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The Honda TreeFund is funding an Oxford preschool's native planting project, aimed at creating a habitat for skinks.

Bright Horizons Preschool owners Justin and Mel Fletcher said \$1000 from the Honda TreeFund would pay for 360 native plants and grasses. These will be planted in a neighbouring 2-hectare paddock, realising plans hatched in 2010 when they opened the preschool to extend its garden so students could enjoy and learn about nature.

"We noticed there were quite a few common skinks in the paddock and thought it would be fun for the children to encourage them into this area," Mr Fletcher said.

The first step was building a fence from recycled materials to exclude skink-predators including cats. Once this was finished, the Fletchers learned that as an Enviroschool, Bright Horizons was eligible to apply for Honda TreeFund funding for native plants.

The application was successful and preschool students and their families marked Arbor Day in June this year by planting the first native trees, shrubs and grasses. A second planting day was held recently, on a mound among old tree trunks which should provide skink habitat.

The next step will be stacking large rocks into a "skink hotel" with nooks and crannies where the creatures can hide, Mr Fletcher said.

No skinks have been sighted since the project started, but the Fletchers are confident that once the project is completed, they should settle into this specially created habitat.

Environment Canterbury Youth Engagement Team Leader Sian Carvell said that each year Enviroschools and schools involved in Environment Canterbury's Waitaha Wai (Water) or Pests and Biodiversity education programmes can apply to the Honda TreeFund for money towards native plantings.

Environment Canterbury Biodiversity Team Leader Jo Abbott said that in 2013-14 Honda New Zealand and Honda dealerships in Christchurch and Timaru funded \$40,000 worth of native plantings in Canterbury.

Environment Canterbury shared this Honda TreeFund money around 20 community and school planting projects. This helped pay for the planting of 12,300 native trees from the Kaikoura district to Timaru.

For every new Honda sold, Honda New Zealand allocates regional councils around the country funding for 10 native trees. Local agents add funds for another three and Honda buyers are invited to contribute. Since April 2004, the Honda TreeFund has funded more than 590,000 trees around New Zealand.

Plantings are good for birds, connecting the Canterbury foothills with the plains and providing nectar, fruit and seeds.

“The Honda TreeFund is win-win, offsetting vehicles’ carbon emissions vehicles while returning native vegetation to Canterbury,” Dr Abbott said.

Environment Canterbury also administers Canterbury Water Management Strategy Immediate Steps and Canterbury Biodiversity Strategy grants. Anyone with planting or waterway restoration projects in mind is eligible to apply, including schools.

To find out more about the Honda TreeFund, go to ecan.govt.nz/biodiversity/funding or contact the Environment Canterbury biodiversity team or education for sustainability teams via 0800 324 636.

Common skinks not so common

A Rangiora preschool’s efforts to create a habitat for skinks was “awesome”, said Department of Conservation biodiversity ranger Anita Spencer.

“The rocks will provide a refuge from predators and retain heat from the sun, which skinks and geckos need to keep a stable temperature,” she said.

Despite their name, the common skink species seen at Bright Horizons is on a downward slide. If nothing is done, the “at risk” genetic group found in Canterbury will become endangered, largely due to lack of habitat.

The refuge may also attract Canterbury geckos, once forest dwellers, Ms Spencer said. Today they are found mostly under rocks, hidden from predators including wild and domestic cats, stoats, weasels, hedgehogs and mice.

The tangled branches of divaricating shrubs selected for the Bright Horizons planting offer a hiding place for skinks and geckos. They also grow fruit and attract invertebrates including moths, which lizards love to eat.

New Zealand is home to more than 80 types of lizard. Skinks are sleek and smooth-skinned - like small snakes with legs – while geckos have broad heads, large bulging eyes and velvety skin. Lizards may thrive in urban gardens if fruit-bearing native shrubs and vines are planted, such as scrambling pohuehue *Muehlenbeckia complexa*, coprosmas *propinqua* and *crassifolia*, porcupine shrub *Melicytus alpinus*, shrubby tororaro *Muehlenbeckia astonii* and tussocks which attract insects.

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