



Photographs by Deanna Marshall



Examples of the diversity found in Victorian grasslands.

# Grassland conservation in the Riverina

By DARREN BAIN

**N**ATIVE lowland grasslands of south-eastern Australia have been reduced and fragmented to such an extent, they are considered one of the most endangered ecosystems in Australia.

In Victoria, as little as 0.5% of natural grasslands and grassy woodlands remain. As a result, grasslands now contain numerous threatened species.

To combat the decline in grassland biodiversity, a project called the Northern Plains Grassland Conservation Management Network (the Network) has been established with funding from the Australian Government's \$3 billion Natural Heritage Trust.

It seeks to establish a network of grassy sites in the Victorian Riverina (Echuca-Mitiamo). The network will include sites over the Patho Plains of grasslands and grassy woodlands.

Each site will gain some formal protection, determined by the landholder's willingness to enter into a voluntary protective agreement to manage the land for conservation purposes.

Set up by the North Central Catchment Management Authority (NCCMA) in partnership with Trust for Nature (Victoria), the project aims to protect the diverse range of species found in grasslands and ensure survival of many rare or threatened plant species.

Grazing management can be a valuable tool in managing the compo-

sition and ecological integrity of the grassland. Sites of any quality may be part of the network, which seeks to be inclusive, requiring only an intention or commitment to manage a site for conservation outcomes.

Within the network, levels of significance and security of a remnant will affect priorities for funding and resource allocation. For some remnants, membership to the network may simply mean inclusion on a database and access to newsletters and solicited management advice.

For others, it may mean regular visits by the Grassland Support Officer or other Trust for Nature staff to help with management needs, coupled with long-term funding for stewardship arrangements.

Ultimately, the network aims to provide a framework to accommodate and link remnants, achieving the shift from no explicit management towards management and protection to achieve conservation goals.

It is hoped membership will trigger and aid conservation and management processes that help individual remnants and the network.

The network will help conserve this endangered vegetation community and contribute significantly to aid involvement of local communities in conservation goals.

Many native grasslands can be effectively conserved by continuing existing management practices, especially if the vegetation is in good con-

dition. Usually this management has been in place for many years, so improvement can be achieved with little effort.

The project will contribute to management targets in the North Central Catchment Management Authorities Regional Catchment Strategy and North Central Native Vegetation Plan.

Targets of the North Central Catchment Management Authority are:

- improving quality and coverage of endangered northern plains grassland;
- improving existing viable populations of significant threatened species;
- identifying areas supporting high conservation significance in the northern plains grasslands threatened by overgrazing and cropping;
- providing financial support to landholders wishing to protect and enhance remnant grasslands;
- identifying ecologically significant roadsides;
- working with public authorities to establish public authority management agreements;
- ensuring local government and the community are aware of present and potential significant grassland sites on freehold land and roadsides; and
- ensuring works minimise or prevent disturbance.

**Contact: North Central Catchment Management Authority, phone (03) 5448 7124.**