

The Bird Watcher of the Plains



Catchment Champion

James Nevinson, Caitlin Paul,
Leah Blake and Mitchell Saunders

St. Michael's Primary School



Creative Catchment Kids

Creative Catchment Kids is an initiative of the Murray Darling Association and Wirraminna Environmental Education Centre. It aims to improve engagement between the Murray Catchment Management Authority and school students by providing opportunities for positive and authentic ventures that encourage students to develop creative solutions to natural resource management issues. **www.murray.cma.nsw.gov.au/creative-catchment-kids.html**

Wirraminna Environmental Education Centre

The Wirraminna Environmental Education Centre is located in Burrumbuttock, north of Albury in southern NSW. Since 1995, the centre, which is adjacent to Burrumbuttock Public School, has provided opportunities for discovery and learning about the natural environment, the ecology of the local woodlands and the beauty of native plants. **www.wirraminna.org**

Murray Darling Association

The Murray Darling Association has membership of over 100 Local Government councils in the Murray-Darling Basin, as well as community groups, businesses and individuals with an interest in ensuring that the Basin continues as a valuable asset for all Australians. Since 1950, the Association has initiated various school and community education programs on managing the Basin's land and water resources. **www.mda.asn.au**



Enviro-Stories is an innovative literacy education program that inspires learning about natural resource and catchment management issues. Developed by PeeKdesigns, this program provides students with an opportunity to publish their own stories that have been written for other kids to support learning about their local area. **www.envirostories.com.au**

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Authors: James Nevinson, Caitlin Paul, Leah Blake and Mitchell Saunders

Teacher: Margaret Wettenhall

School: St. Michael's Primary School

Catchment Champions

In 2013, students involved in the Creative Catchment Kids program researched and wrote stories about 'Catchment Champions', people who have made important contributions to managing natural resources in their local community. The program was generously funded by the Murray and Murrumbidgee catchment management authorities.

The Catchment Champions books are part of the Enviro-Stories Education Program.



**Catchment Management
Authority**
Murray



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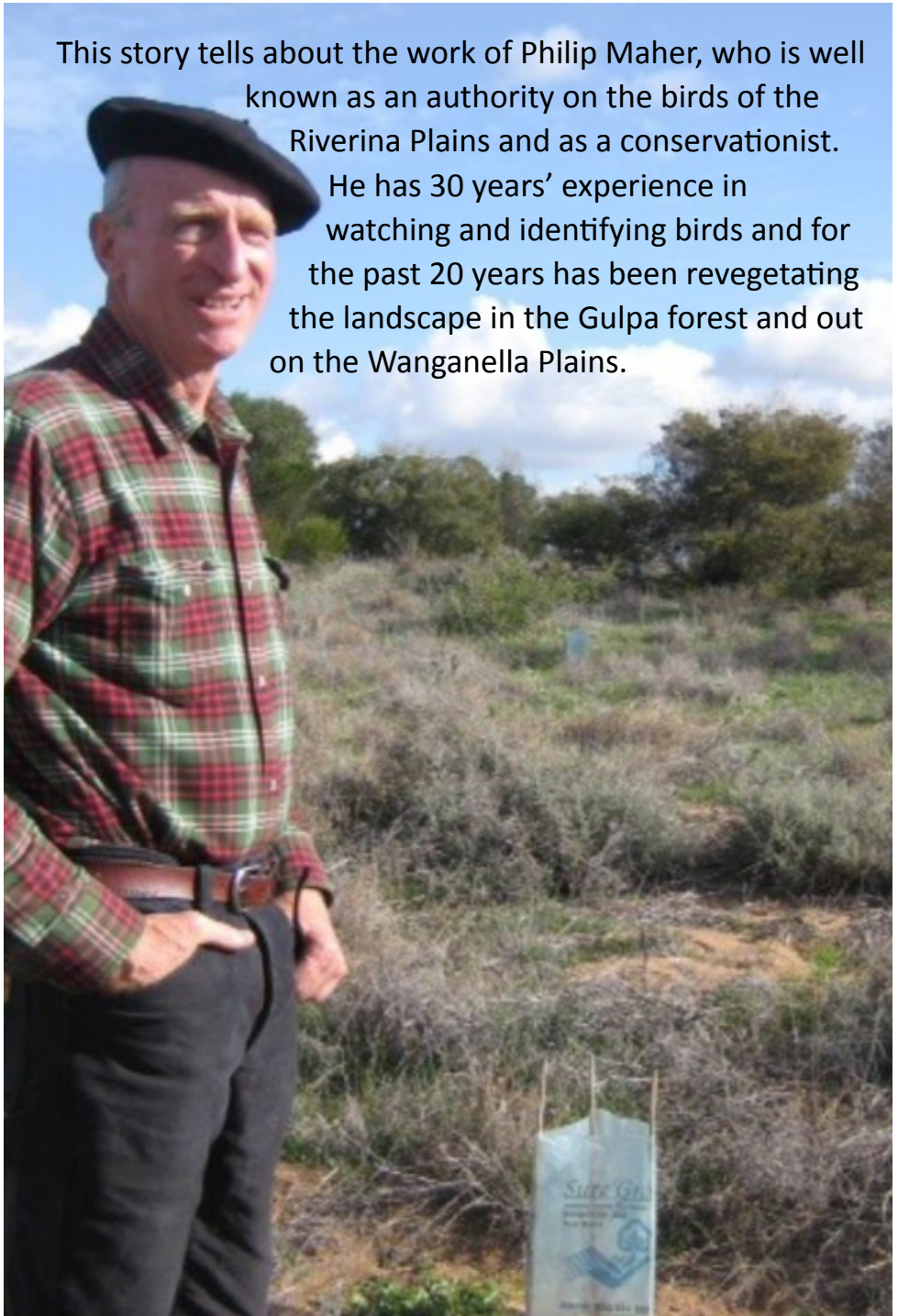


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Murrumbidgee

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This story tells about the work of Philip Maher, who is well known as an authority on the birds of the Riverina Plains and as a conservationist. He has 30 years' experience in watching and identifying birds and for the past 20 years has been revegetating the landscape in the Gulpa forest and out on the Wanganella Plains.



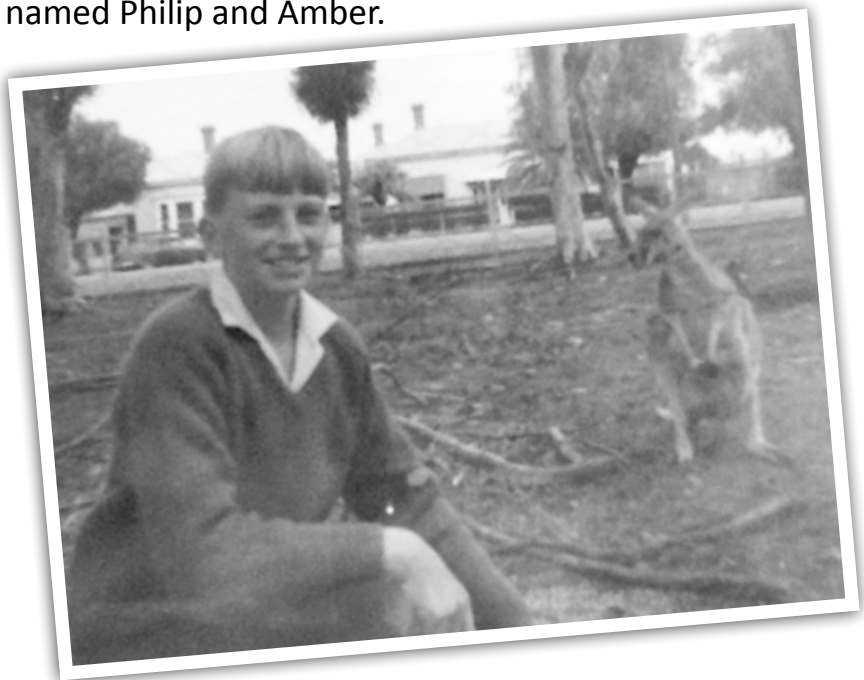
Philip's Early Life

Philip Maher was born to Norman and Alice Maher in 1954. He is the second youngest of five children, having four sisters.

Phil grew up on a farm, and his favourite activities as a child were running around, shooting and collecting bird's eggs. His interest in nature dates from his country childhood, with much encouragement from both his mother and father.

Phil went to Deniliquin South Public School and later on went to DHS [Deniliquin High School]. After high school he worked for the Forestry Commission as a Ranger.

Later he married Patricia and they had two children named Philip and Amber.



Tree Planting

Philip has mainly planted in 6 areas - 3 south of Deniliquin in Gulpa Forest and 3 areas north of town. He also has some areas on his sister's farm and a big sand hill near Wanganella, his main project. The soil composition dictates the type of trees he plants in each area. He also inspects what other species are naturally growing there, such as native pines on sandy soils and Black box and Boree on clay soils.





Philip has battled with many problems and has learnt many things along the way. One of the many challenges he faced was the rabbit plague after the drought. Kangaroos ate the milk cartons used as tree guards, and then the newly planted trees were eaten by the rabbits. He has now upgraded to bigger plastic guards with bamboo stakes. Philip plants after rain using herbicide to knock out weeds and guards to support and protect trees in their growth.



Wanganella Sand Hill

The revegetation of the Wanganella sand hill has been Phil's major, and favourite, project for the last 10 years. Lots of sand hill plants are becoming very rare because of 150 years of grazing by domestic livestock. Rabbits also have stopped regeneration. The project is the hardest thing Phil has ever done. The first nine years were drought, so thousands of trees were lost year after year. Phil often felt like giving up but he stuck with it and is now seeing results.



The Plains Wanderer

In the 1980s the Plains Wanderer, a small ground dwelling bird of the Riverina Plains, was considered endangered.

One day Phil was getting seeds off the trees at night at Mr John Nevinson's property near Wanganella, and luckily came across a Plains Wanderer, the most endangered bird in the area. It is a very secretive bird and rarely seen.

After years of observation he discovered that the bird was more widespread than first thought, but also that the numbers fluctuated over the years. He found it to be an adaptable and resilient bird. Phil is able to find the Plains Wanderer by revisiting the places he has sighted the bird before.



Numbers were quite low in 2013. After many years of drought, all nests were flooded out during the wet summers that followed. Phil is hopeful that numbers will build up again.

Bird Watching

Phil has always been interested in the birds of the Riverina and beyond. He finds birds fascinating and enjoys the challenge of identifying rare species.

There are a few dangers when bird banding. One is the claws on the birds, because they

can scratch you and tear a hole in your skin. Wedge-tailed Eagles are especially dangerous because of the size of their talons. Phil has to wear some thick gloves for protection. Phil said to be watchful of brown and tiger snakes when bird watching and planting trees.





Bird Tours

Phil has been able to turn his hobby into his paying work. From 1985 he was leading bird tours all over the country and since 1994 he has also led tours in South East Asia, New Zealand and New Guinea. Phil also acts as a consultant to Government departments and business organisations

The Future

Phil hopes to continue bird watching tours all over Australia. The desert country remains his favourite place, as he likes its 'boom' or 'bust' nature, the way it changes from year to year.

He also looks forward to seeing the areas he has revegetated mature and attract more birds each year.



Many thanks to Phil for his time in helping prepare this story, and for his inspiring work.





James Nevinson, Caitlin Paul, Leah Blake and Mitchell Saunders

2013 Year 6, St. Michael's Primary School

The 2012 and 2013 Creative
Catchment Kids writing
program was showcased
at the Seventh World
Environmental Education
Congress, held in Morocco
during June 2013.



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