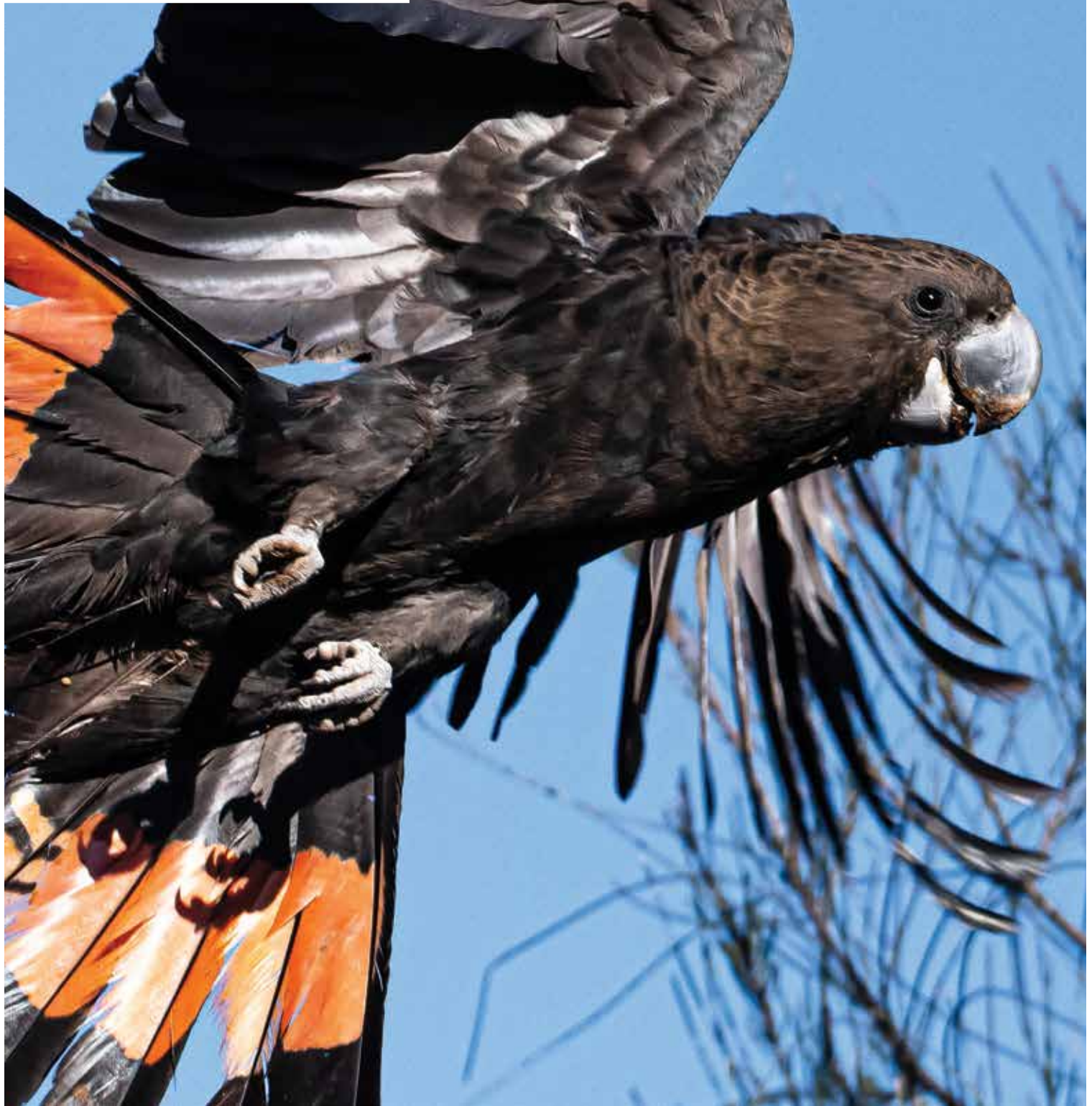


# PARK WATCH



**PROTECTING OUR FOREST REFUGES**  
**POWERFUL OWLS FOUND IN MOUNT COLE**  
**THE ECONOMIC CASE FOR NEW PARKS**  
**NATIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL LAWS REVIEW**  
**THE FUTURE OF OUR BEAUTIFUL BAY**  
**WHO IS GRAMPAINS NATIONAL PARK FOR?**  
**WE NEED BIODIVERSITY LEADERSHIP**

MARCH 2021 NO 284



**VICTORIAN  
NATIONAL PARKS  
ASSOCIATION**  
*Be part of nature*



Be part of nature

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### OUR VISION

*The Victorian National Parks Association vision is to ensure Victoria is a place with a diverse and healthy natural environment that is protected, respected and enjoyed by all.*

Everyone can help in the conservation of Victoria's wild and beautiful places. To find out how you can help, visit [www.vnpa.org.au/support](http://www.vnpa.org.au/support) or call us on (03) 9341 6500.

**EDITOR** Meg Sobey

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### FRONT COVER

In the aftermath of last summer's bushfires, Glossy Black Cockatoo are now facing another threat. Turn to pages 4–8. Photo by Rebecca Van Dyk.

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Authorised by Matt Ruchel, Executive Director, Victorian National Parks Association.  
Level 3, 60 Leicester St, Carlton, VIC 3053.

The Victorian National Parks Association acknowledges the many First Peoples of the area now known as Victoria, honours their continuing connection to, and caring for, Country, and supports Traditional Owner joint-management of parks and public land for conservation of natural and cultural heritage.

Our office is located on traditional land of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation. We offer our respect to Elders past, present and future.

*Park Watch*  
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## CONTENTS

3	From the President
4-8	After the fires
9-11	Time to give a hoot
12-13	Ticking all the boxes
14	Quiz: Central West forests
15	Must we live with the deer invasion?
16-17	What's that? The national environmental laws don't work?
18-21	The future of our beautiful bay
22-23	Who is Grampians (Gariwerd) National Park there for?
24-25	Victoria needs leadership for biodiversity
26-27	The track and the stonefly
28	Saving Feathertop
29	The Prom at a crossroads
30-31	Failing our wildlife
32	Trading in genes
33	Caught on Camera in Wombat State Forest
34-35	Bunyip bouncing back
36-37	Growing our rewilding force
38-39	In Parks: Woodlands Historic Park
40-41	Explorers Corner
42	Quiz Answers
43	Wild Families: Growing up in a wildlife family



# From the President



Dear friends, supporters and members, the good news is out: investment in nature protection provides greater economic benefits to the community than most large infrastructure projects.

An economic assessment of the benefits of protecting and investing in Victoria's Central West forests, as recommended by the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council (VEAC), shows that benefits range from \$2.30 to \$4.80 for every dollar invested. And this is despite excluding many critical benefits, such as water supply and carbon storage.

In comparison, many recent state infrastructure projects have been shown to provide little benefit or even have negative economic benefits. Why is the Victorian Government not investing more in nature protection? Where are the local Members of Parliament, the Minister and the hard nuts of Treasury on this issue? Our Executive Director Matt Ruchel discusses the findings of the economic assessment of these proposed new parks, commissioned by VNPA, on pages 12–13.

The impact of last year's devastating fires on forests in eastern Victoria has been a focus of work for our campaigners. Together with community conservation groups from East Gippsland, VNPA commissioned a detailed assessment of the impact of the bushfires and ongoing logging and made recommendations to the Victorian Government. What is urgently needed is key decisive action from the government to realise its objectives for the conservation of threatened wildlife in eastern Victoria. Turn to pages 4–8 for more.

VNPA staff and supporters, with local and statewide community groups, have been working hard to block the proposal to build a

destructive liquified natural gas (LNG) import terminal in the middle of the internationally-important Westernport Bay. The company, AGL, prepared a long but shallow report on the environmental impacts of their proposal. A large amount of additional information about the destructive impacts of the proposal on the environment, sensitive seagrass meadows and migratory birds was provided to the inquiry about the proposed terminal.

Over recent weeks, further information from energy experts has emerged, showing that the projected role for gas in our economy is far less important than claimed by AGL, as alternatives such as solar and wind energy and the use of heat pumps is continually reducing the need for carbon-intensive and polluting energy sources. See pages 18–21 for more. Many within the VNPA community have donated to support this campaign – thank you for your generosity.

Over the past few years, VNPA has been supporting the emerging Nature Stewards program. Nature Stewards is a new Victorian program that invites and supports adults to learn, connect, and act for nature locally. It aims to grow Victoria's number of environmental volunteers and support the many local groups who give their time for nature. The program builds participants' basic ecological knowledge, connection with nature and with other like-minded people and groups. Programs are run with local municipal councils as the hosts, with at least four different councils hosting programs this year. Outdoors Victoria has been hosting the program – and I thank them warmly for their wonderful support. Read more on pages 36–37.

Over the summer, I read the book *Sludge: Disaster on Victoria's Goldfields* by Susan Lawrence and Peter Davies,

which, while not an appealing title, provides what the authors call a lost history about several environmental crises from the gold rush decades in Victoria up until about 1920. The legacy of the substantial diversion of water from our watercourses and wetlands and the "disposal" of immense quantities of crushed rock, clay and sand from surface and underground mining resulted in massive quantities of sludge flowing down our rivers. Entire river systems and floodplains have been impacted. The devastating consequences on our environment were the subject of Royal Commissions and several parliamentary inquiries. Much of this history has been lost from memory, but the enduring environmental costs will be with us for many decades to come. Reading the book further highlighted the important work that the VNPA is doing to protect nature in the goldfield areas of Central West Victoria.

It is now a year since COVID-19 changed our life, work and community activities. Our Finance Committee and staff have been working hard to ensure that VNPA manages our resources as carefully as possible. The VNPA Council, committees and staff have also been updating our Strategic Plan to help us keep a focus on the many critical challenges that face nature in Victoria and where VNPA should focus our work in the years ahead. I sincerely thank our supporters, donors, Members, philanthropic partners and funders for their continuing support for our work and vision. • PW

Bruce McGregor, VNPA President

## Bushwalking and activities program returns

We are pleased to announce that our bushwalking and activities leaders have been busily planning and preparing adventures and the program is back up and running. For the Autumn 2021 program there is no printed version but you can easily find all of the upcoming activities available at [www.vnpa.org.au/adventures](http://www.vnpa.org.au/adventures). If you would like to receive updates, you can join the dedicated email list at [www.vnpa.org.au/bwag-sign-up](http://www.vnpa.org.au/bwag-sign-up). • PW



An aerial photograph of a forest landscape. A light-colored, winding road or path cuts through a dense forest of dark, charred trees. The forest floor is covered in green undergrowth. In the background, rolling hills and mountains are visible under a cloudy sky.

# AFTER THE FIRES

WE MUST PROTECT  
OUR FOREST REFUGES.  
**BY JORDAN CROOK  
AND MATT RUCHEL.**



In a year where the word 'unprecedented' was overused to the point of losing meaning, the 2019-20 Black Summer bushfires along the east coast of Australia had, and continue to have, an unprecedented impact on our wildlife and ecosystems due to their scale and severity.

VNPA, along with community conservation groups from East Gippsland, commissioned an analysis of the impact of the bushfires on a range of threatened plant and animal species in Eastern Victoria – and the impact of ongoing logging on remaining forest spared from the flames.

What the analysis found was both shocking and deeply disappointing. At a time when not just Australians but the whole world was concerned about the future of our unique and special wildlife, the Victorian Government has allowed its state-owned logging company, VicForests, to log unburnt areas and areas recovering from the bushfires.

Significant unburnt areas – critical refuge areas for threatened and endangered wildlife – are under imminent threat from logging.

### The impact of the bushfires

The 2019-20 bushfires burnt more than 1.25 million hectares of forest across eastern Victoria, killing millions of animals, threatening the survival of hundreds of species, and pushing many ecosystems to the brink of collapse.

Bushfire severity mapping shows that more than half the area in the fire extent experienced moderate to high fire severity. 'Moderate severity' is defined as having 20–80 per cent canopy scorch, and 'high severity' has greater than 80 per cent canopy scorch.

More than 200 flora species have had 50–100 per cent of their extent affected by the fires, of which 154 have been identified by the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP) as of high concern due to fire impacts.

DELWP has also identified 67 fauna species of most concern, of which 20 had 50–80 per cent of their entire habitat burnt.

### Our report

Our recently released joint report *After the Fires: Protecting Our Forest Refuges* focuses on ten forest areas including Errinundra, Cottonwood, Cabbage Tree, Far East Gippsland, Swifts Creek, Nunniong, Colquhoun, Mt Alfred, Sardine Creek to Bemm, and the North-East Alpine Region.

Many of these unburnt and lightly burnt refuge areas contain extremely valuable and rich habitat features essential for the rehabilitation, recruitment and dispersal of wildlife into recovering forests.

The key refuge areas were selected after extensive analysis of bushfire extent and severity spatial data, and Habitat Importance Models (HIMs) data, and verified state government records of key fauna species. This data shows where the most important modeled habitat is for each species. The in-depth knowledge of local conservationists and citizen science also played a vital part in the writing of the report as on-ground survey work was difficult to conduct in 2020.

The report highlights how these refuges will be key for the survival of many iconic East Gippsland locals such as the Long-Footed Potoroo, Glossy Black Cockatoo, Greater Glider, Spot-tailed Quoll, Masked and Sooty Owls, Lace Monitor, Giant Burrowing Frog.

We found that across the ten refuge areas identified, 553 logging coupes covering over 20,000 hectares of forest are planned for logging in the coming months to years by VicForests.

*Continued overleaf*





# AFTER THE FIRES

*Continued from previous page*

Not only have there been no reductions or substantive changes to existing logging plans since the bushfires, two additional logging schedules have been approved by state-owned VicForests in the last 12 months.

## The impact of logging

The science on the impact of logging native forest on threatened and endangered wildlife is solid – and is damning.

For most of the bushfire-affected threatened species focused on in our report, logging is listed as a major threat to their already precarious survival. Many species experienced significant range contractions before the fires, making the small fragments of forest that escaped the 2019-20 bushfires even more critical to conserve.

After the 2019-20 bushfires, DELWP released two reports on the impacts of the fires, which identified the importance of protecting key refuge areas for fire-affected species.

Diblo logging coupe was lightly burnt in 2016-17 but unburnt by 2019-20 bushfires. It was logged in August 2020. Surveys in 2019 found Long-footed Potoroo, Powerful Owl and Yellow-bellied Glider within this coupe.



## 2019-20 bushfire extent in East Gippsland, Tambo, and North-east FMAs, and key identified refuge areas

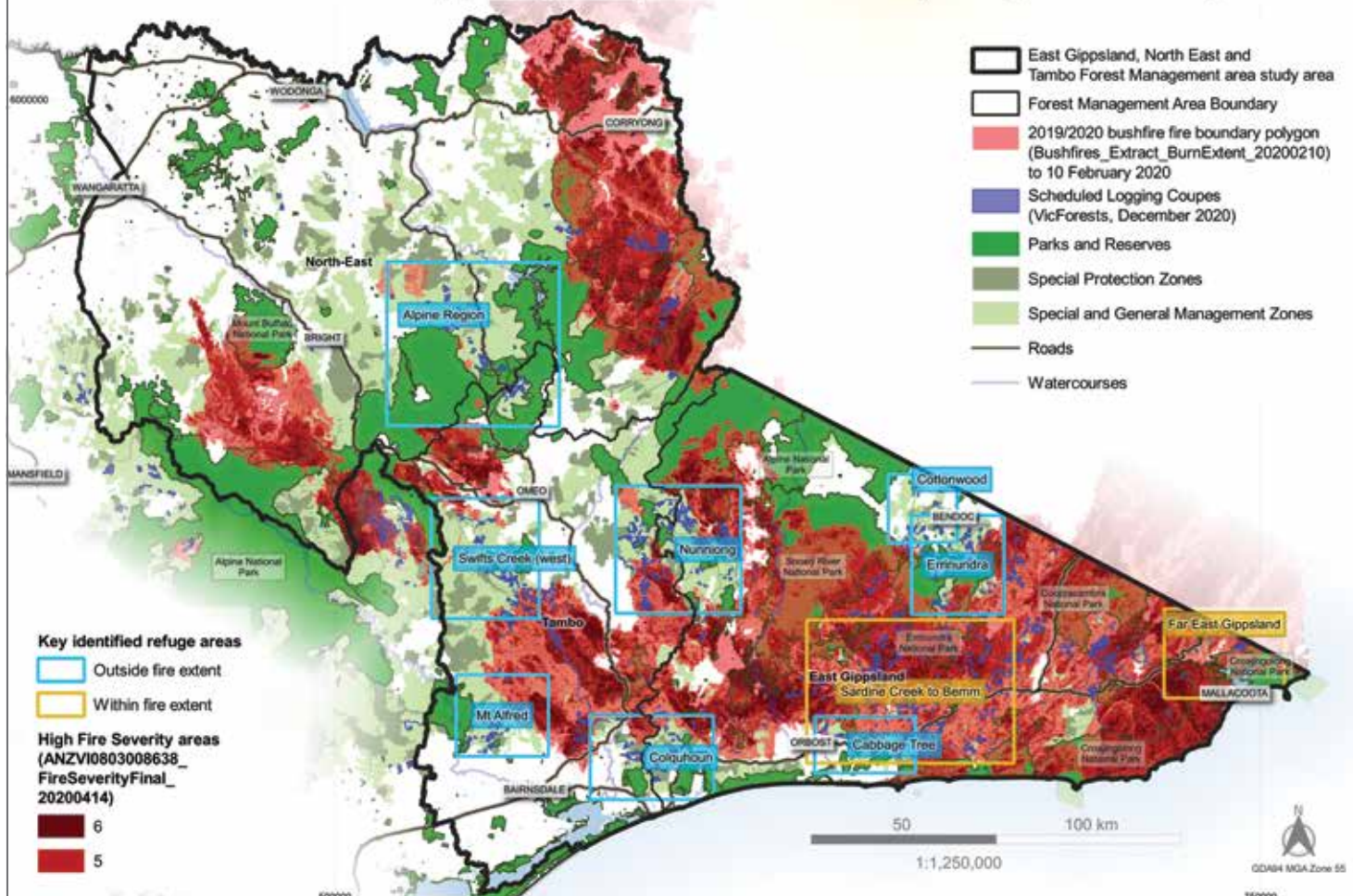






PHOTO: LISA ROBERT

Scientists from the Threatened Species Recovery Hub made recommendations in January 2020 to locate and protect key refuge areas that “will be of profound importance for species’ recovery, and hence should be the immediate and ongoing focus for conservation management.”

In May 2020, the Office of the Conservation Regulator made recommendations that logging stop in key unburnt habitat for threatened species to halt the threat of irreversible damage to biodiversity after the 2019-20 bushfires.

Despite these ongoing warnings and recommendations, logging has recommenced in the refuge areas outlined in the *After the Fires* report as well as other high-conservation value areas since the fires.

*Continued overleaf*

Colquhoun Grevillea  
(*Grevillea celata*) state  
and federally listed  
threatened species only  
found in East Gippsland.



PHOTO: FEROC



Continued from previous page

## Our recommendations

The *After the Fires* report makes the following recommendations:

1. Protect each of the key refuges identified in the report and any other remaining unburnt forests from current and future logging, to ensure the survival and persistence of flora and fauna species that rely on these forests to survive.
2. Commit to not logging any identified habitat remaining in Victoria for each threatened species significantly affected by the 2019-20 bushfires, particularly those species listed in the report.
3. Bring forward the 2030 transition out of native forest logging. In November 2019 the Victorian government committed to a decade-long transition out of native forest logging. Doing so sooner would avoid further damage.
4. Prioritise funding and restoration of areas impacted by the bushfires to restore habitat and provide better resources for weed and pest control programs in forest areas to improve recovery from bushfire events.
5. Declare and map the key refuges identified in this report as high priority assets in need of protection from all types of future fires, including planned burns.

The Victorian Government must take this immediate, decisive action to stop the ongoing logging of these critical wildlife refuges and protect the threatened plants and animals who depend on them for survival. • PW

Read the report *After the Fires* at [www.vnpa.org.au/after-the-fires-report](http://www.vnpa.org.au/after-the-fires-report)

Colquhoun State Forest, area scheduled for logging.



### Our forests need you

Will you help protect what's left by making a kind donation today? If you give by **April 30**, a fellow kind donor will double your gift up to a total of \$20,000.

It's urgent and important and if you give now your gift will go twice as far.

To make your tax-deductible donation, call the team on **03 9341 6500**, visit [vnpa.org.au/protect-forests](http://vnpa.org.au/protect-forests) or fill out the form on the back page.



Who's there?  
Powerful Owls,  
that's who!

# TIME TO GIVE A HOOT







PHOTO: JUSTIN CALLY

WHOO HOO – A FANTASIC FIND IN THE FOREST  
 SHARED BY NATURE CONSERVATION CAMPAIGNER **JORDAN CROOK**.

A curious young Powerful Owl looks on from above.

With deep hoots, Powerful Owls have been discovered for the first time in decades in the forest of Mount Cole.

Unfortunately, this threatened species is living in areas scheduled for logging by the state-owned logging company VicForests.

This cause for celebration mixed with dismay reaffirms the need for the Victorian Government to protect these critical habitats in new national parks – before they are destroyed.

Australia's largest nocturnal bird was detected using remote acoustic recording devices, or 'song meters' set up by VNPA citizen scientists at three sites in Mount Cole between COVID-19 lockdowns. Ecologists who analysed the recordings confirmed that a significant population of *Ninox strenua* is present in Mount Cole forests – in and around planned logging coupes.

VNPA's formally submitted the threatened species detection report in February to the Victorian Government and the Office of the Conservation Regulator. This

critical work could only happen thanks to our dedicated volunteers and the generosity of our supporters.

VicForests don't conduct pre-logging surveys in the areas they plan to log in the west. There are 10–14 logging coupes planned or already logged within the Mount Cole area.

Due to their size (they can grow to 70 centimetres tall with a wingspan up to 1.5 metres), Powerful Owls need large hollows for nesting. These hollows, only occurring in older trees, are destroyed by clearfell logging or in the post-logging burning used in forestry operations.

This was highlighted in a recent Threatened Species and Communities Risk Assessment of the Regional Forest Agreements by the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning:

"At the landscape-level, timber harvesting when conducted over a typical rotation period of 80 years will inevitably reduce the proportion of the forest in older





age classes, including mature and senescent growth stages, depending on bushfire history. This effect will vary from area to area, depending on the extent of older age classes and their protection in the reserve system. However, where this effect is substantial, it would make the forest at a landscape-scale less suitable for hollow dependent species such as possums, gliders and large forest owls.”

(DELWP, 2020)

The Powerful Owl lost a substantial amount of habitat in the 2019–20 bushfires (see previous article). With several detections confirmed, Mount Cole appears to be a stronghold for this giant of the sky.

Calls of other iconic wildlife were also captured by the song meters in Mount Cole – the short barks of Krefft’s Glider and grunts of Koalas, among others (see table below.)

This is the third threatened species detection report submitted due to survey work by VNPA citizen scientists.

In early 2020 we found the endemic and endangered Mount Cole Grevillea in logging coupes at Mount Cole. (See June 2020 *Park Watch* [www.vnpa.org.au/a-rare-discovery](http://www.vnpa.org.au/a-rare-discovery).)

In June 2019, the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council (VEAC) recommended the creation of a new Mount Buangor National Park for Mount Cole, 45 minutes west of Ballarat.

But the Andrews Government is still delaying accepting this expert recommendation for it and other new national parks in Victoria’s Central West (read more on the following pages).

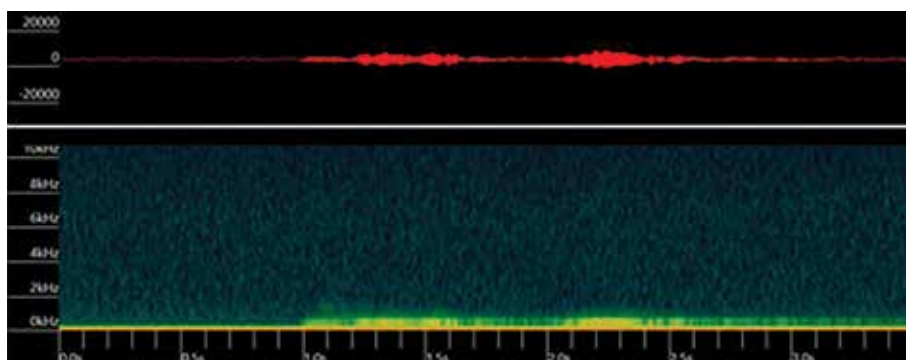
We will continue to conduct survey work in these areas and call on the Victorian Government to permanently protect them before they are irreparably damaged by logging.

These forests should remain filled with the sounds of wildlife forever. • PW

Mount Cole or Bereep-Bereep is on the traditional land of the Beeripmo balug tribe that form part of the larger Djab Wurrung language-speaking people.

## Powerful Owl call detected at Mount Cole Site 2

A song meter



Common Name	Scientific Name	Mt Cole Site 1	Mt Cole Site 2	Mt Cole Site 3
Australian Wood Duck	<i>Chenonetta jubata</i>	Undetected	Present	Undetected
Laughing Kookaburra	<i>Dacelo novaeguineae</i>	Present	Present	Present
Southern Brown Tree Frog	<i>Litoria ewingii</i>	Present	Present	Absent
Southern Boobook Owl	<i>Ninox novaeseelandiae</i>	Present	Present	Undetected
Powerful Owl	<i>Ninox strenua</i>	Undetected	Present (Male & Female)	Present (Male & Female)
Krefft’s Glider (formally Sugar Glider)	<i>Petaurus notatus</i>	Present	Present	Present
Koala	<i>Phascolarctos cinereus</i>	Present (Male)	Present (Male & Female)	Undetected



# Ticking all the boxes



PHOTO: SANDY SCHELTEMA

INVESTMENT IN NATURE PROTECTION PROVIDES GREAT ECONOMIC BENEFITS, EXPLAINS EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR **MATT RUCHEL**.

We know the forests of the Central West are home to 370 threatened species, including the Greater Glider, Mount Cole Grevillea, Grampians Bitter Pea and Powerful Owl. We know they are carbon rich and protect the headwaters of several important rivers. And we know they offer excellent bushwalks and camping spots near to the city.

But none of this seems to resonate with the Victorian Government. Even though the expert investigation it commissioned recommended the creation of new national parks in the Central West, it is still to take any action to do so.

With a sense of mounting frustration we have passed the 12-month anniversary of no decision, even through legislation of the *Victorian Environmental Assessment Act 2001* stipulates that a government response to the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council (VEAC) final report is required within six months.

With the law and nature ignored, we commissioned an independent economic assessment of these new Central West national parks. Maybe this would speak the government's language? We know national parks



PHOTOS: SANDY SCHELTEMA



have great environmental and social benefits, but what of the economic benefits? We had independent economic consultants Sayers Advisory crunch the numbers.

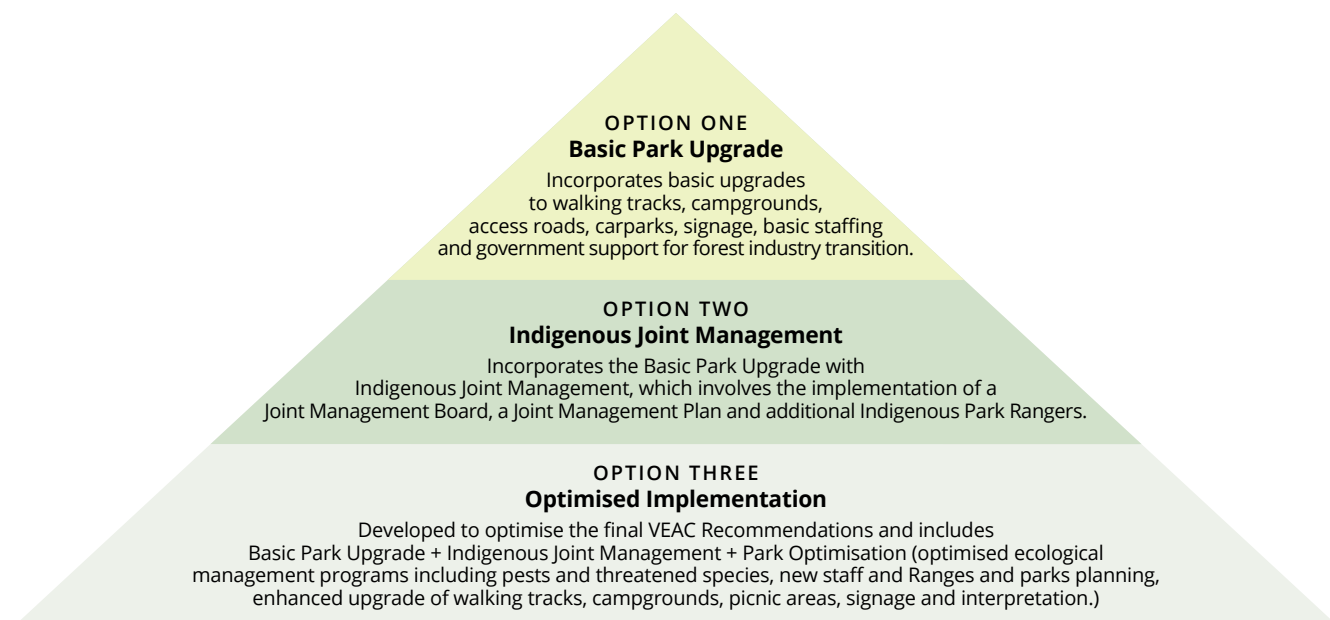
The *New Central Parks West Economic Assessment Report* shows investing in new national parks for Victoria's Central West will return up to four times the investment.

The report assessed the costs and benefits of adding almost 60,000 hectares of new national parks and conservation areas and nearly 20,000 hectares of regional parks in the Central West region, a close distance to Metropolitan Melbourne.

Three scenarios assessed all resulted in a net economic gain, with the cost

benefits ranging between 2.3:1 and 4.8:1 – that is, for every \$1 invested there is a potential return of of \$2.30 to \$4.80 at the societal level.

The report undertook a finer-scale economic analysis of the costs of implementation against three scenarios:



## Results of the New Central Parks West Economic Assessment

	Option 1 Basic Upgrade	Option 2 Indigenous Joint Management	Option 3 Optimised Implementation
<b>Initial Capital Cost</b>	\$8.1M (Real FY20)	\$9.4M (Real FY20)	\$16.8m (Real FY20)
<b>Ongoing Funding Requirement (Operating Costs) Per Annum</b>	\$1.6M pa (Real FY20)	\$3.5M pa (Real FY20)	\$5.1M pa (Real FY20)
<b>Ongoing Funding Requirement (Operating Costs) Present Value over 30 years at 7% discount rate</b>	\$21.6M	\$46.9M	\$68.7M
<b>Benefit Cost Ratio (BCR)</b>	4.8:1	3.2:1	2.3:1

Option three is our preferred scenario, implementing the greatest number of VEAC's recommendations, including Indigenous Joint Management and enhanced ecological management of the areas proposed as new parks and reserves.

This preferred Optimised Implementation model requires an initial investment of around \$16.8 million and ongoing funding of around \$5.1 million each year. Even with this higher investment model, it still delivers a cost benefit of 2.3:1 – that is, for every \$1 invested, there is a projected return of \$2.30 at the societal level.

This demonstrates the great opportunity to deliver both positive community and

nature conservation outcomes – with economic benefit to the state.

In addition to the strict economic case, the benefits of stored forest carbon in new protected areas were also calculated, based on Victorian Government data. If the analysis incorporated a modest carbon price of \$12/tonne (\$456 million) or \$16/tonne (\$608 million), it would significantly increase the cost benefit ratios and project viability. The results demonstrate the potential for forest carbon storage, but were not included in the final cost benefit analysis used in this study.

The Andrews Government has not created any large additions to our parks estate in its past two terms of government. New parks in the Central West tick all the boxes: environment, social and economic. What more reason do they want? For parks sake, get on with it. • PW

The full Economic Assessment can be downloaded from our website at [www.vnpa.org.au/new-central-west-parks-economic-assessment/](http://www.vnpa.org.au/new-central-west-parks-economic-assessment/)

This report was produced thanks to the generosity of supporters, including the Rendere Trust, The Ian Potter Foundation and Brian Snape AM.



# CENTRAL WEST FORESTS

How much do you know about the campaign to protect the central west forests in new national parks and conservation reserves?

- 1 Name a new national park that would be created if the state government accepts the Victorian Environment Assessment Council's (VEAC) Central West Investigation recommendations.
- 2 Name a river whose headwaters would be protected by new central west national parks.
- 3 The critically endangered Mount Cole Grevillea can be found:
  - a. all over Victoria, it's very common
  - b. on VicForests' 'do not disturb' list
  - c. in a vase on Daniel Andrews' desk
  - d. only at Mount Cole
- 4 The Andrews Government is now more than 12 months overdue on a decision to create the new central west parks. What is the reason they still have not made an announcement?
  - a. COVID-19
  - b. Bushfires
  - c. There has been no money allocated
  - d. It's stuck in the bottom drawer, and the drawer is jammed
- 5 The Wombat Forest is the westernmost range for which threatened arboreal mammal?
- 6 Approximately how many of Victoria's 100+ recognised threatened bird species could gain much-needed protection in the new central west national parks:
  - a. 10
  - b. 20
  - c. 30
  - d. 40
- 7 Which state forest near Bendigo would have increased protection if the new central west national parks are created?
- 8 Which of the following activities would you be able to do in the proposed new central west national parks?
  - a. bushwalking
  - b. camping
  - c. four-wheel driving and trail bike riding
  - d. mountain-bike riding

Turn to page 42 for answers.

Visit [www.vnpa.org.au/forparks](http://www.vnpa.org.au/forparks) for information on the campaign.





Many in the community are concerned about the destruction caused by feral deer. Tree guard in rainforest pocket in Monbulk Creek, Dandenong Ranges National Park.

# Must we live with the deer invasion?

**PHIL INGAMELLS** SAYS PROGRESS ON DEER CONTROL MIGHT BE AT HAND, BUT A BIT OF AMBITIOUS CO-ORDINATION WILL HELP.

With no one yet affecting lasting impact on the million or more deer ripping through Victoria's orchards, vineyards, rainforests and alpine systems, the necessary big steps in management are yet to manifest.

Quite a lot has happened on the deer management front over the last couple of years, and there's no shortage of enthusiastic people looking for co-operative control:

1. The Victorian Government now has a Deer Control Strategy, funded to the tune of \$18 million over four years. It was developed from an inadequate draft primarily put together by the Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions (which hosts the hunter-oriented Game Management Authority). The final, improved strategy was largely the product of our Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP), but it still has many shortcomings, not least that it still fails to list deer as a pest animal. Not only that, it handballs action to the development of three Regional Plans, of which the eastern Victoria and western Victoria plans aren't timed to start until a Melbourne peri-urban plan is finalised, hopefully by the end of 2021.
2. Parks Victoria has been running deer management trials, and building the occasional emergency deer fence, but real action has been short on the ground until ...
3. DELWP, together with Parks Victoria, has probably come up with the most effective action yet, aerially shooting deer and other pest animals over the fire-affected landscape of eastern Victoria. That has now gone into its second round.
4. In the meantime, a number of Melbourne eastern region Green Wedge councils have been running deer forums, and developed strategies, tools and incentives to help private landholders deal with deer.
5. Melbourne Water is developing a deer management plan for some of the closed catchments that protect Melbourne's water supply.

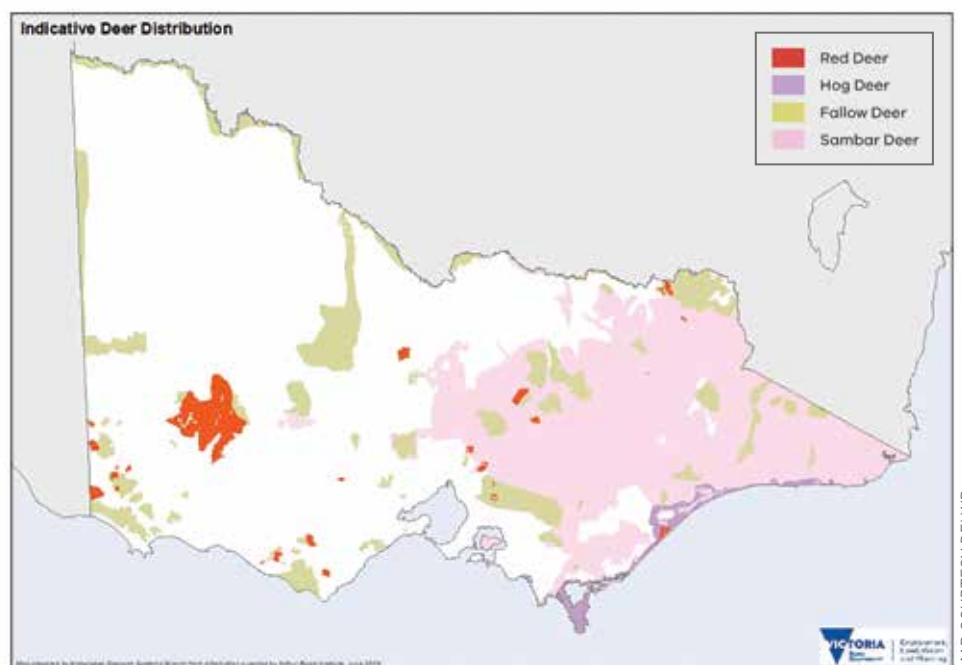


PHOTO: ALEX MAISE

6. The East Gippsland Conservation Management Network has set up a deer management program on private and public land around Lake Tyers, involving government agencies, amateur hunters, professional pest controllers and an Aboriginal community.
7. In frustration at inadequate Victorian Government co-ordination, a community-based group the Cardinia Deer Management Coalition has initiated a statewide Victorian Deer Control Network, potentially involving hundreds of organisations keen to control deer. Its operation will be facilitated by an officer engaged by the Invasive Species Council to work on the Victorian deer problem.
8. One bright hope for all of the above might be the new National Deer Management Coordinator, a recent appointment acting under the Centre for Invasive Species Solutions and funded by the federal and state governments. The position will lead the development of a National Feral Deer Action Plan – a noble but difficult task.

Clearly the call for action is broad and strong with the agricultural community, the conservation community, as well as local, state and federal governments all working on the problem. What's missing is the strategy that will actually pull these disparate actions together. That critical strategy will hopefully be the Victorian Government's three Regional Deer Plans, but they might be a couple of years away.


In the meantime, we still have to act. The rapidly increasing feral deer population is certainly not waiting. • PW



Estimated breeding distribution of deer (combined) in Victoria

MAP COURTESY DELWP





# What's that? The national environmental laws don't work?

WHO WOULD ASK THAT? ASKS EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR **MATT RUCHEL**.

"Ineffective", leading to "piecemeal decisions", "outdated", and "not fit to address current or future environmental challenges" – some of the damning findings of the review of our national environmental laws.

Professor Graeme Samuel's Final Report of the Independent Review of the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act) was released in late January 2021.

The report pushes an overhaul of national environmental laws – and at the centre of these reforms is the development of National Environmental Standards.

To help address the issue of duplication with state and territory development approval processes, the new National Environmental Standards are intended to set the boundaries for decision-making and deliver the protections needed for 'matters of national environmental

significance', such as threatened species.

National Environmental Standards will however only work as part of a reform package, and, as Samuel notes, will only work if there is a mandated and rigorous compliance and enforcement regime to ensure that decisions made are consistently and fairly enforced in accordance with the law. The report proposes the establishment of an Environment Assurance Commissioner and a new, beefed-up enforcement office within the federal environment department, as well as an improved role for Traditional Owners.

Thoughtfully, Samuel cautions that: "Governments should avoid the temptation to cherry-pick from a highly interconnected suite of recommendations". But to date, precisely that has already happened. The Morrison Government is continuing its moves to introduce new 'streamlining' legislation that aims to hand back environmental approval

powers from the Commonwealth to the states – all before the EPBC Act gets the reforms it needs, and the report recommends.

Like its predecessor (the Hawke Review, undertaken about a decade ago), the Samuel review is scathing of Regional Forest Agreements (RFAs) between the Commonwealth and states which allow the logging industry exemption from the EPBC Act. The Samuel review believes that the environmental considerations under the RFAs and associated legislation are weaker and do not align with the EPBC Act's assessment of 'matters of national environmental significance'. It is also noted that there is insufficient Commonwealth oversight of RFAs and the assurance and reporting mechanisms are weak. Who knew? This is a repeated point made by conservation groups such as VNPA for decades. (See most recent article from June 2020 *Park Watch* [www.vnpa.org.au/another-decade](http://www.vnpa.org.au/another-decade))

To end the special treatment of the logging industry, the report recommends





PHOTO: DEBBIE REYNOLDS

Endangered Hoary Sunray (*Leucochrysum albicans* subsp. *tricolor*) are one of many Victorian grassland flora species listed under the EPBC Act.

an increase in the level of environmental protection afforded in RFAs by way of the Commonwealth immediately requiring them to be consistent with the proposed National Environmental Standards and, during the second tranche of reforms, amending the EPBC Act to replace the RFA exemption.

Victoria's outdated RFAs were only recently renewed for another ten years, showing that there is often little appetite for fundamental change. Similar recommendations by the Hawke review a decade ago were ruled out almost immediately by the then federal Labor government.

The report also highlights that stakeholders are concerned that the Commonwealth does not deliver effective oversight of how system-level approaches that are exempt from the EPBC Act have been implemented, nor how they are delivering environmental outcomes. The report cites RFAs as an example

of this and Strategic Assessments as another. Concerns about the failure of the Melbourne Strategic Assessment are acknowledged in the report, including VNPA's specific submission on these issues as they relate to critically endangered grasslands threatened by development in Melbourne's urban growth area. (See [www.vnpa.org.au/renewed-rush-to-clear-the-way](http://www.vnpa.org.au/renewed-rush-to-clear-the-way) from September 2020 *Park Watch*.) The report notes that: "The use of a strategic assessment in some cases, for example for growth corridors of major cities, has been a work around rather than the most ideal planning tool". Canberra speak for 'it's not working and probably shouldn't have been used in the first place'.

However, while acknowledging the failing and legally complex nature of these exempt approaches, the report essentially recommends greater use of these types of tools, but with new conditions and modifications, including:

- Compliance with yet to be established National Environmental Standards and regional recovery plans (where they are in place).
- A new national biodiversity 'offset' policy to deliver offsets in a coordinated way across multiple regions.
- New regional scale "ecologically sustainable development plans", which appears to be a form of regional planning to underpin regulatory approvals, but which need to be consistent with the National Environmental Standards for matters of national environmental significance before being accredited under the EPBC Act.
- Amendments to the EPBC Act to clarify accountability and oversight of Strategic Assessments, particularly those like the Melbourne Strategic Assessment which are in place for many decades.

But if these tools are to have any chance of working, all the building blocks need to be put in place without key pieces getting left off due to the vagaries of the political process. The Samuel review points the way to reform, but if any of it is to have real impact, the reform would need to be significant; and there are few instances of this of late in the Australian Parliament. The environment is complex, and the environmental laws and policies that are set up to help make decisions often need to deal with unique ecosystems and how they interact with seemingly insatiable human visions for development – which is always a challenge for reform.

With a climate and extinction crisis in full swing and a global pandemic overshadowing our lives, perhaps some of the lessons of listening to science and appreciating the simpler things in community and nature might be learned and applied here.

The Morrison Government must hear what this review is saying and deliver the fundamental reform to our environmental laws that is required to protect our natural world as the challenges grow. • PW



# The future of our beautiful bay



THE GOVERNMENT DECISION ON THE FUTURE OF THE "WILD AND GENTLE BEAUTY" OF WESTERNPORT BAY IS IMMINENT, WRITES NATURE CONSERVATION CAMPAIGNER **SHANNON HURLEY**.

PHOTO: JJ HARRISON, WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

The critically endangered Far Eastern Curlew, a summer migrant to French Island National Park's internationally important Ramsar wetlands.

Last year ended with a mammoth effort by statewide and local organisations, groups, government agencies, councils and individuals to reveal the environmental and social impacts of AGL's planned gas import terminal at Crib Point.

One thing is clear – there is overwhelming community opposition to AGL proposal for Westernport Bay.

The Public Hearing from 12 October to 17 December was a crucial part of the process for the Victorian Government to consider and assess the project's environmental impacts through the Environmental Effects Statement (EES) process.

The community response was phenomenal. Hundreds of hours were spent reading and analysing reports, watching the livestream every day for ten weeks straight, working with barristers, preparing and presenting, and defending and arguing the science.

For many of us, Westernport Bay has strong emotional ties and connections that run deep. This was evident throughout the Public Hearing, with people pouring their hearts out online to whoever was watching about how much this special place means to them and their communities. A small snapshot of environmental, cultural and social concerns is reflected opposite.

Over 6,000 submissions were received prior to the Public Hearing – an incredible effort – in which the vast majority were against the project going ahead.

Many of you also generously donated to the campaign – your support made a real difference. We commend everyone that showed their dedication to protecting their Westernport Bay.

Read more about VNPA's involvement and findings from the EES in our last *Park Watch*: [www.vnpa.org.au/speaking-out-forwesternports-wildlife](http://www.vnpa.org.au/speaking-out-forwesternports-wildlife)

Now that the full range of the project's risks have been brought to the foreground and the strength of community opposition displayed, it is almost time for our state and federal governments to make their decision.

Will they favour the community, whose overwhelming opposition to the project emphatically demonstrates we don't want the project? Or gas giant AGL, who do not have failed to properly identify a decent rationale for the need for the project in the first place? A gas import terminal has already been approved in NSW's Port Kembla which will be able to sufficiently meet the needs of Victoria in the instance of a gas shortfall through the national gas grid.

The coming month will be critical. At the end of February, the Inquiry and Advisory Committee (IAC)



that oversaw the Public Hearing submitted their final report with recommendations to the Victorian Planning Minister, Richard Wynne. The Minister has 25 business days to make his assessment on the environmental effects of the project (by around 26 March).

It is unclear which way the Victorian Government will go, and there are a number of other approvals and decisions also to be made at the state level. On 8 February, the Victorian Liberal opposition came out very vocally against the project in an announcement made at Crib Point Jetty by Neale Burgess, State Member for Hastings, and Ryan Smith, the Shadow Minister for Energy and Renewables. Although they oppose AGL's project for Crib Point, they seemingly still support gas extraction within Victoria rather than gas being imported from other states.

Let's hope their national counterpart, the Scott Morrison-lead Coalition, also follows suit when the project comes across the desk of the Federal Environment Minister Sussan Ley. This is likely to take place sometime in May, after the Victorian Government's decision.

Independent and expert analysis clearly shows this project poses widespread and irreversible damage to the entire marine and coastal ecosystems of Westernport Bay. It's simply far too great a risk.

We urge the state and federal governments to reject this project due to AGL's failure to properly identify and mitigate the risks to this highly-sensitive and valued ecosystem. • PW

### TAKE ACTION

Urge the Victorian Planning Minister and Federal Environment Minister to reject AGL's gas import terminal at Crib Point. Take action by visiting [www.vnpa.org.au/protectwesternport](http://www.vnpa.org.au/protectwesternport)

## Words from the community

"Westernport, within Bunurong Country, is quietly celebrated by those who love it, for its wild and gentle beauty.

The Coastal wetlands of Warr'nMarrin, its gnarled banksias and tidal mangroves sustain an abundance of wildlife, as fascinating and mysterious as the distant vista of Seal Rocks disappearing among the wilds of Bass Strait.

Migratory birds feeding on its mudflats signify the presence of a multitude of species. Somehow, it's possible to forget the declining port operations, now locally regarded as a symbol of past misuse, within Westernport's North East Arm.

AGL's destructive, unnecessary plans to transport and process LNG within this cherished Ramsar wetland have inspired a fierce resistance, and growing appreciation of Westernport's fragile resilience.

Local efforts to understand the Bay's priceless ecology, and contribute to its long-term conservation featured strongly in countless heartfelt presentations to the EES panel hearing, confirming the expectation that the precautionary principle within Victoria's environmental protection laws must see AGL's project rejected."

**Julia Stockigt, Save Westernport**

"Despite having two years to prepare, the primary data offered within the EES Social Impact Assessment is confined to just four interviews with local organisations. From a social research perspective, this is ludicrous; it demonstrates a blatant lack of respect for both the communities concerned and government requirements. It makes spurious conclusions demonstrating a lack of integrity regarding research evidence and its representation. A telling example of questionable representation is the title of the EES, 'Gas Import Jetty and Pipeline Project', whereas in reality, the proposal is not for a jetty, but rather a massive heavy industrial Liquid Natural Gas (LNG) plant."

**Bill Genat, Friends of Shoreham Foreshore**

"Crib Point residents are very concerned about AGL's safety and moral track record, which is horrendous. They have accrued approximately \$7 million in fines and penalties for misleading and pollutive behaviour over the last 20 years (Save Westernport, 2020) AGL even freely admits to their bad safety and moral culture when they say in an attachment in their documentation to the EES:

*"AGL understands the community concern about past behaviour. We need to do better ... In relation to the Project, AGL is not expecting the community to trust us and we recognise the community can't simply take our word that safety and environmental risks will be well managed."*

Members of the Crib Point community say, 'that is right AGL, with your record, we do not trust your project for Westernport.' Over the last 18 years, you have proven to us that a leopard cannot change its spots."

**Rod Knowles, Crib Point resident and retired career firefighter**

*Continued overleaf*



*Continued from previous page*

"The Westernport and Peninsula Protection Council's task was to assess and highlight terrestrial and freshwater issues. We worked hard, the four of us spending 580 hours over 22 weeks: Karri Giles, Sandy Milne and Gidja Walker and the expert witness that we engaged; Dr Mary Cole, a fungus expert, who reported on threats to frogs and vegetation from amphibious fungus and cinnamon fungus. In addition, we had two great barristers, James Kewley and Kieran Hickie.

As the pipeline footprint is proposed to be 30 metres wide from Crib Point to Pakenham, it is approximately 171 hectares. Running along the coast, then through a rural area, it takes in a variety of habitats. There are 42 FFG and EPBC Act listed species within 200 metres of the pipeline. This was a big task, and as government scientists had not been asked to present on terrestrial issues, the pressure was on.

We all relished working in a large coalition of environment groups. However, it was difficult to visit the area due to lockdown and lack of access on private property. It was highly concerning to hear of the treatment suffered by landholders in the pipeline path that we met, and witness their resulting stress. Most of all, it is awful to imagine diggers and bulldozers, killing plants and animals, working in 90-metre work sections, spreading pathogens and activating acid sulphate soil. We remain strongly opposed to this proposal."

**Karri Giles, Westernport and Peninsula Protection Council**

"Phillip Island Conservation Society opposes the Crib Point gas import proposal on environmental, economic, and social grounds.

The Phillip Island and San Remo region is the second-most tourism-dependent economy in Australia. Much of this economy is reliant on nature-based attractions, the amenity of Western Port, and its ecological health. Species such as the Little Penguin, Australian Fur Seal, Short-tailed Shearwater, Southern Right Whale, and Humpback Whale are woven into the fabric of our community.

The widely held community vision is one of biodiversity conservation and sustainable development, including a rapid transition to a carbon-neutral economy, and the local visitor economy strategy is based around preserving and enhancing natural assets. Simply put, our environment is our economy.

The Crib Point gas import proposal represents a major intensification of pressure on Western Port – a 40 per cent increase in shipping, and the addition of a permanently moored, continuously operating, heavily lit, noisy, major hazard facility that entrains marine life and discharges chlorinated wastewater of altered temperature on an industrial scale. It should not be allowed to proceed in this internationally significant Ramsar wetland because there are significant uncertainties and risks of unacceptable ecological damage that cannot be adequately mitigated.

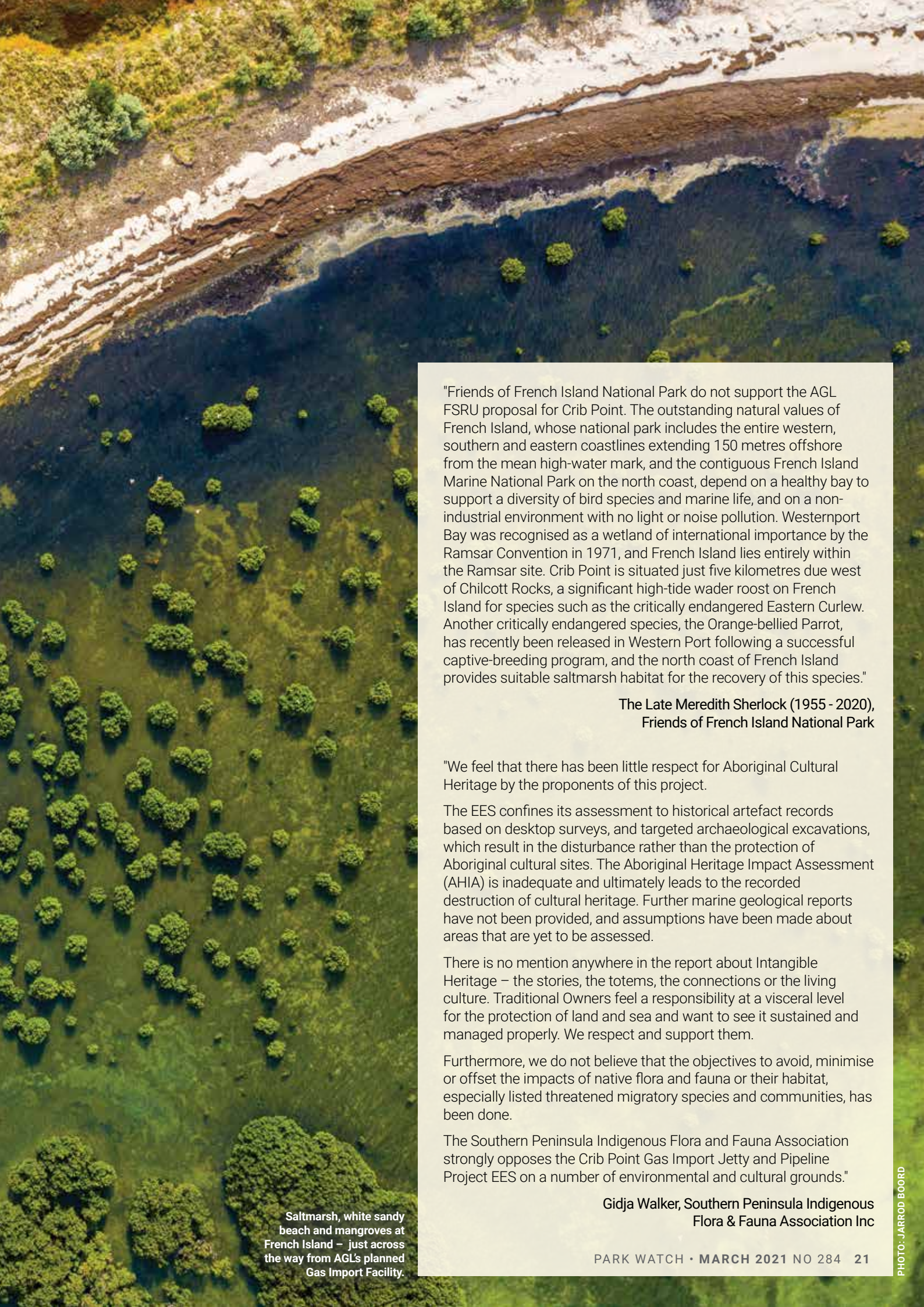
Of greatest concern are toxic spills of diesel and fire foam, introduction of marine pests, entrainment and destruction of fish eggs, light interference for short-tailed shearwaters and other birds, vessel strikes on whales, and underwater noise.

Like other communities around Western Port, Phillip Islanders are feeling a painful anxiety at the prospect of Western Port's ecosystem being sacrificed for use as a gas import factory."

**Phillip Island Conservation Society**







"Friends of French Island National Park do not support the AGL FSRU proposal for Crib Point. The outstanding natural values of French Island, whose national park includes the entire western, southern and eastern coastlines extending 150 metres offshore from the mean high-water mark, and the contiguous French Island Marine National Park on the north coast, depend on a healthy bay to support a diversity of bird species and marine life, and on a non-industrial environment with no light or noise pollution. Westernport Bay was recognised as a wetland of international importance by the Ramsar Convention in 1971, and French Island lies entirely within the Ramsar site. Crib Point is situated just five kilometres due west of Chilcott Rocks, a significant high-tide wader roost on French Island for species such as the critically endangered Eastern Curlew. Another critically endangered species, the Orange-bellied Parrot, has recently been released in Western Port following a successful captive-breeding program, and the north coast of French Island provides suitable saltmarsh habitat for the recovery of this species."

**The Late Meredith Sherlock (1955 - 2020),  
Friends of French Island National Park**

"We feel that there has been little respect for Aboriginal Cultural Heritage by the proponents of this project.

The EES confines its assessment to historical artefact records based on desktop surveys, and targeted archaeological excavations, which result in the disturbance rather than the protection of Aboriginal cultural sites. The Aboriginal Heritage Impact Assessment (AHIA) is inadequate and ultimately leads to the recorded destruction of cultural heritage. Further marine geological reports have not been provided, and assumptions have been made about areas that are yet to be assessed.

There is no mention anywhere in the report about Intangible Heritage – the stories, the totems, the connections or the living culture. Traditional Owners feel a responsibility at a visceral level for the protection of land and sea and want to see it sustained and managed properly. We respect and support them.

Furthermore, we do not believe that the objectives to avoid, minimise or offset the impacts of native flora and fauna or their habitat, especially listed threatened migratory species and communities, has been done.

The Southern Peninsula Indigenous Flora and Fauna Association strongly opposes the Crib Point Gas Import Jetty and Pipeline Project EES on a number of environmental and cultural grounds."

**Gidja Walker, Southern Peninsula Indigenous  
Flora & Fauna Association Inc**

Saltmarsh, white sandy  
beach and mangroves at  
French Island – just across  
the way from AGL's planned  
Gas Import Facility.



# Who is Grampians (Gariwerd) National Park there for?



PARKS PROTECTION CAMPAIGNER **PHIL INGAMELLS** TAKES A LOOK AT THE GREATER GARIWERD LANDSCAPE DRAFT MANAGEMENT PLAN.

After a bizarre group of bare-chested neo-Nazis stormed Grampians (Gariwerd) National Park in January, burning a cross and waving supremacist symbols atop the landscape, it might be time to take a deep breath and consider, coolly, whose park it actually is – and why we manage it.

Grampians (Gariwerd) National Park is public land, but that requires a bit of clarification. There are many categories of public land established under various old or new laws, and though the “public” might own these areas, activities on that land are commonly restricted.

The hallowed Melbourne Cricket Ground is public land, for example, but you and I can’t plant potatoes there.

The native plants and animals of Grampians (Gariwerd) National Park, as for all of Victoria’s national and state parks, are given prime protection status in Victoria’s *National Parks Act* (1975). Any other activity in the parks

must surrender to that level of natural heritage protection. In that sense, the law states that a national park pretty much belongs to that remarkable multitude of life forms or, at least, that their occupancy and welfare must be guaranteed.

But we should take a step back in time.

In a recent article in *The Age*, vigilant historian Henry Reynolds pointed out that in 1788, when the first fleet of soldiers and convicts enthusiastically assumed the Great South Land was unoccupied (the infamous and discredited ‘terra nullius’ call), they were acting contrary to the laws, the policies, and indeed the instructions of the British government of the day.

It was an almighty legal and ethical stuff-up, and it will reverberate through our parliamentary corridors and social consciences for a long time.

That act of dispossession brought about many wrong things, driven by

a general lack of respect shown to Aboriginal people over the last 230 years. As people without property they were deprived of rights, influence and authority.

The current Victorian Government has been in the process of redressing this situation, and that process is accelerating; Victoria may soon be the first Australian state to reach a treaty with our first peoples. But in advance of that, the government has set up the *Traditional Owner Settlement Act 2010* (TOS Act), a far simpler process of awarding Native Title than the federal government’s cumbersome and costly High Court process.

So far, recognition under the TOS Act has established joint management over many national and state parks (and a number of smaller reserves), while still honouring the over-riding objectives of the National Parks Act and other Acts involved.

For some reason though, the TOS Act hasn’t awarded native title over





Jacky Lizard

Red Parrot Pea

PHOTO: PARKS VICTORIA

PHOTO: PHIL INGAMIELLS

PHOTO: PHIL INGAMIELLS

any substantial area of state forest in Victoria, and never over an area earmarked for the extraction of timber. But that's a story for another day...

With a management plan for Grampians (Gariwerd) National Park well overdue, Parks Victoria faced a bit of a dilemma: Traditional Owner status has not been legally established, but almost certainly will be during the life of the new plan.

Parks Victoria has (consistent with government policy to work with Aboriginal communities regardless of legal status) engaged strongly with three local Aboriginal organisations in the process of drawing up a draft plan for Grampians (Gariwerd) National Park, nearby Black Range State Park, and a number of smaller reserves they manage: the "Greater Gariwerd Landscape".

Those communities have put forward strong views on a number of issues, including increased protection for

flora and fauna, more traditional fire management, avoiding light pollution of the night sky, and the restitution of Aboriginal place names.

But the most contentious issue is a re-assessment of the impacts of rock climbing and bouldering on the extensive rock art sites and other culturally significant places.

Largely through a lack of activity management by Parks Victoria in recent times, rock climbing has expanded beyond control. And, a bit like the claims of the cattlemen of the high country, some climbers have asserted an imagined right to traditional access.

These claims are not new: tourism developers have long voiced a right of access to parks and, indeed, bushwalkers and other park users make similar claims. We all want our slice of these wonderful areas.

Our National Parks Act has created a vehicle for resolving conflict: comprehensive park plans that ensure the objectives of the Act are met.

The draft Greater Gariwerd Landscape management plan Parks Victoria has produced is promising; it's thoughtful, thorough, and based on good research and wide public consultation.

However, VNPA has asked Parks Victoria to strengthen some aspects of the plan, especially where issues of 'balance' or 'compromise' turn up. The National Parks Act doesn't allow compromise; it asks for visitor access that is supportive of and consistent with long-term protection of all native species in the park.

As with any other law in Victoria, the Act must be respected and followed.

In Parks Victoria's own words, the proposal for the now half-constructed Grampians Peaks Trail just "emerged" during the life of the previous plan. Proposals contrary to a legally required management plan should never just "emerge"; if they are to proceed at all, they should go through an additional transparent planning process including full public consultation.

We know how much support the thousands of native plants and animals that live in the ancient uplifted sandstone slopes of Gariwerd will need if their remarkable 500-million-year-old evolutionary path is to continue.

They will be facing increased frequency and severity of fire, among other challenging weather events under climate change, and there will be new species of invasive pest plants, animals and pathogens to deal with.

We might all have to do a bit of listening and learning. And those of us who aren't Aboriginal might have to admit that, for all of the remarkable work ecologists, conservation activists and land managers have done over the years, we still don't have all the answers.

There is a task ahead of us. And a strong partnership with people who can lay claim to a virtually timeless association with these wonderful hills might just be a good way to steer management on the right path.

But we must have a plan that will serve the park well – and a plan that we stick to! • PW



A photograph of two wallabies in a rocky, natural environment. One wallaby is in the foreground, sitting upright and looking directly at the camera. It has greyish-brown fur with darker patches. Another wallaby is in the background, slightly out of focus, also sitting on a rock. The rocks are light-colored and weathered.

# Victoria needs leadership for biodiversity

PROPER MANAGEMENT OF BIODIVERSITY REQUIRES STRONG SCIENCE LEADERSHIP, SAYS NATURE CONSERVATION CAMPAIGNER **JOHN KOTSIARIS**.

Over the last twelve months, Victorians have heard a lot of talk from the state government in the context of COVID-19 on the importance of science-based decision making. But in reality, there is much picking and choosing going on – especially when it comes to the environment.

Victoria is the most cleared state in Australia and now has over 2000 recognised threatened species, of which around 85 per cent are

endangered or critically endangered. The need for well-resourced and coordinated monitoring and research for informed conservation action is paramount for the future of our state's biodiversity.

Fundamentally, proper management of biodiversity requires a proper understanding of how species are faring in response to the numerous threatening processes impacting them. This requires strong science leadership.

To facilitate ecologically sustainable development, the *Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability Act 2003* established Victoria's first Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability to report on the condition of our state's natural environment and encourage informed decision making.

The Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability's *State of the Environment 2018 Report* found that most biodiversity indicators are poor





PHOTO: PENJASH, PIXABAY

Critically endangered Brush-tailed Rock-wallabies need informed conservation action.

and trending downwards, and only one, private land conservation, was trending up. However, what was also found is that the data and science available to answer important questions about the condition and extent of biodiversity in Victoria is inadequate. Of the 52 biodiversity-related indicators across all chapters of the report, 29 per cent were assessed as low performing, and 40 per cent had poor quality data.

One of the core recommendations from the 2018 report was to

“streamline the governance and coordination of investment in the science and data capability of all government biodiversity programs” and to appoint a “Chief Biodiversity Scientist to oversee this coordinated effort”.

During the December 2020 hearings of the current Parliamentary Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline, the Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability, Dr Gillian Sparkes, reiterated her Chief Biodiversity Scientist recommendation and emphasized that Victoria needs science leadership across the biodiversity portfolio. Despite this, a week later the Andrews Government publicly released a response to the *State of the Environment 2018 Report* where it supported the recommendation only “in part”.

While the response acknowledged that “the lack of alignment across DELWP and its portfolio agencies in dealing with biodiversity data and science” is “the fundamental problem”, the government stopped short of committing to establish the position of a Chief Biodiversity Scientist to help deal with the issue.

Instead, the government opted to achieve the intent of the Chief Biodiversity Scientist’s recommendation through a mix of new and existing structures and initiatives within DELWP, and made a commitment to review and evaluate the implementation of this approach within 12 months of the establishment of a Science Reference Panel (a non-statutory departmental advisory panel) to inform future implementation.

In other words, the recommendation has been kicked down the road; which

is unfortunate because the need for science leadership is stark when considering, for example, Victoria’s fire management practices and fuel reduction burn program.

In 2020 the Victorian Auditor-General found that: “With the exception of some isolated case studies, DELWP does not know the effects of its burns on native flora and fauna.” To make matters worse, the same modelling program that is used to plan burns is also then used to assess whether burns were effective; without on-ground assessment of the actual effectiveness, over time, of fuel reduction burns in different vegetation types. This can then result in undetected perverse outcomes such as significant impacts on threatened species, and changes in vegetation composition and structure, including a promotion of the growth of grasses and other fire-loving plants that can increase fire risk and facilitate the spread of wildfire.

The appointment of a Chief Biodiversity Scientist within DELWP could offer plenty of benefits and opportunities. We can only speculate at the seemingly bureaucratic resistance to the idea; perhaps it ruffled a few feathers. But with Victoria now clocking over 100 threatened species of birds, it’s not departmental and political feathers that Victorians are concerned about.

The thoughtful recommendation by an independent agency whose job is to improve our environmental systems and information should be taken very seriously. It’s not too late to establish real science leadership for biodiversity in Victoria. We have very little to lose if we do – but a highly diverse and cherished natural heritage to lose if we don’t. • PW





# The track and the stonefly

PHOTO: EERIK SANDSTROM, UNSPLASH

**JORDAN CROOK** EXPLAINS HOW POORLY PLANNED MOUNTAIN BIKE TRACKS RISK THE SURVIVAL OF AN EXCEPTIONALLY RARE SPECIES.

From the outset, it needs to be stated clearly that VNPA supports mountain bike riding on public land when and where it is planned in an ecologically and culturally sensitive and respectful way.

This means illegally built tracks should be removed and damaged areas restored. Any new tracks should be planned to avoid areas of high conservation value, threatened species habitat, and areas of cultural importance for First Nations people.

Many of these ecological and culturally important sites are not obviously visible to most people. This alone shows the importance of including local Friends and volunteer groups, Traditional Owners and local land managers when planning new mountain bike tracks.

When planned properly and managed effectively, mountain bike riding can be a lower impact activity in natural areas.

There are plans for a 'Warburton Mountain Bike Destination' project that includes 44 trails spanning 186 kilometres. In their current form, these mountain bike tracks, particularly the Trail 1/Drop-a-K, cannot be supported by the VNPA due to the significant risk posed to nature.

## Impacts on the Yarra Ranges National Park

A very large section of the planned 'Warburton Mountain Bike Destination' project is within the Yarra Ranges National Park.

Land designated as national park under the *National Parks Act 1975* is required to have Management Plans as a strategic framework that governs the development and delivery of all management programs and actions within the national park, consistent with the objectives of the Act.

The Yarra Ranges National Park is also assigned the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Category II (National Parks): the United Nations List of National Parks and Protected Areas. Category II areas are managed primarily for ecosystem conservation and appropriate recreation. The Yarra Ranges National Park is also recognised as a site of national and state zoological and botanical significance, as it contains a high number of rare and threatened flora, fauna and vegetation types, including extensive, undisturbed areas of Cool Temperate Rainforest and Wet (Mountain Ash) Forest, old-growth forests, threatened Leadbeater's Possum, and critically endangered Mount Donna Buang Wingless Stonefly.

The mountain bike tracks in their current proposed form will impact heavily on the national park's values and threatened species habitat the area was protected for.



## Impacts on Cool Temperate Rainforest

There are 2.5 kilometres of proposed mountain bike track planned to go through the ancient Cool Temperate Rainforest.

The construction of any track through and/or adjacent to Cool Temperate Rainforest further compromises this vegetation community listed as threatened under the *Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988* (FFG Act).

New tracks in areas that have been previously undisturbed will cause significant damage to the dominant Myrtle Beech trees from “lopping” of branches during track construction and wounding of roots and trunks. New tracks will also increase the possibility of the tree-killing fungus Myrtle Wilt entering into these ecosystems.

We believe this is contrary to the specified protections for Cool Temperate Rainforest required by the FFG Act listing.

## Impacts on large, old trees and habitat

New tracks in previously undisturbed areas will also impact on large, old and hollow baring trees, which will then have subsequent impact on hollow-dependent wildlife species such as the threatened Leadbeater's Possum, due to declined tree health and habitat structure.

Many of the tree species within the area of the proposed tracks including Mountain Ash, Alpine Ash, and Snow Gum are highly susceptible to soil compaction, root damage, and changes in hydrology.

The spread of the tree killing pathogen Cinnamon Fungus (*Phytophthora cinnamomi*) is also highly concerning, and not adequately addressed by the proposal.

Tracks should be realigned outside of any Leadbeater's Possum habitat and one kilometres away from known nesting sites. They should also be located outside of the Structural Root Zone and Tree Protection Zone of hollow baring trees both alive and dead or trees with a two metre plus diameter at breast height (DBH).

## Mount Donna Buang Wingless Stonefly

The proposed Trail 1/Drop-a-K will directly dissect Mount Donna Buang Wingless Stonefly habitat.

This exceptionally rare species is found only within its 1-3 square kilometre home range on the summit of Mount Donna Buang within the Yarra Ranges National Park. It has recently been reassessed as critically endangered under the FFG Act.

Its tiny home range makes it highly susceptible to changes in its habitat structure and function, local hydrology,

as well as pollution. What can be seen as a once off event could lead to sustained and rapid decline in the species.

Mount Donna Buang Wingless Stonefly is one of the two species of wingless stoneflies found in Australia and this unique and unusual insect is of great interest to science and our understanding of invertebrates.

The survival of this species is at real risk from the 'Warburton Mountain Bike Destination' proposal in its current state, adding to the pressures it is already under from climate change, road run-off and invasive species.

All this does not mean there should be no mountain bike tracks in the area, but that these tracks should be better planned away from these high conservation-value areas.

The term balance is often thrown around during conversations and debates about the conservation of natural areas and threatened species habitat.

There is 350,000 hectares of public land outside of the protected areas that could instead be considered for new mountain bike tracks; rather than the relatively small (only 170,000 hectares) national parks estate preserved and cherished by the Victorian people for the conservation of native flora and fauna and the natural environment. • PW

Warburton and the mountain bike tracks are on the land of the Wurundjeri people, of the Kulin Nation.

The undisturbed Cool Temperate Rainforest of Mount Donna Buang.







# Saving Feathertop

VICTORIA'S FINEST WILD MOUNTAIN SHOULD NOT FALL PREY TO DEVELOPMENT. HERE'S WHY, FROM PHIL INGAMELLS.

PHOTO: ED DUNENS, WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

When Bogong National Park was proclaimed in 1981, the park boundary was carefully drawn to exclude the Falls Creek and Hotham alpine resorts. This would contain new buildings and infrastructure within the resort areas, and leave the new national park free of pressure from commercial developments.

Less than a decade later, Bogong National Park was absorbed into Victoria's new Alpine National Park, but the resorts and their propensity for ever-expanding visitor infrastructure remained excluded. Since 1981 there has been no significant built accommodation allowed in the area of our Alpine National Park.

But Victoria's tourism moguls, keen to emulate a few spectacular accommodated walks in New Zealand and elsewhere, proposed four "icon" walks for our state. One is a walk already popular with fit hikers: the Falls Creek to Mount Hotham track.

That tourism-generated dream has morphed into a 56-kilometre, five-day hike, much of it on newly created tracks with overnight lodges, bedroom cabins and camping options at Cope Hut, Tawonga Huts, Diamantina River and Diamantina Spur, all to be serviced by tourism operators.

This 'Falls to Hotham Alpine Crossing proposal' should not go ahead, at least not in its present form:

- Of the 229 written responses to the draft "Master Plan", nearly 90 per cent were strongly opposed, largely because of the hut and lodge construction. This response has been ignored, indeed publicly misrepresented, by Parks Victoria.

- Alpine ecologists are concerned about the extensive new track construction: any new tracks in the park will increase the spread of problem weeds.
- The lodges and huts would be located at long-standing popular bushwalker camping areas.
- There is already ample luxury accommodation (under-occupied in summer!) in the Falls Creek and Hotham resorts. The so-called "comfort in nature" tourist is already well catered for in the area.
- The proposal has now been partially funded, with \$15 million allocated in the last State Budget, and planning is proceeding fast. But there has been no proper environmental impact study, and no business case has been prepared despite the effusive claims of economic benefits. Both of these studies should be standard procedure early in the process for any development proposal, let alone one inside one of Victoria's most important national parks.

The most contentious part of the proposal is the route up Diamantina Spur with a lodge and huts near the summit of Mount Feathertop.

- The Diamantina track is very steep and long, and frankly dangerous even for fit and experienced bushwalkers. The weather, even in mid-summer, can bring snow storms and white-outs. It is not at all suitable for inexperienced walkers attracted by an advertised high-country luxury walk.
- The accommodation would have to be serviced daily by helicopters from Hotham. Such a high carbon-

emitting service is contrary to government climate mitigation policy, and sends the wrong message in a national park already suffering under climate change. It would also considerably disturb the natural ambience of Feathertop and the High Plains, the very thing that brings visitors to the park.

Mount Feathertop, at 1922 metres, is one of Victoria's highest mountains and our grandest free-standing peak. It is a truly magnificent feature of Victoria's alpine country and deserves rigorous protection. It should be respected, not exploited.

Importantly, the Victorian Government has recently confirmed that: "It is still government policy that tourism development will be encouraged to be sited on private or other public land outside national parks".

This sensible policy, increasingly adopted by park agencies world-wide, should be governing tourism planning in the Alpine National Park. It beggars belief that the government is actually funding the developments for the Falls to Hotham Alpine Crossing.

A far better option would be to promote an extensive array of alpine day walks in the park, starting from the already available accommodation in the two adjacent alpine resorts. It would be much cheaper and easier to set up and far more sound environmentally, socially and economically.

It's not too late to bury this overly enthusiastic but ill-conceived proposal. We could then concentrate on the real problems facing the park, rather than creating new ones. • PW



# The Prom at a crossroads

Much is planned for Wilson's Promontory National Park in the next year or so. Some of it is very good, but some is a worry.

The best part is the decision to build a predator-proof fence across the entrance, and then invest in managing feral animals so that rare or long-absent Prom residents like ground parrots, quolls and Eastern Bristle Birds can be reintroduced. This fence, the essential first step in the Prom Sanctuary proposal, is now funded.

The worrying part is a number of proposals for a considerable expansion of parking at the Prom. The current management plan sets the car limit at 800 vehicles a day, but that has been quadrupled recently in peak times. The management plan recognises the growing traffic problem, but said increasing car numbers would potentially "degrade environmental values and threaten the visitor experience", adding that "it is neither desirable nor feasible to increase the limit".

We are particularly concerned that new large parking areas are being proposed as the simplest solution, without the consultation normally applying when management plans are over-ridden. The plan did put forward better options, including a shuttle bus service from the entrance station to Tidal River.

The Prom needs a proper traffic and visitor management strategy, one that aims at maintaining a healthy park and great visitor experience in 30 years' time.

We will have more information in the next edition of *Park Watch*. • PW

PHOTO: PHIL WHITEHOUSE, FLICKR CC

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Victorian National Parks Association  
Level 3, 60 Leicester St Carlton VIC 3053  
03 9341 6501 | [emily@vnpa.org.au](mailto:emily@vnpa.org.au)  
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# Failing our wildlife

THE *WILDLIFE ACT 1975* NEEDS URGENT MODERNISATION, WRITES **DR BRUCE LINDSAY** OF ENVIRONMENT JUSTICE AUSTRALIA AND **NICOLA BEYNON** OF HUMANE SOCIETY INTERNATIONAL.



PHOTOL JJ HARRISON, WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

The killing of hundreds of Wedge-Tailed Eagles exposed shortcomings in the Wildlife Act.

In early 2020 the Victorian Environment Minister Lily D'Ambrosio announced a review of Victoria's *Wildlife Act 1975*. The announcement occurred in the wake of egregious instances of unlawful killing of native wildlife, for which penalties turned out to be weak or unavailable. In particular, a sustained campaign by a Gippsland landowner to poison hundreds of Wedge-Tailed Eagles exposed shortcomings in the Act, contributing to the decision to embark on this review. Additionally, in recent years the killing of koalas in logging operations, shooting wombats for sport by wealthy tourists, and the ongoing controversy over duck shooting each illustrate problems with and limitations of the current law.

The *Wildlife Act 1975* is the current law principally, but not exclusively, charged with the governance and regulation of wildlife in Victoria. Its remit extends to native wildlife, but with important exceptions, to which we will return. The 1975 Act has been amended multiple times since in enactment. However, it was the

product of earlier laws directed to managing hunting of native species as 'game'. Overlaid on that premise are purposes concerned with the conservation of wildlife, means to enable that conservation such as the establishment of wildlife reserves, and regulation of trade in and keeping wildlife. The law also includes specific protections for conservation of whales and seals.

The origins of the law in the regulation of hunting of native wildlife influence the contemporary Acts regulatory focus, albeit not solely in connection with hunting but also with other forms of 'take' (disturbance, killing or destruction of wildlife). Circumstances considered for permitted 'take' can include habitat disturbance, killing of species where inconvenient or a nuisance (or purported nuisance) to activities such as agriculture, scientific investigations, as well as commercial or recreational hunting.

'Take' or hunting of protected wildlife without permission under the Act is

prohibited and an offence. 'Protected' wildlife includes wildlife not otherwise declared to be 'unprotected' or that is an identified pest species. The protective scheme of the Act extends to all native wildlife in the wild, aside from these exceptions. Certain non-native species are also treated as 'wildlife', such as deer, a provision largely intended to enable and regulate hunting of these species.

Various regulatory instruments are available under the Act in order to permit lawful hunting or 'take' of wildlife, including licences and authorisations to do so. These tools also enable trade in, keeping and handling native wildlife. The bigger concern, highlighted in the recent *Failing Our Wildlife* report published by Environmental Justice Australia and the Humane Society International, is the extent of destruction of native wildlife. This large-scale permission of native wildlife destruction occurs alongside important anomalies, such as protection of certain invasive species under the Act as 'game' species, notably deer, whose



populations are effectively protected and enabled to grow despite immense damage they do to native ecosystems and flora.

All of the above issues compound an unclear legal and policy basis for wildlife protection in Victoria.

In 2019, 3441 'Authorities to Control Wildlife' (ATCWs) (in effect, authorisations for culling) were issued permitting destruction or harm to 185,286 native animals. This included 966 Emus; 3,655 wombats; 3,152 Ravens; 6,919 Little Corellas; 4,570 Sulphur-crested Cockatoos, 77,300 kangaroos (on top of a commercial quota), as well as 6,604 Grey-headed Flying Foxes, which are a threatened species.

On top of that toll, the law also enables the making of what are termed 'unprotection orders', which remove legal protection for specific species set out in the order. Those species presently subject to this type of exception include Brush-tailed Possums, Dingoes, Long-billed Corellas, and Galahs. An 'unprotection order' covered wombats until that exception was recently removed after controversy concerning a property owner using that 'loophole' to invite wealthy tourists to shoot wombats. Regardless of that change, the killing of wombats can still be authorised by ATCWs.

The Act also regulates and institutionalises the destruction of large numbers of native wildlife annually through lawful hunting, such as duck hunting.

So, in short, a key focus of the Act currently is lawfully enabling and regulating the destruction of native wildlife at a substantial scale. While landholders will defend their right to seek permission to destroy native wildlife on their properties, the present legislative regime contains very little that requires clear and accountable justification for destruction of native fauna, nor requirements to use alternative humane measures to protect crops and livestock. As we note in the *Failing Our Wildlife* report, review and reform of the Act will need to consider far greater transparency of decision-making, ensure it is informed by science, and adopt contemporary regulatory measures such as independent oversight and enforcement and effective sanction.

Additionally, the law establishes little in the way of an underpinning, robust framework for the management of Victoria's native fauna – whether permitted destruction of native fauna is part of that management or not. That is to say; there is little in the way of underpinning theory, policy or rationale to the Act, other than perhaps the process itself of notionally protecting native species and, alongside hunting, regulating destruction or 'take'. While the Act includes conservation in its purposes, it appears minimally informed by a theory and policy for the conservation of native wildlife. For example, there is no consideration in the scheme of an ecosystem approach to native wildlife conservation. Indeed, we would suggest the policy and premises of

the Act need to go further and set out a scheme for the protection and recovery of native wildlife, including populations, habitats and ecosystems. As the report states:

"Our wildlife is in the gun-sights of rapidly accumulating extinction and climate crises. Our laws are hindering and enabling the problem, not confronting it or overcoming it. Generally, the Victorian Wildlife Act is outdated, not driven by clear policy or science, and its administration is mired more in obscurity than good governance".

The purpose of wildlife legislation should be to protect our native fauna, not sanction its decline. Australia is currently leading the world on the extinction of mammals and is ranked fourth globally when it comes to the extinction of all species. The review of the *Wildlife Act 1975* provides a critical opportunity for a reset and to shift the balance of the Act towards protection.

As our report states:

"We hope that this report will provide the review with an indication of the substantive changes needed to bring the legislation in line with best practice. A reformed Act will need strong scientific and ethical foundations for transparent decision making, a major upgrade in accountability, an independent regulator and a proper compliance and enforcement regime with strong penalties". • PW

Read the full *Failing Our Wildlife* report at [www.envirojustice.org.au/failing-our-wildlife](http://www.envirojustice.org.au/failing-our-wildlife)

Pacific Black Duck.



PHOTO: ED DUNENS, FLICKR CC



PHOTO: TIM DONOVAN, FLICKR CC

The ongoing controversy over duck hunting illustrates problems with the current law.



Old age trees provide a great range of hollows and other habitat features that thousands of animal and insect species depend on.

# Trading in genes

CLIMATE CHANGE MEANS THE PREVIOUSLY FINE NOTION TO USE 'LOCAL PROVENANCE' IN RESTORATION PLANTING HAS OUTLIVED SOME OF ITS USEFULNESS, SAYS PHIL INGAMELLS.

Through the many millions of years of evolution, Earth's climate has changed many times. Most often those changes happened slowly, over millennia.

Some species would be lost, but mobile species could just trot off to a more suitable place, and plants could cross-breed with a more resilient version of their species, slowly transforming and evolving to survive the changing conditions.

Today though, we are faced with a compounded problem. The changes in climate are happening very fast in evolutionary terms, and our species and vegetation communities are fragmented, making it difficult for many species to access more robust genetic material.

We did the fragmenting, clearing vast areas of forested land, and we have brought about the changes in climate. We should think carefully about how we can help nature survive the predicament we caused.

Fixing carbon emissions is crucial, but climate impacts will be around for a long time even if we manage to reach those elusive Paris targets. So what else can we do?

Species facing a warming climate can suffer from drought, insect attack, too-frequent fire and other problems.



PHOTO: PHIL INGAMELLS

Take Victoria's beautiful Alpine Ash forests, those soaring eucalypts that cling to the slopes of our highest mountains. Like their even taller sister species Mountain Ash, they are easily killed by a bushfire and must regrow from tiny seeds that sprout in the ash bed.

But it takes some 15 or more years for the young trees to produce new seed, so if a fire turns up within that period, we can actually lose the Ash forest and the animals that rely on it.

This has happened several times in the last few decades. In our Alpine National Park, Mount Buffalo National Park (and surrounding state forest where logging has exacerbated the problem!), the dying Ash forests have sometimes been aerially re-sown with seed collected in advance. But we can't keep doing that if ongoing frequent fire leaves us without seed production.

Alpine Ash also grows in Tasmania, but it's a subspecies with a different genetic make-up. Like most of our other eucalypts, it isn't so easily killed by fire; it re-sprouts from its fire-singed trunk. Perhaps we should be re-seeding with that species here, or even a different species with similar ecological functions such as Messmate Stringybark.

A few years ago, VNPA organised a series of workshops with scientists, land managers and others focused on managing biodiversity in a changing climate. The last of these, held at the Arthur Rylah Institute, called for a series of experimental plots across Victoria's many habitat types, introducing genetic variants of plants to see what might survive best in the future.

Following those seminars, Greening Australia (with some expert advice) has developed a comprehensive guide to setting up these 'Climate Future Plots' across the landscape. It's available at Greening Australia's website.

This is serious and very carefully considered stuff.

However, neither Parks Victoria nor our environment department seem to be taking the issue seriously enough, even though the state government's biodiversity strategy *Protecting Victoria's Environment - Biodiversity 2037* says we should be "Introducing genetic variants or new species from other suitable areas that can continue to play important ecological roles under climate change".

There's little time to lose if we are to give future managers of our finest natural areas the information they will need when critical habitat species fail. • PW



# Caught on Camera in Wombat State Forest

OUR 2021 CITIZEN SCIENCE  
FIELD SEASON RETURNS  
MARCH TO JUNE.

We are excited to invite NatureWatch volunteers back for the 2021 Caught on Camera field season in Wombat State Forest.

This project engages community volunteers in using motion sensing cameras to monitor mammals in response to fire. This will be the tenth year of this project in Wombat State Forest.

Subject to changes due to COVID-19 restrictions, we will need help in the forest on **3 April, 23 April, 14 May, 5 June, 25 June**. No experience necessary – all training provided.

For more information on the fieldwork and to sign up, please visit [www.vnpa.org.au/caught-on-camera](http://www.vnpa.org.au/caught-on-camera) or contact Sera Blair, our NatureWatch Coordinator at [sera@vnpa.org.au](mailto:sera@vnpa.org.au). Spaces are limited and dates are subject to change.

## How NatureWatch fared in the 2020 field season

Our citizen science program had to cancel our regular field season working with volunteers and switch to a staff-only approach with Project Coordinator Sera Blair, Project Officer Kristen Agosta and colleague Caitlin Griffith conducting the site visits. Our strict COVID-19 safety protocols had us using separate cars as much as possible, creating individual colour-coded kits of equipment, wearing



Above: Fungi erupting in the forest.

Right: Project Officer Kristen Agosta setting up a camera



PHOTOS: VNP

masks, and staying well sanitised. Despite these challenges, we really enjoyed our time in the forest and felt fortunate to witness the incredible array of fungi erupting out of the ground. We managed to complete all 20 monitoring sites. This completes our ninth consecutive year of wildlife monitoring in Wombat State Forest.

Our full report will be available on our website, but here is a snapshot of what we found.

**Native mammals:** Agile Antechinus, Bush Rat, Eastern Grey Kangaroo, Black Wallaby, Common Brushtail Possum, Mountain Brushtail Possum, Common Ringtail Possum, Common Wombat, Koala, Short-beaked Echidna.

**Native birds:** Australian Magpie, Brush Bronzewing, Grey Currawong, Rufous Fantail, Spotted Quail-thrush, White-winged Chough.

**Feral animals:** Rabbit, domestic cat, domestic dog, Red Fox, Sambar Deer. • PW

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## Bunyip bouncing back

NATUREWATCH  
COORDINATOR **SERA BLAIR**  
SHOWS US FOREST  
RECOVERY TWO YEARS  
AFTER FIRE.

Bunyip State Park, east of Gembrook, is a sea of green again with intense regrowth after the March 2019 bushfires burnt 54 per cent of the park. Before this in 2010 around 45 per cent of the park was also burnt in Black Saturday fires. We have been carrying out post-fire monitoring of this park since 2012.

Following the most recent fire we managed a post-fire field season from August to December 2019. Our teams of NatureWatch volunteers once again partnered with the Friends of Bunyip State Park and Parks Victoria and completed monitoring activities on 30 sites across the park – an increase on our usual 20 sites per season. In addition to our previous use of motion-detection cameras, we also added song meter audio recording devices at each site, installed photo points, and conducted scat surveys.

We were unable to revisit our field sites in 2020 due to COVID-19 lockdown restrictions and (like everyone) needed to adapt. Instead, we carried out a small monitoring season in early 2021 with just photo points looking at regrowth of vegetation.

### Cameras

Our cameras from the 2019 field season recorded eight native mammal species, 13 native bird species, one reptile species, and six feral species:



A Southern Boobook. It seems to be searching the ground, possibly hunting, which may indicate the presence of small mammals that were not picked up by the cameras.



Sample scat survey data.

### Mammals:

- Agile Antechinus
- Dusky Antechinus
- Unidentified Bandicoot
- Eastern Grey Kangaroo
- Black Wallaby
- Common Wombat
- Common Brushtail Possum
- Short-beaked Echidna

### Birds:

- Superb Lyrebird
- Superb Fairy-wren
- Bassian Thrush
- Brush Bronzewing
- Grey Currawong
- Pied Currawong
- Southern Boobook
- Grey Butcherbird
- Grey Shrike-thrush
- Australian Magpie
- Brown Thornbill
- Laughing kookaburra
- White-browed Scrub-wren

### Reptile:

- Lace Monitor

### Feral animals:

- House Cat
- House Mouse
- Sambar Deer
- Fallow Deer
- Rabbit
- Red Fox

The 2018 field season before the fires we recorded the same animals as in 2019 but also Koalas, Common Ring-tailed Possum, Bush Rats and Rufus Fantails. It should be noted that the Agile Antechinus photographed in 2019 were all at unburnt sites.

### Scat Surveys

Scat surveys were a new technique to be used by NatureWatch volunteers. They are easy to conduct after fire



as the ground is bare, and they can provide additional information about animals that are present on site but that may not move in front of the cameras. Four 30-metre surveys were conducted at each site. Scats were photographed with an orange golf ball for scale and a card with site data to allow us to double-check identification later if necessary.

We were able to identify scats for six common species: Eastern Grey Kangaroo, Black Wallaby, Common Wombat, Sambar Deer, Fallow Deer, and Rabbit. While these are common species, this technique proved useful as it provided additional data on the location of these animals after the fires. One burnt site only

recorded Black Wallabies in the photos collected, but Eastern Grey Kangaroos, Wombats and Fallow Deer were also recorded from scats.

### Photo points

We took photos of each site from a set point to show the current condition of habitat availability and quality. The intention was to return annually to each site and take a new photo to monitor habitat recovery, however, COVID-19 restrictions interfered with those plans. As soon as we were able to return, late January 2021, we captured as many photo points as possible. We managed to visit 23 sites over two field days – thanks to the help of

trusted NatureWatch volunteer, Allan Milne and his 4WD skills!

After being out of the park for almost a year and a half, the vegetation recovery was staggering. There was remarkable regrowth across the park; many sites now very difficult to walk through with a dense understorey of trees and shrubs bursting up after the seed bank was stimulated by the fires.

We hope to return to Bunyip State Park in August 2021 to continue our tenth year of post-fire wildlife monitoring. • PW

Join the NatureWatch mailing list for opportunities to take part in this citizen science project – [www.vnpa.org.au/naturewatch](http://www.vnpa.org.au/naturewatch)

### Examples of recovery:

Photo at top taken on 28 June 2019, and at bottom on 1 February 2021.

Site FR17 – Lowland Forest



Site HW01 – Healthy Woodland



PHOTOS: VNPA



# Building our rewilding force

**DR MADDY WILLCOCK,**  
NATURE STEWARDS  
MANAGER, INTRODUCES  
US TO A NEW PROGRAM TO  
LEARN, CONNECT AND ACT  
FOR NATURE LOCALLY.

Sir David Attenborough, in his recent documentary, has called us to action: let's rewild the world.

Environmental volunteers always have and will continue to be a key part of ensuring a resilient natural world for us all to live in. However, many people don't know where to start, or exactly what to do. Yet we must act now, in greater numbers than ever before, to rewild our world and survive on our changing planet. So how do we achieve this?

This is the challenge of our time. Indeed, individuals and communities are mobilising on public and private land, through volunteering and advocacy, to help restore healthy ecosystems. There are many hundreds of Friends, Landcare and Coastcare groups, as well as citizen science programs such as VNPA's NatureWatch and ReefWatch. More recent initiatives such as Gardens for Wildlife, WaterWatch, and Roots and Shoots are spreading, and younger generations are more aware and ready to act than ever.

This is all very positive, but to achieve the scale of change we need, we must continue to encourage and support more members of our community to get involved and build lifelong nature stewardship behaviours. To encourage this, there needs to be multiple ways to take part, be it through personal behaviour change or local community action.



Nature Stewards is a relatively new Victorian program that invites and supports adults to learn, connect, and act for nature locally. It aims to grow Victoria's 'rewilding force' from across the community, to swell the number of environmental volunteers, and back the many local groups who give their time for nature. The program builds participants' basic ecological knowledge and a connection with nature and other like-minded people and groups. It provides tools and confidence to have a go and get involved in their own home, within the community, or online.

Nature Stewards began in 2017 as an idea, and by February 2019 two pilot programs commenced with the City of Melbourne and City of Melton. To date, we have had 12 programs across four local Councils, with new Councils coming on board in 2021. Participants have come from diverse backgrounds, occupations, ages, and reasons for learning more and getting active in nature. Their feedback on the training is overwhelmingly positive. By the close of 2020, we

had approximately 200 alumni. After completing the training, they are going on to join or establish environmental volunteer groups, undertake conservation work on their own property, take up tertiary environmental studies, apply their new knowledge in their work, or even start a new career in the environment sector.

Ann and Bruce McGregor have been instrumental in initiating and establishing the program in Victoria, with inspiration from their two daughters and the Master Naturalist programs in the USA (see box). Nature Stewards is hosted at the state level by Outdoors Victoria, with outstanding support from CEO Andrew Knight. Seed funding has been provided by the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP), with additional funding by host municipal councils. It is proudly supported by the Victorian National Parks Association, Field Naturalists Club of Victoria, Parks Victoria, and the Alliance of Natural Resource Outreach and Service Programs (the US-based peak body for these programs).





Learning, connecting, and acting for nature – Nature Stewards classes out in the field in Manningham and Melton.



PHOTOS: © NICK COVELLI / BRAINSICK MEDIA

The program runs over ten weekly class sessions (online under COVID-19 conditions) and four field sessions (when permitted), totalling 46 hours of basic training. It offers an introduction to the Victorian and local environment, linking closely with local Indigenous custodians, topic specialists and local groups to deliver relevant, cutting edge information, training, and networking. There are detailed curriculum materials delivered by experienced environmental educator-facilitators. The goals of the program centre on environmental literacy, stewardship, participation, and community connection and wellbeing. We hope to continue to help our participants grow in their connections with nature, confidence and capacity to be part of the rewilding force.

To find out more, to apply to join a 2021 program, or become a program presenter, partner or host, visit [outdoorsvictoria.org.au/nature-stewards/](https://outdoorsvictoria.org.au/nature-stewards/) or find us on Facebook (naturestewardsVIC) and Instagram (naturestewards). You might want to encourage your local Council to host Nature Stewards training, too! • PW

### US Master Naturalist Programs

Many people who want to help protect and restore the environment are inhibited from acting by their perceived lack of knowledge. For over 20 years, Texas Parks and Wildlife Service (TPWS) and other agencies have supported the Master Naturalist program, which provides a basic but comprehensive introduction to local ecosystems and conservation science relevant to where people live.

Participants are inspired by meeting local rangers, local organisations and local wildlife. In Texas, over 12,000 people have started volunteering after their training. Keen volunteers also do extra training each year to upgrade their skills. TPWS, local municipalities and a range of environmental organisations provide many opportunities for Master Naturalists to help with park interpretation for visitors, environmental restoration, citizen science and other activities.

Similar programs now run in over 25 US States, and have trained thousands of environmental volunteers, citizen scientists, tertiary students, teachers, nature guides, and others. In 2017 in the State of Virginia, for example, there were 1,841 active Master Naturalists who contributed 156,000 hours of volunteer service including 127,000 contacts through educational programs for youth and adults, contributions to over 100 citizen science projects, and stewardship at 350+ parks, natural areas and other sites.



# Woodlands Historic Park

PHOTO: BEX, FLICKR CC

Grand old trees are the highlight of the park.

## GEOFF DURHAM TAKES A STEP BACK IN TIME.

Parks Victoria manages more than 2,500 heritage structures, as well as many Aboriginal sites. It is a huge responsibility. There are grand buildings such as the Mount Buffalo Chalet, Werribee Park Mansion (and Point Cook Homestead), the Point Nepean complex, and Coolart, but there are also modest relics like cattlemen's huts in the Alpine National Park. Maintenance of buildings is costly; occupation can provide protection and income. The Chalet has been on a maintenance regime since it closed in 2007 and finding an appropriate use has been elusive.

An example of such use is at Woodlands Historic Park. In 1972 the Shire of Bulla proposed that the property 'Woodlands' and the Gellibrand Hill summit area at Greenvale, 20 kilometres north-west of the city and near the present Melbourne Airport, be acquired and developed as 'metropolitan parkland' given the residential development planned for the area. Woodlands was so acquired, and in 1981, an area of 265 hectares was proclaimed as 'Gellibrand Hill Park' under Schedule 3 ('Other Parks') of the *National Parks Act 1975*. In 1986 Gellibrand Hill was added, bringing the park to 658 hectares. In 1995 the park was

increased to 704 hectares by the addition of the 'Twin Dams Paddock'. At this time the historic significance of Woodlands was recognised by a change of name to 'Woodlands Historic Park'. In 2004 the addition of the 125-hectare North-west Hospital site (originally the Greenvale Sanatorium) increased the park to its present 820 hectares.

In 2006, 68 hectares, including the Woodlands Homestead and associated buildings with adjoining paddocks, was leased to 'Living Legends', a not-for-profit organisation for retired champion racehorses. In retirement at the time of writing are 27 horses, including Melbourne Cup winners Almandin, Efficient, Brew and Rogan Josh.

Subject to COVID-19 closure, the Homestead is normally open daily from 10am to 4pm with free entry. Coffee and Devonshire teas are available. There are fees for guided tours and functions.

### Historic significance

The park is the territory of the Woiworung who are known to have camped there. It protects eight scar trees. The 9.4 hectare Weeroona Aboriginal Cemetery adjoins the park.

In 1842, retired Royal Navy officer William Pomeroy Greene, who was born in Ireland, obtained a Crown grant of one square mile (640 acres or 256 hectares) on a loop of the Moonee Ponds Creek, and the next year erected a London made, pre-fabricated, five room 'bungalow'. He named the property 'Woodlands', referencing the nature of the landscape. Extensions were made to the house, and various outbuildings were erected by the Greenes and subsequent owners.

Remarkably, the original bungalow in the west wing remains intact. It has some of the original National Parks Service interpretative displays supplemented with racing memorabilia. The Greenes, and later owners C. B. Fisher, William Crocker, Ben Chaffey and C.B. Kellow were all associated with horse racing.

When compulsorily acquired, the Homestead was almost derelict. It was restored in 1983-4 with funding from schemes sponsored by federal, state and local governments.

The park is listed on the Register of the National Estate. The Victorian Heritage Database says 'Woodlands Homestead is of historical, architectural, aesthetic, scientific and





PHOTO: BEX, FLICKR CC



PHOTO: PHILIP MALLIS, FLICKR CC



PHOTO: PHILIP MALLIS, FLICKR CC



PHOTO: BEX, FLICKR CC



PHOTO: I AM BIRDSASPOETRY.COM, FLICKR CC

Clockwise from top left:  
Woodlands Homestead  
The predator-proof barrier  
Flame Robin  
Boulder formations  
Eastern Grey Kangaroo

### Friends of Woodlands

The volunteer group, the Friends of Woodlands Historic Park Inc, commenced as the Friends of Gellibrand Hill Park in 1982. Activities have included fence removal, plant propagation, planting, weeding, garden restoration, homestead guiding, and interpretative presentations. They meet in the park on the first Saturday of the month. Contact Sue Wright, phone 0414 526 407.

archaeological significance ... a rare remnant of the early period settlement in Victoria'. Two magnolia trees in the homestead courtyard planted in the mid-1840s are believed to be the oldest surviving exotic plantings in Victoria. Two irrigation systems installed by Ben Chaffey in the 1920s are of scientific significance.

The park contains the ruins of two other homesteads – Dundonald (built c.1860s) and Cumberland (c.1870s).

### Kangaroos and bandicoots

An electrified predator-proof barrier fence was erected around the 400 hectare 'Back Paddock' in the 1980s. Twenty-one Eastern Grey Kangaroos were introduced and bred to a population of over 1,200. They are now periodically culled, but can also be seen in other parts of the park.

Eastern Barred Bandicoots are near threatened in Victoria. Commencing in 1989 some 174 animals were progressively released here. By 1995 the population expanded to about 600, but then sadly declined until disappearing in 2005 through the loss of habitat due to the millennium drought and grazing by kangaroos and rabbits. The area of the paddock was reduced to 300 hectares and

bandicoots were reintroduced. The present population is about 150.

### The woodlands

The landscape remains relatively unchanged. It is grassy woodland on undulating granite country at the edge of the basalt plains.

Trees are a feature of the park – mighty River Red Gums (some 500+ years old), impressive Grey and Yellow Box, and a Sugar Gum plantation. There is remnant bushland near Gellibrand Hill and some patches of native grassland. Drooping Sheoaks have been restored to the boulder-strewn Woodlands Hill above the homestead.

Weeds are a problem. Gorse has been controlled, but some Boxthorn remains, and there is ongoing infestation of Serrated Tussock, Chilean Needle-grass and Patersons Curse, among others. Rabbits, foxes and cats are of continuing concern.

As suburbia advances, the park becomes increasingly significant as urban open space. It is popular and great for picnics, walking, cycling, horse riding, bird watching and kangaroo viewing. Dogs are permitted on-lead except in the Back Paddock.

Overlooking the airport, Gellibrand Hill (with a radar tower and direction finder) has 360-degree views.

### Access

Melways Maps No 177 & 178. Public transport by No 59 Elizabeth Street tram to Airport West, then Sunbury 478 bus to Oaklands Road.

Car parks with toilets are at the Homestead off Oaklands Road and at the extensive picnic grounds off Somerton Road. Vehicle entrance gates are closed between 4.30pm and 9am. There is also a car park off Providence Road past the Weeroona Aboriginal Cemetery, approached from Mickleham Road. Moonee Ponds Creek Trail for cyclists and walkers from Docklands to the park goes past Gellibrand Hill and through the Twin Dams Paddock ending at Somerton Road.

### References

For the history of the park see *Red Gums and Riders – a history of Gellibrand Hill Park* by Jane Lennon, Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, 1993. An unofficial web site *Woodlands Historic Park* contains a wealth of information not available on the Parks Victoria site. • PW



# Explorer's corner

## TIPS AND TRICKS FOR GETTING IN TO NATURE



## Delicious and low waste eating

Whether you're going for a bushwalk or camping out of your car, getting into the outdoors is an important part of our lives – as is eating! Many of us opt for more 'convenience' foods which produce more waste than when we are at home. But camping food can be delicious, fresh and low waste.

La Trobe University Outdoor and Environmental Studies recent graduate and VNPA intern Bianca Jones shares an example of how she goes about preparing food for a weekend getaway.

### Day 1

#### *Breakfast at the local bakery*

If I'm heading out early in the morning, I like to stop by a local bakery for breakfast. I do this to support small, local businesses and because it is easy (and tastes great!) I usually also pick up a few extra goodies for breakfast or snacks. It's also a good opportunity to break up driving and a chance to change drivers.

#### *Lunch: quinoa and feta salad topped with feta*

Recently, I've been trying very hard to go single-use plastic free, and this often involves making my own meals. One of the most common lunches I've been preparing includes homemade spinach, carrot and chickpea quinoa and homemade falafel, topped off with feta in a bowl.

#### *Dinner: baked potatoes*

Baked potatoes are a great option for a single night trip as they can be cooked on a fire and can be smaller in portion sizes to cater for your needs – definitely one of my favourites. Top potatoes with your favourite selection of toppings, either prepared at home or at camp.

### Day 2

#### *Breakfast: toasted croissant*

Many of my peers go for the egg, bacon and mushroom breakfast while base/car camping; I like to treat myself while I'm away and go for a toasted ham and cheese croissant, using a fresh croissant purchased from a bakery along the way. When backpacking I go for the traditional powdered milk, oats and honey option, as they are lighter to carry, last longer and are less fragile.

#### *Lunch: rice crackers with tomato, brie cheese and avocado*

I usually pack enough of my salad, mentioned earlier, to have for two days. If I feel like something different, then I'll bring along rice crackers or vita-wheats with tomato, brie cheese and avocado.

#### *Dinner: mushroom risotto*

Mushroom risotto is one of my current go-to meals as it is really good on cooler nights and can be prepared fresh on a camp stove or fireplace. There is also usually leftover wine!

### Day 3

#### *Final breakfast: toasted croissant #2*

I tend to pack enough for two breakfasts and go with a toasted cheese and tomato croissant for the final morning.

### Snacks

- soy crisps
- fresh fruit
- dried fruit and trail mix



## Key tips and tricks for low waste meals

- Only take what you need! Plan your meals before heading out so you only take the essentials; this will lead to you having less waste while you're out adventuring.
- Making things from scratch often lowers the amount of waste you have, both from packaging and food scraps, as you only buy what you need and can source items that aren't packaged.
- Shopping within your local area helps minimise your carbon footprint and promote the local economy. Small specialty grocers often have things produced close to where you live.
- Buy things without the plastic wrapping – you don't need to buy the packet of six potatoes in plastic, buy loose ones and wash at home.
- Look for more sustainable ways to prepare and carry your food, such as buying in bulk and using Tupperware, silicone or cloth bags instead of single-use plastics or zip-lock bags.
- Leftovers make really good lunches, be that from the night before a trip or if you over cater while your away.
- Many fresh foods like avocado (as long as it isn't too ripe) can last for several days without being refrigerated and can provide more variety in your diet for trips of longer duration. I always pack fresh food when I go camping.
- Bring along a small sealable bucket, such as a hommus bucket, and use it to keep compost scraps and take them back to your home compost bin. • PW



PHOTO: OSKAR KARLIN, FLICKR CC

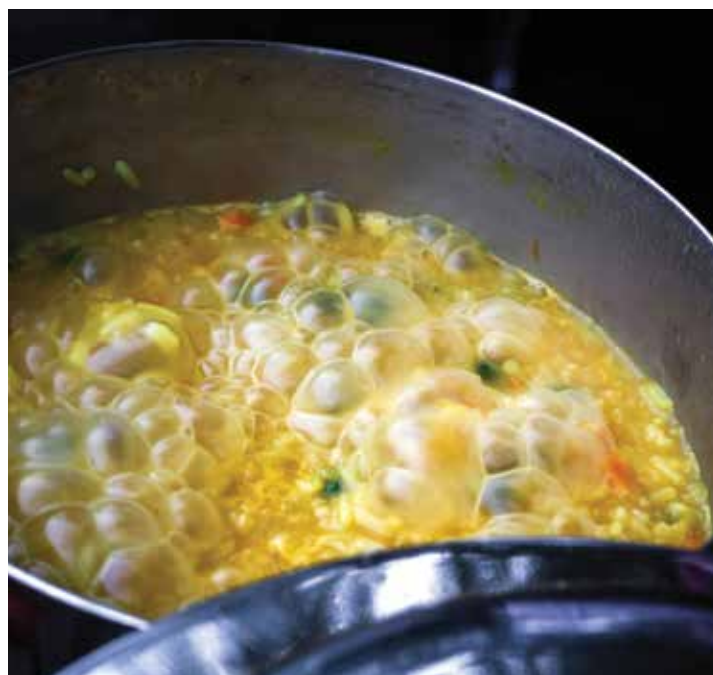


PHOTO: SHAUN DUNMALL, FLICKR CC



PHOTO: BETH OLSON, FLICKR CC

Keep an eye out for more from 'Explorers Corner: tips and tricks for getting in to nature' in future editions of *Park Watch*.



ILLUSTRATIONS BY TRACE BALLA



# QUIZ ANSWERS

(From page 14)

1 There are a number of new national parks and a large range of other conservation reserves recommended to be created as part of the VEAC Central West Investigation. Areas recommended for new national park status are **Mount Buangor National Park, Pyrenees National Park, Wombat-Lerederg National Park**, as well as an addition to the existing **Greater Bendigo National Park**.



PHOTO: SANDY SCHELTEMA

2 The headwaters of multiple major river in western Victoria would be protected in these new national parks. These include the **Wimmera, Loddon, Campaspe, Coliban, Maribyrnong, Moorabool, and Werribee-Lerderderg rivers**. The top end of the Wimmera River would even get extra protection as a Heritage River if the VEAC recommendations are adopted.

3 The **Mount Cole Grevillea** (pictured right) is found only at Mount Cole. Note that this species was recorded in current logging coupes at Mount Cole by VNPA citizen scientists.



PHOTO: SHANNON HURLEY

4 **We don't know.** While bushfires last summer and the pandemic have caused major disruptions, we are unsure why the Andrews Government has been able to announce many other projects but have not met the legislative timelines to decide on new national parks in the central west.

5 **The Greater Glider.** This large gliding possum (pictured below) had much of its habitat in eastern Victoria destroyed in the 2019-20 bushfires, making protection of its habitat as a national park in Wombat Forest even more important for this threatened species.



PHOTO: GAYLE OSBORNE

6 **40 threatened bird species** would gain greater protection for their habitat in new central west national parks, including Swift Parrot (pictured right), Diamond Firetail, Powerful Owl (see pages 9-11), Grey Crowned Babbler and Blue-billed Duck.



PHOTO: DAVE CURTIS, FLICKR CC

7 **Wellford State Forest.** The protection of this area as a national park would 'fill a gap' in the protected areas around Bendigo and protect this area from logging.

8 **All of these activities** will be allowed in the proposed new Central West national parks. You can enjoy them all on formed paths, track and roads and designated camping spots.



PHOTO: SANDY SCHELTEMA

VNPA has been advocating with local groups for the protection of these forests for over a decade. To take action on the For Parks Sake! campaign to protect these special places and the wildlife that live in them, visit [www.vnpa.org.au/forparks](http://www.vnpa.org.au/forparks)



## Growing up in a wildlife family

WHAT WOULD YOUR LIFE BE LIKE IF YOU WERE PART OF A FAMILY OF NATIVE ANIMALS?

### Being part of a Grey-headed Flying-fox family

If you were a baby flying-fox, you would live in a colony of tens of thousands of other flying-foxes. During the first few weeks of your life, you would be inseparable from your mum and cling to her for warmth and milk. Your dad would be busy defending the territory. After about a month your mum would leave you at the colony's 'creche' while foraging for food at night and bringing back breakfast for you at dawn. You would start practising your flying, and at three months old you would be strong enough to join your mum on food trips. By the time you were six months old, your mum would be pregnant with your brother or sister,



ILLUSTRATIONS © RENEE TREML

and you would take care of yourself. As a Victorian Grey-headed Flying-fox, you would have been brought up and live your life at Yarra Bend Park in Melbourne, Eastern Park in Geelong, or Rosalind Park in Bendigo.

### Being part of a Sugar Glider family

If you were in a Sugar Glider family you might live in a shared nest with up to seven adults and their young. Your nest would be in a tree hollow, with a bed of soft fresh eucalyptus leaves. Huddling together, you and your clan would be able to keep warm during cold winter weather. As Sugar Gliders are commonly twins, as a baby you would live with your sibling in your mother's pouch for around two months before leaving the nest with your mother to look for food. You would be able to glide using a membrane from your finger to your ankle and steer using your long bushy tail. You would learn a number of different call sounds, including a soft dog-like bark, to warn of potential predators. Your home would be in the tree canopy in forests and woodlands along the east coast and northern Australia. • PW





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