

PARK*watch*

38° 17' 13" S, 144° 43' 25" E



VICTORIAN
NATIONAL PARKS
ASSOCIATION
70 years protecting nature

MARCH 2023 #291

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(*Arctocephalus pusillus*).
HANNA GEESON

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WESTERN PORT BAY

A NATURAL TREASURE AT RISK



Act now to safeguard Western Port Bay. Donate at vnpa.org.au/protectWPB

Red-necked Stint, Jam Jerrup, Western Port Bay. JAMES WHITE

From the President

Welcome to the March 2023 edition of **Park Watch**

Mt Stirling's Circuit Road is a magnificent drive. It offers views to the south across the Howqua Valley to Mt Buller, to the east across the King Valley to The Crosscut Saw, Mt Buggery, Mt Speculation and to the north-east the distinct outline of Mt Cobbler stands prominently at the end of a long ridge.

Circuit Rd is also a gateway to several native forest tourist attractions: visiting Bindaree Falls; picnicking at Craig's Hut; summiting Mt Stirling; hiking one of the many single-day and multi-day trails; and camping along the beautiful King and Howqua rivers.

Circuit Rd unfortunately also provides a reminder of the relentless destruction of our native forests by VicForests. Towards No3 Road are native forest areas destroyed by VicForests' clear-felling and scarred by unnatural single-species plantations.

VicForests FY21-22 Annual Report provides another chapter in a sorry tale. During FY21-22 VicForests received Victorian Government grants in the order of \$23 million, achieved an income from sale of forest products of \$80.8 million and recorded a loss of \$54.2 million. VicForests' net worth has crashed to negative \$2.9 million.

Since 2007 multiple VicForests Chairman and CEO reports have highlighted the strategic importance of achieving Forest Stewardship Certification (FSC), yet VicForests consistently failed to get FSC accreditation for native forest harvesting. Since announcing a postponement in the 2020 Annual Report VicForests appear to have stopped trying to achieve this higher standard for forest management.

Litigation costs have been trending upward at an alarming rate yet successive annual reports provide little evidence of accountability, root-cause analysis nor any course of action to

remediate. In November 2022 two Supreme Court cases were brought upon VicForests in relation to the endangered Greater Glider and the vulnerable Yellow-bellied Glider. Both cases were successful in establishing VicForests' breaches of the law, relating to flaws with VicForests' pre-harvest surveys for these forest-dependent creatures.

The Victorian Government needs to lay out a clear plan that brings forward Victoria's transition out of native forest logging and protects our natural heritage.

The cases were also successful in establishing VicForests' failure to adequately protect gliders where they had been recorded. The Hon. Justice Richards delivered her judgement in November 2022, stating that 'The ecological evidence was clear – greater gliders that live in coupes that are harvested in accordance with VicForests' current practices will probably die as a result of the harvesting operations.' The same was said by Justice Richards in relation to the fate of Yellow-bellied Gliders faced with VicForests' current harvesting operations.

The destruction of our native forests is painful for all Victorians; it is time to act! Victoria should and can sustain a vibrant, efficient and productive timber industry based on plantation timber. VicForests must take responsibility and be accountable for their position in the timber industry and their obligations to the Victorian public. The Victorian Government needs to lay out a clear

plan that brings forward Victoria's transition out of native forest logging and protects our natural heritage.

Congratulations to the Victorian Labour Party for winning a third term, we thank The Hon. Lily D'Ambrosio and wish her all the best with her new portfolios, and we welcome the new Minister for Environment The Hon. Ingrid Stitt. We encourage the Victorian Government to act: release a detailed and accelerated forestry transition plan (the current publicly available plan is only four pages and contains no detail); close VicForests and install an independent, registered liquidator to wind down its operations; establish an independent science-led transition authority to assist with the transition; establish the Office of the Conservation outside of the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action as a truly independent regulator with a sufficient budget to allow for all operational needs, including oversight of salvage logging and so called fire prevention works.

Having been nurtured by Outdoors Victoria, we are pleased to announce the Nature Stewards program is moving to VNPA. The program promotes environmental literacy and stewardship of nature through discovery, action, and ongoing learning. This is a very exciting addition that will enable broader and deeper community engagement through an excellent education program.

Thank you to all our supporters. Through your generosity we can continue to engage the community and work to grow and protect our natural environment. To make a tax-deductible donation, visit vnpa.org.au/donate.

And thank you team for the wonderful job of refreshing the design of *Park Watch*, it's another outstanding edition and it looks great.

Enjoy the read! 🌿

David Nugent, VNPA President



What's up for nature in Andrews' third term?

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR **MATT RUCHEL** REPORTS ON WHAT THE 2022 STATE ELECTION DELIVERED FOR NATURE

Following a largely lacklustre state election in November, the Andrews Government won an historic third term, with a slightly increased majority. Victorian Labor has now been in power for the bulk of this century: about 19 years out 23.

Labor's progressive history

The Victorian ALP has always prided itself on its progressive politics and policies, and this has certainly been the case on social policy and on the big ticket items like climate change. When it comes to nature, it's more of mixed bag. Some previous leaders of Victorian Labor like Joan Kirner and Steve Bracks, made some step changes in protection of the natural environment, but probably didn't have the backdrop of global climate change and increased frequency of extreme weather events dominating the 'environment debate'.

The first term of the Andrews Government (2014–18), saw a very good and comprehensive environment policy released. They reversed some the backwards steps of the previous Coalition government, including banning cattle grazing in the Alpine National Park, reversing 99-year leases in national parks, delivering a long overdue revised biodiversity strategy, the new *Marine and Coastal Act* and reform of the *Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act*.

Delivery of these reforms has happened, sometimes slowly, but that seems as far as it goes in term of election policy. Neither the 2018 nor the recent 2022 election saw any release of comprehensive environment or nature policy, and only a very few targeted announcements.

Election announcements

The only policy that was at all close to dealing with nature was a [Suburban Parks announcement](#), which built on Suburban Parks Package release at the 2018 election, plus additional

\$10 million Green Links fund for revegetating urban creek lines. The important part was a commitment to 'introduce planning controls on 12 key rivers and creeks in Melbourne to create wildlife corridors, protect waterways and restore the natural environment.' The creeks – Edgars, Darebin, Gardiners, Jacksons, Koonung, Kororoit, Cherry, Merri, Moonee Ponds, Steele, Stony and the Maribyrnong River – are safeguarded from any future inappropriate development. This brings these important urban waterways somewhat in-line with protection already in place for the Yarra River.

...the election delivered very little in terms of concrete policies for nature.

The Coalition had largely nothing, except a couple of micro announcements around Ricketts Point Marine Sanctuary, with no comprehensive policy releases and during the election spent more time on scare campaigns around regional park regulations, which were later found by RMIT/ABC fact check to lack context. The new Liberal leader, John Pesutto, had to beat a Teal independent candidate in the seat of Hawthorn. Interestingly it was reported during the election campaign that at a candidates' environmental debate earlier in November, Pesutto said he expected the logging of native forests to end by 2024. This was in stark contrast to formal Coalition positions (that can seemingly only be found on the National Party website), which commits to winding back the phase out of native forest logging. The Greens released a good biodiversity policy and the Teals were effective in raising native forest logging issues.



In reality, the election delivered very little in terms of concrete policies for nature, with lack of competitive tension between the major parties on environment policy in general. Having said that, the Andrews Government did make some substantive commitments, outside of the election cycle in the last term including: end of native forest logging by 2030; Immediate Protection Areas in 2019; new central west parks in June 2021; Feral Horse Action plan and State Wide Deer control strategy. But implementation has been tortuously slow. The government claims it has protected huge swathes of Victoria, but none of the work to legislate these areas formally as parks or reserves has happened.

Looking to the future

There has been a significant kick start to end of native forest logging with the decision by Opal to shut the M5 white copy paper machine at Maryvale Mill. This machine was specifically dependent on native forest to make bleached pulp and was one of the main blocks to hasten the transition. Many of the other processes of Maryvale can use pine and blue gum, so the end of the M5 machine is a real milestone on the path to end native forest logging.

There should be no further excuses to speeding up the transition, particularly as logging has been temporarily suspended in large areas of eastern Victorian due to successful court cases from community groups, which found that VicForests have been operating in breach of the state laws related to the protection of biodiversity in our forests. 🌿

Polling shows clear community appetite for policy and action on nature

VNPA COMMISSIONED A STATE-WIDE OPINION POLL OF 1000 VICTORIANS BEFORE LAST YEAR'S STATE ELECTION WITH SOME REVEALING RESULTS

The poll found saving threatened wildlife, ending native forest logging and creating new national parks on both land and sea have widespread support.

It showed support from Victorians for existing and new national parks, along with strong threatened species programs, is soaring.

These results are consistent with previous polls. Interestingly, when asked to compare policies, more than one third of Victorians say their vote would be influenced by saving threatened wildlife and stopping extinction (36 per cent), which is slightly more than climate pollution policies (35 per cent). Closely behind is three in 10 voters who say ending native forest logging would influence their vote (30 per cent).

Both issues outstripped support for the suburban rail loop and level crossing removal (20 per cent) and COVID restrictions (14 per cent), which dominated media coverage.

If it were a question of money, the comparative little spent on the environment can go a long way. The cost of two or three level crossing removals is roughly equal to the total amount the Andrews Government has spent on our more than 2000 threatened wildlife and habitats since 2014. There are now commitments to remove 110 level crossings, so a couple of less crossings and funding for better environment for the future seems to be a fair trade off! 🌿

Find out more at vnpa.org.au/polling



86%

of Victorians support the state having a comprehensive network of national parks and conservation reserves across land and sea



83%

supported all Victorian political parties having comprehensive policies, programs and laws to stop extinction of local plants and animals



82%

of Victorians specifically support having marine national parks to protect habitats



76%

support the Great Forest National Park in the Yarra Ranges, as well as new parks in the central west such as Wombat Forest (75%) and Strathbogie forests (77%)



64%

support the ending of native forest logging, with 29% in strong support



68%

believe the best use for Victoria's 3 million hectares of publicly owned state forests is for the protection of wildlife, trees and nature



11%

support native forest logging



30%

said their vote would be influenced by policy announcements about the end of native forest logging, new national parks and stronger wildlife protection laws



82%

support the new community and local business backed plan proposed for the state government to better protect Western Port Bay

FREEPIK, EUCALYP, DARIUS DAN, SMASHICONS, FLATICON.COM

Yes, Minister! Ingrid's to do list

Victorian Labor has made significant commitments during its time in power, but many are yet to be delivered. We've taken the liberty to create some priorities for the new Environment Minister, Hon. Ingrid Stitt.

Overdue

- End Native Forest Logging**
 - Rapidly speed up transition including relevant worker & business support.
 - Liquidate VicForests.
 - Create a stand alone independent regulator.
 - Announce new Immediate Protection Areas including Alpine regions, such as Mt Stirling.
 - New threatened wildlife protections.
- Strathbogie & Mirboo North**
 - Announced as IPAs in 2019.
 - Legislate & formalise recommended new cultural reserves & new conservation parks.
- Legislate promised central west national parks**
 - Create clear plan to deliver new parks.
 - Remove logging from proposed parks.
 - Stop rampant salvage logging.
- Ecosystem decline**
 - Respond to Ecosystem Decline Inquiry.
 - Ramp up implementation of reformed FFG Act.
 - Improve biodiversity funding.
- Immediate Protected Areas**
 - Implement IPAs in Central Highland & East Gippsland announced in 2019.
 - Commence overdue review process.
 - Protect key threatened wildlife such as Greater Glider.

Urgent!

- Protect Western Port**
 - Commit to the new Framework for Western Port Bay & a dedicated fund to deliver the plan.
- Fix the urban grasslands**
 - Purchase & properly manage the years-overdue Western Grassland Reserves.
 - Prosecute illegal clearing of conservation areas & replace what lost with alternative site.
- Integrity of national parks & conservation areas**
 - Abandon Falls to Hotham Track.
 - Revise Warburton Mountain Bike Track proposal to avoid conservation areas.
 - Stop salvage logging in national parks.
 - Ensure National Parks Act is respected when developing new infrastructure.
- Feral animals**
 - Release final state-wide deer plans & get more resources for implementation.
 - Ramp up control of feral horses.
 - Establish a new collaborative management partnership.

Create a lasting legacy

- Better marine protection**
 - Get rid of government policy that bans new marine national parks.
 - Complete Victoria's first marine ecosystem plan, the Marine Spatial Planning Framework.
 - Better fund marine park management.
 - New package to purchase & protect private land.
 - Fund ramping up private land purchase for conservation such as revolving fund.
- New investigation for protection**
 - Initiation of new investigations by VEAC into key gaps in the formal reserve systems.
- Protecting nature for future generations**
 - Include proper oversight of salvage logging operations.
 - Ramp up biodiversity & park management in face of climate change.
 - Increase parks management funding to one per cent of state budget.
 - Dramatically increase state-wide biodiversity funding.
 - Review fire planning, preparation & response.
 - Realistic planned burning targets which take biodiversity into account.
 - Proper regulation & oversight of fire preparation works & planned burning.

Without a wing or a prayer

NATURE CONSERVATION CAMPAIGNER, **BLAKE NISBET**, ON HOW WE CAN PROTECT THE WINGLESS STONEFLY

The extraordinary Mount Donna Buang Wingless Stonefly (MDBWS) was deeply threatened by the Warburton Mountain Biking Destination proposal. This unique and critically endangered creature requires the use of our threatened species laws for its protection, as detailed below.

For many Victorians, Mount Donna Buang is a special day-trip destination, known for its panoramic views of Melbourne and the surrounding mountain ranges in the summer, and for snow-chasing and tobogganing in the winter. Just north of the Warburton township in the Yarra Ranges National Park and sitting at a comfortable 1,245 metres above sea level, this lush alpine mountain is the closest snowfield to Melbourne come winter, and hosts stunning patches of Mountain Ash Forest, Snow Gum Woodlands and Cool Temperate Rainforest, making it a great place to explore all year round. But, for one little creature, this mountain is not just for day tripping. For the MDBWS, this mountain is home.

MDBWS (*Riekoperla darlingtoni*) is an extraordinary creature. It's one of only two stonefly species in Australia which are wingless, with a current area of occupancy known only to the mountain springs and high-elevation streams surrounding Mount Donna Buang. Remarkably, when these springs and streams dry out over summer, the MDBWS is able to burrow into the damp substrate where moisture is retained to survive the summer. The combined features of flightlessness, ability to survive cessation of stream-flow, and long life-span (three years) render the MDBWS of high scientific interest.

Unfortunately for the MDBWS, it finds itself on the pathway towards extinction, listed as 'Critically Endangered' under Victorian legislation and internationally under the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). There has been a delay with the federal listing of



Mount Donna Buang Wingless Stoneflies. EDDIE TSYRLIN

this species, but the MDBWS is currently being re-assessed under Commonwealth legislation.

Despite occurring entirely within a national park, the MDBWS is extremely sensitive to disturbance and is faced with significant and compounding threats, such as climate change, run-off and pollutants from car parks and visitor facilities. A more recent threat is a proposal to establish extensive mountain biking tracks throughout its known range. The highly specialised adaptations of the MDBWS, combined with its low dispersal abilities and extremely limited distribution, accentuate any threat to its habitat.

The first step is through a Critical Habitat Determination (CHD), a tool under Victorian legislation which gives a legal status of protection to a listed species' or community's critical habitat. Once determined, public authorities must give proper consideration to the CHD under Victorian legislation, which in turn would influence the conduct and behaviour of relevant public authorities and positively impact the treatment of threatened species and communities. A CHD also triggers a requirement from the minister to consider whether a Habitat Conservation Order (HCO) is required, a higher level of protection for critical habitats under the same Victorian legislation. An HCO trumps the planning scheme and gives the minister powers to suspend any licenses, authorities or approvals that contravene an HCO.

The Action Statement for MDBWS states that Mount Donna Buang and its surrounds constitutes a key part

of the critical habitat for the MDBWS with reference to the Victorian legislation, but no formal CHD has been made for the species. In fact, there is no record of any CHDs ever being determined under Victorian legislation, meaning that this vital tool for biodiversity conservation has been completely neglected, and we are yet to see its full powers in play.

This is despite the provision under the *Flora & Fauna Guarantee Act* having been in place since 2019, which clearly states the circumstances under which a CHD is required. The lack of CHDs is likely linked to the department's failure to release its long-promised guidelines for CHDs.

The need for a CHD (and HCO) in respect of the MDBWS is highlighted by the recent mountain biking proposal on Mt Donna Buang, which amongst other things, threatens the Wingless Stonefly through the risk of direct mortalities from bike tyres and the introduction of pathogens (such as Myrtle Wilt) which could decimate the small pockets of habitat this insect relies on.

We thought that threatened wildlife habitats would have been protected within national parks, but as we have seen with the Warburton Bike Track Proposal, not even park status can guarantee their safety. Elements of the revised bike track could still have negative impacts on the Stonefly (see p.12), so an added level of protection is very-much required, to ensure the same fight doesn't need to resurface again when the next 'bright idea' proposal gets put forward. 🌿

Muddying the waters: Lerderderg heritage river and the Wombat Forest storm recovery

AN UPDATE FROM NATURE CONSERVATION CAMPAIGNER, **BEN GILL**, ON OUR WORK PROTECTING HERITAGE RIVERS IN WOMBAT FOREST

Community vigilance has helped stop some of the salvage logging in the Blackwood area of the Wombat Forest, but scope of proposed works are disastrous for an environment already struggling to recover after the June 2021 windstorm.

In a further continuation of the onslaught on the Wombat Forest, letters were sent from VicForests to local Blackwood residents in November 2022 detailing the intention to conduct a 'Salvage logging operation', with 10 coupes either wholly or mostly covered by Special Protection Zones (SPZs) in the area known as the Lerderderg Heritage River Walk.

Heritage rivers are protected under the *Heritage Rivers Act 1992* (Vic) for their high conservation, recreation or cultural values. Part of the river is also classified as a Representative River due to its significant geomorphic and hydrologic features. The Act specifically forbids the harvesting of timber and new roads; disturbance of any kind should be avoided in these riparian areas.

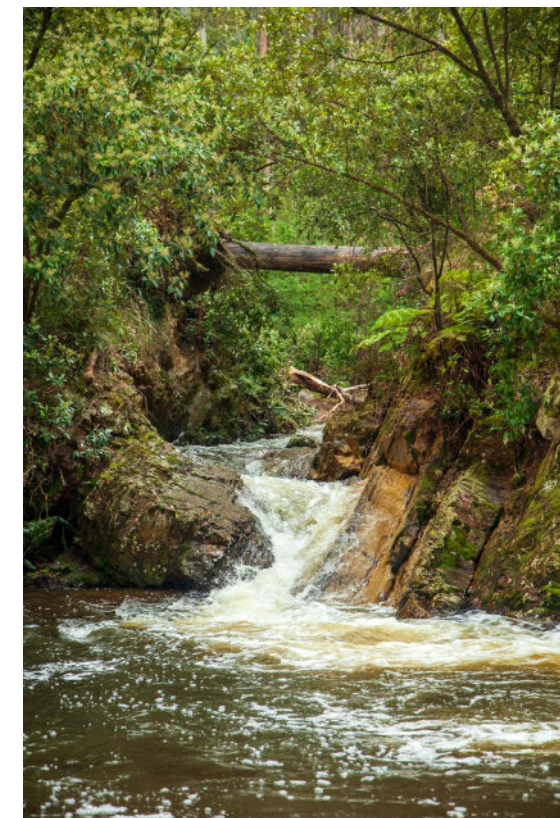
After the alert, VNPA staff conducted several site surveys noting the location of hollow-bearing trees; large significant tree locations; flora and fauna surveys; and extensively documented the condition of the surrounding forest by both drone and photography. We noted a very small scale cleanup of the walking tracks by Parks Victoria contractors that were clearing the tracks with chainsaws – pushing the logs from the track into the forest to continue its cycle of breakdown and decay feeding the myriad of systems that rely upon this very important natural process.

Whilst there were some trees down in the immediate Heritage River area it was very small scale compared to some of the more

badly affected windthrown areas high on the slopes above the valley floor. But these areas outside of the Heritage River boundaries may also have negative effects on the protections designed to protect these important areas through new roading and associated runoff and ground disturbance from the proposed works. VNPA prepared a package of concerns that was presented to the Office of the Conservation Regulator (OCR) in effort to curb the opportunism of VicForests. We also contacted Melbourne Water with our concerns and had some constructive conversations about the impacts on waterway health.

In late December the OCR issued a notice to VicForests under Section 70 of the *Sustainable Forests (Timber) Act* (SFTA Act). The purpose of this direction is to ensure that timber harvesting operations comply with the SFTA Act and is an opportunity to provide regulatory intervention and protect environmental and heritage values as required. These directions require:

- Exclude SPZ from net coupe area.
- Exclude any other activity associated with timber harvesting (e.g. road construction) from SPZ, unless an exemption obtained under MSP 1.3.
- Not remove any standing or naturally fallen trees or debris from SPZ.
- Only remove timber or debris that has been accidentally felled or has otherwise entered the SPZ due to timber harvesting operations being conducted outside the SPZ. Any such removal must be sanctioned by the managing authority in accordance with Section 2.5.1.9 of the Code of Practice for Timber Production 2014 (amended 2022).
- Exclude timber harvesting on all public land within the Lerderderg Heritage River Area, as it is defined in the *Heritage Rivers Act*.
- Notify the OCR not less than two business days prior to contractor sign in at the above coupes or not less than two business days prior to works commencing; and not more



Lerderderg River

than one week post-completion of harvesting of timber resources.

This action has saved 10 coupes from the potential impact from VicForests continued attack on the integrity of our native forests, and a unique part of the Lerderderg River. But should it really be the job of the community to ensure the government follows its own laws?

There are 175 storm recovery coupes on the TUP plus the DEECA fire program, which runs parallel or adjacent, so there is still much to do.

It is a small win but much more is needed to ensure more adequate and thorough protections. The government needs to rethink the salvage logging strategy which is doing far more damage than any benefit and cease delaying legislating our future national park. 🌿

We acknowledge these locations are part of the unceded traditional lands & waters of the **WURUNDJERI** and their ongoing role in caring for Country

Privately-operated Alpine park glamping proves unpopular

IN FEBRUARY, PARKS VICTORIA RELEASED THE ENGAGEMENT SUMMARY FOR THE FALLS TO HOTHAM PROJECT

This report captures the public's feedback on the government's plans to fund the construction of four tourist hubs in the heart of the Alpine National Park. The hubs, to be built by Parks Victoria but privately-operated, will impact 45 hectares of the park – that's 22 times the size of the MCG.

While the consultation was largely over trivial issues, with no invitation to comment on the overall value of the project (let alone oppose it), many Victorians made their views heard.

We were unsurprised to see that the report highlighted high levels of dissatisfaction with Parks Victoria's plan to build luxury huts within the Alpine National Park.

The main objections to the development covered:

- Environmental impacts: clearing native habitat, invasive species incursion and the fragile nature of Alpine ecosystems.
- Commercialisation of the park.
- Equitable access to the park: the exclusion of non-wealthy individuals that cannot afford high priced access to the huts.
- Defying the purpose of the park: to protect native flora and fauna, including those listed under state and Commonwealth legislation.

Given that the Falls to Hotham Alpine Crossing project would likely remove up to 30 hectares of vegetation, or a significant portion of that area, exposing an enormous amount of bare, friable soil, the proposal is totally inappropriate for the Australian Alps.

Engage Victoria submission

Please consider families and those who can't afford to pay much for hiking. Please don't adversely affect those who wish to use the trail for free and camp for free.

Engage Victoria survey

- Safety of non-experienced walkers using remote sections of the park.
- Questionable consultation by Parks Victoria and the overall validity of the business case.

With little support from the community, it's clear that the Falls to Hotham project has no social license. If it does proceed, the high price (to what is currently free or low-fee camping) will create a financial barrier and compromise equitable access to the publicly-owned park.

Parks Victoria and the state's new Environment Minister, Ingrid Stitt, must throw out this proposal that privatises the Alpine National Park by installing exclusive huts for use by those with deep pockets.

Our park, native wildlife and community deserves better than this poorly thought out proposal. There is already too much pressure on our parks: invasive pests and weeds, increased bushfires and climate change impacts, and rapidly growing visitor numbers. That's why they are protected in perpetuity. Or supposed to be.

My deep desire is that this unique and wonderful Alpine region be preserved and protected in its natural state. I want future generations of young people to discover its beauty as I did.

Engage Victoria submission



Camping hut in the Alpine National Park

Parks Victoria should be investing in upgrading existing walking trails and focussing on improving the park's current facilities. If this large-scale construction in the Bogong High Plains and Mount Feathertop goes ahead, the natural and cultural heritage of Victoria's high country will be forever compromised.

What do they want to construct?

The four proposed overnight hub locations along the track include the historic Cope Hut, Tawonga Huts region (both on the High Plains), Diamantina Creek (near the West Kiewa River) and High Knob (near the summit of Mount Feathertop).

A new track will be constructed, existing tracks widened and the construction of up to 80 new structures.

Learn more about our campaign to protect the Alpine National Park from development, and voice your concerns
vnpa.org.au/stop-alpine-park-development

We acknowledge these locations are part of the unceded traditional lands & waters of the **TAUNGURUNG** and their ongoing role in caring for Country

Salvage or savage? VicForests continue Wombat onslaught

BEN GILL REPORTS ON THE BATTLE TO TEMPER SALVAGE LOGGING IN THE PROMISED NEW WOMBAT-LERDERDERG NATIONAL PARK

In June 2021, large tracts of the Victorian countryside were hit with a sustained windstorm. Hours of relentless winds felled thousands of trees through the forest and surrounding countryside. A few weeks later there was jubilation at the Victorian Government's announcement that they had accepted the VEAC recommendation to create the Wombat-Lerderderg National Park, helping to protect 44,700 hectares of forest.

This jubilation was short-lived, however, as VicForests were keeping a keen eye on developments. Within days of the storm they were flying survey aircraft over the area to assess the 'windfall'. After a long and wet winter the weather swung to mild dry conditions. With that came the howl of logging machines, and the rhythmic industrial clacking of bulldozers pushing new tracks deep into the valleys of the Wombat State Forest. Log handlers dragged their bounty of native forest habitat to await their fate in a pulp mill, as woodchip or a shipping pellet.

FOI obfuscation

Our attempts via Freedom of Information (FOI) to access important salvage logging information were rejected just before Christmas. After six months of attempting to address VicForests' stipulations to limit our FOI scope, we eventually referred their continued obfuscation to the Office of the Victorian Information Commissioner. This can be a lengthy process, potentially taking up to four months to review, but will be our best chance of accessing the necessary information.

The works appear to be finished at Babbington Hill. And while we have seen some welcome pockets of Vanilla Lillies and native grasses come back,

there are still large mounds of bark and fines that decry the 'fire mitigation subtext' that enable these operations. The log landing leaves a scar with large bluestone shale pushed deep into the damp soils, restricting any chance of large trees being able to deeply root and rise above. These landings were chosen for their largest and straightest trees, adding to VicForests' bounty. Disturbance of top soils by 45–60 tonne machines and fully loaded log trucks has left this site in a state that will take a very long time to recover.

Some standing trees were removed for the creation of log landings and some because they appeared to be damaged. On interrogation, the response from the Office of the Conservation Regulator (OCR) was Python-esque: 'Albeit if still "standing", the tree is defined as fallen timber and subject to lawful harvest during storm salvage operations.'

Court-ordered glider surveys

Meanwhile over in Osborne Road, machines lie silent but still on site. Greater Gliders have been recorded at the edge of the coupe. The imminent destruction of their homes will fill the quotas denied to VicForests in the state's east after rounds of court cases found it yet again flaunting the code and failing to properly survey for threatened wildlife.

We have requested on multiple occasions any rehabilitation plans but to date no one involved in the 'storm recovery works' has been able to produce one with any specifics of the works that will be required to restore the health of the forest.

In December 2022, VicForests announced a state-wide shutdown due to their ability to harvest adequate timber to meet their quotas after the Friends of Kinglake and Environment East Gippsland judgement ordering VicForests to conduct extensive surveying for Greater Gliders in proposed coupe areas.

As log supply dried up in the east, a convenient 'make work' solution seem to have appeared in the Wombat, with



Logging in the Wombat State Forest. WOMBAT FOREST CARE

work for contractors and logs to use commercially, all under the guise of some sort of clean up. Works sprung up at the new Leonards Hill Site with fresh fervour, pushing snig tracks deep into the valleys that form part of the water catchment area.

Finding solutions

In a bureaucratic form of 'rock, paper, scissors', we are attempting to detangle the complex web of what legislation trumps another to find the outcome that may best help mitigate the damage from this operation. However, it is increasingly clear that if it is being done for apparent 'fire recovery', there is very little recourse.

A little further in the Wombat Forest on Wurundjeri Country the headwaters of the spectacular Lerderderg River meanders through the steep hills of Blackwood. The Lerderderg River is protected under the *Heritage River Act* and surrounded by Special Protection Zones, but even this was not enough to stop a VicForests attempt to place 10 coupes on the area – again under the guise of storm recovery works.

VNPA submitted a report to the OCR and had some success with the Regulator issuing a 'Section 70' notice that severely limits VicForests' capacity to access salvage logging in this area.

We'll continue to keep fighting for the protection of the wildlife that depend on this forest, but what we really need is our own government to stop logging and start legislating the promised Wombat-Lerderderg National Park.

We acknowledge these locations are part of the unceded traditional lands & waters of the **WURUNDJERI & DJA DJA WURRUNG** and their ongoing role in caring for Country

Western Port Woodlands Alliance formed

VNPA IS PART OF A NEW ALLIANCE FORMED FOR THE BASS COAST DISTINCTIVE AREA AND LANDSCAPE HEARINGS

The Western Port Woodlands, stretching from Nyora to Grantville, will be under the spotlight during the Bass Coast Distinctive Area and Landscape (DAL) hearings starting on 6 March 2023.

Bass Coast was declared as a distinctive area and landscape under the *Planning and Environment Act 1987* in October 2019. The declaration under Part 3AAB of the Act states that:

- Requires the preparation of a Statement of Planning Policy (SPP) in partnership with local government and Traditional Owners.
- Requires the development of a long-term vision and strategies to protect distinctive areas in consultation with local communities

- Introduces the opportunity for protected settlement boundaries for townships – like Melbourne's urban growth boundary.

As raised in the June 2022 *Park Watch* article 'Sand In their Eyes', DELWP (now the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action, DEECA) ignored the woodlands as a significant landscape but sought to protect nearby cleared hills with planning controls leaving locals and conservationists perplexed about the very large blind spot shown by the department to the woodlands and the landscape values they add to the Bass Coast through recreation and biodiversity protection.

Yet, during the 2022 state election campaign, Western Port Woodland supporters were told that the Bass Coast DAL process would help guide protection and management of the woodlands and the conflict between sand mining and development and the biodiversity of the woodlands.

WPW Alliance experts will be presenting on 12, 14 and 17 April with closing statements on 26 April.

For a Zoom link to the hearing please email vnpa@vnpa.org.au

VNPA has teamed up with Save Western Port Woodlands and the South Gippsland Conservation Society as the Western Port Woodlands Alliance in the DAL hearings process. We are calling a range of botanical, ecological, geological and planning experts to represent the alliance in the hearings and push the case for the woodlands to have stricter planning overlays that reflect their high conservation values.

A win for the Wingless

YARRA RANGES NATIONAL PARK HABITAT PROTECTED... FOR NOW

After a long, combative process with public hearings that featured the council's lawyers attacking their own experts and long and ill-informed debates on what constitutes Cool Temperate Rainforest, a decision on the proposed Warburton Mountain Bike Destination was finally made.

The government unequivocally rejected the majority of tracks proposed for the Yarra Ranges National Park. Both the minister and the Inquiry and Advisory Committee (IAC) saw through hogwash and hearsays to make a strong science-based decision that observed the state's threatened species legislation and the *National Parks Act*.

Months after the decision was originally expected to be made, we were relieved to see the most problematic part of the proposal

stopped in its tracks (the large 'signature' tracks – trails numbered 1, 45, 46 and 47 – in the Yarra Ranges National Park). These would have irreparably damaged fragile habitat for the critically endangered Mount Donna Buang Wingless Stonefly and hectares of Cool Temperate Rainforest.

The minister's report notes that the proposed and highly problematic track network presented an '... unacceptable risk of significant effects particularly on Cool Temperate Rainforest and Cool Temperate Mixed Forest and the Mount Donna Buang Wingless Stonefly, which are of high conservation value'.

While this is a fantastic decision the process is not over. The minister did review several of the smaller tracks (2-8) in the Yarra Ranges National Park and resolved them to be adequate pending further assessment and



survey work within the park. We'll continue to track the development and keep our supporters and community updated. Look out for our

in-depth analysis of the decision in the next *Park Watch* and where to now for our work defending the integrity of the Yarra Ranges National Park.

Many VNPA supporters called on the Government to protect this natural wonder from unnecessary harm. And it paid off. Whether you wrote a submission, made a call, donated to the case, shared the campaign or signed the open letter – every action counts.

Thank you!

Read more about the decision vnpa.org.au/warburton

Wingless Stonefly. JACOB L'HUILLIER LUNT



SURFIDER FOUNDATION SURF COAST

Hip Hip Hooray! 20 years of Victoria's marine national parks and sanctuaries

SHANNON HURLEY ON WE HONOURED VICTORIA'S MAGNIFICENT MARINE LIFE AND THE PEOPLE WHO HAVE CARED FOR OUR COASTLINES SINCE THEY BECAME PARKS

To celebrate the milestone of 20 years of marine protection through the network of 24 marine national parks and sanctuaries, friends groups across the state, Parks Victoria and VNPA rejoiced with a series of events activities.

Parks Victoria as the land ('water') manager held interesting webinars, events, and produced stunning videos. Watch them at parks.vic.gov.au/explore-nature/marine-national-parks-and-sanctuaries-20th-anniversary

Marine Care Ricketts Point celebrated their sanctuary with the chance to get up close and personal with marine life, photography displays, beach cleans, art activities and a journey through the history of the sanctuary's protection. They even had a life-sized replica of the largest flying bird of all time, the five million-year-old Pelagornithids!

The Friends of Point Addis Marine National Park had a wonderful Welcome to Country and smoking ceremony by Corrina Eccles, a Wadawurrung woman, plus speeches, a barbecue and a specially made Weedy Seadragon cake.

Friends of the Barwon Bluff Marine Sanctuary recognised Chris Smyth, former VNPA campaigner, who was instrumental in the creation of the network.

Needless to say the care of such important marine treasures would not be possible without the marine rangers and other marine staff at Parks Victoria who research, monitor, manage and educate; the dedicated volunteers and community who pick up rubbish, report illegal fishing activity, monitor Hooded Plovers, lead education activities and snorkel events; and

We think 5.3 per cent of the state is not enough! If you'd like to follow the journey, sign up to support the growing protection of our marine estate at vnpa.org.au/marine

other local groups and individuals who advocate for their protection or simply enjoy visiting them.

We'll continue to advocate for their effective management, and push our leaders to increase investment in our marine parks and sanctuaries.

Smoking ceremony at Point Addis Marine National Park



Barwon Bluff Marine Sanctuary 20th birthday cake



Mangroves at Shelly Beach, Crib Point. CELESTE DE VIS



THE TIME IS RIPE FOR THE FULFILMENT OF OUR VISION FOR WESTERN PORT BAY, WRITES SHANNON HURLEY

While the state government might be wishy washy on the issue, we're more committed than ever to our plan to protect this living wetland haven from the wave of threats it faces. In early November our discussions with the environment minister's office about a blueprint for a healthy Western Port Bay looked promising. But when the state election rolled around later that month, the Labor Government was tight lipped and no commitment was forthcoming. We're not sure what part of our bold, science-led plan to manage, restore and legally protect the marine and coastal environment didn't float their boat. Especially considering it had the backing of community, businesses, tourism and industry. We may not have gained a formal commitment from the state government to adopt and realise 'the Western Port Bay Framework' (yet). But what we did gain was impressive, and all thanks to the dedication of the local community determined to bring this vision into fruition.

We acknowledge that Western Port is on the traditional land and water of the **BUNURONG** people from the **BoonWurrung** language group and acknowledge their ongoing role in caring for Country

- Here are just some of 2022's grand achievements:
- A very successful forum in Hastings attended by election candidates and community members.
 - A commitment from many candidates to champion the framework (many are now elected and we're ready to work with them).
 - Over 60 businesses, groups (including community, tourism, and conservation) and councils signed on to support the plan.
 - Hundreds of individuals have pledged their support, including real estate agents, artists, carers, teachers, business owners, mothers, fathers, daughters, sons and more.
 - A brand new website where you can learn more and add your support: actforwesternportbay.au
 - Community leaders who have stepped up and spoken to people who live and breathe both the beauty and the threats of Western Port every single day, spread the word on social media, approached others, and gave input to our plan.



Red-necked Stints, Barrallier Island, Western Port Bay. ANDREW SILCOCKS/BIRDLIFE AUSTRALIA

Even for those of us who may only be occasional visitors to Western Port Bay's inspiring land and seascapes, it's not hard to acknowledge how special this place is. With a new environment minister, the community is as keen as ever to push for the adoption of a new way of managing, caring and planning for the future of the Bay. This is important work, because if we continue 'business as usual' we risk the continual degradation of Western Port Bay's treasured natural character. Already we are seeing poor water quality flood the Bay, urban growth happening at the fastest rate of anywhere in the state, and proposal after proposal for yet another plan for its industrialisation, development and as a dumping ground for pollution.

The tide needs to turn!

Seeing Western Port Bay's marine and coastal environment effectively managed and restored is no easy feat, that's for sure. This is likely why it has not yet been achieved across a whole of bay scale. This means we're doing something big. If we bring together land and sea managers, Traditional Custodians, businesses, community groups, tourism, fishing and industry, we can break down the silos and fractured decision-making to create a collaborative approach to looking after the entire Bay. It will take vision, drive, tenacity and courage. We have all that – all we need to do is bring our elected representatives on board.

Help us realise our plan

We are halfway there. We have done the grunt work. We have a plan. And we have support for the plan. Now

- we need prioritisation and investment from government to adopt and implement:
- **A new strategic plan** for Western Port Bay – bringing together objectives, actions and programs into a coordinated planning and management tool that recognises the natural values of Western Port and the future economic prosperity of the region.
 - **A new collaborative management partnership** – bringing together Traditional Custodians, community representatives, government agencies, councils, local business and industries, fishing and recreational groups.
 - **A dedicated Western Port fund** with annual funding for its objectives (at least equivalent to the Port Phillip Bay Fund).

We have quite the task ahead of us: 2023 will require increasing the support, investing in community leaders, running events and thoughtful conversations with government and decision-makers. 🌊



Boating on Western Port Bay. JULIAN MEEHAN

To help us power this campaign and gain government support for the framework, we invite you to make a tax-deductible donation at **vnpa.org.au/protectWPB**



Weedy Seadragon. MATT TESTONI

Young adults become marine scientists for a day

In December 2022 VNPA launched the Youth Team program – recently re-titled NextGen Nature – with a fantastic day of snorkelling at Point Gellibrand, Williamstown, as part of the Great Victorian Fish Count.

More than two dozen young adults came together to discover the fascinating seascape at the Point Gellibrand Rockpools and become marine scientists for a day.

We started our day by getting to know each other. Then, armed with a diving slate and supported by professional instructors, we went underwater, aiming to record all the fish species we saw. This valuable data has been uploaded to the Atlas of Living Australia, aiming to improve our understanding of Victoria's marine species in the long term.

We finished the activity by sharing some chips on the beach and playing some very fun games (because adults love to play too!).

This activity was organised by

NextGen Collective, an emerging initiative that seeks to connect and empower more young adults in the protection of nature. 🌿

Consuelo Quevedo, NextGen Nature Coordinator

If you're interested in hearing more about NextGen Nature go to vnpa.org.au/nextgen

We'll be releasing a calendar of activities soon across our social media platforms, so stay tuned!

Introducing NextGen Nature

VNPA's Youth Team has renamed itself 'NextGen Nature'.

During a half-day workshop in February, the team worked on developing their identity as a group, shared their expectations for the project, and began drafting a calendar of fun activities to involve other young adults in the conservation space. 🌿

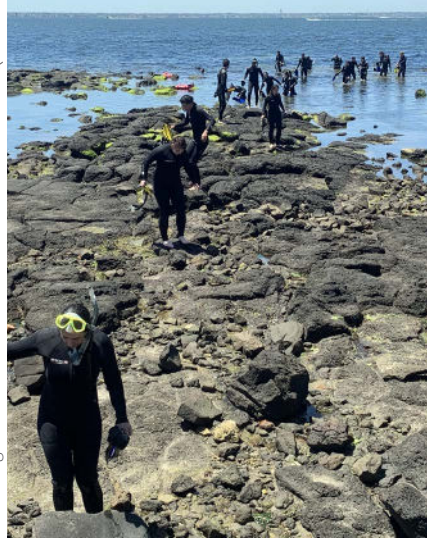


It was a super fun activity, and it felt like such an inclusive and positive environment. It was so nice to have a youth-focused activity.

It was really fun doing outdoorsy conservation activities with other young people. I really enjoyed that there was some socialising afterwards and that in particular makes me want to do more of them.

It's easy to be involved in nature when you know where to go. I learned what VNPA is and that they want young people involved.

Snorkelling at Point Gellibrand in December. CONSUELO QUEVEDO



Getting into nature!

There are so many ways to get into nature with VNPA. This includes volunteer-led bushwalking and activities, special engagement activities through Wild Families and NextGen Nature, education opportunities through Nature Stewards and citizen science activities with NatureWatch and ReefWatch.

A snapshot of our Autumn activities calendar

Nature Stewards course

**Mornington Peninsula Shire
18 March – 27 May**

A 10-week program to introduce you to local and wider Victorian ecosystems and natural places.

Western Suburbs coastal bike ride Saturday 18 March

Riding our bikes along the coast, we will see significant places of conservation along Port Phillip Bay, such as Jawbone Marine Sanctuary, Altona Coastal Park and Cheetham Wetlands.

Citizen Science: Spotlight on Bunyip Friday 31 March, 7–10pm

Check out nature after dark on a spotlighting survey in Bunyip State Park. This is a great opportunity to see and record possums and gliders. Full training is provided.

Coach trip: Lake Nagambie, Whroo & Chateau Tahbilk Saturday 15 April

A coach trip with a stop at Lake Nagambie, then Whroo Historic Reserve to view the Balaclava open-cut mine and visit the old cemetery.

Bushwalk: Grass Tree walk, Brisbane Ranges Saturday 29 April

An undulating woodland walk with the loveable grass trees looking over us like wise old spirits. Walking mostly on well-formed tracks and a short gorge to cross along the way.

Tremendous Trees: Science, mindfulness & art Sunday 29 May, 10am–12noon

Come learn about the wonderful world of trees. Visit the world's tallest flowering trees, learn how to identify and measure eucalyptus and get to know a special tree using scientific, mindfulness and artistic techniques.

Discover more at vnpa.org.au/activities

Where we went in Spring 2022

Hundreds of people took part in our nature-based activities between October and December.

Dozens learnt about wildflowers and birds at the Bunyip Discovery Day while others experienced the joy of Greater Gliders and Yellow-bellied Gliders on NatureWatch's spotlighting evenings.



Bunyip Discovery Day

Families and nature-lovers learned about grassland ecology and conservation at events hosted by the Grassy Plains Network.

Bushwalkers explored Box-Ironbark Forests and urban nature.

Plus: Citizen scientists recorded ocean life on ReefWatch's Great Victorian Fish Count (see p.33); and young adults donned fins on a snorkelling adventure (see p.16).



Grassy Plains Network



Urban nature bushwalk

Successful San Remo Sea Slug Census

Sums done down by the sea shore

Sea Slug Census participants under the San Remo Bridge.



DOZENS OF PEOPLE
TOOK PART IN OUR
LATEST SEA SLUG
CENSUS UNDER THE
SAN REMO BRIDGE, LEAD BY
KADE MILLS, REEFWATCH
COORDINATOR

We acknowledge these locations are part of
the unceded traditional lands & waters of the
BUNURONG
and their ongoing role in caring for Country

I have waited 55 years to see one!"
was the cry from one participant as
a sea slug was pointed out to her at
ReefWatch's recent San Remo Sea
Slug Census.

Her son (squatting over a rockpool)
then points and asks 'Is this one of
those things you wanted to see'. Much
to his mother's chagrin, at 16 he had
found his own within ten minutes of
walking out onto the intertidal area
under the San Remo Bridge. Phew,
the hardest part of running a Sea Slug
Census event – finding a sea slug –
was achieved!

Sea slugs is not a scientific term nor
is it a particularly flattering title when
used to describe these tiny gastropods
(snails). Upon hearing or reading the

word 'slug' your mind likely conjures
up an image of a drab grey elongated
blob that slimes its way around the
garden. As you can see on these pages
this is a far cry from what we find in
Victoria's marine environment.

To help participants find sea slugs they
were briefed to 'think like a slug, to
find a slug' this meant searching out
dark cool places with plenty of water.
This kept participants on the firm
ground under the bridge to reduce
trampling as it was darker and cooler
in the shade of the bridge. Travelling
up to two hours for the chance to see
a sea slug by the San Remo seashore,
over 70 people of all ages immersed
themselves in the pleasure and
meditative quality of focussing all of

your energies into searching for these
elusive critters.

Many slugs (most of them colourful)
were found across the two days of
searching under the bridge at San
Remo. Many more were found by
the author and one of Victoria's top
nudibranch spotters, Nick Shaw,
on a night snorkel at the same
location. Night snorkelling and rock
pool rambling is an incredible way
to observe many of marine species,
especially nudibranchs which are more
active after the sun goes down.

The highlight of the event, aside
from the enthusiasm and care
taken by all the kids, was watching
people's perception change as they
developed a new-found appreciated

for this intertidal area which is often
derogatorily referred to as 'just a
mudflat'. Because this ain't no ordinary
'mudflat'.

The San Remo Marine Community
is an extensive reef and seagrass flat
to the north of San Remo Bridge.
It has a unique combination of
physical attributes that are not found
elsewhere in Victoria (northerly aspect,
adjacent to fast flowing channel, low
wave energy and made of pitted basalt
rarely found in intertidal areas).

However, it is the diverse array of
marine invertebrates in particular
the sea slugs that make this place
so special. Over 120 species have
been recorded from the area. That
is approximately 25 per cent of the

known southern Australia species and
over five per cent of the world's!
Community helped get the site
formally protected in 1991 after
fighting off a proposed marina.

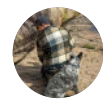
Damage from boats, sedimentation,
and coastal development are on-going
threats to the bay. We'll continue
to run citizen science events and
document sea slugs in San Remo and
work on achieving our Western Port
Bay framework (see p. 14).

*This event was funded by Coastcare as a
part of Summer by The Sea.*



A selection of the many sea slugs sighted on the day. ALL IMAGES KADE MILLS

The Phascogales and the phantom logger



NATURE
CONSERVATION
CAMPAIGNER **BEN GILL**
ENCOUNTERS CUTE
CRITTERS AND MENACING
MACHINES WHILST
INVESTIGATING DUBIOUS
LOGGING PRACTICES IN THE
COBOW STATE FOREST

We acknowledge these locations are part of the unceded traditional lands & waters of the **TAUNGURUNG & WURUNDJERI** and their ongoing role in caring for Country

An alarming pattern of justifications is being used to gain access to restricted or protected conservation areas. Parts of the Cobaw Ranges are the latest to fall victim to problematic 'storm recovery' and fire mitigation works.

The Cobaw State Forest is located near Lancefield, 70 km north-west of Melbourne in the Cobaw Ranges. The ranges are mainly granitic and reach a maximum height of 760 metres. The area is unique in that it serves as an island haven for biodiversity in a sea of cleared farmland. The Cobaws are almost wholly covered by a Special Protection Zone (SPZ) managed for conservation. These were also recommended by the Central West VEAC Investigation for the Cobaw State Forest to become a new 2,532 hectare conservation park, which was accepted by the Andrews Government in June 2021.

VNPA discovered seven coupes listed on VicForests' website. Equipped with the spatial data, we conducted a thorough site survey and were left greatly perplexed by the limited storm damage visible using on ground investigation, drone and photographic

records. We eventually made contact with the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action (DEECA, formerly DELWP) Forest Management, who are running the program, to highlight issues related to 'salvage logging' in the proposed conservation park and SPZ.

We also held concerns about the impacts to the understorey and groundcovers from the compaction of 45–60 tonne logging equipment, especially as the area was recovering after being extensively burnt in a DELWP planned burn that jumped containment lines in October 2015.

Our concerns were noted. DEECA reached out to assure us there would be no 'broad acre' storm recovery works in the Cobaws. They said works would be restricted to roadside clean up for fire mitigation purposes (in other words, a smash and grab 'forest recovery' operation carried out solely by VicForests). Detail was sparse as to the scope, timing and locations of the proposed works, and we were unpleasantly surprised when a concerned local community environment group alerted us to machinery movement in the area.

Opposite: The beautiful Cobaws State Forest.

Right: The phantom logging machine.

Below: A Brush-tailed Phascogale caught on camera in the Cobaws.

ALL IMAGES BEN GILL

The ghostly machine

Now this is where it gets a bit fishy... VNPA staff attended Reillys Track deep in the forest where a machine had been noted in earlier surveys. Upon arriving at the location we found no machine but could see the unmistakable paw prints of a 45 tonne log stripper meandering up a deeply rutted and almost impassable 4WD track to a beautiful area of habitat. This area features mixed age healthy trees including Messmate (*Eucalyptus obliqua*), Candlebark (*E. rubida*) and Manna Gum (*E. viminalis*). The understorey consists of Silver Wattle (*Acacia dealbata*), Blackwood (*A. melanoxylon*) and Cherry Ballart (*Exocarpos cupressiformis*).

Due to the presence of safety work zone signage we recorded the GPS position and took reference photos. VNPA staff submitted a report to the Office of the Conservation Regulator (OCR) and DEECA asking for confirmation of work zones as the location failed to fall into any of the areas previously discussed with the department. On the same day a local environmental citizen science project recorded Brush-tailed Phascogales (*Phascogale tapoatafa tapoatafa*) on two separate cameras. The ground in the location they were recorded featured a healthy natural cover of debris, providing an ideal foraging location for the insects and bugs that Phascogales rely upon.

Excited by the findings on the camera trip, we decided to return to the Cobaws to move the cameras and check on the machine 'working' deep in the forest far from any real fire access track. We were appalled to find two large log piles 100 metres apart, extensive damage to the ground cover off-track and crushed granite from the weight of the machine that may have once been home to reptiles and insects. We took GPS coordinates from the locations of the machine and the log piles.

Early the next day we received a call from DEECA responding to the



previous week's request for more information on the log stripper working in the Cobaw. We were informed that DEECA and VicForests had attended the site indicated in our report and could not find the machine or see any sign of the presence of one. It was suggested that our GPS pin drop may have been off target. This was checked three times in spatial software as being correct.

A little perplexed at the possibility we may have caught a rare glimpse of the 'phantom logging machine' in an area outside of its expected habitat range, we reconfirmed the position with a third site visit and pin drop. It is strange to think that a machine such as this – so cleanly stripping logs and leaving behind vast tendrils of fine fuels in its wake – was apparently not being actively monitored.

Who's on first, what's on second?

This creates a spaghetti of confusion over who is responsible for what, who has oversight over whom, and which legislation trumps another in a constant rendition of 'rock, paper, scissors' transformed as 'The Forests Act, The Water Act and Regional Forest Agreements'. DEECA are responsible for fire risk management in state forest, national parks and conservation reserves, and contract VicForests to do the works. But the works aren't forestry

for possible commercial purposes (even though they are cutting down or removing logs) and undertaking 'storm recovery' combined with 'fire mitigation' is a dangerous trend toward increasing use of the fire powers to gain access to previously protected areas such as the Cobaws SPZs. Of course, they shouldn't be logging in there because it's a water catchment but... but the fire act and emergency storm powers mean they can!

A further twist is that the OCR have reiterated that as this 'a fire mitigation' operation they have no oversight even though the operation is being physically conducted by VicForests contractors and staff under the supposed supervision of DEECA. So the plot thickens and the waters are further silted while the machinery of government rides roughshod over any hope of holding this rogue industry to account.

Oversight, accountability and clarity are what is needed if we are to have any hope of restoring these forest habitats. But with the current glacial pace of permanent protections there's a real risk it will be too late.

As authorities balance public safety, protections for the natural environment and pressures from the timber industry, we'll continue to emphasise the intense need for transparency and independent oversight. 🌿

Trevor Speirs

PARK WATCH SPOKE TO WOMBAT FORESTCARE MEMBER TREVOR SPEIRS ABOUT HIS INTERESTS AND INSPIRATIONS



1. What is one of your earliest experiences of Wombat Forest?

Mainly to do with birdwatching. We had moved down from NE Victoria where the bird life is quite abundant and we were a little disappointed in the Wombat at first. But over time you come to realise that it takes patience and with a bit of experience you begin to uncover the secrets that the Wombat has to offer.

2. What drew you to start standing up for Wombat?

I went to a Wombat Forestcare (WFC) committee meeting and was really impressed by their passion for, and knowledge of, the forest. They were discussing the campaign for Wombat to become a State Park and I got involved shortly thereafter.

3. How long have you been involved in caring for Wombat Forest?

Probably just over 10 years, so a latecomer compared to other WFC members. Before I joined they had been fighting for many years to stop the logging which was devastating the forest. The consequences of that logging, with the thick regrowth now so abundant in some parts, especially around Daylesford, is a clear example of the damage done to the environment by the timber industry.

4. Of all the actions you have taken to stand up for nature, which has had the biggest impact and why?

The group's constant advocacy over the years for the Wombat forest and its surrounds to be the subject of a VEAC investigation. I would think WFC definitely played a role in that coming to fruition. Of course, although the investigation found the Wombat to be worthy of protection as part of the national parks estate we are still waiting for this to be legislated. We've also had some small wins such as having planned burn boundaries realigned so that greater glider habitat is excluded.

5. Can you tell us about a time when standing up for nature felt too hard and how did you overcome it?

The state government's delay in responding to VEAC's decision and then when they finally accepted their recommendations, their continued reluctance to legislate for the Wombat's protection. It's just disappointing

that our elected representatives seem to have no concern about the terrible plight our biodiversity is in. Now we have VicForests salvage logging. The longer their operation goes the more damage is done to proposed national park areas. I suppose we just have to continue campaigning against this destruction through public awareness until this madness stops.

6. If we could all do one thing to care for Wombat Forest today, what would you recommend we do?

Contact your local member of parliament and express your outrage with the damage that VicForests is inflicting on the forest. It would be wonderful if more people appreciated how extraordinary our natural environment is, not just here in the Wombat, but nationally.

7. What would a healthy, protected and respected Wombat Forest be like to you in 5-10 years?

I feel it will take decades for the forest to recover from the amount of human exploitation that has occurred over so many years. It would be wonderful if it could one day go back to an old growth forest like it once was, but with so many competing interests in forest management these days, it might be wishful thinking.

8. What are your main areas of interest?

I am very keen on raptors, and particularly owls. There is definitely something mysterious and otherworldly about owls that is quite captivating. Plus it gets you out into the forest at night, and when all the trail bikes have long gone home, it really is quite lovely to roam through the forest on a warm, still night. Of course the darkness brings out our other nocturnal species and I am also keen on gliders, bats and other small mammals.

9. What have your experiences working with Wombat Forestcare taught you or opened up for you?

Wombat Forestcare is the first group I ever joined. I think if you can have a group of dedicated people, all with a strong desire to get the right outcome it's a lot easier than being a lone voice. We have been lucky at Wombat Forestcare to have a passionate convenor in Gayle Osborne who has worked tirelessly for the forest's protection. 🌿

What is 'plant blindness' and is there a cure?

I'm renovating my house. Today the builder removed plants that were in his way: a Mallee I had grown from seed was cut to a stump; a Hakea I had pruned over 15 years into an archway over a path is now a plain vertical. This tidying was despite my obvious profound grief at an earlier excavator's swing smashing an orange tree in half, and despite the clear path he wanted being achievable simply by tying the plants back.

As my rage settles, I realise this is a garden-scale version of what happens

when VicForests rips the guts out of the Dandenong Ranges with salvage logging (see p. 24), or sand mines get the go-ahead in fragile grass tree bushland in Western Port Woodlands (see p. 12), or when more concrete smothers a critically endangered grassland to build evermore steel and concrete boxes.

It's 'plant blindness', and its consequences are lethal, hacking us a step closer to an unsustainable and ruined world. People with plant blindness don't see ecosystems,

don't see the irreplaceability of the extraordinary green mass of our biosphere.

So here, born of rage, is the start of a regular *Park Watch* series on our unique and amazing plant heroes that we share this amazing state with. Time to open our eyes and help cure plant blindness and delve deeper into the botanical wonders right in front of us.

Adrian Marshall (Grassy Plains Network Facilitator) with Jordan Crook (Nature Conservation Campaigner)

Plant Blindness with Dr Debbie Reynolds



Spiny Rice-flower (*Pimelea spinescens* subsp. *spinescens*)

Time and time again, Spiny Rice-flower has saved grasslands slated for destruction. That's because it is listed as Critically Endangered under the federal *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act) and the Victorian *Fauna and Flora Guarantee Act* (FFG Act).

It's an old species, probably found in Gondwana, and it likely evolved in salty marshes. Melbourne is a hotspot for its genetic biodiversity, and it has spread via wind across the Victorian Volcanic Plain. Each plant is either male or female (dioecious), so to have a sustainable population you need significant numbers of both (there are hermaphrodites too, but they don't produce as high-quality seed).

A once-common sub-shrub, it survives in about 350 wild populations containing perhaps 80,000 mature individuals, mostly in patches of grassland and grassy woodland along roadsides and railway lines on the clay soils of the Victorian Volcanic Plain and the alluvial soils of north-west Victoria.

Collecting seeds from different areas is vital for Spiny Rice-flower conservation. Many patches are diminishing in size and we need to grab seed before it's too late. Its insect pollinators only travel short distances, so survival is threatened by inbreeding within isolated populations. Regular fire is also fundamental to maintaining healthy populations.

Spiny Rice-flower will suffer unique impacts from climate change. Keilor Plains plants, close to Melbourne, are adapted to a very dry climate because they exist in three rain shadows (the You Yangs, Brisbane Ranges and Otways). Their genetics will need incorporating into the far western plains populations (e.g. Colac), which are



A male Spiny Rice-flower

adapted to wetter conditions, if those populations are to survive a rapidly drying climate. We could also lose populations around Melbourne if climate change pushes them beyond their limits of coping.

One remarkable feature of the Spiny Rice-flower is its taproot, which is like an oversized carrot, up to one metre long, that serves to find water in dry conditions and which resprouts after fire. Translocating Spiny Rice-flower is difficult because they need to be dug out to a considerable depth, and often a tree spade is used. Unlike most grassland plants, Spiny Rice-flower is winter-flowering, making it an important resource for many insect species.

Spiny Rice-flower has a very active Recovery Team that meets three times a year, discussing new research, management and how to respond to known threats. A new draft Recovery Plan is in the works, with public consultation just finished. 🌿

Dr Debbie Reynolds is Pimelea Conservation Officer at Trust for Nature, and Grassy Plains Network member

Alarm at Dandenong Ranges fire logging



PLANS TO REMOVE AND SELL FALLEN TREES IN THE DANDENONGS HAS RAISED ALARMS, REPORT **JORDAN CROOK**, NATURE CONSERVATION CAMPAIGNER AND **ROBERT PERGL**, SOUTHERN DANDENONG RANGES LANDCARE

We acknowledge these locations are part of the unceded traditional lands & waters of the **WURUNDJERI** and their ongoing role in caring for Country

VNPA and landcare groups have raised the alarm over plans to remove fallen trees and sell them from two forested areas in the Dandenong Ranges National Park and Silvan Closed water catchment, under the banner of largely unregulated fire operations.

The Dandenong Ranges National Park has long been a popular day trip for locals, visiting tourists from Melbourne and abroad. Tall trees and lush forest gullies with Tree-ferns are a major drawcard and a reprieve from the surrounding suburban landscape. This area was recognised for its unique cultural and natural heritage with early protection of the Ferntree Gully section starting in 1882. Sections have been added progressively to form a 3,500 hectares network.

It protects one of Greater Melbourne's largest patches of intact remnant vegetation and is home to an array of unique plants, animals and landscapes.

Now in 2023 the parks conservation and recreational values are under threat from nefarious plans to salvage log sections of the park under the guise of fire management by state fire management organisation Forest Fire Management Victoria (FFMV), a section of the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action (DEECA).

In June 2021 storms tore through Victoria heavily impacting the

Dandenong Ranges as well as the Wombat Forest (see articles pp.11 and 20). The storms saw thousands of trees fall across the state, succumbing to the unusual wind directions, heavily sodden soils as well as past impacts on the trees caused by infrastructure, such as compaction, root damage and changes in natural hydrology.

The storm damage, with strong winds from the south and east, was dramatic with an estimated 25,000 trees felled in the Yarra Ranges alone. One power company told ABC Radio that the storm event had caused one years' worth of damage in one night.

Locals and VNPA have been monitoring storm clean-up operations since days after the storm event and advocating for an ecologically sensitive approach to removing hazardous trees and clearing fallen trees from roads, fuel breaks and tracks.

So alarm bells were raised in December 2022 when FFMV notified locals and VNPA of a 100 hectare zone within the national park and in the closed Silvan Water Catchment. FFMV were to remove 40 to 60 per cent of fallen logs in the area before Christmas 2022 with the works being undertaken by state native forest logging company VicForests, with profits from the wood being split between VicForests and FFMV.

The proposal would see log haulers, bulldozers and other heavy machinery,



Above and opposite: FFMV fuel breaks on Board Track, Dandenong Range National Park. JORDAN CROOK

most of which being over 20 tonnes, rolling around off-track into forested areas to remove logs while damaging and compromising the recovering forest and remaining trees that survived the storms initial impact.

We know salvage logging is the worst kind of logging, adding pressure to the recovering forest after the initial disturbance event and hitting the forest at its most vulnerable stage of recovery.

These works, if they go ahead, will not only permanently damage the forests and habitat that is supposed to be protected by the national park status but will also arguably increase the severity of fires in the area by encouraging regrowth of flammable understorey.

It has been well known for a long time that the clearing of intact forest and replacement with dense shrubs and tree seedlings increases the severity of bushfires. To date no one has been able to provide us with the fire modelling showing the fallen logs have increased the fire risk. We do know that logs pose very little increased fire risk and are vital for many of the species that call the area home such as the Tooarrana (or Broad Tooth Rat). Environmentally, the best outcome is to leave the logs in sit as habitat. But it is obvious they have some sort of commercial value.

The community doesn't want the log removal operation. It will have a terrible impact on the park and the values it was established to protect with the works flying in the face of the objectives of the *National Parks Act*. The justifications behind the log removal operations planned by FFMV have been about gaining access for prescribed burning, Silvan water treatment plant and commercial timber salvage. None have standing in good

management of protected areas such as national parks.

According to FFMV, the operation is not salvage logging but the motivation appears opportunistic as much as anything else. FFMV's comment in *The Age* on Xmas Eve 2022, makes this pretty clear '...removing some of the large debris provides an opportunity for community and commercial use that would otherwise be burnt.'

FFMV do have the legal responsibility for these works, and essentially only need to consult Park Victoria. The big issue, however, is that their role is largely unfettered, without formal independent oversight and with only vague guidelines. Fire management salvage logging is not even subject to the Forest Code of Practice, but it is subject, at least in theory, to national and state threatened species laws (see pull out box).

The fallen trees have created structurally complex and diverse habitats for a range of wildlife. Broad acre fallen log removal into off-track areas of forest into the standing remnant vegetation will potentially permanently damage the forest. In the face of an uncertain future of climate change and biodiversity loss, public land management needs greater scrutiny and a science-based approach, not the type of poorly regulated and loosely justified operations as planned by FFMV in the Dandenong Ranges

This scheduled operation has a total lack of explanation and transparency of proper process. It sets a very poor precedent for management of our prime conservation areas, and under the guise of fire preparation logs are removed for commercial use. The community will not stand for this. It's completely inappropriate. 🌿

Unfettered.

Who oversees fire works?

VNPA and Southern Dandenong Ranges Landcare have written to both the Office of the Conservation Regulator (OCR) and the federal government regarding impacts on seven nationally listed species. The OCR replied that:

Decisions around DEECA's fire operations, including assurance, are managed through the department ultimately by the Office of the Chief Fire Officer. There is no regulatory body to oversee fire management... (emphasis added)

The federal response was also disappointing, largely a tick and flick:

The department has engaged with the Victorian Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action (DEECA) to ensure they are aware of obligations to protect threatened species under the EPBC Act.

I understand that DEECA has undertaken a self-assessment to identify relevant protected environmental values and implement appropriate management controls and will refer proposals if a significant impact on a protected matter is likely to occur. (emphasis added)

So much for new era in the application of national environmental laws! 🌿



The other housing crisis

Failing to protect hollow-bearing trees



BUSHFIRE MANAGEMENT IN VICTORIA IS CAUSING BIODIVERSITY DECLINE THROUGH SIGNIFICANT LOSS OF HOLLOW-BEARING TREES
REPORTS **MICHAEL FELLER**

The Victorian Parliament's Inquiry into ecosystem decline in Victoria, released in December 2021, makes for sobering reading. Victoria is now the most intensively settled and cleared state in Australia with over 50 per cent of native vegetation being removed since Europeans arrived.

The Victorian State of the Environment 2018 report noted that Victoria has the highest number of threatened plants, animals and insects by sub-region in Australia, with over 700 fauna and flora species and ecological communities listed as threatened under Victoria's threatened species framework. The report suggests that between one quarter and one third of all terrestrial plants, birds, reptiles, amphibians and mammals, along with numerous invertebrates and ecological communities, are considered to be at risk of extinction.

Tree hollows are important across the globe. About 18 per cent of bird species in the world rely on hollows for nesting, with 13 per cent of those listed as threatened under International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List criteria.

In Australia, over 300 species of native animals need hollows for breeding, such as large forest owls and other threatened wildlife.

In some southern Australian forests, cavities that are suitable for vertebrates often require 120 to 180 years of tree growth to develop, and sometimes longer. Many of these older trees were removed when forests were converted to agriculture. State logging is removing many more. The net result is that very few hollow-bearing trees are left on the landscape. For example, it has been estimated that some 30–60 per cent of Victorian Mountain Ash forests contained old-growth containing hollow-bearing trees when Europeans first arrived; this figure is now just over one per cent.

Bushfires and forest harvesting are generally thought to be the major threats to hollow-bearing trees. The Victorian *Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act* lists both loss of hollow-bearing trees and inappropriate fire regimes as threatening processes. Bushfires may kill trees, causing some to collapse, but many dead trees remain standing for some time so any hollows they have can still be used by wildlife.

We acknowledge these locations are part of the unceded traditional lands & waters of the **WURUNDJERI** and their ongoing role in caring for Country

Opposite: Living 1.5 metre dbh *Eucalyptus cypellocarpa* with hollows felled in early 2022 near Mount St Leonard in Yarra Ranges National Park. ALL IMAGES MICHAEL FELLER

Clearfelling removes hollow-bearing trees. If such trees are left standing within a logging coupe they have an uncertain future as they can be blown down. Unfortunately, we have no good data on hollow-bearing tree loss caused by fires and logging.

Another significant cause of loss of hollow-bearing trees is bushfire management operations conducted by Forest Fire Management Victoria (FFMV). There are three major contributing factors: fuel break creation and maintenance; creating breaks around areas to be prescribed burned; and prescribed burning

It is deplorable that a living, hollow-bearing, old-growth tree cannot be protected in a national park.

Fuel break creation and maintenance

FFMV recently embarked on a major program to build new fuel breaks and to clean up others. As Phil Ingamells wrote in the December 2021 issue of *Park Watch*:

The clearing of vegetation for fuel breaks has always been a bit of a hit or miss strategy for protecting the community and the environment from fire. Breaks can contain a fire in mild weather, but do nothing to stop fires in extreme weather when spotting by burning embers can reach kilometres ahead. Breaks have also been known to create wind tunnels that can drive a fire.

They do serve as a point from which to conduct remote fuel reduction burns, or back burns in the face of fire, but these operations are also under serious question.

Any trees in or near these breaks that are considered hazardous by FFMV personnel are cut down. This has included many hollow-bearing trees. As an example, on a 300 metre section of the fuel break running along the ridge between Donnellys Weir and Mt St Leonard near Healesville, six hollow-bearing trees were cut down in early 2022. These trees were all near the break but in Yarra Ranges National Park. They were up to 2.2 metres in diameter (at breast height) and were mostly living. It is deplorable that a

living, hollow-bearing, old-growth tree cannot be protected in a national park.

Creating breaks around areas to be prescribed burned

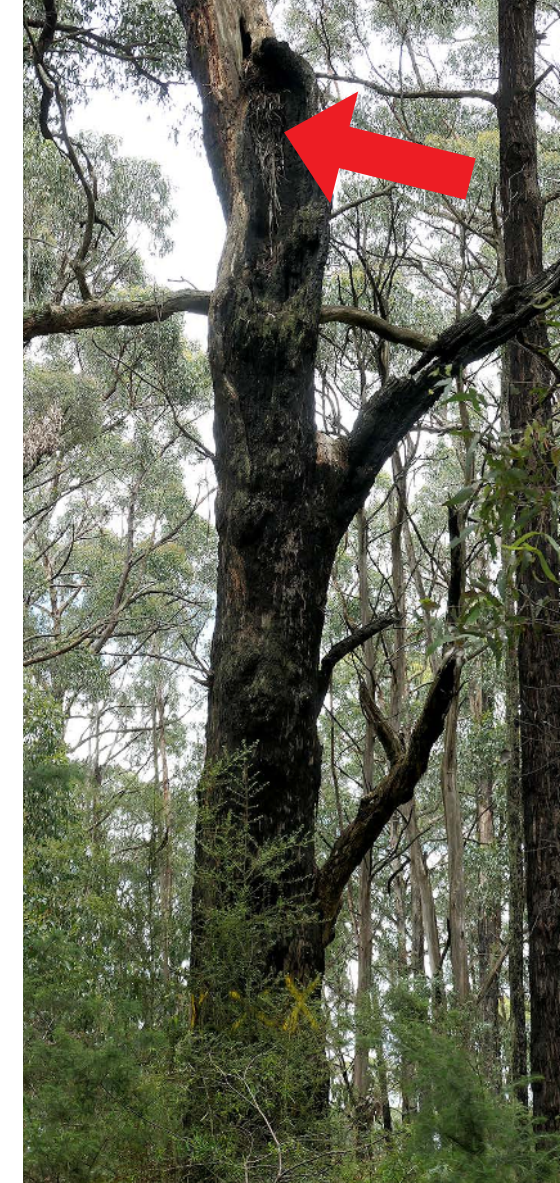
To prevent fire escaping an area to be burned, breaks are cleared and any trees deemed hazardous to the

people conducting the burns are cut down. Again it is FFMV personnel who decide which trees are to be cut and again many hollow-bearing trees are cut as these are more likely to be considered hazardous. If the

burn is to be conducted within a national park, then it is trees within the national park that are cut.

Fire management seems to take priority over park management, which is the exact opposite of how proper land and fire management should occur. Proper fire management should always be subordinate to overall land management. In Victorian national parks and other protected areas fire management activities are conducted by FFMV but these activities should always be controlled by the overall land management objectives for the area.

continued overpage...



Above: A living hollow-bearing tree in Chum Creek with visible nesting material coming out of a hollow. Photo taken 3 December 2021. Red arrow points to nesting material. Possums lived in this hollow.

Below: The tree from above after it was felled. Photo taken 10 December 2021.



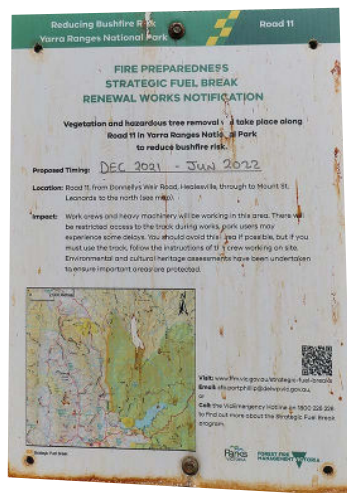
The other housing crisis continued...

The training given to those who decide which trees to cut appears questionable as many sound, living trees are cut and in one instance noted in January 2022, a living tree with an obvious animal nest in a hollow was cut down. The animals were possums, and were in the tree when it was cut down. A letter of objection to Victoria's Office of the Conservation Regulator (OCR) got nowhere when FFMV simply told the OCR that they had done everything correctly.

A recent report from the Victorian Auditor-General's Office concluded that the OCR has limited enforcement powers and has been unable to assess noncompliance by VicForests or effectively evaluate its timber harvesting activities. Thus, OCR's inability to regulate FFMV seems similar to their inability to regulate VicForests. In fact, it is unclear if the OCR have any formal responsibility for regulating FFMV, and FFMV appear to be able to do whatever they want.

Prescribed burning

The most common form of fuel reduction in Victorian forests is prescribed burning. This operation is highly questionable due to the fact that it reduces forest flammability for only a few years after which flammability often increases to greater levels than before the burn, as a result of changes in understorey vegetation,



Sign indicating FFMV work in Yarra Ranges National Park, April 2022.



Hollow containing nesting material in a tree felled by FFMV in Chum Creek, December 2021.

so that long unburned forests are often less flammable than ones that have been recently burned.

Prescribed burning also has no impact on fire behaviour under extreme weather conditions. This was well described by Phil Ingamells in the June 2021 issue of *Park Watch*.

Not only is fuel reduction burning questionable from a forest flammability viewpoint, but it can also lead to a variety of undesirable biodiversity impacts, one of which being a loss of hollow-bearing trees, which are more prone to collapse during or after a burn.

Thus, a study in NSW concluded:

...low intensity prescription burns may cause levels of destruction of hollow-bearing trees that are substantial enough to warrant immediate attention from managers.

Another recent study in Victoria concluded:

...planned burns in Gippsland increase the collapse risk of HBTs [hollow-bearing trees] significantly and, by implication, are likely to cause loss of habitat for hollow-dependent fauna in areas where hollows are needed.

Departmental procedures

DEECA has a 'Procedure for the removal, destruction or lopping of native vegetation on Crown land' which allows them to remove native vegetation (DEECA and Parks Victoria are already the largest clearers of native vegetation in Victoria).

They are supposed to consider important biodiversity values, such as hollow-bearing trees, and if vegetation removal is necessary then they are supposed to consider 'counterbalancing', i.e. offsetting, the removal. There is no indication that any counterbalancing of hollow-bearing tree loss has ever been conducted.

We don't know exactly how many hollow-bearing trees are destroyed by FFMV but observations made by myself and others suggest that the numbers are indeed significant. They must be reigned in by any government serious about biodiversity protection. 🔥

Restoration or conversion?



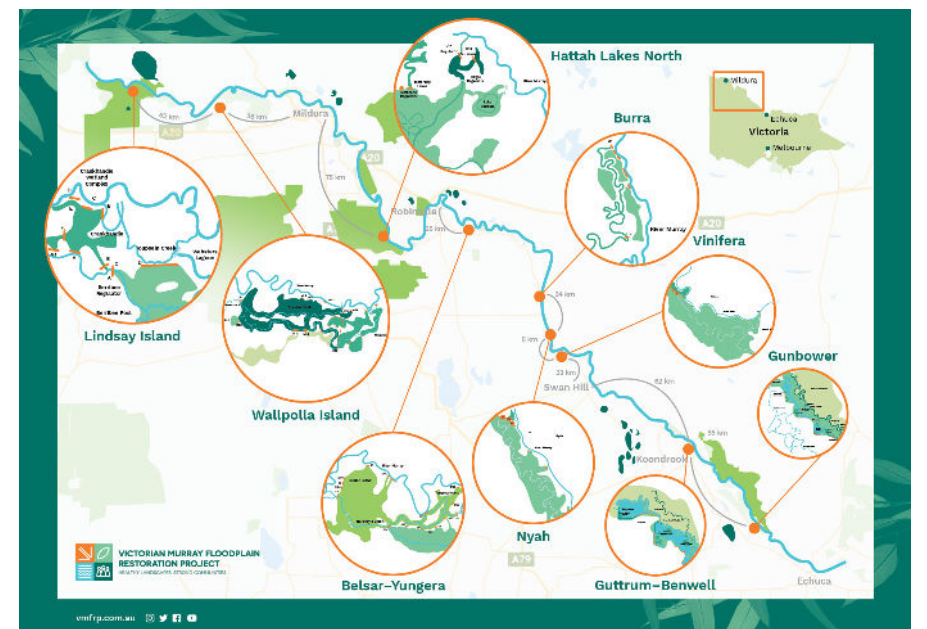
JORDAN CROOK QUESTIONS THE VALUE TO THE ENVIRONMENT AND THE TAXPAYER OF PROPOSED FLOOD PLAIN ALTERATIONS ALONG THE MURRAY RIVER

The Victorian Murray Floodplain Restoration Project (VMFRP) is a series of nine floodplain alterations being proposed by the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action (DEECA), local Catchment Management Authorities (CMAs) and Parks Victoria under the banner of ecological restoration of wetlands and climate adaptation of ecosystems.

The projects will go through assessment under either an Environment Effects Statement (EES) or an Environment Report (ER) under four assessment packages in a perplexing move by the then Planning Minister to assess the projects individually over four separate processes while their impacts will be felt across the whole river system.

The projects are in fact an elaborate and very expensive experiment to 'manage water effectively and efficiently on the floodplain' and will cost tax payers \$300 million. They are part of a water offset plan that will see less water enter these wetlands naturally to meet targets set out in the Murray Darling Basin Plan and divert further water to irrigators.

Concerns have been raised by botanists, ecologists, academics and Traditional Owners that the water manipulation will lead to unknown and potentially disastrous outcomes. These could lead to the simplification and conversion of ecological vegetation communities, death of ancient Red Gums via inappropriate flood regimes, impact of movements of Turtles and fish, to name a few unresolved issues. Organisations such as Environment Victoria and Environmental Justice



Location of the nine VMFRP sites. VMFRP ENVIRONMENT REPORT CONSULTATION PLAN

Australia also have deep concerns about the management and regulation of water in the projects.

The idea of increasing the 'efficiency' of a natural ecosystem is dangerous. Further regulating an already over regulated river system will lead to unknown and perverse outcomes for natural areas and our impacted national park.

The installation of the newly built infrastructure and access roads will see 4,512 large and hollow-bearing trees removed as part of the projects and close to 380 hectares of native vegetation across the whole project, including within parks.

VNPA recently submitted to the Belsar-Yungera and Hattah Lakes

North Projects EES and at the hearing presented our concerns about the impact on natural systems and the Hattah-Kulkyne National Park.

We will keep you updated on the further EES and ER processes for Vinifera, Nyah and Burra Creek, Guttrum-Benwell and Gunbower and Lindsay Island and Wallpolla Island. 🌿

We acknowledge these locations are part of the unceded traditional lands & waters of the
**LATJI LATJI, NGINTAIT,
DADI DADI, WADI WADI,
WEMBA WEMBA, BARABA
BARABA & YORTA YORTA**
and their ongoing role in caring for Country

Next steps to save the Western Grassland Reserve



THE WESTERN GRASSLAND RESERVE AND THE OVER-ARCHING MELBOURNE STRATEGIC ASSESSMENT NEED TO BE URGENTLY REINVIGORATED AND PRIORITISED, SAYS GRASSY PLAINS NETWORK FACILITATOR, **ADRIAN MARSHALL**

Imagine you have a big paddock. It was once decent grassland. But now, wherever you stand, more than half of the vegetation is weed. And not just one weed species, but a mix of Serrated Tussock and Chilean Needle Grass and some nasty newer ones like Cane Needle Grass.

In that paddock there are some good patches of Kangaroo Grass and a few native herbs resisting the weed invasion. Everywhere around that paddock is also covered with weeds, and the seeds blow in year after year. Imagine you've got ten years of funding to do whatever you want to improve the conservation quality of this paddock. What are you going to aim to achieve? How do you reduce the weeds without killing the natives? If you kill the weeds how do you stop them growing back?

Now imagine you have a hundred paddocks like that. Each one has a different mix of weeds, different site conditions: some are rocky, others have been cropped, some have wetlands in them, some farm dams, there are ephemeral creeks and stony rises. What you do on the first paddock isn't going to have the same results in any other paddock.

After ten years, the funding you have will dry-up and the paddocks will be handed to Parks Victoria. That's the offset-style deal these paddocks are managed under. But after those ten

years' intensive management, there will still be weeds everywhere and the grasslands will still need intensive management, but there won't be the money for that. Nevertheless, Parks Victoria will be told to turn it into a national park. Welcome to the Western Grassland Reserve!

Reserve is at a crossroads

The bleak vision described above is one of the big take-home messages to come out of a recent series of online forums and site visits to the Western Grassland Reserve run by the Grassy Plains Network in conjunction with the Melbourne Strategic Assessment team at DEECA.

Conservationists warned of the weed explosion back in 2010, and since then little has been done by those in charge. But the latest mapping of the weed extent is truly shocking – more than 50 per cent of the reserve is majority weed cover. The grim reality is that we will be living with high weed coverage for a long time.

Huge and complex

It is both daunting and magnificent to see the to-the-horizon scale of the future Western Grassland Reserve – 15,000 hectares is immense. And the complexity is off the charts.

Firstly, there's a dozen weed species, including one we've haven't seen

before (African Thistle, anyone?). The Reserve includes Bunurong, Wurundjeri and Wadawurrung country, with rich cultural heritage including an ancient stone observatory that could genuinely be the oldest astronomical structure in the world. There are four local governments involved, and it's set-up under a joint Commonwealth-Victorian agreement. It's a working landscape slowly being purchased over dozens of years.

There's also 1000 hectares of land with unexploded ordnance (Live Bomb Range Road is called that for a reason). The land is a patchwork of former uses, some de-rocked, some fertilised, some grazed hard, some cropped, each use leaving different conditions to consider.

Plus there are competing conservation priorities, like how Golden Sun Moth loves Chilean Needle Grass. And the Public Acquisition Overlay means the land bankers, who own much of this land right next to Melbourne's rapidly growing urban fringe and who want to maximise their real estate profits, can bog progress down for years in court (they won't win, but that doesn't stop them trying).

The Western Grassland Reserve might well be the most complex restoration project in Australia's history.



Kangaroo Grass (*Themeda triandra*). JOHN ENGLART

It's time for triage

What is clear is the need to focus protection and recovery efforts on the good bits. A vast application of the 'Bradley Method', working from the good bits out, somehow pushing weeds back with species-rich grassland as we go. At the same time, the expanses of weed-dominated land need to be stabilised – we don't want them getting worse.

Land acquisition has failed to obtain the best bits of the Western Grassland Reserve. That has to change.

It's time for some big thinking. We need to revive the expert advisory panel that was inexplicably disbanded years ago. We need to move past just spraying weeds. We need to use

every tool we have to control biomass and shift the dominant grass species to a more native mix. Grazing, fire, improving soil health, you name it we must do it; rigorously, scientifically, relentlessly. We need universities, NGOs and Traditional Owners involved alongside the contractors who plan and manage the on-ground works, so we learn together. We need a workforce of grassland specialists, which at the moment is lacking.

We urgently need a restoration strategy to create a future for Victoria's native seed industry so that we will have enough seed to do what we have to do – and that's a hundred times as great as the seed production capacity we have today. Direct seeding

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Tussock Skink (*Pseudemoia pagenstecheri*). ROB VALENTIC

Next steps to save the Western Grassland Reserve continued...

is currently the only cost-effective way to replace the weeds in that vast landscape. We've known that for a decade. Maybe something's coming together but it's wait and see. We need research. Once upon a time the now disbanded Technical Advisory Group came up with a research program, but that was never acted on by those in charge. We've lost a decade of opportunities because of failed governance. One good research discovery could save ten of millions of dollars. Seriously, the Western Grassland Reserve is big money, billions over time. The dominance of weed species does not mean we should give up on the Western Grassland Reserve. Regardless of their country of origin, exotic grasses still provide habitat and resources for invertebrates, reptiles, birds and mammals. They still improve soil health and sequester carbon.

Time for engagement

The events the Grassy Plains Network proposed and ran last year in



Above: Collection of yellow Common Everlasting (Chrysocephalum apiculatum) and purple Native Bluebells (Wahlenbergia stricta). JESSIE BORRELLE
BELOW: Golden Sun Moth (Synemon plana)



conjunction with DEECA were one of the first engagement activities on the Western Grassland Reserve to have been run in years. And how good did it feel to stand out there and actually have some dialogue! A key message from participants was the need for a real partnership with stakeholders and for more engagement with the community. We think what's most needed are a some highly visible in-your-face fantastic restoration sites. Highly floral, lots of information, education and signage. Well-considered locations, places people can see the possibilities of a good future, understand what a well-restored and managed grassland can really deliver.

Time to move past the failure

It's time to learn from mistakes. We've had the Victorian Auditor-General's Office report that absolutely slammed DEECA for its failings. We've had the Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline and its recommendation to immediately buy

the Western Grassland Reserve land. We've seen the weed mapping. There is no more time left to pretend it is all okay. Major change is essential and urgent. We have a new federal government and minister. We have a new state environment minister. Let's fix this mess and be remembered for something good. 🙌

Tell me again, what's the Western Grassland Reserve?

Melbourne's Urban Growth Boundary was expanded in 2009 to meet the perceived urgent need for more land for housing. Mapping and modelling showed the last big patches of remnant Victorian Volcanic Plains grassland were just outside the future new Urban Growth Boundary. So the Western Grassland Reserve was set up as partial compensation for the loss of 6250 hectares of native vegetation and almost 3000 scattered trees across the 46,000 hectares of proposed new growth areas. The Western Grassland Reserve is

essentially an offset, and like an offset it gets intensively managed and then, so the theory goes, it will be in good enough condition to not require further intensive management inputs. After ten years, each acquired block gets handed over to Parks Victoria, which has to find its own funds for any management. The whole process was formalised as the Melbourne Strategic Assessment, 15,000 hectares of farming land was to be acquired by 2020, with acquisition and management funded by a levy on development within the new growth areas. It didn't go well. In 2020 the Auditor-General's Office released a damning report *Protecting Critically Endangered Grasslands*, highlighting substantial failures of governance, cost overruns, and that only ten per cent of the

promised land had been purchased. Worse still, private landholders who had not yet had their land purchased were walking away from their responsibilities to control weeds, leading to massive weed invasion and significant loss of biodiversity. In response, the Victorian Government passed the *Melbourne Strategic Assessment (Environment Mitigation Levy) Act 2020*, and now more money is flowing to speed land purchase and improve management. We now have 17 per cent of the total land purchased. Funds are going to local councils to offer landholders incentives to manage their land better prior to purchase. Intensive on-ground and aerial mapping efforts are providing detailed paddock by paddock data that has not been previously available. 🙌



Great Victorian Fish Count

THE GREAT VICTORIAN FISH COUNT SNORKELLING DAY AT KITTY MILLER BAY, PHILLIP ISLAND, WAS A HUGE SUCCESS WITH PARTICIPANTS, SAYS REEFWATCH COORDINATOR, KADE MILLS

Victoria's coastline is notoriously fickle, wild and windy with plenty of waves one day, then calm, tranquil and as flat as a board the next. To be honest, flat as a board only happens a few days of the year and it just so happened that the Great Victorian Fish Count we scheduled for Kitty Miller Bay had two of those days. It was great to be joined by staff from the Bunurong Land Council for the smoking ceremony and Welcome to Country to begin the weekend, with many of the staff joining us in the water to count fish. In-water proceedings were led by VNPA staff and local man with gills, Ash Belsar of OutThere Outdoors. In two days, over 90 people had a ball searching the waters of Kitty Miller Bay counting fish. Plenty of fish were counted, but the highlight for most was snorkelling with an array of stingrays. So much so that two of the kids that came down on the Sunday so their other parent could swim with the rays.

This was a great opportunity for my son and I to get into the water together! We often snorkel here, but snorkelling with purpose and the goal of seeing as many fish as we could meant we stayed out longer, and paid more attention to specific species.

The event provided people with an opportunity to participate in the Great Victorian Fish Count in a fun, safe and relaxed environment. With the support of all participants we were able to collect data on the presence and relative abundance of fish at a new location. We also connected people with and developed their understanding of Victoria's underwater world. Too often we hear 'I only go snorkelling when I am in the tropics, I didn't think there would be anything to see here'. Events like this ReefWatch are successfully quashing this view. 🙌 This event was funded by Coastcare.

A safe and very enjoyable event full of beautiful underwater scenery and suitable for all ages and abilities... Clean water quality and friendly, well organised and experienced staff and volunteers makes this an educational, fun and relaxing experience to cater for all who loves the ocean in any way.

My daughter and I had such a great time... The facilitators were so friendly, helpful and knowledgeable. A very well organised program.



From top: Participants at the Kitty Miller Bay Great Victorian Fish Count; a male Herring Gull; one of the Southern Eagle Rays we encountered (and counted); Fish counter in action. ALL IMAGES KADE MILLS
We acknowledge these locations are part of the unceded traditional lands & waters of the **BUNURONG** and their ongoing role in caring for Country



Cry me a river

Water for Wyperfeld



LARA BICKFORD,
VNPA VICE PRESIDENT,
REVEALS THE BEAUTY
OF WYPERFELD NATIONAL
PARK, AND THE STRESS IT
IS UNDER FROM LACK OF
FLOODING

It was during the depths of Melbourne's third COVID lockdown in 2020 that Wyperfeld National Park came into my awareness. After enduring months of venturing no more than 5 km, the contrast of camping in the vast peaceful mallee of north-western Victoria could not have been a more welcome antidote to the months of confinement in Fitzroy.

After a five-hour drive from Melbourne through the mostly treeless landscape of broadacre crop farms, the surrounds change to mallee wilderness. Something about the tenacity and uncomplaining, modest nature of the bushes, trees, grasses, fungi and creatures that live here inspire confidence that life can not only survive, but thrive in some of the harshest conditions in Australia.

We spent the days walking, observing and discovering the many treasures that carve out a niche for themselves

in this vast park (Victoria's third largest national park). Walking and observing is how one appreciates this region. The slender pines, Buloke and River Red Gums, and Mallee and Kangaroo Grass feature, but it is so much more. The landscape may not be dramatic like its southern neighbour Gariwerd, but there is beauty, subtleness and complexity everywhere. It was July so there was a huge number of different fungi. My 12-year-old Harold never got tired of spotting new and increasingly bizarre examples.

Delving into history

To find out more about the park, I referred to Geoff Durham's wonderful book *Wyperfeld* (1995). After describing the ancient formation of the park, Durham writes of the Wotjobaluk people who lived on this land for thousands of years.

Opposite: Flood plain areas with trees under stress.
ALL IMAGES JOHN MILLER, FRIENDS OF
WYPERFELD

The abundance and variety of food, materials and culture that thrived there indicates the rich diversity of this region. After European settlement, as land clearing marched north, it was the incredibly high number and variety of birds that we can thank for being the inspiration to create and preserve this region in the first place.

Back in 1908, Archie Campbell visited and observed '42 birds' and breakfasted on 'scrambled mallee hen eggs' while staying at Pine Plains Station. He soon returned with ornithologist Arthur Mattingley who wrote of the area 'Nature wild and primeval reigned supreme... the whole place is a paradise for nature lovers... replete with animal life... this area should be preserved'.

And here we are, on the back of the foresight and work of these visionary Victorians, we have this rare, wonderful part of Victoria with the amazing Mallee vegetation and all the wonder it contains.

A high value ecosystem

The defining unique feature of the Eastern Park are the flood plains that surround the creek linking Lake Albacutya in the south and Wirrengren Plain in the north. When the Wimmera River leaves Hindmarsh, it is referred to as Outlet Creek, the final ephemeral part of this water system (it is one of a small number of rivers that flows away from the sea).

Pre-European records indicate that water would reach the park roughly every 20 years. This requires the Wimmera River to fill Lake Hindmarsh (a massive ephemeral freshwater lake), then overflow to flood into Lake Albacutya, and finally overflow to Outlet Creek and Wirrengren Plain at the top of the park. The distance between Lake Albacutya and Wirrengren Plain is 30 km, but the Outlet Creek meanders over 80 km as it winds and feeds a series of 17 smaller lakes which terminate in the park. The last flood into Wyperfeld was 1975.

The value of this region is undisputed. Lake Hindmarsh and the Lower Wimmera River System is listed on the National Heritage List by the Australian Heritage Commission, and the terminal reaches of the river to Wirrengren Plain are protected as a Heritage River Area under Victoria's *Heritage Rivers Act 1992*.

Water entitlements

Lake Albacutya notably has Ramsar listing, an international convention protecting 'Wetlands of International Importance Especially as Waterfowl Habitat'. However, the lake's high conservation value flood plains and the vegetation and animals they support, the ones who rely on flooding times to breed, can only be sustained with periodic flooding. Gradual diversion and storage of waters from the Wimmera River for agricultural and domestic use has resulted in insufficient water reaching the park.

Locals, nature lovers and environmentalists had great hope in the Wimmera Mallee Pipeline Project, completed in 2012. Massive water savings were predicted with the abolition of wasteful open canal systems to enclosed pipes. The Commonwealth bought a yearly environmental water entitlement of 28,000 megalitres specifically for Lake Albacutya and the terminal reaches of the river. However, water allocations to the Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder (CEWH) are rarely honoured due to the high water storage level required in reservoirs before water can be allocated for use.

These rules are being examined by VNPA with the aim of amending to increase the chance of honouring the CEWH allocation, especially when the rainfall is high, as it is now. It is only during consecutive wet years that environmental water releases to the Wimmera's large terminal lakes are expected to be of benefit. The current wet conditions have filled the Wimmera system and water is flowing into Lake Hindmarsh. Of course, this region is not exempt from the effects of climate change. It has been observed that successive high-rainfall years have seen a significant reduction in rainfall compared to 50 to 100 years ago. This makes the challenge



River Red Gum die back in Wyperfeld National Park

even greater and must be taken into account when looking for solutions.

Dedicated Wyperfeld enthusiasts, including numerous VNPA members, have spent many years tackling risks to the park, including control of rabbits and multiple noxious weeds. Much success has been had. These threats continue and also need resources, but right now it is the lack of periodic flooding that is the park's largest existential threat. It is precisely this flooding that makes this park the rich, diverse and important area it is.

Now is the time for enthusiasts to act in support of returning water to Wyperfeld to allow the flourishing of this magnificent national park. 🌿

If you would like to find out more about VNPA's campaign and how you can be involved, please contact Lara Bickford
lara_simon@iprimus.com.au

We acknowledge these locations are part of the unceded traditional lands & waters of the
WOTJOBALUK NATIONS
and their ongoing role in caring for Country

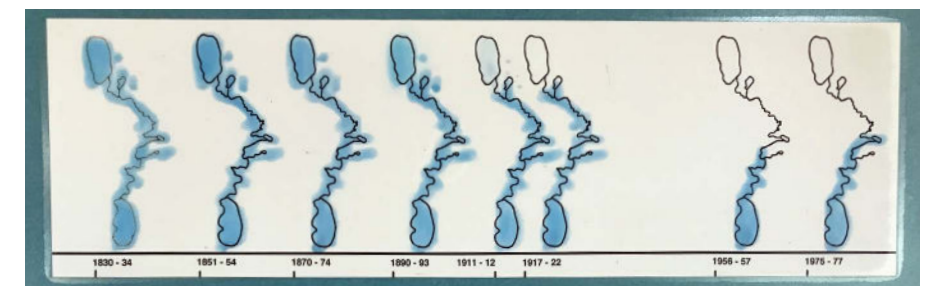


Image from the Wyperfeld Visitor Centre clearly indicating the reduction in flood events to the point of disappearance over the last 120 years.

Macedon Ranges' majestic Snow Gums



TANYA LOOS,
BIODIVERSITY
PROJECTS OFFICER

WITH MACEDON RANGES
SHIRE COUNCIL, DESCRIBES
THE AREA'S GROWING LOVE
AND CONCERN FOR THEIR
SNOW GUMS

We acknowledge these locations are part of the unceded traditional lands & waters of the **TAUNGURUNG, WURUNDJERI & DJA DJA WURRUNG** and their ongoing role in caring for Country

The first time I really 'met' a Snow Gum was not in classic Snow Gum habitat; on top of a mountain in the high country. This Snow Gum was by the Campaspe River, on a private property in Ashbourne, west of Woodend. The landholders had done a capital job of restoring their river frontage, and their exemplary paddock management meant that their large old trees would survive for generations to come.

And what large old trees they were! Massive Manna Gums with long limbs snaking along the ground, Yarra Gums with healthy dense canopies, towering Candlebarks and – the highlight – many wonderful old Snow Gums. Snow Gums (*Eucalyptus pauciflora* ssp. *pauciflora*) have stunning white, grey and multi-coloured bark that is especially beautiful when wet. Lowland Snow Gums, which grow below 800 metres altitude, are quite different in form to the Snow Gums we may observe in the Victorian Alps, or at the summit of Mount Macedon.

These Campaspe River Snow Gums were huge and heavy trunked, much like a Manna Gum. Unlike the mallee-like form of the higher altitude Snow

Gums, which are twisted and multi-stemmed as the trees cope with the hazards of harsh mountain living. The landholder showed me how to identify the Snow Gums from the other white gums such as Candlebarks. Snow Gum fruits or gum nuts are very large and the leaves are also quite distinct, with parallel veins rather than a network of veins branching out from a central line.

Fast forward a year or so later, and I began working at Macedon Ranges Shire Council as their Biodiversity Projects Officer. I was delighted that one of my first roles involved taking the reins of a council-led Snow Gum Citizen Science Project!

The project began in 2018, when the Snow Gum population on Mt Macedon was selected as a target species for monitoring ecosystem health (modelling indicates this vegetation type is the most vulnerable to climate change).

Meanwhile, Newham and District Landcare Group, and in particular member Helen Scott, fell completely in love with the Snow Gums growing along their roadsides and in their paddocks. Gums were propagated and handed out to new members.

Opposite: Snow Gum leaves and fruit.
Right: Snow Gums on the Campaspe River. ALL IMAGES HELEN SCOTT

What is so special about Snow Gums?

Snow Gums are one of approximately 700 species of eucalypts described in Australia. They are revered for their beauty, their tenacity and will to survive even the harshest snowy environments.

They have a wide distribution, ranging from eastern SA, across central and southern Victoria, central and eastern Tasmania, eastern NSW, extending north across the New England Tablelands plateau to near the Queensland border. Although they are most well known for their alpine populations, there are scattered lowland populations, with some Snow Gums in SW Victoria and Gippsland growing at 50 metres above sea level.

Unfortunately, many alpine populations are suffering from dieback, caused in part by a beetle whose wood-boring larvae are killing the trees as the climate warms. Climate modelling also paints a grim picture – this thirsty species requires at least 600 millimetres annual rainfall to thrive. While not listed in Australia, the Snow Gum qualifies as 'Near Threatened' in the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species.

Macedon Ranges Snow Gum Project

Firstly, a local Snow Gum working group was formed. Local ecological consultants Karl Just and Tim D'Ombra then assessed the distribution and health of Snow Gum

populations across the Macedon Ranges. Their brief was to collect spatial, quantitative and qualitative data to better inform programs for their ongoing protection and management.

As much of Macedon Ranges Shire is private land, by necessity the project had a strong citizen science focus. Building on the excellent education work of Newham Landcare, council launched a Snow Gum monitoring blitz – with a brochure, articles and social media asking residents to send in their Snow Gum sightings.

We co-led a workshop on the ins-and-outs of eucalypt identification, the ecology of eucalypts, the flora and fauna that depend upon them, and the care of these large woodland giants on private land. The workshop concluded at a much loved Snow Gum affectionately known as 'the whopper'. Meanwhile, Karl and Tim undertook detailed assessments of the health and distribution of Snow Gums across the shire, traversing the roadsides and visiting landholders who had submitted sightings. Nothing like a visit from an ecologist on your property!

In June 2022, the project report was published. Karl Just presented the project findings at a public meeting in June. This gathering of Snow Gum enthusiasts from across the Ranges even featured a local harpist playing a Snow Gum inspired composition.

Despite still bearing the scars from the 1983 Ash Wednesday fires, the Mt Macedon Snow Gum population was assessed as being in relatively good health, with over 50 per cent of trees

assessed as in 'very good' health. In the lowland populations the picture was even more positive with 77 per cent of trees recorded as 'very good'.

Happily, the health assessment also found that there are plenty of young Snow Gums in the region. This means the local conditions are still suitable, and that adequate numbers of saplings are reaching maturity.

But what got all of us really excited is that the assessment identifies the Macedon Ranges population of both alpine and low-lying snow gums as the 'largest number of individuals and sub-populations of Snow Gum known to occur outside of the Alps region'. Newham Landcare's Snow Gums, with some 697 trees distributed across five hectares, was identified as the largest lowland population in Victoria.

The enthusiastic participation in the Snow Gum Citizen Science project revealed a cohort of Snow Gum Guardians already taking action to protect and nurture this wonderful eucalypt. The Snow Gum can now be promoted as a mark of pride and point of difference for our shire.

Outside Macedon Regional Park, the majority of Snow Gums recorded were on council-owned roadsides, highlighting council's special responsibility. Although we all can play a part in the ongoing protection and survival of Snow Gums, we continue to work with landcare groups, landholders and agencies (such as Parks Victoria) – especially as the climate warms and dries. 🌳





Kalimna Park woodland near Castlemaine. The area on the left of the track was subject to a 'fuel reduction' burn in 2015. The relatively open understorey on the right is long-unburnt. PHIL INGAMELLS

Getting fire right



MISINFORMATION
IS RIFE IN DEBATES
ABOUT FIRE
MANAGEMENT IN VICTORIA. IT
MUST BE CHALLENGED, SAYS
PHIL INGAMELLS

For years now, VNPA has been critical of the incapacity of the agencies managing fire safety in this state: currently that's Forest Fire Management Victoria (FFMV).^{*} Our land managers seem to have been subservient to a litany of inherited myths, and display a puzzling lack of curiosity over recent research.

An important element of that research shows that fuel reduction burns will be effective for a few years, but can be followed by a couple of decades of greatly increased growth of flammable shrubs, followed over the long-term by relatively open and less flammable understoreys.

Publication of those important studies has failed to alter fire management in Victoria; it hasn't even prompted FFMV to implement a monitoring program whereby the changes in forest composition and structure are measured, over time, after management burns are performed.

Indeed since the 1930s, when the Victorian Government began formally recording its fuel reduction

burns, there has been no program to monitor the results of those burns: no recording of changes in flammability levels over time, no documentation of understorey species changes or, for that matter, no measurement of effective increases in public safety.

It is surely extraordinary that a succession of government departments with responsibility for the wellbeing of the community, not to mention the wellbeing of our great natural heritage, should have continued for so long without giving us (let alone themselves) any independent, objective evaluation of their burn programs.

The community might also be to blame – we have taken them on faith.

In recent years, there has been a growing call for the reinstatement of Aboriginal burning practices, and those programs, albeit at a small scale, are being trialled in locations across Victoria. They are very much part of the movement towards Traditional Owner joint management of our national parks and other public land,

a movement that has been supported and facilitated by the broad nature conservation community, including VNPA.

In general, joint management of our parks has started out well: a recent management plan for Barmah National Park, and a visitor strategy for Lake Tyers (Bung Yarnda) State Park are among a number of fine examples.

And Aboriginal burning programs could have the capacity to challenge our stuck-in-a-rut fire management programs. Pre-1788 Aboriginal fire management, at its best, must necessarily have been based on an accumulation of observations of the impacts of fire.

If you were burning to increase the abundance of an edible tuber, fruit, or weavable sedge, it would be important to know what had failed, what had worked, and keep building on that knowledge over generations.

It was surely, in its way, science.

But any hope that fire management by FFMV might be due for a rebirth under the influence of Aboriginal methods of observation is proving optimistic; indeed it just might be running off the rails.

An article late last year in *The Conversation*, 'How 1970s conservation laws turned this 'paradise on Earth' into a tinderbox', summarised the findings of a peer-reviewed paper

generated from the hallowed halls of Melbourne University and published in the respected international journal, *Fire*.

That paper carried an even more confronting title: 'The Curse of Conservation: Empirical Evidence Demonstrating That Changes in Land-Use Legislation Drove Catastrophic Bushfires in Southeast Australia'. It has been cheered in some circles, but it has also attracted an avalanche of claims from well-informed people that it contained misleading statements and came to unjustifiable conclusions.

It seems to have been driven by a lingering annoyance that the declaration of wilderness areas was a coloniser's notion that negated Aboriginal occupation of those areas. But wilderness areas (and indeed most national parks) were largely fostered by the community's need to seek refuge from the industrial age – from the coloniser's assault on the land.

Victorian law establishes Wilderness to be land that 'has not been substantially modified by the influences of European settlement' and that in restoring a declared Wilderness Area, only 'the removal of evidence of developments of non-Aboriginal origin' is allowed. There was no attempt to hide or deny Aboriginal occupation.

The paper then claims that Victoria's *Land Conservation Act 1970* 'prohibited burning by settler landholders'. The Act, in fact, makes no mention of burning, and the investigative body it set up, the highly reputable Land Conservation Council, was an advisory body – it had no authority to prohibit anything.

The burning rights of farmers, especially those with grazing rights on public land, were largely removed under the *Forests Act 1958*, following a recommendation from a 1946 Royal Commission into Forest Grazing which partly blamed the 1939 Black Friday bushfires on the burning of the bush by graziers. (Interestingly, the Royal Commission pointed out back then that the burning of forest grazing licences promoted a growth in more flammable scrub.)

Perhaps the most disconcerting aspect of the paper is its unsubstantiated

claim that 'settler burning' mimicked Aboriginal burning, that Gippsland's farmers and graziers recognised the importance of Aboriginal fire management and had carried on that tradition.

It's a very generous rewriting of history, given that settler farmers had driven Aboriginal people from their land and, in so many cases, murdered the original occupants. It's a notion that, surely, deserves re-examination by the authors.

There are other substantial errors identified in the paper, including the use of a solitary East Gippsland pollen core to draw conclusions on fire frequency across the state. And the bold statement that the authors' data demonstrates 'that catastrophic bushfires first impacted the local area immediately following the prohibition of settler burning in 1970', ignores a long history of post-settlement bushfires in the region.

Other criticisms of the paper include its failure to recognise that weather has been the overwhelming cause of large fires in Victoria, and that under climate change that threat grows.

Our natural areas are complex beyond reckoning, yet they survived and evolved over hundreds of millions of years without the help of Traditional Owner management, and without the strong management hand of FFMV.

These areas have been so abused and fragmented over the last 200 years that they now clearly need a helping hand. But anyone, and any institution, claiming with certainty that they know best how to manage the bush should take a deep breath, look around, and think some more.

There is still a lot of learning to be done. And management of our remarkable natural heritage will depend on the respectful application of that learning. 🌿

^{*}Forest Fire Management Victoria includes staff from DEECA (Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action), Parks Victoria, VicForests and Melbourne Water. Legally, FFMV is responsible for all fire management on public land in Victoria, including national parks and other conservation areas.

Threat of logging hangs over Mt Stirling



ALARM BELLS WERE RAISED LATE LAST YEAR AS VICFORESTS FLAGGED LOGGING FOR 11 AREAS AROUND MT STIRLING IN VICTORIA'S HIGH COUNTRY, REPORTS NATURE CONSERVATION CAMPAIGNER, **BLAKE NISBET**

VNPA has a long-standing vision that the forests between Mt Stirling Alpine Resort and the Alpine National Park should be linked into the national park and managed by Parks Victoria. This would improve recreational experiences, ecological management and the overall integrity of our alpine region.

We have been conducting on-ground ecological surveys in these threatened forests of Mt Stirling, along with community groups Friends of the Earth (FOE), the Victorian Forest Alliance (VFA) and the Friends of Mt Stirling (FOMS). We embraced winter-like conditions and heavy rains on our first field trip in November, and upon returning to the mountain in December, we were welcomed with even colder weather including some summer snow flurries!

Despite the challenging weather, we conducted flora surveys in areas earmarked for logging, as well as some spotlighting surveys overnight. We identified populations of the endangered *Euphrasia lasianthera*, a semi-parasitic herb with striking pink flowers, along a track which VicForests propose to upgrade into a logging road. We also found a suspected population of *Pimelea ligustrina* subsp *ciliata*

within an area proposed for logging, an endangered shrub which occurs throughout our alpine and sub-alpine regions. Both trigger protection under the legislation which governs logging in Victoria and will be reported to the state environment department. To our distaste, we also identified that our iconic Snow Gums (*Eucalyptus pauciflora*) are within at least one area proposed for logging.

Whilst undertaking flora surveys on the north side of Mt Stirling, we identified a large Eucalyptus tree which had distinctive V-shaped incisions up the trunk and was oozing with sap, which can be ecologically attributed to the Yellow-bellied Glider. They like to scour up and down the trunks of these trees, commonly referred to as 'feed trees', chewing into the tree to extract the sweet sap. Spotlighting surveys later confirmed populations of the Yellow-bellied Glider on the south side of Mt Stirling, near the Bindaree Falls, as the night's silence was often interrupted by the high-pitched shrieks, moans and gurgles often used to describe what truly is an iconic and unique variety of calls from this highly vocal animal.

These are the first records of populations of Yellow-bellied Gliders within the Stirling-Alpine Link. The Yellow-bellied Glider is listed as vulnerable to extinction under the *Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act*, and has recently been identified by the Supreme Court as a species which VicForests has failed to adequately survey for and protect during logging operations across areas of Victoria. The orders of the Supreme Court require comprehensive surveys and increased protections for these Gliders in other parts of the state and have set the precedent as to what is

required by law to protect the Glider populations around Mt Stirling, which includes things like the protection of hollow-bearing trees and 100 metre corridors along watercourses.

These threatened forests have had a temporary reprieve from logging due to small community groups calling out VicForests on unlawful logging, with them having to press pause on their operations across most of the state. They simply cannot be trusted to log within the Stirling-Alpine Link which is of high recreational and ecological significance.

In November 2019, over 96,000 hectares of Immediate Protection Areas (IPAs) were announced by the Victorian Government alongside the Victorian Forestry Plan to end native forest logging, but the high country missed out on receiving any protections from logging which continues to threaten these regions.

If the Stirling-Alpine Link can't be simply added to the national park, then it should be declared an IPA along with other ecologically significant areas across Victoria's high country, and comprehensively assessed to ensure that its value is recognised and that suitable protections are put in place. 🌿

Find out more and take action at
vnpa.org.au/logging-mount-stirling

We acknowledge these locations are part of the unceded traditional lands & waters of the
TAUNGURUNG
and their ongoing role in caring for Country



Yellow-bellied Glider JUSTIN CALLY

Ann Wigglesworth

ANN HAS BEEN SUPPORTING VNPA FOR 22 YEARS AS A MEMBER, REGULAR DONOR AND OCCASIONAL PARTICIPANT IN OUR ACTIVITIES PROGRAMS. **JANE CROUCH** RECENTLY CAUGHT UP WITH ANN FOR A SEASIDE CHAT.

1. What drew you to support VNPA?

When I returned to Melbourne in 2000 after living in Mozambique and Sydney, and I was looking for a good bushwalking club and was recommended VNPA. I'm originally from a country town in the UK where walking was a regular part of family life. I studied Environment Sciences at university in the UK and as the uni was near a nuclear power station, I became involved in the anti-nuclear campaign. I was horrified that we had no safe means of disposing of the nuclear waste. I feel the same about plastic today!

As I read more of the organisation's wider remit, I valued their important work. I came to love the Australian landscape, where it is wild and untouched. I walked with VNPA every year until COVID necessitated the suspension of the activities program.

2. Tell us about one of your favourite Victorian parks and what aspects of the place do you especially enjoy?

It has to be Wilson's Prom! The landscape and beaches are magnificent, and where else can you go camping in such a spot, walking away from roads and cars to enjoy the natural environment in its purest form? I love the idea of building a fence across the isthmus to keep out feral animals.

3. Do you have a particular favourite creature or plant, that you go out of your way to observe or photograph, and why is it special to you?

I love Australian marsupials, especially Koalas and kangaroos. They are both so gentle and are vegetarian (like me). I am devastated by the idea that Koalas are endangered due to the 2020 bushfires destroying so much habitat. But it is not only bushfires. Victoria continues to clear old growth forest even though there is so little of it left and it is home to our native wildlife. It is a disgrace that we turn those beautiful trees into wood chip!



Ann at Werribee Gorge (top) and walking in the Angelsea Heath section of the Great Otway National Park (below). LIONEL BOXER

4. If you were hosting an international visitor, and had a week to spare, where would you take them?

The Great Ocean Road with its stunning seascape! Although it is a major tourist area, it is still very low key with many small unspoilt communities – just visit out of the main holiday season. You can see kangaroos in Anglesea enjoying the watered grass of the golf course, and Koalas in Kennett River. A large part of the Anglesea heathland, with its rich variety of flowers and orchids, has become part of the Great Otway National Park since the closure of the Alcoa mine. I only hope that the new Great Ocean Road Coast and Parks Authority (GORCAPA) do not over-commercialise this beautiful coastline.

5. If you could invite a famous person on a bushwalk with you, who might it be and why?

Craig Reucassel, journalist and presenter, who did such a fantastic job in the 'War on Waste' TV series which showed up our crazy and environmentally damaging consumer culture. Craig could learn about the extinction of native wildlife in Australia, the loss of habitat and the work of VNPA, so that the importance of conservation of the natural environment could be mainstreamed.

6. What has time in nature taught you?

There is nothing as inspiring as the amazing variety of trees, shrubs, flowers and animals that make up our natural world, and its free! But we must look after it. That is why I donate to VNPA to protect the places I love, and that will continue after I die from the bequest I've made in my Will. Meanwhile, I continue to roam with a light footprint in Victoria's wonderful national parks. 🌿

WARBY-OVENS NATIONAL PARK

Creek in Warby-Ovens National Park
ALL IMAGES GEOFF DURHAM



GEOFF DURHAM VISITS ONE OF VICTORIA'S NEWER NATIONAL PARKS, WARBY-OVENS IN THE STATE'S NORTH-EAST



Waterfall in Warby-Ovens National Park

We acknowledge these locations are part of the unceded traditional lands & waters of the **YORTA YORTA** and their ongoing role in caring for Country

As the name indicates, Warby-Ovens National Park is a park with a split personality. It is not just a two-way split between the Warby Range and the lower Ovens River, but a three-way split as it includes the distinctive Killawarra Box-Ironbark forest. It is land of the of the Yorta Yorta Nation. Major Mitchell passed through in 1836.

The first reservation of 2,750 hectares was in 1975 following recommendations of the Upper Goulburn and Upper Murray Regional Committees. The present Warby-Ovens National Park of 14,750 hectares, declared in 2010, is the end result of various Land Conservation Council, Environment Conservation Council and Victorian Environment Assessment Council (VEAC) investigations. It includes donated and purchased land and incorporates the old Warby Range State Park.

Warby Range

The Warby Ranges section is about 8,421 hectares. It is a Devonian Granite outcrop that extends north 25 km from Glenrowan to the Boweya Road and Killawarra Forest. The

name comes from Benjamin Warby who squatted near here on the Taminik Plains in 1844. The park has dry granite outcrops, rocky valleys and seasonal waterfalls. There are impressive views over the surrounding plains.

When I visited in September last year the distinctive Spurwing Wattle was in full spectacular flower. This is its only natural occurrence in Victoria. Also present at one site is the endangered Northern Sandalwood. Other trees are White Cypress-pine, White and Grey Box, Red Stringybark and Blakley's Red Gum. Scattered grass-trees are a feature of the park.

The ranges are the stronghold of the Turquoise Parrot. Other birds include the Diamond Firetail, Speckled Warbler and Hooded Robin.

Wenhams camp site has toilets and is suitable for caravans. It overlooks a valley where kangaroos are always present. A small fenced arboretum for indigenous wildlife was established here by the defunct Friends of the Warbys. Some plants have thrived, others have languished.



Clockwise from top left: Park entry sign; Spurwing Wattle *Acacia triptera*; Wenhams Camp; Ovens River

Lower Ovens River

The Ovens River section is about 3,109 hectares. It extends over 20 km as the crow flies through farmland on the Northern Riverine Plains from north of Wangaratta to the Murray River. The river has many twists and turns, off-shoots and billabongs. The park is narrow – from a few metres to several kilometres wide. The only two bridges across the river are on the Murray Valley Highway and Peechelba Road. The informal dirt tracks in the park are impassable when wet. Camping is permitted anywhere along the river. There are no toilets.

The Ovens River was named after Major Ovens, Private Secretary to Governor Brisbane.

VEAC pointed out in its River Red Gum Forests Investigation:

The Ovens River – a Heritage River – remains the only substantial, essentially unregulated Victorian tributary of the Murray River, with only two tributaries (the Buffalo and King Rivers) having a small storage each. The resultant near-natural flow regime partly explains the high biodiversity values and moderate-good stream condition.

The signature tree is the River Red Gum. Birds include Azure Kingfisher, Australian King Parrot, Yellow Rosella and Barking Owl.

Killawarra Forest

The Killawarra Forest section is about 3,220 hectares. It was named by squatter Edward Green from the Aboriginal word for scrub or turpentine bush. It adjoins the north end of the Warby Range with a dramatic change of topography. It is comparatively flat, on old sedimentary rock of the riverine plain with box-ironbark vegetation. Wildflowers are a feature.

During the 1930s Depression, the Forest Commission had camps in the forest and in the Second World War there were internment camps here.

Silvicultural management has resulted in regrowth and few old trees. Nectar-feeding birds are common. They include the threatened Swift Parrot, Regent Honeyeater, Fuscous and Yellow-tufted Honeyeaters.

Within the forest is Forest Camp, suitable for caravans, with toilets and a rotunda.

The Killawarra Forest is linked to the Lower Ovens by the Chinaman and Irishtown Creeks.

Visitor information

When visiting, you will need the Parks Victoria Visitor Warby-Ovens National Park Visitor Guide which has comprehensive relevant information including maps showing access, roads and tracks, lookouts, camping and picnic sites and descriptions of 11 walks. Camping is free and bookings are not required. Check the Parks Victoria site parks.vic.gov.au or phone 131963 for road closures.

Centrally located, Wangaratta is the perfect base from which to explore the three very different sections of the park, and the local wineries. Wangaratta has plenty of accommodation. In August 2021 the park was added to the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Green List in recognition of good management and biological importance. 🌿

The park has a new Friends Group – Friends of the Warby-Ovens National Park. For information contact Andy Kimber 0439 209 749





Nature Stewards joins VNPA



Engrossed in Powerful Owl vomit, Yarra Ranges, Autumn 2022 program. MARY-ELLEN WALLACE-SMITH



OUTDOORS VICTORIA'S HIGHLY SUCCESSFUL NATURE STEWARDS PROGRAM IS JOINING VNPA, WITH **MADDY WILLCOCK** AS NATURE STEWARDS' COORDINATOR

The Nature Stewards program is thrilled to become part of VNPA's community learning and engagement team.

With a motto like 'Learn. Connect. Act', every day is one of discovery and insight.

If you're not familiar already, the Nature Stewards program runs over six to ten weeks, is taught by experts, and hosted by local councils.

Our goal is to connect curious people with their local habitats and wider Victorian ecosystems. The program is a great way to gain knowledge, learn practical ecology skills and meet like-minded others in the local community.

Our participants learn all about:

- Rocks, soil, fungi, plants, and animals
- Climate change and seasons
- Ways to care for Country and manage private property
- Being a citizen scientist, conservation volunteer, advocate for nature, or a nature guide
- How and where you can volunteer in your area

As we enter our fourth year, we're excited to grow our impact across Victoria and deliver new versions of the program, such as an under 18 years program.

The quality of the presenters has been extraordinary. I feel privileged to have met and heard their wisdom. It's exciting.
Leesa, Melton 2019

Now I feel confident when I am in nature, connected when I see some insects, animals, or plants, and proud when I know that I have some knowledge.

Shrikrishna, Melbourne 2020

I have really loved being in Nature Stewards and found it very valuable. It has given me confidence and helped me clarify the kind of environmental volunteering that interests me the most.

Jane, Geelong 2021

What happens in a Nature Stewards program?

We offer a curiosity-piquing introduction to Victoria's broader and local environments, with pathways to support nature at home and locally. We bring together a wealth of expertise across our education team, local traditional custodians, and other local and state experts to deliver cutting-edge information, training, and networking.

Our goals centre on environmental literacy, participation, and community connection and wellbeing. We hope to support our participants to grow in their connections with nature, like-minded people, and to build their confidence and capacity to help nature and society.

We're very proud of our wonderful alumni and love hearing how the program can and does support them in their lives and work after graduation.



Checking out soils at Bald Hill Reserve, NW Hub Program, Autumn 2021

Nature Stewards staff

The success of Nature Stewards rests with our wonderful team of facilitators and specialist presenters, and environmental volunteering, tertiary education and industry presenters. They bring an incredible wealth of knowledge and enthusiasm, and having the opportunity to help them inspire our participants is a dream come true.

For myself as Nature Stewards Coordinator, family and scouting adventures ignited a great respect, love, and spiritual connection with nature. My training spans geological field research, STEM education program development, anthroposophical art therapy and now in running the Nature Stewards program.

We look forward to meeting our 2023 participants, with programs starting from 18 March. 🌱

Huge thank you to Andrew Knight, Josh Ambrosy, Robyn Allen, Andrea Vela, and the Outdoors Victoria board for their trust, support, and guidance in initiating and supporting the program to date.

To find out more, to become a program Facilitator or specialist presenter, partner or host, or to apply for a program near you, visit vnpa.org.au/naturestewards
Find us on Facebook **naturestewardsVIC** and Instagram **@naturestewards**

Discovering the world of stories beneath our feet

Stories beneath our feet: Exploring the geology and landscapes of Victoria and surrounds, Leon Costermans and Fons VandenBerg

Costermans Publishing 2022 660pp RRP \$82. Via mucklefordbooks.com

Leon Costermans' *Native Trees and Shrubs of South-eastern Australia* has been a basic reference for over 40 years, famous for making tricky information clear and accessible to non-expert readers. His latest book, written with Fons VandenBerg, aims at a similar achievement: to make complex realities accessible without oversimplifying.

More, it aims to make geology, a subject 'often perceived as little more than the dull study of static, lifeless rocks' engaging, even exciting. The authors want readers to read 'clues' in the rocks, and reconstruct the stories of their formation: to help them better understand their local landscapes and those they travel through.

The method encourages readers to be active in attacking the subject, not passive sponges of information. The text is interspersed with illustrations accompanied by questions, like: 'what do you think?' It challenges readers to offer their own interpretations, unafraid of making mistakes.

The nearly 2,000 eloquent and instructive photos, diagrams and maps are closely tied to the text, encouraging readers to align words to their own observations. One of the

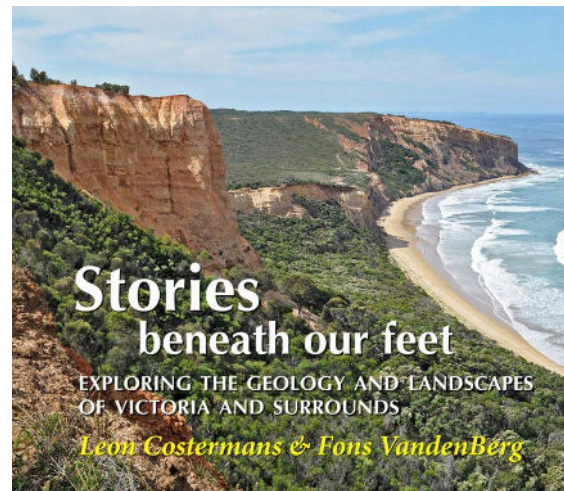
book's great virtues is that it points outside itself, to 'aspects of the land which anyone can observe':

Understanding of landscape evolution involves abstract or conceptual thinking, so it is easier to start by considering aspects that anyone can observe...

In line with this objective, almost half of the book is devoted to looking at eight separate regions of Victoria in more or less self-contained chapters each about 40 pages.

If you're nervous about plunging straight into the broader subject, you can begin with your local region as a 'case study' approach (though I should record that the authors recommend that you read over the first section to begin with). In any case, anyone planning a field trip or bush walk could enhance the experience by first reading the relevant region study in this book: each one includes an exploratory tour, with sites indicated by numbers on the accompanying map.

The book invites you to get out into the country, prowl around and have a look: and the numerous illustrations



challenge you to ground truth the text. There is even an invitation to take a grand tour along the main Divide from the Grampians to eastern NSW, offering illuminating comments on landscape structure, soils and vegetation along the way. You'd need to pay attention on the tour though: the text is dense with observations of what is around you.

'The aspects we do deal with can be explored by anyone, without specialist background knowledge or equipment', say the authors: but they don't compromise or oversimplify, so to the beginner this will be a slow, careful and wonderfully rewarding read. 🌿

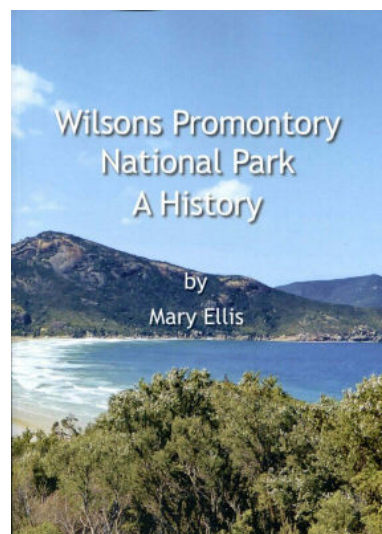
Bernard Slattery is Secretary of the Friends of the Box Ironbark Forests, Mount Alexander region

A new history of the Prom

Wilsons Promontory National Park – A History is a meticulously researched history by Victorian field naturalist and historian Mary Ellis.

It is published by the South Gippsland Conservation Society.

The book is available for purchase online for \$35 (plus post and packaging \$12.40) at promcountryhistory.org.au



Project Hindmarsh 2023

Project Hindmarsh 2023 will be held over the weekend of 7–9 July in the town of Rainbow.

This year, organisers Hindmarsh Land Care aim to restore a section of the Rainbow Rises with some of the original wildflowers, herbs and shrubs.

For more information, please contact jstarks@hindmarshlandcare.org.au

Alec Baillie Costin AM (1925–2022)

Alec Costin died in August last year, aged 93. He was probably the single most influential individual involved with Australia's mountains through the last 70 years. Part of his legacy is the high level of understanding and protection of Alpine, Kosciuszko and Namadgi National Parks.

Costin was an international authority on the ecology of high mountain ecosystems. His research record is second to none in extent, range and quality. He was constantly available to encourage public interest and to exert political awareness of conservation issues, through better management of both public land and farming land. As a farmer himself he had ample experience of how all land could be managed for better productivity and better land health.

Starting in 1942, Costin's early work on the soils and vegetation of the Monaro region offered the first comprehensive ecosystem inventory done at a regional scale in Australia. He was awarded a Doctor of Science (Agriculture) for his Monaro Report in 1964.

Costin spent most of 1950–52 in Europe. Working with some of the best mountain ecologists of the day he developed his foundational understanding that Australian mountains needed to be understood on their own terms, not as watered down European mountains. He observed the historical impacts of seasonal grazing on soils and vegetation in the post-glacial period in European mountains.

From 1952–54, Costin worked with the Victorian Soil Conservation Authority, especially on the Bogong High Plains. He worked closely with Professor John Turner, founding member of VNPA, and with Maisie Fawcett, whose exclusion plots are still a monument to practical science. In Victoria, Costin realised that despite minor differences between mountains in the two states, the Australian Alps' soils, plants and animals could be seen as a single related unit.

At CSIRO in NSW from 1955, he and colleagues established a series of far-reaching experiments to explore and explain the relationships between

soil, vegetation and water yield under Australian alpine conditions. His main focus during these years was on the damage being caused to Australia's most important catchment by government-encouraged rangeland grazing and by the new Snowy Mountains Hydro-electric Scheme. Costin's science supplied the detailed evidence needed to help a growing conservation movement to address problems being caused by both activities.

In 1957 alarm about the condition of the highest areas had increased to the point where the Academy of Science published *A Report of the Condition of the High Mountain Catchments of NSW and Victoria*. Although written by a Committee (Professor J.S. Turner, Professor R.L. Crocker, Dr J.W. Evans and Costin), this document was driven and informed by Costin's research and concern. It was instrumental in the decision in 1958 to withdraw grazing from above 1,350 metres in NSW, a decisive contribution to the future of the park, and also led to better practices by Snowy Scheme engineers.

Always a passionate communicator, Costin wrote hundreds of articles, gave talks and conducted field trips and tours; his work was highly influential in the politics of protection of the Main Range through the 1950s to 1990s. His message was clear: engineering capability and economic motivation should not be the only criteria when considering development.

Costin was co-author of *Conservation* (1971) and *Kosciuszko Alpine Flora* (1979). He applied ecological principles to practical management of agricultural land on his farm property on the Shoalhaven River. He saw this as a matter of land use capability, dividing his farm into those uses for which each zone was best suited, including water conservation, shelter and wildlife habitat.

Costin was also influential on the Kosciuszko State Park Advisory Committee and in advising NSW Premier Tom Lewis about setting up the NSW National Parks and Wildlife



Alec Costin (right) with his friend and colleague Dane Wimbush on a visit to Kosciuszko National Park in 2015

Service. He was always interested in the interface between research and application, advising on rangeland grazing, irrigation versus drylands land use, management of the south-east forests of NSW and the wastefulness and destructiveness of widespread fuel reduction burning in back country.

Costin maintained involvement in Victorian alpine management. At the launch of the Alpine National Park at the Snowy Plains in December 1988, Costin reminded Minister Kay Setches of the basic incompatibility between national park status and grazing. As he pointed out, under some management styles 'Alpine Playground and Development Zone' would be a more accurate and honest description than 'National Park'.

Costin was elected a Fellow of the Academy of Science in 1980; awarded the Member of the Order of Australia (AM); and the recipient of many other awards and honours, including the McKell Medal. 🌿

Deirdre Slattery

Remembering Jill Casey

Jill Casey's welcoming smile and loyalty to VNPA would have been enough of a contribution to the organisation she came to love, but there was more.

Jill was a keen bushwalker, and a regular at VNPA events. She was also one of a number of stalwart volunteers appearing at our office, in the days when that sort of thing was not just easier, but normal.

At heart Jill was an educator, and was an active member of our Education Committee for many years. Over a decade or more she produced, and assiduously updated, education kits for schools on our various activities and campaigns. It was in the (not so long ago) pre-digital age, and involved copying VNPA articles and brochures as well as copious newspaper cuttings, compiling them, and mailing them out to the multitude of schools across the state that had contacted us for material.

While she was scrupulous in conveying VNPA's messages, she nevertheless believed students should hear all sides of a story, and with her help they did.

Towards the end of her life, Jill returned to the UK to be with her son and her daughter Anne (VNPA councillor from 1991-2007 and President from 1996-98).

Jill deserved to be proud of her role filling a gap in material for schools on nature conservation issues.

Her cheerful greeting is missed by those who knew her. 🌿



Jill Casey with her daughter Anne Casey in Norwich UK

Welcome new VNPA staff

Since December, VNPA has welcomed three new faces into our office.

Jane Crouch started in December as our new Fundraising Manager. Jane has had over 20 years of fundraising experience with international development, health and environment not-for-profits. Travel on all continents, plus work in outdoor education, energy conservation and adventure travel, has given Jane global perspectives. But now she's very happy to 'act local' and bring her diverse experience to protecting the magnificent natural beauty of her home state of Victoria.

Maddy Willcock joined VNPA in February as Coordinator of the Nature Stewards program (see p.44). Her training spans geological field



research, STEM education program development, and anthroposophical art therapy.

Kristian Lang joined our fundraising team in February as Philanthropy Executive, having spent the last four years working in membership organisations focused on renewable energy and environmental philanthropy. With a background in international relations, Kristian is keen to tackle the global issue of environmental degradation by protecting the beautiful environment we have in Victoria. 🌿

Our thanks to Park Watch designer Mary

We're very fortunate to have many people working behind the scenes to protect nature and national parks with the Victorian National Parks Association. Mary Ferlin is one of these people. A keen bushwalker, nature-lover and adventurer, Mary joined as a VNPA member many years ago. In 2012, we discovered that she was also a talented designer and we engaged her to design our much-loved publication **Park Watch**.

Mary expertly designed an impressive 42 editions of *Park Watch* – beginning with the June 2012 edition launching a new logo and celebrating our 60th Anniversary, and culminating in a special bumper edition in November 2022 celebrating our 70th anniversary. Mary worked well with four different editors over this time and also designed many other engaging reports, greeting cards and posters, as well as Wild Families materials for our younger audiences.

Mary is simply a delight to work with and often generously lends us her nature images for our materials. Her loyalty and dedication, which included prioritising *Park Watch* deadlines over her travels, is very much appreciated. Now that we have combined the role of editor and designer for *Park Watch* by welcoming Paul Clifton to the team, Mary will focus her efforts on other design work for VNPA and other clients, as well as revitalising a property she recently bought near Daylesford.

Many thanks and congratulations Mary for your fantastic contribution. 🌿

If you have a design project please contact Mary Ferlin, South Star Design at vnpamf@hotmail.com.



Thank you and farewell Emily

Many of our members and donors will know the delightful Emily Clough, who has been VNPA's Fundraising Manager for the past 13 years.

Emily has helped to grow VNPA from a small organisation to a staff of 20, that now delivers a variety of campaigns and programs. Effective fundraising requires talents and sound judgement in many areas including communications, event management, budgeting and digital savviness – and Emily excelled.

An organisation of our size relies on everyone pitching in to help with the bigger tasks. Emily played a critical role in running our AGMs and major events such as the Shine a Light – Hands Off Parks protest at Wilsons Prom in 2013, the Great Forest Picnic – We ♥ Parks activity in 2017 and a range of other hands-on events and activities. Emily loved the special atmosphere

created by bringing our supporters together to stand up for nature and national parks.

Always organised and seemingly unflappable, Emily was respected as a very approachable, compassionate and supportive colleague to her team-mates and a thoughtful and caring contact for VNPA supporters.

Emily has told us how very grateful she is for the generosity and friendship from our community and that she will continue to be a loyal member for the long-term.

Emily took two periods of parental leave when she and her husband Henry welcomed their children Isla and Arthur. With both kids now at a great age to travel, Emily is having a career break to take a trip around Australia with her family.

We look forward to receiving the occasional postcard and hearing what's next for Emily. 🌿



Nicole Mertens swims off to new waters

After four years with VNPA, ReefWatch Project Officer Dr Nicole Mertens has moved on to continue her career as a marine biologist. We wish Nicole all the best.

Here are some words from a farewell poem penned for Nicole:

Oh the things Nicole can do
Marine biologist, artist, communicator
Tech wizz, nudi nerd, illustrator
Designer, writer, facilitator
Community builder, unique educator
There are so many thousands of people out there
Who are so much more aware
Of our precious marine life way down where
We would quickly run out of air
Marine scientists, friends groups, friends and colleagues
Dive and snorkel guides, marine lovers, school kids, families
Nudibranchs, marine fish, sharks, crabs and rays
Are all better off,
because Nicole came to VNPA 🌿

Right: Nicole (centre) created beautiful illustrations for a range of resources including Great Victorian Fish Count shirts, Wild Families activity sheets, our Marine Life of Victoria board game and Sea Slug posters.



Wild Families



OVER SUMMER, WILD FAMILIES SPENT TIME AT POINT ADDIS MARINE NATIONAL PARK LEARNING WHY SEAWEED IS SO IMPORTANT

Great facts we learnt about seaweed and algae

Seaweed is big algae. Some algae that lives in the sea is so tiny you need a microscope to see it. Some algae such as kelp can grow 50 cm a day and creates under the sea forests.



There are three main colours of seaweed: green, brown and red. Sometimes seaweed changes to other colours such as white or black when it has died or washed up on the beach.

South-eastern Australia has more species of algae than almost anywhere else in the world – over 1,000 species.



Seaweed and algae provide important habitat in the open ocean, on reefs, in rockpools and even when washed up on the beach.

Algae makes a huge amount of the Earth's oxygen.



Take your own seaweed discovery adventure!

On your next beach trip, you could learn about seaweed, too. Here are some tips to help your family get to know more about seaweed.

Take some time to notice the seaweed on the beach, in the water and in rockpools.

Look closely at the seaweed.

See how many different colours of seaweed can you find.



Find some seaweed washed up on the beach and touch it with your toes. What does the seaweed feel like?



Carefully have a look under some dried seaweed on the sand and see if you can see any small critters living in it. Put it back as it was before you looked underneath.



Have a look at some live seaweed in a rockpool. What animals do you think would feel safe in amongst the seaweed?

Take a deep breath in and thank the plants AND the algae for the oxygen you breathe!



IMAGES: MARTIN GRIFFITH, SHANNON HURLEY

Q. Why was the sand wet?
A. Because the sea weed!



I really liked making artwork out of seaweed and I really liked finding all different types of seaweed and all the different colours. I also really liked all the cool facts.

Sam, 10

Stay safe while looking after nature

Don't stick your hands or feet into clumps of algae (living or dead). Instead keep your hands and feet where you can see them to avoid bites or stings.

Seaweed is habitat, don't pull it off, damage it or pull it apart. If you pick up loose seaweed, return it to where you found it.



WILD VIBES/UNSPLASH



Explorer's Corner

TIPS & TRICKS FOR GETTING INTO NATURE



What do I eat on an overnight or weekend hike?

BUSHWALKING LEADER **ROB ARGENT** SHARES HIS CHOICE OF FOOD TO PACK WHEN HE'S HEADING OFF ON A ONE OR TWO DAY HIKE.



Here is a rough outline of the food I pack for a weekend hike. I have a very sweet tooth, but otherwise pretty boring taste!

Mornings

- Cereal
- Condensed milk
- Tea
- Oatmeal
- Sugar
- Milo

Snacks

- Scroggin (mixture of dried fruit and nuts)
- Jelly Beans/lollies
- Chocolate
- Muesli bars

Lunches

- Bakery products (on first day only)
- Salami/Wurst
- Butter
- Tuna sachet
- Capsicum
- Cream cheese
- Bread/dry biscuits
- Cheese
- Vegemite
- Fruit: dried and fresh
- Chocolate/Biscuits

Dinner

- Rice/Noodles (2min noodles are quick but tasteless)
- Dried/fresh vegetables
- Tuna (sachet) or other protein
- Cup-a-soup
- Dried potato
- Sauce
- Cooking oil
- Spices
- Instant Pudding
- Booze
- Emergency food

The basic hiking food principles

- Food can be one of the great pleasures of bushwalking (as well as nature and good company).
- Food gives energy and adds morale.
- Food is often a popular topic of discussion.
- Food must be planned – too little leaves you hungry; too much (weight) leaves you tired.

Be prepared

- Consider the actual food value.
- Choose meals that are easy to prepare.
- On a weekend trip it is possible to pre-cook and freeze dinner; this only requires re-heating.
- Aim to use 'one billy' meals – all the ingredients cook together in one pot.
- Try to keep food lightweight and compact, about 900g/day.
- Carry only what you need plus a little extra (e.g. an extra pack of 2 minute noodles or muesli bars).
- An overnight hike is not a time to start a diet!

Pack well

- It is ESSENTIAL to maintain fluid intake, especially in hot weather. Water bladders (Platypus/Camel Back) are an excellent method for maintaining fluids.
- Snacks on the track keep up energy levels and give a good excuse to stop for a break.
- Pack lunch near the top of your pack at the start of the day: this keeps it handy and un-crushed.
- Beware of crushed and cracked containers squashed in your pack: re-use tough plastic bags or solid containers.

Litter and safety

- Carry out what you carry in: ALL scraps, peels, cores, papers, plastics.
- Don't leave food out at night: possums, wombats and native rats love to share.



Rob's tips on gear to pack for your overnight hike were published in part one of this article in Park Watch #290 (Nov 2022). Both articles are available with a range of other tips and tricks for getting into nature at vnpa.org.au/programs/explorers-corner

WESTERN PORT BAY

A NATURAL TREASURE AT RISK

Western Port Bay is at risk

- Right now, Western Port Bay has the highest number of deteriorating marine environmental health indicators in Victoria.
- Populations of snapper and waterbirds are declining.
- The Bay is already seeing serious water quality problems.
- Substantial land use changes need to be carefully managed.
- Areas around the Bay are experiencing the fastest urban expansion in the state.
- Large areas of bird habitat are extremely vulnerable to climate change.

65% of Victoria's bird species, like this Red-necked Stint, can be found in Western Port Bay



PHOTO: JAMES WHITE

It's too special to risk losing. And when it's gone, it's gone.

How you can help

Your gift today will help develop and realise a bold plan to protect Western Port Bay and support sustainable marine and tourism industries.

Protect a special part of Victorian nature.

Act to safeguard Western Port Bay.

Donate now at vnpa.org.au/protectWPB

White Mangroves clean the water and protect young fish and crustaceans



PHOTO: CELESTE DE VOS