

Phascogales – Community Grant Recipient

Dave Fagg

When I sat down to talk with Colin Smith from the Junortoun Community Action Group (JCAG) about their “Phascogales, sugar gliders, birds, bats and bikes” project, I had only one question: “Colin, what is a ‘phascogale’? And how do I pronounce it?”

Pronounced ‘faskogale’, the phascogale is an Australian marsupial about the size of a rat. If that’s still a struggle to say, then the local name, ‘tuan’, is much easier to get your mouth around. The tuan eats smaller mammals, birds, insects, and lizards. The male tuan is unfortunately destined to die before its first birthday, from the stress of the mating season.

The tuan is one of several rare and endangered species in the Junortoun area. Along with the sugar-glider and the owlet-nightjar, the tuan needs a place to sleep during the day, and find sanctuary from predators.

To this end, JCAG and Catholic College Bendigo decided to work together. They have constructed and installed fifty nest boxes which dot the bushland reserves surrounding the intersection of Mclvor Highway and the O’Keefe Rail Trail. More nest boxes are planned, extending all the way to the Axe Creek swing bridge.

Colin took us for a stroll along the O’Keefe Rail Trail. He pointed out a box, about the size of a large letter-box and fixed to a tree. The nest boxes are stamped with the name of the animal for which it is intended, and also feature an entrance hole, which differs in size according to the size of the animal. For example, an eastern rosella box requires a larger hole than a box for a sugar-glider.

But none of it could have happened without a keen group of students from nearby Catholic College, whose La Valla campus is nestled in the bushland behind the Bendigo Greyhound Club.

“Working with the school has been fantastic,” says Colin. Leah Cordedda, teacher at Catholic College, tells the story: “Our Martyn Program allows students in Year 8 and Year 9 to choose a ‘passion project’; a topic they are excited about. We had a student, George, who chose the nest boxes as his project. He and Colin would often talk, and before we knew it, George had two classes working on it!”

To support the partnership with the school, the Junortoun Community Action Group applied for a grant from the City of Greater Bendigo. Having applied in the past, Colin is impressed with the

new online grants portal, which has streamlined the process: “As long as you have all the information you need, you can apply for a grant before lunch. The online portal makes it easy.” The council also pitched in with practical help, sending park rangers Ami Greenfield and Mark Toohey to share their considerable knowledge with the team.

Ms Cordedda says the project has produced excellent educational benefits: “The Phascogale project is a case study in ‘real-world’ education,” she explains. “Not only do students learn which species of animals live around our school, but they also delve into the science of species, and the construction of the nest boxes feeds into the STEM curriculum within the Martyn Program. As well, the students monitor the animals with specially designed video cameras, which gets them learning about information technology.”

Each nest box is stamped with a number that means students know which box they constructed. Leah says, “They love knowing which box is ‘theirs’! It’s created so much ownership.”

Narelle Lyle, from Bendigo council, admires how JCAG and the school worked together for a common aim: “We love seeing people from different groups working together. It creates relationships between people that didn’t exist before. That’s community.”