

BestFarms Biodiversity Abounds at Tortoiseshell Farm

Sheila Howat and Sean Grant have spent thirty years building their 100 acre Bridgetown property from undeveloped land into the thriving environment it is today. Tortoiseshell Farm includes bed and breakfast accommodation, a wildlife refuge, bush retreat and a hobby farm. In 2005, future improvements were worked into a formal strategy for managing and improving the environment at a BestFarms Environmental Management System (EMS) workshop.

Tortoiseshell Farm is home to Sheila and Sean and their menagerie of animals, as well as being a short term getaway for many people eager for a country break. Sheila is a Registered Wildlife Carer with Department of Environment & Conservation, so Tortoiseshell Farm is also a refuge for a wide variety of orphaned, injured or disabled native birds and animals in need of care and rehabilitation.

The property was purchased 30 years ago as undeveloped land and the domestic residence was built mostly by hand. Other improvements such as the water catchment, fencing and animal introduction has happened slowly over time. Seventy acres of the property have been left as natural bush that, once logged by previous owners, has been allowed to naturally regenerate.



Photo: Sheila with, Tortoiseshell Farm residents, Freckle and Wally.

With the lifelong priority of being a Wildlife Carer, Sheila says that environmental considerations have always been given some attention but, until she attended the BestFarms workshop, environmental management was somewhat haphazard.

Sheila now works to her written farm action plan with a long term management strategy for all identified issues including managing an increasing number and volume of environmental weeds, building biodiversity by increasing habitat for native species of flora and fauna and displacing non-native species. The action plan also takes into consideration the impact tourism can have on the environment, and the Farm, and the need for a clear and formalised fire plan for residents and guests alike, something of particular importance on Tortoiseshell.

One of their most successful projects, developed with the assistance of the BestFarms plan, is the creation of a frog habitat. Sheila also feels she is just about on top of

environmental weeds, such as feral pines and tagasaste, now that she has taken the structured approach to their control. "Paying for someone to do the weeding has worked out well, as it gets done."

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Fallen trees are left on the forest floor as habitat, and Sheila is currently working out the best way to allow guests access to the bush area without a negative environmental impact, through walktrails and other interpretive experiences. She believes that educating people about the needs of native animals and bush areas is better than keeping them away and uninformed.

The coming year will see Tortoiseshell Farm formalising their fire plan to make it accessible and useful to guests, and aim for the BestFarms certification level to receive formal recognition for their efforts. "BestFarms is such a user friendly programme" says Sheila "Its greatest boost to us has been the positive reinforcement and recognition of what we have achieved environmentally. I am really looking forward to the desk audit".

Sheila is also working in conjunction with Roo Gully Wildlife Refuge in Boyup Brook to improve the plight of the Western Brush Wallaby. Other plans include the reduction of lawn areas for water conservation and installation of more rainwater tanks to minimise the environmental impact of guest's.

"So many good things are happening now (on farms)" says Sheila, "the majority of farmers are making an effort. This is for the long term, for children and grandchildren. Flora and fauna are under increasing pressure from encroaching human activities and it is important to look after what we have left...even if you don't have the ability to proactively improve your environment, if you can do no harm or at least minimise harm that is a worthwhile contribution."



Sheila Howat (second from left) participating in the BestFarms Soil Monitoring workshop in 2006

Tortoiseshell Farm is a great example of the efforts and care by landholders that BestFarms was developed to recognise. You can contact Tortoiseshell Farm on (08) 97611089.