

# Case study 3: Will and Nina Bennett





## All in the family: Improving sustainability for future generations.

**Generations of purposeful management for a productive farm, with a focus on enhancing biodiversity and sustainability, has created a nature haven that Will and Nina Bennett – and their three children – love to live and work on.**

### Ashby

“Ashby” is situated in the Midlands of Tasmania - a landscape of rolling hills, river flats, fertile soils, and low rainfall. Today, pockets of bushland occur on the hills and the valleys comprise expansive pastures and crops. Some of these areas are particularly special - prime examples of what woody grasslands were like before European colonization.

Wildlife on the property is plentiful. Forester Kangaroos, and, appropriately, Bennett’s Wallabies, are abundant. Spotted-tailed Quolls occasionally emerge from the bushlands to explore around the farmhouse. If you’re lucky, you might encounter a Tasmanian Devil in the bush. A White-bellied Sea Eagle plucks eels from the dam and a pair of endangered Tasmanian Wedge-tailed Eagles keep a watchful eye above.



White-bellied Sea-Eagle. Photo: Chris Tzaros.

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## Runs in the family

Farming is well and truly in this family's blood. Will's family has grown Merino sheep on Ashby for five generations – over 100 years. Nina is also from a sheep farm in northern NSW. Will's parents, Richard and Jill, fenced off areas and planted trees, and established conservation covenants on the property, to protect the landscape for future generations. Today, they remain passionate about sustainable farming and are actively involved in restoration on the farm.

Since Ashby is such a beautiful and vibrant place to live, it's no surprise that Will and Nina's children, Alice, 18, Percy, 16, and Dougal, 15, have developed a keen interest in agriculture and a predilection for the farming lifestyle.

"I think all three of our children have a genuine interest in agriculture and can see themselves as part of the future of Ashby." says Nina. "They love going out in the bush, whether that's helping with stock work, or mountain bike riding, or motor bike riding". Percy and Dougal particularly enjoy the busy times like harvesting and shearing, and Alice has selected school subjects related to agriculture and sustainability.



Bennett's Wallaby. Photo: Chris Tzaros.

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## Sustainable farm management

Because of their strong family connection to the landscape, Will and Nina have a commitment to ensuring its sustainability into the long-term. “The health of the natural environment is vital for a sustainable family farm”, said Nina. This is especially important in the face of a changing climate. “Over the past 10 years, we’ve noticed the climate has become more extreme, with more intense rainfall events and less reliability” said Will.

Conservation is considered in all aspects of farm management. The native grasslands are grazed lightly and timed so native species can seed and reproduce. Sheep are carefully distributed to control soil erosion. Improved pastures are tested before fertilizers are applied, and native pastures are not fertilized. Particularly valuable patches of bush are fenced off.

Will and Nina have agreements in place with several external partners. They have planted “wildlife corridors” with Greening Australia, providing shelter for stock, and strategic links between habitat patches. Through the Midlands Conservation Fund, 520 ha is both grazed and managed for conservation, and they receive financial compensation to continue their conservation work. An additional 420 ha is under a conservation covenant, ensuring permanent protection of the natural values.



Yellow-throated honeyeater. Photo: Chris Tzaros.

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A key benefit of such partnerships has been the knowledge that is shared. “When you engage with experts... you start to see how ecologically important some of the areas actually are”. Their family had been managing the land sustainably for years prior to these agreements, but the programs provided valuable insight to improve their grazing strategy even further.

More recently, Will and Nina have partnered with Farming for the Future, a multi-year study – the biggest of its kind in the world – that aims to quantify the contribution of different types of natural resources (‘natural capital’) to profitability across hundreds of Australian farms. With this new insight, Will and Nina will be able to make more informed decisions about how to best manage their land for both its health and farm profit.



The Bennett Family. Photo: Alex Maisey.

### Keeping the big picture in mind benefits the whole farm

Through these kinds of partnerships, Will and Nina keep the ‘big picture’ in mind. They think long-term and consider their impact across a broad area – beyond the boundaries of their farm. They contribute to projects which aim to create habitat links, such as “wildlife corridors” and “stepping stones”, across several properties. “There are now large, connected areas across multiple properties throughout the Midlands protected under some sort of environmental conservation agreement”, said Nina.

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Indeed, the benefits of their work can be felt across the entire property. “Although only some areas are under these agreements, they are intrinsic to the health of the *whole* farm”, says Nina. “Native flora and fauna are thriving in the protected areas. These areas provide great shelter for the sheep during lambing and in bad weather, and they complement the cropping enterprises ... in terms of the whole farm, it feels balanced”.

And of course, they continue to enjoy the lifestyle and recreational benefits of living and working on a beautiful farm with their family. “It feels good knowing that these special areas are now managed and protected with help and advice from experts. Our appreciation and enjoyment of these areas has grown with these partnerships. Whether it’s a walk to move sheep, or a bush barbeque, we are very lucky to live and work where we do”.



Ashby farm. Photo: Alex Maisey.

### Farming for the Future (post-script)

The opportunity to bring new sources of high-quality, on-farm data into decision-making is driving a game-changing research project underway across Australia. Wool growers will be among the first to benefit from this work. While producers have long known that a farm’s natural capital will influence productivity and profitability, that relationship has yet to be properly quantified at scale. Farming for the Future is looking to change that, through research and the development of tools that will enable producers to bring their natural capital onto their farm balance sheets. AWI has signed up as a partner of Farming for the Future, ensuring that the interests of wool growers are well-represented in the research.

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Name of Farmers:

Will and Nina Bennett

Name of Property:

Ashby

Location and size:

Ross, Northern Midlands, Tasmania – 4,000ha

Type of farm:

Merino sheep and mixed cropping

Size of flock and break down of breeds/types:

20,000 Merinos (11,000 breeding ewes)

Type of wool grown:

16 Micron Merino wool

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