthetics of the environment, the productivity of the land and the social obligation. He notes that without the blackberries you have more space to grow grass and feed your cattle, but also:

'You don't want to be known as someone who has a paddock infested with blackberries... You want to make your property look and function as good as it can be.'

Matthew is fortunate that his property lacks steep rocky hillside and almost all of the property is accessible by vehicle. Additionally, all of his neighbouring landholders are on board with blackberry control. One challenge that still exists is the problem of blackberries on nearby public land, enabling the spread of blackberry onto his property.

'If it wasn't for that huge patch of blackberries up there on public land, we wouldn't be getting birds eating those berries and bringing them down here to our property and dispersing the seeds.'

In the future Matthew plans to keep on improving the soil health on the land, grow more productive pasture and planting out the remaining gullies. Through doing this work, he hopes to protect waterways and create shelter belts for his stock, while also bringing in more birds and insects to continue to improve biodiversity and in Matthew's words, to 'look after the place'.





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FOUR CASE STUDIES
VBT DIGITAL VIDEO COLLECTION

VBT CASE STUDY VIDEO

The case study video is an encoded mp4 file. Play the file directly from the supplied USB drive or after first copying the file to a computer harddrive.

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