

Case study 1: Jo and Greg Bear



Less is more: Farming with nature for a profitable, low-stress business

Jo and Greg Bear are growing more than sheep on their northern Victorian floodplain farm.

Bringing back the gudgeon

Nestled amongst a vast, open landscape of paddocks and shrublands in north-central Victoria sits Canary Island. This inland island is formed by the Twelve Mile Creek diverging from and then re-joining the Loddon River. In dry times, the waterways – which are lined with old River Red Gums – act as a refuge for native animals: owls, waterbirds, woodland birds, and dunnarts (mouse-sized, carnivorous marsupials). Below the surface, the threatened Southern Pygmy Perch calls these creeks home.

You could be forgiven for thinking this oasis is part of a National Park. Rather, it's part of "Tiverton", a farm belonging to holistic sheep farmers, Jo and Greg Bear. The farm sits on the Loddon River floodplain, with chenopod grassland and Lignum swamps dissected by creeks, drainage lines, and gilgais.



Alby Bear and the wetland. Photo: Jo Bear.



Purple-spotted Gudgeon. Photo: Doug Gimesy.

In a newly created wetland next to Jo and Greg's farm-house, lives the critically endangered, Purple-spotted Gudgeon. This stunning iridescent blue fish, with characteristic purple spots, was thought to be extinct in Victoria until it was re-discovered in the nearby Reedy Lakes system in 2019. The introduction of the gudgeon to the wetland was driven by Alby, Jo and Greg's 16-year-old son. With support and advice from local wetland ecologists, revegetation from state agencies, and placement of rocks to hide from predators, the wetland has quickly formed high quality habitat – a perfect gudgeon refuge. Today, the released individuals are healthy and growing well,

raising hopes that they will prosper.

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Not a “poor old farmer”

The paddocks on Jo and Greg’s farm provide habitat for many native species, so they don’t always look neat and tidy. The grasslands buzz incessantly with the calls of White-winged, Purple-backed and Superb Fairy-wrens, Singing Bushlarks, Zebra Finches and White-fronted Chats. “People think we must be the poor old farmer,” said Jo. But this assumption is far from the truth - Jo and Greg operate a productive and profitable business, carefully and strategically considering their approach to grazing and farm management.

Jo and Greg are knowledgeable and skilled farmers. Farming is in their blood – Greg grew up on the Canary Island farm, and Jo hails from a sheep farm just down the Loddon Valley Highway. Initially, they ran multiple enterprises: sheep, cattle, hay, and crops. This proved unsustainable: “We were running around with our heads in the ground and our legs running round in circles, and we weren’t making much money”.

Consequently, Jo and Greg sought a new way to do things. In 1998, they attended a holistic grazing management course that opened their eyes up to new management approaches. They switched to a single enterprise focused on wool and lambs, introduced changes to their grazing regime, and haven’t looked back.



Greg and Jo Bear.. Photo: Jo Bear.

Sometimes less is more – even in farming

Making these changes required a substantial mindset change. “Sometimes farmers are told you need to increase production to make more money. I don’t think that’s the total answer,” said Greg. Increasing production often involves increasing costly inputs to the farm, which can create even more financial risk. Instead, Jo and Greg’s strategy is to operate a low input, low-cost property, with a focus on growing sustainable and diverse native pasture into the long term.

They consider themselves to be primarily farmers of grass, rather than farmers of sheep. They believe that the more grass you can grow, the more money you can put in the bank. Basing their business on native grasses and shrubs lowers risk, as these species have occurred in the landscape naturally for a long time.

Today, the dryland pastures – 90% of the farm – are comprised of high diversity native grasses and shrubs. These pastures are crash grazed with long periods of rest. The remaining 10% of the property is lucerne based flood irrigation paddocks, predominantly used to finish lambs.

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Because the native species are well adapted to their environment, inputs are low. They don't need to use fertiliser to grow native pastures. Merino sheep like large, diverse paddocks, so Jo and Greg have focused on growing a wide variety of native pasture species, to ensure their animals stay healthy. As the stock are healthy, labour costs and input (such as drenching) are both low.

Since shifting to holistic grazing, profits have been steady and consistent. By farming with nature, their business is more resilient to climatic extremes and market fluctuations. While they don't reap the big profits in really good years, they don't suffer extreme losses in poor years either. They feel they make a good living on a low-input, low-cost, low-stress system.

Lifestyle benefits

Jo and Greg stressed the most substantial benefits have been to their lifestyle. By simplifying management and operating a low-input farm, they are far less busy, even with four times more land than when they started. They now have time to contribute to their community, and spend time with their family, feeling they are no longer tied to the farm.

Jo and Greg feel it's important to demonstrate how holistic grazing can facilitate the co-existence of biodiversity and farming. That's why they jumped at the chance to be 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 Jo and Greg will be able to make more informed decisions about how to best manage their land for both its health and farm profit.

Jo and Greg value the beauty of their land and enjoy their lifestyle. "It's just nice to go out on the motorbike and see birds – it's good for the soul," says Jo. "We say we've won the lottery of life, to have the farm, and to have the knowledge from our parents." And they're not done with improving habitat for wildlife yet – "It would be wonderful to get broilgas back".



The newly created wetland. Photo: Jo Bear



White-winged fairy-wren. Photo: Chris Tzaros.

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Farming for the Future (post-script)

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 Farmers:

Jo and Greg Bear and Greg's brother Graeme and his wife Rosina

Name of Property:

Tiverton. AH Bear & sons

Location and size:

Canary Island & Loddon Vale, Victoria. 4,500 ha.

Type of farm:

Specialist wool grower (25%) lamb production (50%) and then 1st X ewe lamb producer on agistment property (25%). All maternal ewes are Merino with different rams.

Size of flock and break down of breeds/types:

Merino x Merino - 1400 ewes

Merino x Dorset rams - 2700 ewes

Merino x Border Leicester ram - 2500 ewes

Type of wool grown:

Medium micron

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