

Wyena Holsteins Enjoy Wildlife Corridor

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Tall eucalyptus trees overlook Wyena Holsteins in Carpendeit, Victoria. Once a part of the vast Heytesbury Forest, the 25 square kilometer (6178 acre) Jancourt Nature Conservation Reserve is the largest remaining remnant. Wyena Holsteins owner, Donna Edge, received an environmental grant to plant wildlife corridors to help connect the state park to remnant bush on her farm and the roadside corridors. "Our cows love the corridors," shared Donna, "The trees provide wonderful shade and shelter throughout the year."

Donna Edge and Danny O'Shannassy moved to the farm two decades ago. They appreciate the natural features of the farm and surrounding area. It was a great place to raise their two children, David and Cally. Donna keeps records and cares for the cows while Danny cares for the land, fences, and watering systems.



Much of the farm has free-draining red loam soils over volcanic gravel. This is preferred over the black cracking clay soil that sometimes results in pastures that are too wet to graze. Although drought affected them in recent years, the farm typically receives 900 mm of rainfall annually (35.4 inches.) Donna and Danny improved the land for dairy production in many ways. They fenced the farm into 24 paddocks, each 5 to 12 acres and added gravel cattle lanes. Large watering troughs, supplied by a dam, provide water for the cows. Fertilizer and seed applications also contributed to increased pasture productivity.

"I bought the farm cheaply because it was run-down," explained Donna. The first thing she did was build a new milking shed with a 10-cow swing-over herringbone parlor that can be operated by one person. A two-pond effluent system was installed to handle shed waste. The waste water is then recycled for irrigation of pastures or summer crops.

"The house was old and worn out, but the roof didn't leak," said Donna, "I didn't spend any time there anyway." Six months after purchasing the farm, she moved a house from Princeton onto the property. Patiently, Donna set out to do something every year to renovate the house. "I'd rather have good pastures and a nice milking shed," she added.

The land improvements Donna is most proud of are the wildlife corridors. The east-west and north-south corridors intersect on her 80 hectare (197 acre) farm. The family planted 1-foot tall trees and watched them grow to over 20 feet tall in the past ten years. The corridors consist of Manna Gum Eucalyptus, Australian Blackwood, and other native species of trees and prickly bushes. Manna Gum leaves are the favored food of koalas and the prickly bushes help keep foxes from destroying bird nests. A variety of wildlife such as koala, deer, kangaroo, pigs, echidna, and cockatoos use the corridors to access new tracts of forest.

Donna was raised on a dairy farm in southwest Victoria where her mother milked cows and her father trucked livestock and fertilizer. When she was 20-years-old, Donna applied for an exchange program with the University of Minnesota. That led Donna to spending ten years working on well-known dairy farms in the United States and Canada including Sherman Holsteins in Minnesota, Mil-R-Mor Farm in Illinois, CraigCrest in Ontario, Dreamstreet in New Jersey, and Brigeen Farms in Maine. "Before you get tied down, go travel, there are so many opportunities, so why not do it," advised Donna.

When Donna took up farming in Australia again, imported embryos from Hanover Hill in Ontario and Brigeen Farms became foundational females in her registered Holstein herd consisting of both Black and White, and Red and White bloodlines. As we toured her pastures looking at the cow herd, it was evident Donna is a successful breeder of high quality, productive, Holstein dairy cattle.

Several years ago, Wyena Holsteins was asked to be part of the 10,000 Holstein Cows Genome Project funded by the Dairy Futures Cooperative Research Center, a partnership between farmers and the Australian government. The project team identified 91 Holstein herds, mostly in Victoria, who were doing a good job of recording genetic gain. Cows from these herds were profiled for 50,000 DNA markers. Donna is proud the results of the research are being used to make better predictions on the breeding merit of young bulls and heifers.

“We’re milking 109 cows here at the moment, 120 at peak,” stated Donna, “Scale pays, the more cows you milk, the better you get paid for your milk.” Structural changes favoring larger farms and tough times in the local dairy industry propelled Donna to enroll in online courses at Charles Stuart University. She completed her Bachelor of Agricultural Business Management – Dairying in 2018. As the industry continues to evolve, Donna is prepared to make a change. The beautiful pastures and cows at Wyena Holsteins are for sale. Selling the farm was a difficult and important strategic decision for the family. With both sadness and excitement, Donna is moving forward to discover what new adventure lies ahead in the next season of her life.

