

## **Photo Gallery Commentary – Photos from February 2007 to December 2008.**

When we took over management of our farm the entire district was continuing to grapple with several years of below average rainfall ... 'drought', if you like. The February 2007 photos show the condition of the entire farm: next to zero ground cover meaning ineffective water cycling – with most of the rain that was falling on the farm running straight off, losing top soil and supporting erosion. Our "weak link financial" was the Resource Link (not Product Conversion or Marketing) and this was where we needed to focus. Our priority was to grow grass and the approach we took was to simply get out of nature's way. That is, we did not sow down pastures but rather accept what grew naturally after each rainfall event.

By around June / July 2007 a mix of grass species were evident across the place. On the native pasture areas there were virtually no weed species. On some of the front arable paddocks Wild Radish was apparent, prompting one neighbour to offer to spray it for us. Each plant can produce up to 10,000 seeds and if seeds get mixed with wheat it severely impacts on flour quality due to high oil content. Research revealed that one of the best management tools for this species was grazing by sheep, and that a friend of Phillip's had for 5 consecutive years sprayed 3 times per year to rid his paddocks of it ... with no success. We took 2 actions to address this Weak Link – Social. The first was to chip out all plants within 100 metres of our boundary, and the second was to accept a request from another neighbour to allow some of his sheep on the place for several months. Plant numbers this year are substantially lower but this may be just seasonal.

December 2007 saw us receive in excess of 100 mm of rain. This led to an explosion in the germination of primarily native summer grasses, with the place having an impressive canopy across most paddocks. From a biodiversity perspective a consequence was the loss (eviction) of Lapwings (Plovers) as they prefer bare or lawn like paddocks. Rabbits have similar preferences and their numbers were decimated. Fly and mosquitoes were also minimal, due we think to the pasture spider population explosion. On the other end of the scale it was extraordinary to see an influx of 2 species and Quails, and with them came 4 different species of raptors. This whole process was very much 'species community succession' at work.

By late autumn 2008 we had a solid amount of grass vegetation on the place. Our 'weak link financial' became Product Conversion and given we were still not ready to buy our own stock we elected to agist stock. We wanted large numbers for a relatively short period, enabling us to put our [Low Stress Stockhandling](#) skills to work, whilst ensuring a reasonable portion of the vegetation was trampled rather than eaten (assisting the soil micro-fauna to do their stuff), and then allowing for the pasture to fully recover: encouraging the growth of perennial plants. We achieved our goal by agisting over 2,700 sheep right through the winter months. An unforeseen added bonus was that it was not necessary to concern ourselves with providing the stock with water (although they did have access to water) as they obtained sufficient from the pasture itself.

Since then we have again allowed the pasture to recover, although there was a significant hiccup through Spring 2008 with significant numbers of Australian Plague Locusts hatching on the place. The weak link in the lifecycle of these herbivores is egg laying ... without bare ground these critters cannot lay their eggs effectively. We did the right thing and reported the Locusts, and were very grateful for the help of a neighbour who sprayed them when they were banding.

At this point (January 2009) we are preparing to either agist or buy cattle as we believe they are the type of livestock best suited to aiding land regeneration. Some of the reasons include: hooves will help break up the mature soil capping which in turn assists water infiltration, seeds tend to survive their digestive process assisting in the spread of various species across the farm via the manure, the quality of manure is high due to the 5 stomach processes, and each manure pad is relatively (to sheep) large and creates its own habitat and supports dung beetle activity.

With some financial assistance of the Lachlan Catchment Management Authority we have had installed in excess of 7.5 km of additional fencing, taking paddock numbers from 9 to 21. Once we get our water scheme in place (designed but waiting on a couple of factors before we can implement) given we only intend ever having one herd or mob of animals on the place at any time this will mean that on average 95 % of the whole farm will not have animals on it ... allowing the plants to recover. Higher consequent animal densities will also mean much better mineral cycling, with dung being spread much more evenly across each paddock. Part of the deal in sourcing funds from the LCMA necessitated us signing a Property Vegetation Plan which has a 10 year term. The ramifications are that we have effectively set aside 2 areas totaling 65 ha for conservation, and the balance for pasture management.

In all of the above we've also managed to renovate the farm cottage and have hosted 3 field days. The first was organised by the local facilitator of the Grassy Box Woodland Conservation Management Network. Visitors came to see the vast array of native plants that have re-grown naturally under our management. One of the most evident of these has been 2 species of native Hopbush. Most of these plants must have been no taller than 5 cm for the past 100 years or so, and they are now in excess of 1 metre. The second field day was run by the Lachlan Catchment Management Authority, and involved 17 people coming to see what had been achieved. This was in the context of the LCMA considering acquiring a software package that will potentially assist them in deciding where they will get 'the biggest bang for their buck' in terms of investing in environmental outcomes. The third visit was from the Weddin Wanderers. This is a local walking group who meet once a month with the two-fold goal of increasing member fitness and seeing first hand what the community has to offer.

Given all of the positive feedback we have had we've now taken the decision add a further enterprise to our business: farm tours. Anyone interested can contact us via [phillipdiprose@gmail.com](mailto:phillipdiprose@gmail.com) or +61 (0) 2 63435105.

Additional insights into our learnings on the farm can be seen on our blogsite:  
<http://ochresearchives.blogspot.com>

When looking at the December 2008 photos you will see a dramatic increase in the amount of vegetation cover. A word of caution: looks can be deceiving in that whilst the cover looks solid the actual ground cover level remains low. Erosion and runoff has declined in most places on the farm. The last photo shows a small section of primarily Red-Grass. It is in patches such as these (few that they are) that we have achieved our goal of 100 % ground cover, 100 % of the time. The 'Quail Paddock' has been named so on an aspirational level – we want to maximise biodiversity on our place, and now understand that to achieve this goal we also need to maximise the diversity with which we manage various paddocks on the farm. Still a HUGE way to go.