

# Case study 4: Stuart Hutton



## Through droughts and flooding rains: a farm management strategy that stands the test of time.

**A careful revision to a grazing strategy, with a focus on simplicity, improving biodiversity, and soil health, has stood the test of time for Stuart Hutton.**

### Top of the Hill

At the top of a range on the northern Tablelands of New South Wales is “Fern Hill”, a 1,000 ha farm owned by Stuart Hutton. A landscape of rolling hills creates a mosaic of vegetation types interspersed among lush paddocks, with stringybark woodland on basalt hills, patches of open grassy box woodland, and peppermint forest along wetter gullies.

Growing up on Fern Hill, Stuart observed first-hand profound changes to farm management – and the effects these changes had on the land. “We used to see Scarlet Robins regularly when we were children. After that we started on the clearing regime. And then they declined.” Eventually, this species disappeared from the farm completely.

As a young adult, Stuart became frustrated with the stress and time commitment associated with spraying pastures and using chemicals. “That doesn’t stop ever – more fertiliser, more spraying, more equipment. My father and I were trying to work out how to get off that cycle, and to ask - was that the right way to do things?”



Scarlet Robin. Photo: Chris Tzaros.

*Farming for the Future* is a research and change program initiated by [the Macdoch Foundation](#).

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In 1996, looking for answers, Stuart did a course in regenerative agriculture. This inspired him to make substantial changes to his farming strategy, and he hasn't looked back.

### Keeping things simple

Today, Stuart's focus is on maintaining healthy pastures and soil, while keeping things as simple as possible. His grazing strategy is carefully planned. Sheep and cattle are kept in a single mob, and rotated through 80 paddocks. Paddocks are rested for long periods to promote growth and paddock health. Calves and lambs are quickly returned to the mob after weaning.

Stuart uses MaiaGrazing, an electronic grazing chart planning system, to calculate the 'carrying capacity' of his farm – the amount of stock the land can support through different seasons and climatic conditions. Stuart adjusts the stocking rate regularly to match to carrying capacity.

Stuart believes this strategy has an important advantage. "It takes a lot of stress out of the system. If it's starting to get dry and your data is telling you to sell stock, you go and sell stock.". Instead of worrying, he trusts the strategy and uses it to guide his management.



Stuart Hutton and his partner Susan. Photo: Alex Maisey.

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## Through droughts and flooding rains

Stuart reckons his management technique has stood the test of time. “Having done it since ‘96, it’s a fair trial. We’ve been through lots of droughts, and the system really works.”

A major test was the 2019 drought in NSW. Stuart’s grazing charts predicted a substantial reduction in the carrying capacity of his land associated with the reduction in rainfall. “The numbers that were telling me that I needed to act to save my land.” So he sold most of his stock.

Stuart feels strongly that he made the right choice. “Many farmers were spending \$10,000 per week on feed during 2019, and the stress was incredible for them. I didn’t have that stress - I just sold everything and went on holiday. I wouldn’t do it any other way.”

Stuart also believes his management facilitates healthier soils and healthier land. While the drought caused substantial tree deaths in the broader district, he observed very few dead trees on Fern Hill. When the drought broke, the farm was hit with 350 mm of rain. While other farms had major issues with clogged dams and gullies, Stuart’s farm responded differently. There was no runoff – all the water went into the soil. “To me it was perfect, because it would move through the soil profile slowly, and there was no loss of soil.”

## Return of the Robin

While Stuart hasn’t noticed changes in production *per se* since he changed his strategy, he feels there are other important benefits in having healthier land. “For me, I count biodiversity and soil health as profit within my system. I’m hoping that we will get recognised for building biodiversity in the future. It’s not just value for me, its value for everybody.”

Quantifying the value of biodiversity and soil health is an important, yet unanswered question for Stuart. That’s why he’s part of *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 insight, farmers like Stuart will be able to make more informed decisions about how to best manage their land for both its health and farm profit.

Stuart and his partner Susan enjoy the benefits that come from living on healthy land. “I really do love waking up in the morning and getting on the horses and moving stock. Whenever we can, we go out on the horses because it’s quiet and you see more birds”

Since 1996, they’ve noticed more birds, and new species of birds gradually returning to the property. Now, the farm boasts a vibrant list of species – including Latham’s Snipe, Buff-banded Rail, and, excitingly, the Scarlet Robin.

“It’s a real pleasure to go out and see that stuff. I think we’ve still got a long way to go in that regard - but we’ve planted lots of trees and shrubs to try and keep them”.

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Latham's Snipe. Photo: Chris Tzaros.

### 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 and to investigate whether investment in natural capital is associated with increased farm profits. 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.

Name of farmer: Stuart Hutton

Name of property: Fern Hill

Location and size: South-west of Guyra, on the northern tablelands of NSW. 1,000 ha.

Type of farm: 60% wool, 40% cattle.

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**Size of block, breakdowns of breeds and types:** Merino. 1000 ewes, 950 lambs, 500-600 wethers (a bit less than what we'd normally be running, but haven't built up since the drought in 2019).

**Type of wool grown:** Merino, 15-17 Micron, 80-90 mm of a bold or crimping type. Plainer bodied sheep that requires no mulesing.

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