

PARK *watch*

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VICTORIAN
NATIONAL PARKS
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MARCH 2024 #295

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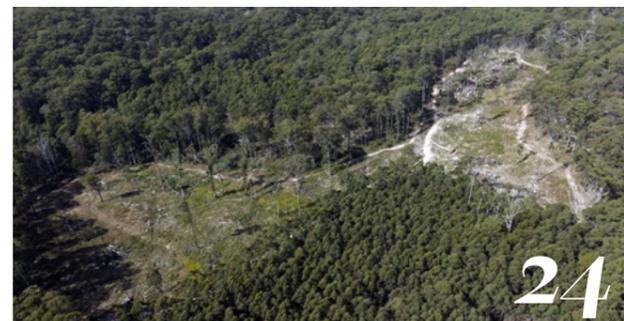
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Mountain Ash (*Eucalyptus regnans*)
in Toolangi Forest, Wurundjeri
and Taungurung Country.
JORDAN CROOK

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VNPA acknowledges the many First Peoples of the area now known as Victoria, honours their continuing connection to, and caring for, Country, and supports Traditional Owner joint-management of parks and public land for conservation of natural and cultural heritage. Our office is located on traditional land of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation. We offer our respect to Elders past, present and future.



JESSIE BORRELLE

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Snow Myrtle in Grampians/Gariwerd National Park (Phil Ingamells)

Celebrate the life of someone special

Commemorate and celebrate the life of a loved one by making a donation to the Victorian National Parks Association.

By making a donation in memory of someone special, you are ensuring that Victoria's national parks, natural places and wildlife flourish – in memory of your loved one.

If you wish, a card acknowledging your gift can be posted to the next of kin.

To make a gift in memory, please contact Kristian via support@vnpa.org.au, or on 03 9341 6506 or download a donation form at vnpa.org.au/gifts-in-memory

If you would like to request donations to VNPA instead of flowers at a funeral or memorial service, please get in touch with our office.





From the President

Welcome to the March 2024 edition of *Park Watch*. With the end of native forest logging, this is a year of opportunity for nature conservation in Victoria. The Government Advisory Panel has a critical role in the future of our native forests; how we protect and regenerate our forests, and how we utilise our native forests for recreation. In particular, our Mountain Ash Forests, Snow Gum regions and Cool Temperate Rainforests – all unique to Victoria and all threatened – must be protected, managed and, where possible, restored. In this edition of *Park Watch* we have articles on legacy trees and favourite trees. A favourite tree of mine is a

Snow Gum on the Australian Alps Walk track, perched on the saddle 200 metres south-west of Mt Speculation. Overlooking the Viking and Wonnangatta Valley, this age-old Snow Gum provides one of the best seats in the house. Protecting Western Port Bay is another priority, and we welcome Federal Environment Minister, Tanya Plibersek's decision to block the proposed wind turbine assembly plant at the Port of Hastings. Clean energy is a fundamental component in limiting greenhouse emissions, and should be established in a manner that supports nature conservation and biodiversity. We are deeply saddened by the death of Dr Michael Feller. A consummate

scientist, mentor, teacher, campaigner, adventurer, gentleman and nature-lover, Michael's contribution to nature conservation has been significant. Michael will be sadly missed. We're now in a very important period for nature conservation in Victoria. The decisions and policies established by the Government over the next 12-18 months will define the future of our biodiversity in Victoria and what we pass on to future generations. With your support, VNPA will continue to advocate for our unique natural areas, and the plants and animals that call them home. 🌿

David Nugent, VNPA President



Park Watch Quiz: Legacy trees



1. How did the Blanket Leaf get its name?
 - a) Fibres from the tree are used to make blankets.
 - b) The woolly underside of the leaf is soft, like a blanket.
 - c) They shed their leaves in winter, which blanket the ground.
 - d) They're named after the naturalist William Blanket.
2. True or false? Snow Gums only grow in places that are covered with snow throughout winter.
3. Which animal creates V-shaped cuts in Manna Gum trees (below) to drink their sugary sap?
 
4. The Ada Tree, Elephant Tree, Kalatha Tree, Kalatha Giant and Hackett Tree (right) are all types of what?
 
5. True or false? River Red Gums are the biggest type of tree in Victoria based on girth.
6. Tree Geebung can be found:
 - a) Only in a small area of Victoria, from Toolangi across to Mt Baw Baw.
 - b) Along the east coast, from Queensland down to Victoria.
 - c) In Cool Temperate Rainforest across Victoria and Tasmania.
 - d) In both Australia and Papua New Guinea.

7. True or false? Mountain Grey-gums grow up to 65m tall.
8. Red Ironbarks are known for their:
 - a) Thick, hard, furrowed black bark.
 - b) Ability to form a lignotuber – a swollen lump at the base of the trunk that protects against fire.
 - c) Dark red flowers.
 - d) Both a) and b).
9. True or false? The Strzelecki Gum has less than 50 remaining populations
10. Sweet Bursaria is integral to the lifecycle of which Victorian butterfly?

See p.40 for answers

IMAGES: MATTHEW LEFOE, JORDAN CROOK

Slaughter of native waterbirds to continue

PARKS AND NATURE CAMPAIGNER, JORDAN CROOK, SAYS 29 JANUARY 2024 WILL GO DOWN AS A VERY BAD DAY FOR WILDLIFE AND WETLANDS ACROSS VICTORIA

Despite a record number of public submissions against it, the Allan Government is pushing ahead with the controversial blood sport to continue duck and quail shooting across Victoria.

The inquiry into Victoria's recreational native bird hunting arrangements focussed on multiple issues. This included the impacts of native bird shooting on ecological and Indigenous cultural heritage sites, safety concerns by public land users, the animal welfare implications of shooting wildlife out of the sky, and poor compliance and enforcement operations by the Game Management Authority.

The recommendations of the inquiry were broad and included an end to the recreational shooting of

native birds. An odd inclusion was a recommendation to change the name of State Game Reserves to 'Outdoor Recreation Reserves', a currently non-existent land tenure in Victoria.

It is unclear if an Outdoor Recreation Reserve would see a reduction in areas managed for conservation. It is important to note that while state game reserves and other reserves (such as streamside, geological, geomorphological, bushland and wildlife and natural features reserves) allow duck and quail shooting, nature conservation is their main objective (while also supporting passive recreation).

In their 29 January media release, the government committed to a series of 'common-sense' (but opaque) changes:

- Improving hunters' knowledge and skill with mandatory training and education.
- Stricter compliance levels, including further penalties for hunters breaking the rules.
- Banning the use of lead shot for quail hunting.
- Implementing the Waterfowl Wounding Reduction Action Plan.

- Greater recognition of Traditional Owners' knowledge of hunting and land management.

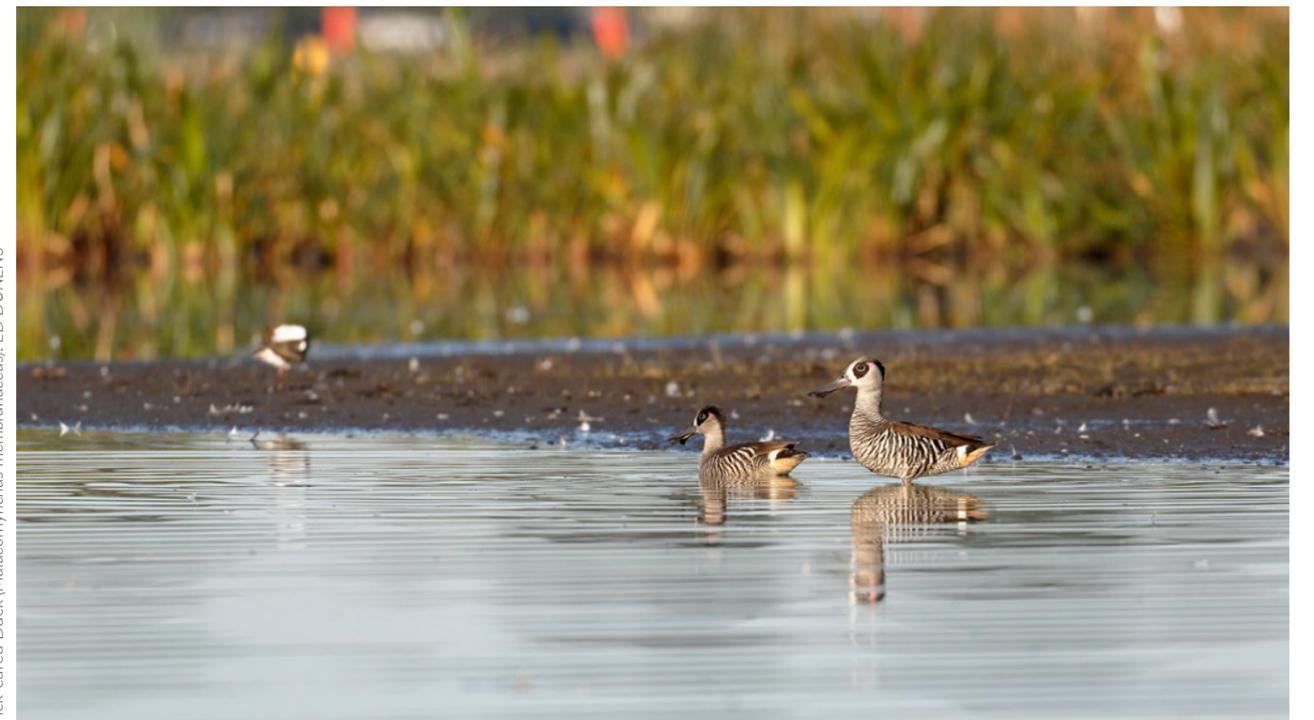
These minor adjustments will still see shooting occur across our shrinking wetlands and in the habitat of Critically Endangered wildlife such as Plains Wanderers and Southern Brolgas.

Data from 2022 shows just 0.42 per cent of Victorians partake in native bird shooting. Native bird shooting for recreation has been banned across most of Australia: WA in 1990, NSW in 1995 and Queensland in 2005.

The numbers of ducks killed and wounded will continue to be an animal welfare issue that is truly intolerable in this day and age.

What a wasted opportunity by the Allan Government to shift its relationship with native wildlife to one that recognises their inherent beauty and integral role in a healthy web of life.

Despite this knock back, I'm convinced that one day soon our elected leaders will see wildlife not as moving targets, but as living examples of evolutionary changes made in conjunction with the state's ecosystems and conditions. 🌿



Pick-eared Duck (*Malacorhynchus membranaceus*). ED DUNENS

Great expectations for the Central Highlands forests



MATT RUCHEL,
VNPA EXECUTIVE
DIRECTOR SAYS IT'S
FINALLY TIME FOR
THE GREAT FOREST NATIONAL
PARK

For decades there has been a community push for better protection of the Mountain Ash forests of the Yarra Ranges and surrounds. Now we've seen the end of native forest logging, it's the time to get on with it.

In the 1990s, VNPA ran a campaign for an expanded national park in the Central Highlands.* Originally proposed as the Ash National Park, but later changed to the Yarra Ranges National Park, the 76,000 ha park was legislated in 1995. It included many of the existing closed water catchments but fell far short of what was required. Reports from the 1994 Land Conservation Council (LCC) – the body predating the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council (VEAC) – clearly articulated the reasons for this.

[The LCC are]...proposing a considerable smaller park than that suggested by conservation groups... as it wishes to ensure that sufficient timber resources is available to meet the needs of the timber industry.

And it stayed that way for the next three decades.

A concerted 2010 campaign by VNPA and other conservation groups came close to obtaining a commitment from the incoming Andrews Labor Government. Their 2014 environment policy, the last comprehensive environment election policy by any major party in Victoria, announced a Forest Industry Taskforce. Its purpose was:

...to reach common ground on the future issues facing the industry, job protection, economic activity, protection of our unique native flora and fauna and threatened species, such as the Leadbeater's possum.

The taskforce, which VNPA was represented on, had intensive

discussions for around two years. It was prematurely abandoned by the timber industry, who preferred to fight rather than innovate. An undeniably challenging task, some important work was triggered, but it clearly revealed the perilous state of the forest and the forestry industry. It was, in part, a precursor to the final announcement of the end of native forestry in 2023. The final nails in the forestry coffin were the successful court cases run by community conservation groups and continued financial losses.

With commercial native forest logging finally ended on 1 January 2024, the time has come to create the Great Forest National Park and protect other important parts of eastern Victoria, now free of logging.

Long list of assessments

So-called Immediate Protected Areas, announced in 2019, covered some parts of Central Highlands, but the process established to formalise them lagged.

In December 2023, the first part of an evolved and expanded process was released: an interim report by VEAC, *Assessment of the values of state forests in the Central Highlands*. This work built on the 2017 assessment *Conservation values of state forests*, which was triggered by the Forest Industry Taskforce. These assessments, done under a relatively new power given to VEAC, do not have the weight of full-blown investigations, which require a government response after tabling in parliament. A full final assessment is due 31 July 2024, and will include other areas east of the Hume Highway. This assessment will input into a newly created process – the Eminent Person Panel for Community Engagement – and work with a yet-to-be-announced additional advisory panel:

...to consider and make recommendations to Government on the areas of our forests that qualify for protection as National Parks, the areas of our forests that would be suitable for recreation opportunities... and opportunities for management of public land by Traditional Owners.



Mt Donna Buang, Yarra Ranges National Park. LONG ZHENG

Central Highlands is located north and east of Melbourne and includes the townships of Alexandra, Eildon, Erica, Healesville, Marysville, Noojee, Warburton, Yarra Junction and numerous other towns, as well as the north-east fringe of metropolitan Melbourne.

The Central Highlands forests have very high values as the source of Melbourne's water, and for carbon storage, recreation and – until recently – timber production. The ash forests, in particular, are a significant source of freshwater for Victoria, containing the headwaters of many important rivers.

There are 616,970 ha of public land of which 63 per cent is state forest. National and state parks make up 27 per cent, including the Dandenong Ranges, Kinglake, Lake Eildon, Baw Baw and Yarra Ranges national parks, and the Bunyip, Cathedral Range, Moondarra and Warrandyte state parks.

Central Highlands are the stronghold of the Mountain Ash forest, the world's tallest flowering plant, with only a few small pockets remaining elsewhere in Victoria and Tasmania. They are amongst those containing the highest density of carbon in the world.

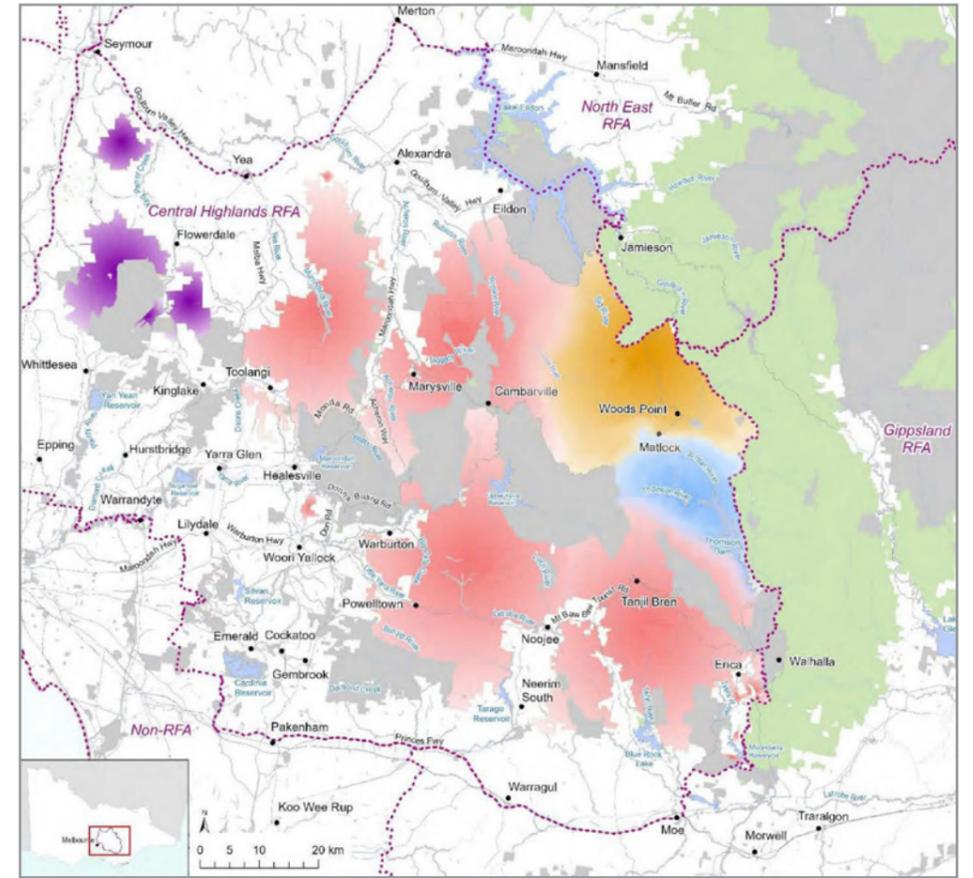
Almost 400 threatened plant and animals have been recorded here, including Leadbeater's Possum, Sooty Owl, Baw Baw Frog and Southern Greater Glider, as well as several aquatic plants and animals found in the forested waterways.

The forests face significant threats from climate change, including heatwaves and floods, higher temperatures, declines in rainfall, and increased bushfire frequency and severity. Population growth in nearby Melbourne with inevitable increases in visitation will also increase pressure.

Legend

- Large areas of outstanding natural values and relatively low conflicting land uses
- Large areas of moderate natural values and relatively high conflicting land uses
- Large areas of variable generally moderate natural values and relatively low conflicting land uses
- Large areas of outstanding natural values but high level of conflicting land uses
- State Forest
- Other public land
- Regional Forest Agreement boundary

SOURCE: ASSESSMENT OF THE VALUES OF STATE FORESTS IN THE CENTRAL HIGHLANDS, INTERIM REPORT, VEAC, DEC 2023



These randomly-created advisory and eminent panels are a divergence from full-blown expert and independent VEAC or LCC processes successful for over 50 years. Will they improve outcomes or are they just a further delaying tactic?

The Labor Government's record on the formal creation of national parks is the slowest of any Victorian government in decades. Are they serious about getting end results, or do they just want to express intent? As we know, national parks are not created until they are legislated (see p. 8).

Now is the time

The most recent VEAC assessment highlighted that there are clear gaps in the reserve system to ensure a comprehensive, adequate and representative reserve system. VEAC also highlights that a large, protected area such as a national park is commensurate with outstanding natural values (pink on the map) and would link the existing Yarra Ranges, Kinglake, Lake Eildon and Baw Baw national parks with the Bunyip,

Cathedral Range and Moondarra state parks. They note that there are few uses that would conflict with a national park designation. The inference is that it should be straightforward to create a new national park.

The area around the Upper Thompson water catchment (blue shading on the map) was also identified as having high natural values, though there was an inference in the report that the area had competing lands uses, such as mining and hunting, and should be considered differently. But isn't the point of national parks to avoid or eliminate these types of threats to natural values?

Two other areas west of the Kinglake National Park (purple shading) were identified as having lesser values and conflicting uses around Woods Point (orange shading). Due to the broad brush used, rather than the fine comb VEAC usually uses, this area has been classed as having lower values even though high value and vegetation communities exist within these areas. Room for new conservation parks

or nature conservation reserves or additions to existing national parks should be on the table for these high conservation value areas. It would also be important to link the Toolangi Forest and Kinglake National Park.

VEAC did not provide detailed boundaries or recognise other park types, including conservation reserves and regional parks. Regional parks are often smaller and weaker in terms of tenure but do allow a wide variety of recreation uses and can be important as buffers, particularly around towns. The Great Forest National Park as a concept was always proposed as having a network of different tenures with a large national park at its core, along with the appropriate engagement, involvement and joint management of Traditional Owners.

Decades of science prove the value of the park and high community support – do we really need another panel? With native forest logging finished, now is clearly the time for a Great Forest National Park. 🌿

*At the time targeting the LCC, as part of 1994 Melbourne District Review 2.

Victorian national parks creation on a go slow



THE GOVERNMENT IS TAKING FAR TOO LONG TO CREATE PROMISED NEW NATIONAL PARKS, SAYS **MATT RUCHEL**, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

The Allan Government argues it takes time to legislate parks. But if we consider the parks created in the last 25 years, the current government is dramatically lagging.

It has been an extraordinary 32 months since the State Government accepted the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council (VEAC) recommendations for the central west national parks. This is between two to three times longer than it took for the Box-Ironbark, Red Gum and Great Otway national parks to progress from government responses to final reports to creation.

To create national parks and conservation areas in Victoria, first you

need to write legislation. This takes time, there's a lot of noise and process, including multiple advisory committees and reports.

But even by accounting for all manner of bureaucracy and paper shuffling, the Andrews/Allan Government is appallingly slow in legislating new national parks.

Another three years?

VEAC commenced its investigation in March 2017, which was delayed due to the 2018 state election. The final report was released on 21 June 2019, but it wasn't until two years later (24 June 2021) the Andrews Government responded – in breach of the statutory timelines.

Now we hear it could take another three years to legislate the parks! On 20 November 2023, the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee heard that:

...on-ground surveying and mapping to support the preparation of park plans commenced in the second quarter of

2023 and is anticipated to continue for the next three years.

Some timelines in the government response to the central west parks were linked to the 2023 end of native forest logging, but that was brought forward to 2024, removing any legitimate excuse or blockage from logging.

This is a terrible record of accomplishment, worse if you consider the added delay in responding to the VEAC report, and even more disastrous if it does end up taking another three years. This would be the slowest national parks creation in Victorian history.

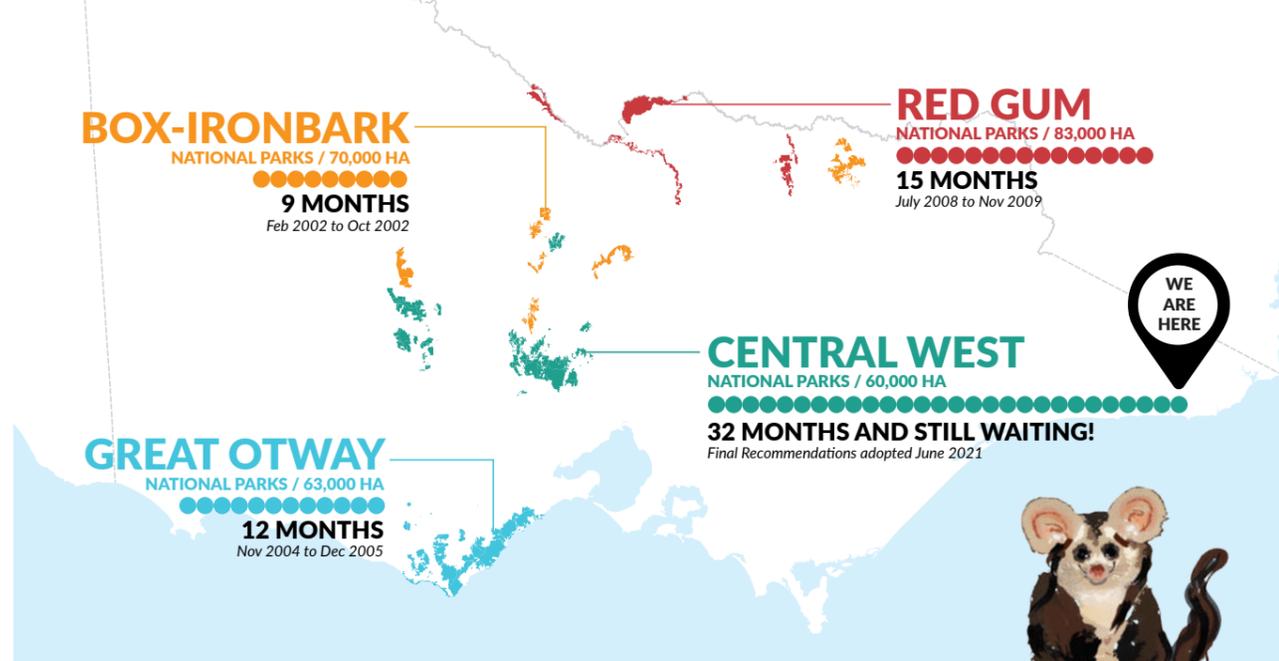
The longer it takes to legislate, the greater the chance to undermine the project. And, as we have seen with the Wombat Forest, delays provide further opportunities for damage and poor management.

Ignoring our commitments

In the global context, more than 115 countries, including Australia, have *continued opposite...*

Creation of Victoria's national parks

Comparisons over time: final recommendations to legislation



joined the High Ambition Coalition for Nature and People to champion and ensure the successful implementation of the global target to protect or conserve at least 30 percent of the world's land and ocean areas by 2030.

In December 2022, all parties to the Convention on Biodiversity agreed to the inclusion of the 30x30 target in the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework. On 9 June 2023, all Australian environment ministers agreed to:

- Take shared action to address the biodiversity crisis with ambitious national targets, in line with the Global Biodiversity Framework, by mid 2024.
- By 2024, develop a roadmap to protect and conserve 30 per cent of Australia's land.
- Strengthen Australia's marine protection.

About 18 per cent of Victoria is currently safeguarded in national parks or conservation reserves. The Labor Government has been pursuing new parks at a snail's pace.

To properly care for our remaining forests and woodlands, our parks must be created as soon as possible. As we've seen repeatedly since the initial 2021 commitment by the Labor Government, wildlife and habitats are not protected until the parks promised are legislated. 🌿

Ask Premier Allan to stop logging and start legislating our promised parks

vnpa.org.au/action/legislate-not-log



Greater Glider, Wombat Forest. GAYLE OSBORNE

Plant Blindness* with Irene Proebsting

*The inability to notice plants in everyday life, to recognise their importance, and a belief they are inferior to animals.

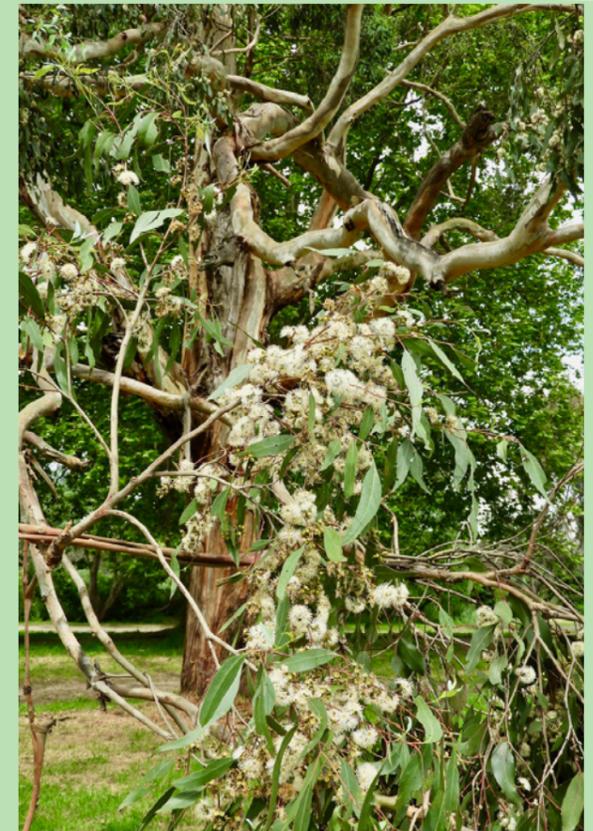
Strzelecki Gum *Eucalyptus strzeleckii*

Endemic to the Strzelecki Ranges and the rolling hills of South Gippsland in Bunurong and Gunaikurnai Country, *Eucalyptus strzeleckii* is a forest swamp gum. Also known as the Wax Tip because of its glaucous new growth, the plant flowers in October. Blossoms are white and buds small, ovoid, in clusters of seven. It is often difficult to distinguish from Swamp Gum (*E. ovata*) and Manna Gum (*E. viminalis*), but once you know the features to look for it can fairly easily be recognised.

Bark can be a variation of motley browns, creams and greys to luscious mossy greens, rusty reds and tangerine. Some specimens are very colourful when shedding and after rain.

There are some fine examples of remnant trees around Warragul and Drouin, where the high rainfall has meant they have grown quite large for their species. Its range is from South Gippsland, across to Western Port, and Yarram in the east. Neerim South and Tyers also have important edge-of-the-range populations.

Because of the severely fragmented nature and low numbers of small remnant populations, last year the Strzelecki Gum was listed as Critically Endangered. Keep an eye out for them when driving across the Strzelecki Ranges and South Gippsland. 🌿



Strzelecki Gum in flower. IRENE PROEBSTING

Irene Proebsting, Latrobe Valley Field Naturalists' Club

How strategic are strategic assessments?



GRASSY PLAINS
COORDINATOR,
ADRIAN MARSHALL,
ASSESSES STRATEGIC
ASSESSMENTS

There is lots of talk around the reform of Australia's national nature laws, the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act). And rightly so. If the current EPBC Act is strengthened, with gaps in the Act repaired and weaknesses resolved, these reforms could turn Australia's biodiversity and climate crisis around.

But let's talk specifically about one element of the current legislation, strategic assessments. They are used as a means of balancing conflict between environmental protection and development. Strategic assessments affect large areas – like whole urban growth corridors, or all offshore petroleum in Commonwealth waters. The core idea? They identify the most important parts to protect and regulate development to minimise impacts.

They claim to streamline approvals, and to produce better environmental, social and economic outcomes than the cumulative outcomes of the case-by-case assessments they replace. Their use is growing worldwide. They are being pushed by developers and vested interests as a key plank in future reforms. This is big stuff.

But do they work, or do they just open the door for damage over larger areas? Surprisingly, little rigorous research exists to help answer that simple question.

Australia's first attempt was the Melbourne Strategic Assessment (MSA) in 2010. This accompanied the expansion of the Urban Growth Boundary and the release of 60,000 hectares of land for development. As compensation for the destruction of nature across the new growth corridors, the MSA proposed protection of 15,000 ha of Western Grassland Reserve, the 1200 ha Grassy Eucalypt Woodland Reserve, and 36 Conservation Areas.

Readers of *Park Watch* are familiar with our opinion of the MSA: it was rushed, poorly thought through, appallingly implemented, and has so far failed to conserve the grasslands, woodlands, plants and beasts it was designed to protect.

And now there's research that supports our opinion.

Enter the rigorous academics

A recent article, 'Challenges and lessons of implementing strategic environmental assessment in a critically endangered ecosystem', by RMIT University's Marco Gutierrez, Ascelin Gordon and Sarah Bekessy, examines the question.

The authors evaluated the MSA's implementation of biodiversity protection and analysed a mountain

of documents. A range of stakeholders were interviewed, including conservation advocates, consultants, landowners, public officials and researchers.

The authors found 'systematic and pervasive failures, including questionable funding and enforcement arrangements'.

Will they ever learn?

Slowly: An ecological and political train wreck of this magnitude can't be fixed overnight, or even in a few years. The current MSA management is showing genuine improvement. There is increasing goodwill, but conservation targets simply aren't being met. They can do much better.

Just a bit: The latest Strategic Assessment is the Geelong Strategic Assessment (GSA). It's clear some lessons have been learnt since the 2010 MSA. The GSA is yet to be approved by the Commonwealth, but drafts we've commented on have included many poor conservation actions. In its current form, the GSA runs the risk of repeating past MSA mistakes.

It's politics: The MSA was a disaster born of pressure, of the mantra of growth at any cost, and a big push to get housing built. The GSA is also rushed, with decisions out of sequence and improvements overlooked in favour of advancing development.

Opportunities for change

At present there's no reason to have confidence in the ability of strategic assessments to deliver the conservation outcomes they promise.

A thorough overhaul of the EPBC Act, and strategic assessments, is central to protecting our natural web of life. We must urgently fix the way strategic assessments are undertaken. All the lessons of the MSA need to be learned. We need more rigorous research to help identify the mistakes, adapt our approach and guide the way forward.

A poor funding model. Under the MSA, funds to purchase the Western Grassland Reserve are received from developers incrementally over

Spotlight on Nature with Meghan Lindsay



Yellow-bellied Glider *Petaurus australis*

Yellow-bellied Gliders are unique nocturnal gliding mammals found from far north Queensland down to the border of Victoria and South Australia. You might get a fright if you hear one calling in the middle of the night – they have a loud banshee-like scream that can be heard over 500m away! Their other calls, odd gurgling and moaning sounds, are less intense but no less intriguing.

These fluffy gliders are aptly named. They have dark grey to brown fur on top with yellow fur on their tummy. They weigh between 450-700g and have a long fluffy tail. Like many of our tree-dwelling mammals, they rely on large old hollow-bearing trees for their homes.

Their gliding membrane allows them to glide up to 140m between trees. They travel large distances during the night searching for food, sometimes over 2km. But how does this small animal get the energy for travelling such a distance?

If you've ever seen V-shaped cuts up the trunk of a tree, you might have wondered who made them. Yellow-bellied Gliders chew these V-shaped incisions into the trunks of eucalypts to harvest the trees' high-sugar sap. They enjoy sucking on the sap of different eucalypts including River Red Gums, Mountain Grey



Yellow-bellied Glider. JUSTIN CALLY

Gums, Manna Gums and Messmate Stringybarks. They also munch on insects they find underneath the bark. Yellow-bellied Gliders are federally listed as threatened with extinction. They're threatened by habitat destruction and fragmentation, altered fire frequencies and climate change.

We can help look after these gliders by protecting the old legacy trees that they like to feed on and live in.

decades. A better approach would have been for the state to purchase the land up-front, then receive developer payments over time.

Our solution: Get on with it and buy all outstanding land now.

Delays in acquiring the land. It's already taken 14 years to buy (an underwhelming) 18 per cent of the Western Grassland Reserve, almost none of the Grassy Eucalypt Woodland and a handful of the conservation areas. In the meantime, the other 82 per cent is mostly being abandoned to weeds and decline.

Our solution: Buy as much as possible as soon as possible, and force interim management.

Limited experience. No one in Australia had runs on the board managing and restoring so much

grassland. Huge scales, complex land use history, many serious weed species, and multiple conservation goals for plants, animals and ecological communities, have seriously set back good management.

Our solution: Expert advisory panels, research, partnerships with multiple land management organisations, universities and community groups.

Ambiguous enforcement. The MSA is an agreement between the state and the Commonwealth, but if the state doesn't deliver, the Commonwealth can't do anything to legally enforce the state to abide by its obligations.

Our solution: Enact federal legislation of clear and strong enforcement, with federal authorities making sure commitments are delivered.

Golden Sun Moth. SIMON BENNETT



Picnic for the Park puts spotlight on rogue logging

PARKS AND NATURE CAMPAIGNER, JORDAN CROOK, ON ROGUE LOGGING IN THE DANDENONG RANGES

In early September 2023, over 100 people gathered in the picnic ground of Olinda Falls in the Dandenong Ranges National Park, Wurundjeri Country. Forest Fire Management Victoria (FFMV) had planned fire management operations in the area. Speakers from

the local area and academics explained the impact such post-disturbance logging has on nature's ability to recover and how it affects fire severity. We led a guided tour of the storm-impacted area. We wanted to show the community firsthand the impact log extraction would have on endangered plants and wildlife who depend on the park's habitat. Those who expected to see piles of fallen trees making the area impenetrable on foot were surprised. In reality, the fallen trees were spaced out, and likely to meet

the benchmark for the ecological vegetation communities vital for wildlife, such as Echidna, Lace Monitor and antechinus. The community and concerned Victorians have now seen for themselves the excessive operations planned by FFMV for the scale of windfall in the bushland areas of the park. It was a pleasure to organise such an important community event with the Southern Dandenongs Landcare Group and keep the spotlight on terrible commercially-driven operations proposed for our national park. 🌿



Top: Picnickers in the park. Bottom, left: Rob Pergi addressing the group. Bottom, right: Dr Alex Maisey. MEGHAN LINDSAY

How not to save a stonefly

BLAKE NISBET, NATURE CONSERVATION CAMPAIGNER, WITH GOOD AND BAD NEWS FOR THE MDBW STONEFLY

Almost a year ago, VNPA launched a bid seeking the protection of critical habitat for the Mt Donna Buang Wingless (MDBW) Stonefly (*Riekoperla darlingtoni*).

Our aim was to protect the restricted 'Goldilocks zones' of cool mountain streams that the Stonefly calls home. We're now at the sticky end of this process and it's fair to say that there's some good news, and there's some bad news.

Let's start with the good!

Firstly, it's important to remember that under the *Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988* (FFG Act), a Scientific Advisory Committee (SAC) advises the State Government on conservation matters. Our nomination for the legal protection of the Stonefly's critical habitat was lodged through the SAC.

We have recently been informed that, in April 2023, the SAC recommended a Critical Habitat Determination for the MDBW Stonefly. Hearing the SAC support our call for the protection of critical habitats, an important but widely neglected tool in Victoria's nature laws, was a fantastic result.

The SAC recommendation was then directed to the ultimate

decision-maker, the Secretary of the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action (DEECA).

Remarkably, the DEECA Secretary went against the advice of the SAC, opting not to protect the critical habitat of the MDBW Stonefly. It goes without saying, but this is where the bad news kicks in. This is an extremely disappointing outcome.

The Secretary provided a statement outlining his decision and published new guidelines around the eligibility of areas for Critical Habitat Determinations.

The new guidelines, put simply, are a three-step process that 'tests' whether an area would be eligible for critical habitat protection under Victoria's nature laws. For the MDBW Stonefly, it would require that:

1. The area of habitat is essential to the Stonefly.
2. Threats to the Stonefly's habitat cannot be adequately mitigated by existing arrangements.
3. A Critical Habitat Determination would materially improve the habitat's protection against these threats.

We are confident the MDBW Stonefly's critical habitat meets these criteria. While the Secretary was satisfied the Stonefly met the first phase of the criteria, he disagreed that it met the second. He was satisfied that the existing arrangements in place adequately mitigated threats to the Stonefly's habitat.

Our contention here is that the Secretary did not consider the entire suite of threats facing the Stonefly's habitat and whether existing arrangements are adequate to mitigate these threats. Decreases in rainfall and snowfall, increases in air temperature, prolonged droughts, human trampling, vehicle trampling, and impacts from invasive plants and animals are some of the threats not addressed in the Secretary's statement.

Instead, his decision was predicated on the assessment of only one threat in isolation – the proposed Warburton Mountain Bike Destination trails through Stonefly habitat (largely knocked back by the state planning minister).

We will continue to urge the Secretary to reconsider his decision and advocate for a Critical Habitat Determination for the MDBW Stonefly.

One last hopeful note – our nomination did trigger the release of guidelines which have been missing in action for about four years since the amendment of the FFG Act. Now the State Government must get the ball rolling by testing the eligibility of critical habitats for our long list of threatened species and communities. There are over 2000 of them to be assessed, and priority should be placed on those with the highest extinction risk (Critically Endangered) and progressed through towards those with a lower extinction risk (Vulnerable). 🌿



Mt Donna Buang Wingless Stonefly. EDDIE TSYRIN



JORDAN CROOK, PARKS AND NATURE CAMPAIGNER, ON WHY AND HOW WE SHOULD CARE FOR OUR LARGE, OLD AND NEXT GENERATION TREES

Trees are monuments too

Around the world, large old trees hold a special place in human society and folklore. Often referred to as veteran, ancient or champion trees, the common thread across continents, countries and cultures is the care and admiration reserved for them.

Our new report, *Protecting our living legacies*, is a practical policy guide to safeguarding large old trees on public land in Victoria. It describes the importance of old legacy trees and offers strategies to improve the care and management of our living monuments.

What is a significant tree?

This is a good and pertinent question. We define a 'significant tree' as any hollow-bearing tree, a tree of significant age, size, height or girth/diameter for their species, or a rare species in outlying populations that are beyond their natural range.

Something that deserves special emphasis is the fact that the age and significance of a tree is not always obvious from its size.

An old Mallee tree may only grow to two or three metres tall but be older than a towering 60m tall Errinundra Shining Gum (*Eucalyptus denticulata*). Tree Geebung (*Persoonia arborea*)

measuring just 19 to 21cm diameter at breast height (DBH) have been aged at 170 to 510 years old using radiocarbon dating. This relatively small midstorey tree species, endemic to the wet forests of the Central Highlands, can be just as old (if not older) as the towering Mountain Ash (*Eucalyptus regnans*) surrounding it.

Growing conditions can also produce stunted growth in older trees. This is best observed in alpine areas where the cold, windy conditions prevent trees from growing past a certain height and size. For example, the Mt Stirling Summit Tree, a Snow Gum (*Eucalyptus pauciflora*), stands just over five metres tall but is thought to be at least 320 years old.

Threats to significant trees on public land in Victoria

Immediate, cumulative, and long-term threats from logging, planned burning, root damage, windthrow, bushfire and impacts of climate change are all serious threats to significant trees.

One of the issues we identify in our report is that current mitigation and so-called protection efforts often don't consider these long-term threats, nor are they monitored.



Fire and fuel management works

Because of their perceived risk to workers and the public, hasty appraisals of trees as hazardous by DEECA/FFMV is leading to these agencies felling large numbers of significant trees. Human safety must remain of the highest importance, but risks can be reduced without felling large numbers of trees.

If a joint ambition of preserving both human life and significant trees is to be achieved, then we need to see appropriate oversight and transparency in FFMV's fire management operations, combined with a willingness to improve tree and biodiversity management. This looks like direct investment in conducting independent, on the ground habitat and tree assessments prior to fuel reduction works.

Native forest logging and logging-like operations

As Victoria transitions from native forest logging to fully plantation-based silviculture, the need to plan operations away from significant trees is warranted on both an ecological and economic basis.

Significant trees perform essential ecological functions and can be a draw card for tourism and improve economic prospects in regional areas. If the Redwoods of California can bring tourism and economic

continued overpage...

A magnificent Mountain Ash (*Eucalyptus regnans*) in Toolangi Forest, Wurundjeri and Taungurung Country. JORDAN CROOK

Our goal with Protecting our living legacies is to spark a conversation about how we can better manage and care for our trees on public land, particularly those significant trees which are large, old, or contain tree-hollows, and how we can increase their longevity.

This report is for public land managers and anyone who wishes to advocate for the protection of significant trees on public land.

It addresses the growing concern among forest scientists, community groups, tree advocates and nature lovers over the loss of significant trees across the public estate.

vnpa.org.au/publications/protecting-our-living-legacies

Trees are monuments, too continued...

development, Victoria too can have this type of nature-based, sustainable tourism enhanced by appropriate track creation and visitor facilities.

Victoria has a decreasing number of impressive old trees spread across the forest estate. Protecting these trees and installing appropriate visitor infrastructure would bring greater ecological and economic benefits than their destruction and that of the surrounding forests.

Management and planning

Balancing safety hazards, habitat significance, amenity and other values is critical to significant tree management. Proper management is also highly preventative, reducing future risk of tree failure from disturbance to roots, trunk damage that encourages pathogens and rot, and poor pruning methods that compromise tree structure, vigour and health.

Protections for old legacy trees

Under state regulations, large trees on public land must meet a high benchmark to qualify for protection: 2.5m diameter at breast height (DBH, or 1.3m above ground level). This policy ignores the fact that size can be a poor indicator of the age and significance of a tree.

Many species will never grow to that size and growing conditions can produce stunted growth in older trees. Some of the biggest trees in Victoria were found in forests scheduled for logging (until the industry was phased out on 1 January 2024). Until the State Government protects these areas in conservation land tenures, and legislates the end of native forest logging, the threat to these living giants remains.

Many of these trees are theoretically protected from being directly felled in operations. The reality is that adjacent logging exposes them to multiple threats, including deliberate removal after being designated 'hazardous', heavy machinery damage and isolation and vulnerability to wind-throw.

Hollow-bearing and significant trees have also been felled and damaged during prescribed burning operations and poorly planned or executed firebreak works.

To sum up, many of Victoria's large and old trees that should be protected are not. This is an incredible opportunity and the inspiration that led to *Protecting our living legacies*. It is time to recognise the functions of large old trees as both crucial structures and as foundations of human well-being, and to prioritise their conservation and protection. Amended policy and practice is needed urgently. Without such action the disappearance of large old trees and associated organisms will continue to accelerate.

The actions we take today will decide if future Victorians get the chance to stand in the belly of a living giant like the 'Yea Link Survivor' (which can fit 40 people inside it) or watch Lace Monitors sun themselves in hollows of Wellsford Forest's Ironbark trees.

That is an experience everyone should have the chance to enjoy.

We can, and must, find better ways to care and manage large and old, hollow-bearing and significant trees across Victoria's public land estate. Join us in protecting our living legacies so they can be treasured for many more years to come.

Donate now to protect our old legacy trees

vnpa.org.au/legacy-trees



Measuring a Barrel-tree (*Eucalyptus fastigata*), Brown Mountain, Gunaikurnai Country. JILL REDWOOD



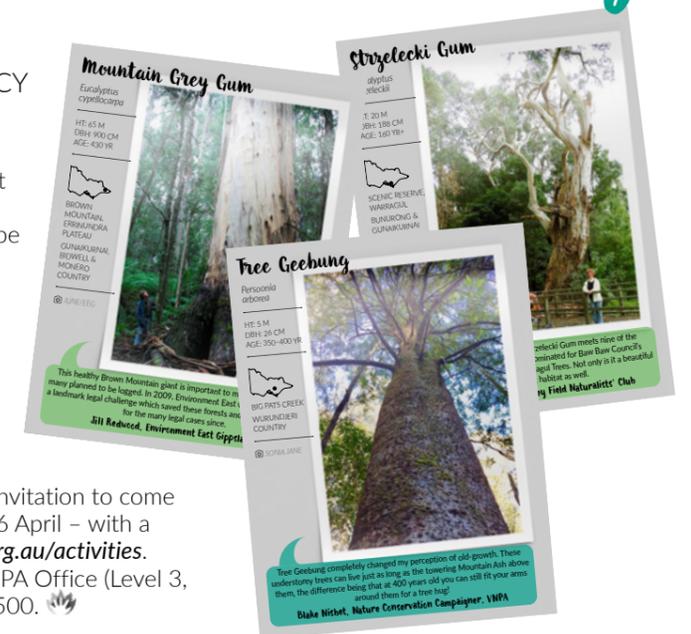
Our favourite trees

TEN VICTORIANS TELL US ABOUT AN OLD LEGACY TREE THAT IS IMPORTANT TO THEM

Size isn't everything when it comes to Victoria's significant trees. Different trees take vastly different times to reach their maximum height, meaning a relatively small tree could be just as old – and significant – as a giant.

VNPA has produced a mini booklet highlighting ten exceptional old legacy trees. From a 65 metre tall Mountain Grey Gum (*Eucalyptus cypellocarpa*) on the Errinundra Plateau, estimated at 430 years old, to a 350-400 year old Tree Geebung (*Persoonia arborea*) that is just five metres tall.

Our 'favourite trees' booklet was sent to members and supporters in February, with a letter from Jordan Crook describing our campaign for old legacy trees. It included an invitation to come meet the legacy trees of the Central Highlands on Saturday 6 April – with a second date added on Saturday 4 May. To book, visit vnpa.org.au/activities. To pick up a copy of the booklet, drop in to see us at the VNPA Office (Level 3, 60 Leicester St, Carlton), or call our friendly staff on 9341 6500.



River Red Gum

Eucalyptus camaldulensis

HT: 45 M
DBH: 1200 CM
AGE: 500-900 YR

Aunty Monica Morgan, Yorta Yorta Elder

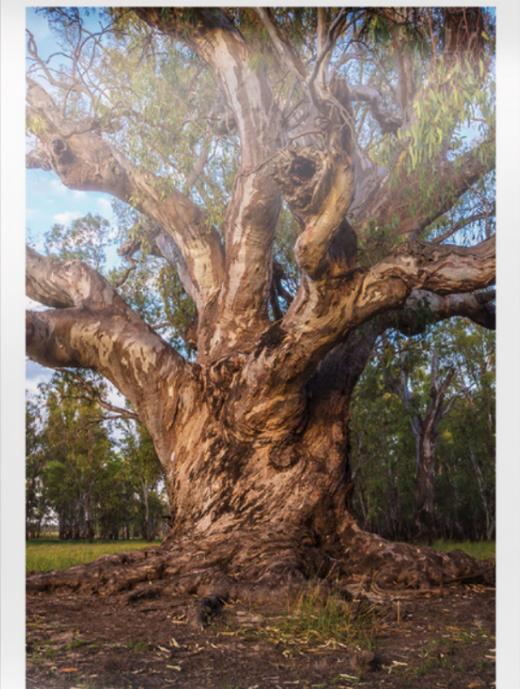
My name is Monica Morgan and I am a proud Yorta Yorta woman. For my favourite tree I have chosen a River Red Gum (*Eucalyptus camaldulensis*) that is situated in the heartland of Yorta Yorta Country and rests by the foreshore of the beautiful Barmah Lake in the Barmah National Park. This country was originally known as the Moira, the largest Red Gum forest in the world. It straddles the Great Waters Dhungulla, also known as the Murray River. They are my bloodline and an important part of my traditional lands. Both sides have wetlands that are a nursery for all original wildlife only found here in this country.

Under the great branches of this and other Red Gums exist important places where my ancestors camped. These sites hold cooking middens and fireplaces created over many thousands of years, as well as places of burial. This tree would have also seen the massacre that occurred near the lake, led by Trooper Henry Dana in 1843.

My mother, Elizabeth Morgan, a strong Yorta Yorta woman, would travel from Cumeragunja by horse and buggy as a child with her great-grandmother Elizabeth Atkinson. All the family would set up camp on the foreshore of the lake where this beautiful tree now stands – fishing and hunting and learning the stories and where she and my Uncles took me as a young woman. Now, as a mother and grandmother, I too pass on the ways and stories of my Yorta Yorta mob under this same tree.

All of us together need to ensure that the pressures on our country and its environment in today's modern world does not destroy this tree and the thousands of young and old Red Gums around it. We all as one need to preserve these important places and provide the water at the right time of the year, every year to ensure future generations can camp, fish, gather food and medicines, hunt, sing and dance for our Mother the Earth.

BARMAH NATIONAL PARK
YORTA YORTA COUNTRY



MICHAEL RAWKE/FLICKEUR

Spring blossoms for Nature Stewards across the state



MADDY WILLCOCK,
NATURE STEWARDS
COORDINATOR,
REPORTS ON THE
SPRING BATCH OF NATURE
STEWARDS GRADUATES

Thank you also to all our awesome guest presenters and the Nature Stewards board members for their ongoing enthusiasm, guidance, and inspiration given to our participants in their connections with and support of nature and local community.

We are very excited to announce our new Nature Stewards coordinator, Dr Nicole Mertens, who will be taking over from Dr Maddy Willcock while she is on parental leave. Nicole brings a wealth of knowledge, skills, and experience to the program and we can't wait to see what 2024 and beyond holds.

Best wishes for an awe-inspiring autumn out and about in nature. 🌿

Our Spring 2023 program saw three Nature Stewards courses across the state, in Ballarat, Whittlesea and Geelong.

Thank you to Landcare Regional Programs Victoria, the Geelong Field Naturalists Club and our Council partners for funding and supporting the course delivery. A huge thanks also to our wonderful facilitators that made the courses so incredible: Julie White, George Paras, Jeff White, Danielle Bain and Nicole Henry.

As we gear up for another huge Autumn 2024 with six courses, we are thrilled to welcome three new facilitators: Jess Brown, Darren Tinker and Bob Hartmann. They will be teaching two new courses in North-west Victoria and Bendigo, and team teaching our Ballarat course.

Check if there's a
Nature Stewards
course coming to your
area
vnpa.org.au/nature-stewards



Melvin Xu, mycologist, exploring the wonderful world of fungi in Whittlesea. GEORGE PARAS



Geelong class checking out the marvels of local geology at the Dell with Deb Evans. NICOLE HENRY



Ballarat Spring 2023 class digging into revegetation works at Miners Rest Wetlands. SOPHIE HONEYMAN

Spring 2023 graduate feedback

'Learning in depth about nature motivates us to preserve and value it. If hypothetically every person learns this program, our waterways would be clean, our protected parks nurtured and we all collectively minimise waste and practise sustainability.'

Zahraa

'People really do care about the environment but sometimes need a reminder to stop, think and act. We can influence that through our own action and enthusiasm.'

David

'The knowledge and enthusiasm from the participants and facilitators... creates such a hype and greater connection to nature. Knowing that you're coming into a class full of support and knowledge and there is a strong desire to contribute. A high bar to meet – it was fabulous.'

Nichola

'[Main takeaway is] that there are good people doing good work in my local area. Learning about the various ways in which individuals are stewarding nature through their volunteerism or work is inspiring. I have also learnt so much about ecology and how this can be applied to all aspects of planning and design.'

Oid

'I have changed the way I see nature and the world around me. I can see ways that I can make a difference. I have information about how to do this now. I feel like I belong to my community.'

Jillian

'It was a wonderful experience. I learned a lot and am already recommending it to others. It has made me focus on nature more and feel more connected to it.'

Lenneke

Where we went in summer



WE HAD A BUSY SUMMER SEASON GETTING OUT AND ABOUT INTO NATURE



Citizen scientists went spotlighting and set up wildlife monitoring cameras in the Wombat Forest and Dandenong Ranges.



Bushwalkers enjoyed walks at Castlemaine and Royal Park.



Two-wheel explorers cycled past wetlands from Geelong to Lara.



Ocean lovers went for a snorkel at Kitty Miller Bay, Phillip Island, for the Great Victorian Fish Count.



Marine citizen scientists searched for sea slugs at San Remo.



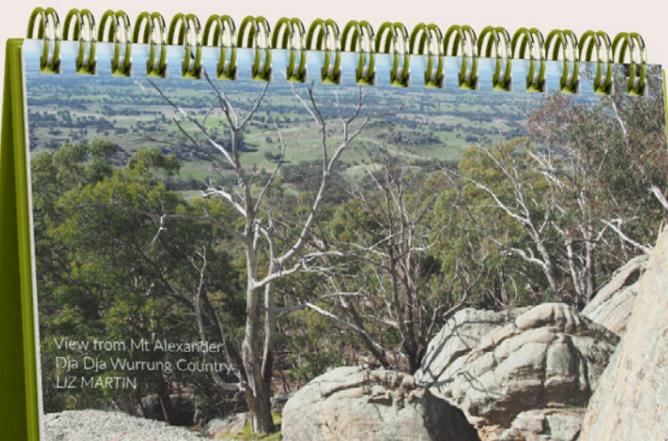
Marine enthusiasts learned about the ever-evolving coastline of Port Phillip Bay at a 'Nature of change in Port Phillip Bay' webinar.



Grassland enthusiasts went on tours to Jolly's Parwan Grasslands and learned all about Grassy Eucalypt Woodlands at a Grassy Plains Network monthly meeting.



Family using slates in the Great Victorian Fish Count, Kitty Miller Bay, Bunurong Country. CONSUELO QUEVEDO



View from Mt Alexander, Dja Dja Wurrung Country. LIZ MARTIN

A snapshot of our autumn activities calendar

Bushwalk and camping weekend – Budj Bim

Friday 12 April to Sunday 14 April
Explore the cultural and natural heritage of Budj Bim National Park.

Mt Macedon bushwalk

Sunday 24 March
This 14km walk will journey from Mt Macedon village to Memorial Cross and Camels Hump.

Sea Slug Census

Sunday 31 March and Monday 1 April
Join us at San Remo to search for sea slugs!

Nature Stewards courses

Courses begin in April
Courses in Ballarat, Bendigo, Knox, Merri-Bek and Moonee Valley. Learn about local plants, animals, fungi and what you can do to help nature locally.

Mt Alexander bushwalk

Sunday 12 May
We'll take the 12km summit ridge circuit.

Join our autumn activities!



Check our online Activities Calendar and find a bushwalk, citizen science event, short course or other nature activity. There are plenty of opportunities for people of all ages to join us for an adventure in nature.

Keep an eye on the calendar, new activities are added regularly!

Discover more at
vnpa.org.au/activities

Subscribe to our
mailing list to receive
activities updates
vnpa.org.au/activities-sign-up

The winds of change

Potential positive 👍 or negative 👎 high level marine impacts from energy development	
Loss of marine and coastal fauna and/or flora as a result of habitat loss, modification or degradation	👎
Increase in marine and coastal fauna and/or flora as a result of installed infrastructure providing new habitat and refuge	👍
Displacement of marine fauna (from, for example, feeding, breeding or resting areas)	👎
Colonisation of structures by invasive, non-indigenous marine species. These species may compete with native species for food, habitat etc.	👎
Colonisation of structures by indigenous species may provide habitat availability	👍
Colonisation of structures by indigenous species may interfere with ecosystem dynamics	👎
Changes to marine and coastal habitat – provision of new habitat	👍
Changes to marine and coastal habitat – loss, modification or degradation	👎
Modification of water quality	👎
Marine pollution	👎
Changes to coastal processes – e.g. reduced wave or tidal action which may modify habitats near installed infrastructure	👎
Changes to coastal processes – e.g. reduced wave or tidal action leading to reduced erosion or increased accretion	👍



MARINE CAMPAIGNER
SHANNON HURLEY
ELABORATES ON
WHY WHALES AND
CLEAN ENERGY HAVE A LOT
MORE IN COMMON THAN
MANY PEOPLE REALISE

We acknowledge this location is part of the unceded traditional lands and waters of the **Gunditjmara, Eastern Maar, Bunurong and Gunaikurnai** and recognise their ongoing role in caring for Country.

We need a fast transition from polluting to clean energy sources to avoid the extreme impacts of climate disruption. This is especially important to stop our marine waters from rapid warming and ensuring marine life aren't forced out of their home range. But this does not mean offshore wind farms and supporting infrastructure can be plonked anywhere. The right technology in the wrong place can cause irreversible damage to marine habitats. There is one way to avoid significant damage to marine ecosystems and that's through marine spatial planning (MSP). Better yet, when undertaken early in the process helps avoid problems and setbacks that further delay the Victorian Government from reaching their climate targets later. Yet marine planning is absent from state and federal government plans

as they surge ahead with the offshore wind industry. This is why VNPA have launched a new discussion paper, *The winds of change*, that sets out how MSP can create a responsible, nature-positive offshore wind industry. Using MSP to organise and coordinate the marine space has many purposes and benefits. By far the biggest one is to identify important marine values and areas that should be off limits to development to avoid and protect significant areas for marine wildlife, and ones more suitable for development. Had marine planning been adopted, perhaps the Southern Ocean Renewable Energy Zone wouldn't have been proposed within one of the most important Southern Right Whale nursery areas off the coast of Warrnambool! We also recently saw the rejection by the Federal Environment Minister

of the Port of Hastings proposal for a new port facility for the assembly of components of offshore windfarms in Western Port Bay. This was a welcome decision; this project would have caused unacceptable and irreversible damage to a protected Ramsar wetland. The Victorian Government needs to go back to the drawing board, which will further delay plans to meet climate targets. In our view, this could have been avoided if MSP had been used early in the design process (see more on p.23). *The winds of change* calls for the Victorian and Commonwealth governments to get ahead of the planning process so our essential natural environment is not sacrificed for the energy transition.

continued overpage...

The winds of change discusses opportunities for early planning interventions in the establishment of the offshore wind energy industry. It demonstrates how marine spatial planning can be used to protect marine biodiversity values, save time, reduce costs, and minimise rejections. We encourage any groups, agencies, organisations or individuals to contact us to share their thoughts.

Read the report online at vnpa.org.au/publications/winds-of-change

The winds of change continued...

Victoria's marine wildlife

Victoria's south-eastern seas and shores are unusually abundant – 80 per cent of the marine life found here occurs nowhere else on earth. They are home to more unique species than the Great Barrier Reef.

Some of our coastal and marine areas are internationally recognised Ramsar wetlands. Places like Western Port Bay, where the port facility was proposed, require extra special management and protection.

Away from the shoreline, Victoria's deeper, open waters support plankton, sea jellies, squid, large mammals like Fur Seals, Bottle-nosed Dolphins and Southern Right Whales, seabirds such as gannets, petrels and Little Penguins, and fish including pilchards, anchovies, Silver Trevally, Barracuda and Jack Mackerel. Many are listed under our nature laws.

Top three priorities

1. Implement the Western Port Bay Framework by piloting the first MSP for Victoria to protect these internationally important wetlands through the energy transition.

Western Port Bay's health is deteriorating, yet this Ramsar wetland is subject to further development as the potential location of Victoria's renewable energy terminal to support the assembly of components of offshore windfarms. An MSP would help the Victorian Government coordinate the many competing uses and protect the wetland within state jurisdiction. The plan could take into consideration the influence of the offshore wind areas.

Responsibility: Victorian Govt (DEECA) to lead, Federal Govt (DCCEEW) to support.

2. An MSP team with adequate expertise to be hosted within DEECA's marine planning team. This is a vital step to help develop Victoria's first pilot marine spatial plan in Western Port Bay.

Responsibility: Victorian Govt (DEECA) to lead, Federal Govt (DCCEEW) to support.

3. A dedicated body to advise on impacts of the energy transition on nature (including marine issues). *Responsibility: Victorian Govt.*



Mangroves at Crib Point, Western Port Bay, Bunurong Country. CELESTE DE VIS

The ocean deserves planning equity, too

On land there is a detailed scheme, along with statutory planning and laws, for developers to manage infrastructure proposals on certain land tenures and overlays. This includes national parks and high conservation value areas. These arrangements do not exist for the marine environment, but they should. Marine planning is essential if developers are to protect whale calving grounds, deep coral reef beds or seabird flyways from irresponsibly placed infrastructure.

Our current environmental assessment processes are woefully inadequate for planning site areas for an entirely new industry. Both the state Environmental Effects Statement (EES) and the federal *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act) process are highly

individualised, costly and limited in scope. In other words, they are not an adequate planning tool.

What is adequate is MSP – a tool that already exists and the Victorian Government committed to under Victoria's *Marine and Coastal Act 2018*. It just needs to be implemented.

The case for MSP

MSP is a tool for governance, collaboration, funding and decision making for offshore wind projects.

Various state, national and international policy and plans reinforce the need to roll out MSP to guide industry development. At the state level, a lack of marine planning processes is inconsistent with the *Marine and Coastal Act*. The Marine and Coastal Strategy 2022 states that the MSP Framework applies to the Victorian Offshore Wind Strategy, to apply the guidance, approach and processes in the MSP Framework.

The benefits of MSP include:

- Planning can save time and money for industry and stakeholders.
- Information gathered during the process can be used as baseline data for EES and to value marine energy resources.
- Assurance to stakeholders that marine energy projects are located in pre-defined areas.
- High-value marine and coastal assets that can be geographically defined are removed as potential sites, providing certainty to all parties, and reducing costs.

Nature is part of the climate change solution

Marine ecosystems are an important part of the climate solution. We must protect them through the energy transition, otherwise we would simply be sacrificing one part of nature at the expense of another.

Scientific evidence shows that protecting and restoring wild animals (i.e. fish and mammals) and their functional roles, along with habitats like forests, wetlands, and coastal and grasslands, enhances natural carbon capture and storage. 🌿

Terminal diagnosis



SHANNON HURLEY EXPLAINS THAT WITH THE REJECTION OF THE

OFFSHORE WIND TERMINAL AT HASTINGS, NOW IS THE PERFECT TIME TO ADOPT A NEW PLAN FOR WESTERN PORT BAY

In January, a surprisingly good news story hit the front pages. The Federal Environment Minister rejected the Port of Hastings proposal to develop and operate a port facility for the assembly of components of offshore windfarms.

While previous federal environment ministers hadn't been bold enough to realise their responsibilities under Australia's threatened species laws, in this case Tanya Plibersek was. Rightfully so, as the proposal risked irreversible damage to the wetlands ecological character including: a key destination for over 20,000 migratory birds flying the East Asia-Australasia flyway; a world-class blue carbon sequestration environment; a globally unique Bryozoan reef; and home to the largest shearwater, fur seal and penguin colonies in the world.

While we all know the transition to renewable energy is rapidly required, the Port of Hastings rejection is a bracing wakeup call that nature needs caretaking throughout the energy transition.

The decision highlights how the Victorian Government overlooked its duty to protect an internationally

significant wetland (being both a Ramsar-listed wetland and a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve) at the expense of meeting climate targets. It also highlights the setbacks to meeting climate targets in the absence of upfront marine spatial planning (MSP). But this is not just about offshore wind. Whether or not Victoria's Energy Terminal is destined for Western Port, this ecologically, socially and culturally significant wetland is worthy of proper planning and protection. This is further justified by the latest Victorian *State of the Environment Report*, which says wetlands (along with grasslands) are deteriorating when compared to other relatively stable ecosystems.

This is not surprising, with Western Port's wetlands constantly subjected to inappropriate and ill-thought-out development proposals, inconsistent planning, inadequate oversight and monitoring, and poor accountability and governance.

Together with the Western Port Biosphere Foundation, Save Western Port and Phillip Island Conservation Society, we have led the development of the Western Port Bay Framework to see proper planning undertaken.

Refresher on the Framework

The Western Port Bay Framework is made up of three core elements: a new plan, a partnership to develop the plan, and a fund to make both happen. A marine spatial plan would guide organising, management and decision-making. It would bring together Traditional Custodians, government, ecologists, managers, community, industry, tourism and recreation to coordinate Western Port's current and future challenges.

Due to Western Port Bay's regional scale, it is a well-suited candidate for marine spatial planning. It is Victoria's second largest bay, but does not have an Environmental Management Plan like neighbouring Port Phillip Bay.

It's also subject to multiple fossil fuel and renewable energy proposals, has declining ecological health with shores that are experiencing the fastest growth of anywhere else in the state.

The plan is not merely a 'nice to have', but a requirement under the *Marine and Coastal Act 2018* and the Marine and Coastal Strategy. They state the need to strategically plan and manage industry use and development in the marine and coastal environment in a coordinated way to:

- Provide for industry uses in appropriate locations (preferably on private land).
- Minimise impacts and risks to the marine and coastal environment.
- Appropriately manage competing or conflicting uses.
- Facilitate coexistence and co-location of compatible uses.

The Marine and Coastal Strategy specifically states that the MSP framework applies to the Victorian Offshore Wind Strategy. It also says an MSP must be identified and undertaken for an area between 2023-27.

If Western Port Bay isn't the perfect fit to pilot Victoria's first marine spatial plan, we don't know what is!

We call on the Victorian Government to adopt the Western Port Bay Framework and pilot the development of first MSP for Victoria. This is a perfect opportunity for those charged with protecting nature in Victoria to fulfil their commitments under the Marine and Coastal Strategy. 🌿

Learn more and get involved with our campaign
actforwesternportbay.au

We acknowledge this location is part of the unceded traditional lands and waters of the **Bunurong** and recognise their ongoing role in caring for Country.

Logging in the shadows



BEN GILL, NATURE CONSERVATION CAMPAIGNER, INVESTIGATES COMMUNITY FORESTRY AND FOREST PRODUCE LICENCES

The State Government's 2023 decision to end native forest logging focused very heavily on the east of the state, leaving unanswered questions about the future of other types of logging, especially so-called 'community forestry'.

Community forestry operated across the west and north of the state, and in a small part of the east. It included 124 coupes covering approximately 65,000 hectares; an area bigger than Wilsons Prom. Since 2017, we'd seen a 52 per cent increase in logging areas, largely run with the support of government grants. Logging methods vary from clearfell at Mt Cole, storm salvage at Wombat and Cobaw Forest,

logging of Murray River Red Gums and other fragments of forest in the west. VNPA, together with Wombat Forestcare and other groups, highlighted this inconsistency and called for commercial forestry to end across the whole state.

On 25 January 2024, VicForests announced that it:

...cannot continue because of the risk of litigation and the cost it would burden the taxpayer with. The Court is also likely to require a disproportionate survey effort before any operations can occur. VicForests does not consider that it has the capacity to provide coupes to Licensees and to manage Community Forestry operations.



Rogue logging in Cobaw Forest, Wurundjeri and Taungurung Country
BEN GILL

We acknowledge this location is part of the unceded traditional lands and waters of the **Djab Wurrung, Dja Dja Wurrung, Wurundjeri and Taungurung** and recognise their ongoing role in caring for Country.

Accordingly, VicForests cancelled all Community Forestry program operations. They finally ceased on 5 February 2024.

In 2023, Wombat Forestcare began legal proceedings against VicForests operations in the future Wombat-Lerderderg National Park. This court case was the catalyst for bringing forward the date of the exit from native forest logging. While the case influenced this decision, it is still ongoing.

So, is that the end of it? Unfortunately, not necessarily.

The underlying capacity to issue 'forest produce licences' still exists. This was how native forest was managed in the 1980s and 90s and we will need significant reform to remove the capacity to return to business-as-usual logging.

What is community forestry?

Advocates of community forestry still circulate. It is a woolly term, which sounds nicer than 'industrial forestry' but has fewer negative connotations. We had a look at some of the global literature, and the picture it paints is not that rosy.

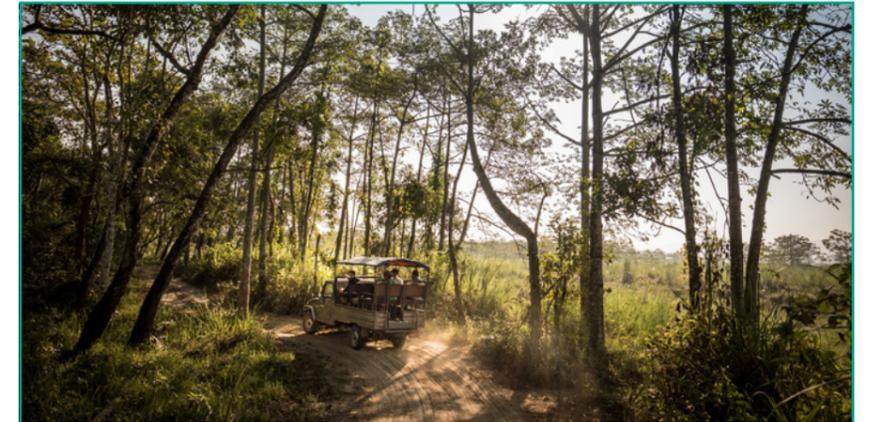
While community forestry is marketed as having the potential to empower local communities and promote sustainable land management, there have been many international examples where initiatives have fallen far short of their intended goals or resulted in negative outcomes.

Community forestry, adaptive silviculture, regenerative forestry, urban forestry, sustainable forestry. These are all synonyms for forestry of different scales. All have faced criticism for prioritising timber extraction above looking after nature, leading to conflicts between conservationists, industry stakeholders and Indigenous communities. Some of the key points raised in the international literature include the following points.

The illusion of empowerment

Community forestry promises to empower local communities and Indigenous peoples in decision-making processes related to forest management. In reality, communities

continued overpage...



International examples of community forestry

Brazil: Extractive Reserves

Extractive reserves in Brazil are designated for sustainable use by traditional communities, including Indigenous peoples and rubber tappers. However, reserves have faced threats from deforestation, illegal logging, and land grabbing by ranchers and agribusiness interests. Conflicts over land tenure, resource access and nature conservation have undermined the effectiveness of some initiatives.

Indonesia: Community-Based Forest Management (CBFM)

Indonesia's CBFM program aimed to devolve forest management rights to local communities. However, the program has been criticised for prioritising commercial interests over local livelihoods and environmental conservation. There have been instances of land grabbing, conflicts with Indigenous communities, and environmental degradation associated with CBFM projects.

Mexico: Ejidos

Ejidos are communal landholdings where local communities have rights to manage forest resources. While ejidos have the potential to promote sustainable forestry, they've faced challenges such as illegal logging, corruption, and conflicts with government agencies and private interests. Some ejido communities have struggled to effectively manage their resources and derive sustainable livelihoods from forestry activities.

Nepal: Community forestry

Hailed as a success story in community forestry, Nepal's experience has revealed deep challenges. In some cases, elite capture and power struggles have led to the exclusion of marginalised groups from decision-making processes. There have also been reports of over-harvesting, corruption and misuse of funds.

While areas of Nepal have increased tree cover through community forestry, these are often monoculture production forests.

Philippines: Community-Based Forest Management (CBFM)

The Philippines' CBFM program aimed to empower local communities to manage forest resources sustainably. In reality, the program has faced challenges such as weak institutional capacity, inadequate support from government agencies, and conflicts over resource tenure and rights. Some projects have struggled to achieve meaningful community participation and have been susceptible to elite capture and corruption.

Tanzania: Participatory Forest Management (PFM)

Tanzania's PFM program aims to involve local communities in forest management and conservation. However, it has inadequate support from government, limited technical capacity, and conflicts over land tenure and resource access.

Some PFM projects have struggled to address underlying drivers of deforestation and have been undermined by illegal logging and land encroachment.

Logging in the shadows continued...

often find themselves marginalised and disempowered, as corporate and vested interests eclipse local voices.

Conflict over conservation

At the heart of the debate surrounding community forestry lies a fundamental conflict between conservation and exploitation. While proponents argue that community involvement can lead to more sustainable land management practices, the evidence is scarce to support this.

Any form of forestry in ecologically sensitive areas compromises the integrity of our natural environment.

Greenwashing and corporate capture

In the realm of community forestry, greenwashing is a pervasive

phenomenon. Forestry companies across the globe seek to present themselves as environmentally responsible while exploiting natural resources for profit.

By co-opting community partnerships and sustainability certifications, these companies obscure the true impacts of their activities and perpetuate a cycle of degradation of the natural world.

Cultural heritage at risk

For First Nations people, the negative impacts of community forestry extend beyond environmental degradation to the erosion of cultural heritage and traditional knowledge.

Sacred sites, ancestral lands and cultural practices are threatened by the relentless pursuit of profit, leaving Indigenous communities

dispossessed and disempowered. The loss of connection to country and culture represents a profound tragedy, one that calls into question the very foundation of our society's relationship with the land.

Keeping a close eye on the loopholes

While the expedited timeline for the end of native forest logging is cause for celebration, there are several important mechanisms that may still enable damaging loopholes.

We must keep a very close eye on these to minimise any perverse outcomes for our forests' future. 🌿

Salvage logging in the Wombat Forest. BEN GILL



Kangaroo Grass,
Bababi Djinanang
Grassland,
Wurundjeri Country
JOHN ENGLART

State of our grasslands



ADRIAN MARSHALL, GRASSY PLAINS COORDINATOR,
ON THE RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE LATEST STATE
OF THE ENVIRONMENT REPORT

The Allan Government must do more to protect grasslands. They are in significant decline according to the Victorian *State of the Environment 2023 Report* (SER), our state's five-yearly nature report card.

Most other ecosystems are 'largely stable', but not grasslands. There's a lot of work to be done across all of our landscapes, but grasslands are of particular concern.

What's the problem?

Grasslands are in very bad shape, despite being Critically Endangered under our national nature laws, the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act) and threatened under the *Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988* (FFG Act).

There are four key reasons:

1. Grasslands are still being cleared. This has been going on since colonial invasion.
2. We're not protecting the good stuff. Proportionally, there isn't much grassland in the parks system compared to, say, forests, heathland or alpine areas.
3. Most grassland is on private land, with little legal protection.
4. The Melbourne Strategic Assessment, the one program for protecting significant areas of grassland, is not meeting its own targets. As the SER says, 'The impact of the Western Grassland Reserve on the protection of grasslands is limited'.

Identify, purchase, protect

One of the SER's recommendations to meet state biodiversity protection targets stands out: the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council

should identify the best land in private ownership, especially in high-priority ecosystems and landscapes, for the government to buy.

Grasslands must be a focus of that investigation. It's hard to believe, but we simply don't know where the best bits are.

Getting grassland into the public reserve system is not enough. Shamefully, most grasslands in public ownership are losing their biodiversity, suffering from a lack of funding and resources for ecological burns and weed removal, as well as from erroneously being dumped in the too-hard basket.

With most grassland on private land, we desperately need better protections in this space. Developers and land bankers can incrementally 'clear' grassland by doing nothing to control weeds. The legislation covering this, the *Catchment and Land Protection Act 1994* (CaLP Act), is useless and needs review.

Conversion of farmland to cropping is another increasing threat as farmers feel the economic stress of climate change. 'Existing land use' rights, which facilitate conversion, are a legal grey area that needs reform.

Other planning laws, which allow clearing for activities such as bushfire management, rock extraction and fencing, also need tightening.

Incentive programs to promote nature-positive management and on-title protections, such as covenants, should be boosted.

Prioritisation of conservation over development

Protecting biodiversity, habitats and public lands estate will require

biodiversity conservation being given greater consideration in decisions involving competing public land uses. Nowhere is this more evident than with grasslands, often misperceived as empty paddocks of no conservation value, a mindset that needs to change.

So much grassland is being lost to infrastructure such as intermodal freight hubs, poorly considered 'sustainable' solar, and road projects, and residential or commercial development. Not just in the big cities, but in regional centres across Victoria.

And it's not just individual projects. It's the design of whole precincts and growth areas, overseen by the Victorian Planning Authority, that need improved environmental focus.

Bringing people in

Public perception of grasslands is vital to their long-term survival. Our collective voice can get decision-makers to put grasslands front and centre.

To increase positive public perception, we need to make our grasslands more attractive. Managing them well is a good first step, but we really need flower power. Very public, very local, in your face floral display. And all the things that show we care, such as decent looking fences and good signage.

We need well-funded community education campaigns too. We need grasslands in the school curricula. We need to reach the culturally and linguistically diverse communities who live where grasslands grow. We need citizen science events and stargazing on the vast Victorian plains.

It is five years until the next SER report card. With some real action now, we can turn around the state's inferior performance on grassland conservation. We know exactly how to do it. 🌿

Sighting stats assist seeking sea slugs

REEFWATCH COORDINATOR, KADE MILLS, SHOWS DATA IS MAKING IT EASIER TO FIND SEA SLUGS

When I mention sea slugs can drop their body and regrow a new one from just their head, people suddenly want to know more about them, and specifically how you go about finding these amazing creatures. The answer is 'it's tricky', but knowing what you are looking for, and are likely to see, is a step in the right direction. Now we have made the job a little easier for you by analysing the data from our 19 Sea Slug Censuses. Take a close look at the top 10 species found, commit them to memory and keep an eye out for them next time you visit the shoreline!

Once you find one (and upload an image to iNaturalist), you will have taken a small step toward discovering the 500+ sea slugs known to occur in Victoria. Our dedicated team of over 400 participants has already found 315 of them across these censuses, with each sighting contributing to our understanding of these charismatic cryptic creatures, some of which are rarely seen.

Data from across the country is now being analysed for publication. Stay tuned for more slug tales. 🐌

Find out more at vnpa.org.au/programs/sea-slug-census

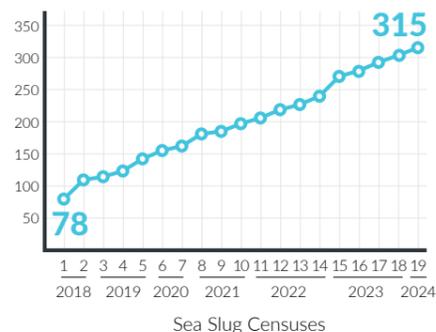


Fig 1. Species accumulation

VICTORIA'S TOP 10 SEA SLUG SIGHTINGS



IMAGES: NICK SHAW

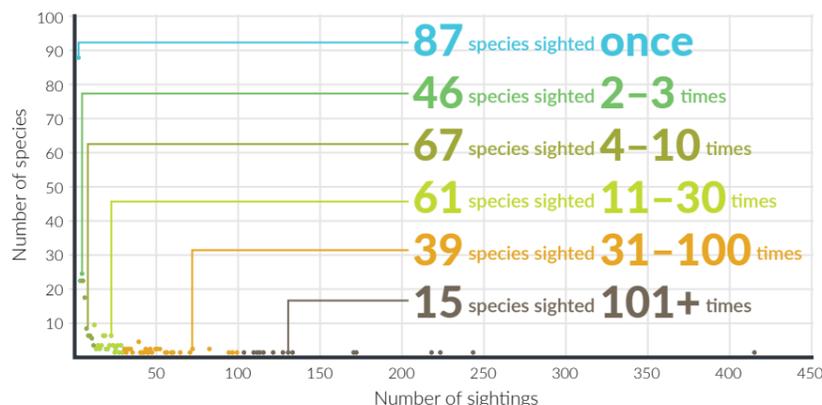


Fig 2. Times each species sighted

Reg Elder



REG ELDER WAS AWARDED LIFETIME MEMBERSHIP OF VNPA IN 2014, HAVING JOINED IN 1995, AND HAS BEEN ACTIVELY INVOLVED IN BUSHWALKS, COMMITTEES AND CAMPAIGNS OVER THE LAST 29 YEARS

What are some of your first memories of nature?

I grew up in two small country towns in New South Wales. The bush, the creeks, the rivers and the rainforest gullies were our playgrounds. We spent hours wandering through the bush, we never felt lost, and we observed the changing landscape, the birds, the animals and the vegetation. My parents had a great respect for nature and they provided my earliest memories of people with a concern for the environment.

How did you first come across VNPA and what kept you as a member and supporter over the years?

In 1995, at the age of 59, and a widower, a friend introduced me to VNPA when we attended the annual VNPA picnic at Healesville. I joined and my first activity was a base camp at Mt Buffalo, where I met my future wife Cathie Roby. We met again on a base camp over the New Year at Falls Creek. I soon became a regular bushwalker and with Cathie's encouragement joined the Bushwalking Activities Group (BWAG) Committee and became an active leader of day walks and base camps. I was also involved in tree planting projects with Grow West, near Bacchus Marsh and Project Hindmarsh at Nhill. VNPA organised groups for the annual tree planting weekends at Nhill and I attended at least 12, making the long bus trip to the Mallee. They were rewarding projects and you saw what community groups were doing to improve the environment. My wife Cathie joined me with leading walks and organising base camps. Over 10 years we held an annual week-long base camp, close to a state or national park in Victoria, with one trip to the Blue Mountains. We also supported campaigns, with a memorable one being the rally in Melbourne at Parliament House to 'Save the Prom' and another at Falls Creek against grazing in the High Country. In about 2000 I took over organising the annual

VNPA picnic and did this for about 12 years. For some years prior to Covid, I worked as a volunteer in the office helping Heath Rickard to sort out files and photographs. It was an honour to be awarded Honorary Life Membership of VNPA in 2014.

Tell us about a favourite experience of yours in a national park or in nature.

A great experience was in the Dandenongs while leading a day walk. As we walked along the track overlooking a creek a male Superb Lyrebird, only metres away in the creek bed, started singing. We stopped and were entranced as we waited on the track and listened as the lyrebird mimicked and sang what seemed to be an endless repertoire of amazing calls. We eventually had to move on and leave him to his courtship duties.

If you could go for a bush walk with one person who would it be and why?

I have met with many knowledgeable and interesting people while walking and participating in VNPA activities, and I would love to be able to walk through the bush again and discuss these issues with knowledgeable people. However, bushwalking is beyond me now but a dream would be to walk again with my wife Cathie and bushwalking friends in our High Country.

What is something you have learnt from nature?

Our native animals, birds and plants survive very well in their untouched natural environments where they have evolved. However, they are doomed to extinction if their environment is severely damaged or destroyed. Protection of the natural environment is the only way to save many from extinction and I wholeheartedly support VNPA and other conservation groups as they fight to preserve the environment and nature. 🐌

Frogs, bogs and laws that do their jobs

Alpine Tree Frog

Recovering alpine environment
PHIL INGAMELLS



JESSIE BORRELLE,
DIGITAL
ENGAGEMENT &
COMMUNICATIONS
MANAGER, LOOKS AT THE
GLARING SHORTCOMINGS
WITH OUR ENVIRONMENTAL
LAWS

Once upon a time there was a frog. A frog so small (3cm in length) you could fit at least four of them in your breast pocket. Smaller and plumper than an unwrapped Freddo, but just as likely to leave a stain.

Alpine Tree Frogs (*Litoria verreauxii alpina*), despite their common name, are tethered by evolution's dynamic threads to ponds, fens, low marshy lands and the like. This ecological niche is perfectly filled by the habitat of the Alpine National Park with its unique network of nationally endangered Alpine Sphagnum Bogs and allied Fens.

This was how a modest amphibian came to be the unwitting star of a showdown between federal and state decision-makers. The story of the Alpine Tree Frog is one that illuminates the contradictions in the way our nature laws are currently designed and executed.

When, in 2010, the State LNP Government decided to regurgitate the practice of bovine grazing in the Alpine National Park under the guise of flawed scientific trial, then federal environment minister, Tony Burke, could not simply reject the proposal in the national park, not matter how absurd. Instead, federal intervention had to focus on one of the values of the park, not the whole ecosystem the park was created to protect.

Cue the Alpine Tree Frog and its boggy habitat. Hooves being hooves, the impact of grazing on the frog – a nationally threatened species – and its endangered habitat, was deemed too damaging to indulge. The reclusive Alpine Tree Frog shone a light on a glaring discord in the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act).

Currently, national parks are not designated as 'Matters of Environmental Significance' and therefore not a 'trigger' for decisions made about their protection under the Act. This is despite the fact Australia signs up to international agreements which obligate us to do so.

Review of EPBC Act

This was one of many examples that informed the independent 2020 Samuel EPBC Act Review (10-yearly reviews are a requisite of the Act). It is over a year since the federal Environment Minister, Tanya Plibersek, released the Commonwealth's response. The Minister's report showed promise, backing the need for:

- strong outcome-focused standards to protect our unique web of life
- an independent national regulator to oversee decision-making
- increased and adequate funding for restoration that nature needs right now.

However, draft legislation expected in 2023 has been delayed, and the bones and muscle needed for a new body of nature laws barely developed. A lack of ambition and obfuscation defines the process at present.

Protecting places we love

The collective concern among lawyers, community groups and conservationists is that we are yet to see any material on critical elements of the proposed reforms.

Decision-making in the government's draft documents leans too far towards individual ministerial discretion and subjectivity, as do definitions of 'unacceptable impacts' on nature and community. Language about tangible and positive outcomes for nature is diluted in favour of making processes more efficient. In plain terms, putting faster decision-making ahead of guaranteed on-ground protection of nature is not going to address the climate and nature crisis we are in.

It should be explicit that standards require decisions to be consistent with the objects of the Act. To effectively protect nature, we need consistent standards based on the best available science. And those standards must be upheld, no matter who is behind the desk at the time.

In VNPA's 2020 review submission, we drew attention to ten key issues. Of these, formally designating 'Matters of National Environmental Significance' is especially salient.

The words 'national park' betray the incongruent reality that while these

areas are of national significance, they are managed largely by the states. The whims and priorities of state governments (luxury accommodation, mountain bike tracks, logging, hunting) override long-term protections for parks. With international commitments at stake, including under the Global Biodiversity Framework, we simply cannot assume that the states have the national interest at heart.

As routinely noted by VNPA and the Places You Love Alliance, the EPBC Act is not fit for purpose. If it were, extinction rates would be in decline, as would deforestation, unsustainable agriculture, and urban sprawl. Instead, since the EPBC Act came into effect in 2000, bulldozing and logging have destroyed over 7.6 million hectares of threatened wildlife habitat. Those behind the wheel of destruction faced little or no penalty.

Victoria has overseen 2000 of our native plants, animals and habitats become listed as threatened. A confounding 559 of those teeter on the brink of extinction.

Limits of our laws

Our existing laws are extremely limited. They don't always put the integrity of the living web of nature first. Too often they prioritise industry and development and downplay the knock-on effects of climate damage, invasive species and pollution.

Nature laws should be able to adapt to reflect shifting conditions, similar to the changes in our natural world – increasing bushfires and extreme weather, expanding feral pests, inappropriate development.

If national park status can't guarantee the safety of our most threatened wildlife, we are failing both our duty to honour nature, and fulfil our international conservation obligations.

Adding a new 'trigger' for national parks and reserves would give the Australian Government power to intervene to protect national parks and protected areas when risks to their integrity arise.

The national parks trigger, a policy recommendation by all members of the National Parks Australia Council, was a Labor election commitment in the 2019 election. It's logical. It's practical. But since Labor lost that election, the commitment has fallen off the agenda and did not appear as a recommendation in the Albanese Government's report on the Samuel Review.

If it were put back on the agenda, in the future we wouldn't need to reassign our threatened amphibians as plaintiffs. If we had nature laws that considered whole-of-landscape protection, our tree frogs could busy themselves by their streamside bogs, perfecting their mating trills, warming their bumpy emerald-olive skin in the sun.

It shouldn't be the job of a frog to hold back a herd of hooves, a rush of development, a warming atmosphere. That duty lies directly at the feet of our elected governments, and their responsibility to create and uphold nature protection laws that work. 🌿

**VNPA is a member of
Places You Love Alliance
formed to fight for a new
generation of national
environment laws. The
Alliance collectively
represents 1.5 million
Australians who love
nature and want to save it.
placesyoulove.org**

We acknowledge this location is part of the unceded traditional lands and waters of the Bidwell, Dhudhuroa, Gunaikurnai, Jaithmathang, Taungurung and Nindigudjam Ngarigu Monero and recognise their ongoing role in caring for Country.

Mountain Celery (*Aciphylla glacialis*), Alpine National Park



Art and nature in the You Yangs



ARTIST EVA KLUSACEK REFLECTS ON A RECENT 'ART AND NATURE' IN YOU YANGS REGIONAL PARK



ALL IMAGES: EVA KLUSACEK

In the spring of 2023, I led an 'Art and Nature' walk at the You Yangs, as part of VNPA's activities program.

The thinking behind combining art and nature in one activity is that observation is a strong link between the two.

When we are drawing a subject, we need to take time to observe it. These mindful moments of observation force us to take notice of details that we might otherwise miss if we were walking past without stopping.

Through observation, we learn more about nature, and develop new or renewed connections with nature.

We had a nice size group for the activity, with a mix of people attending. The aim was for it to be a fun activity, with a focus of enjoying ourselves and trying something creative and fun.

Many laughs were had at the first activity where we had a go at drawing each other in a few different ways in quick sketches to 'loosen the nerves'. This allowed us to get a feel for drawing and using the charcoal or pencils on our sketch pads.

We then progressed on to different locations along the roughly 3km path, stopping at predetermined locations, to draw things like trees, branches, leaves, or a whole landscape scene.

There were still smiles on everyone's faces at the end of the activity, so it seemed like everyone had a great time! Hopefully it encouraged them to keep drawing, observing and practicing. And not being afraid to have a go.

Most importantly, it was a chance to share some time together in nature and connect in a different way than we would normally be used to.



We acknowledge this location is part of the unceded traditional lands and waters of the Wadawurrung and recognise their ongoing role in caring for Country.

IMAGE: JESSIE BORRELLE

Container deposit scheme for nature



EVERY RETURNED CONTAINER EARNS 10 CENTS TOWARDS VNPA'S WORK PROTECTING NATURE

Victoria has, at long last, a Container Deposit Scheme and you can take part! This state-wide recycling program keeps waste out of nature and contributes donations to charities and community groups. VNPA is registered as a charity partner with all three operators: North Zone (operated by Visy), East Zone (operated by Return-It) and West Zone (operated by TOMRA Cleanaway).

How does it work?

Collect eligible containers at your home, school, workplace or club. Be a clean-up champ and collect discarded containers in your neighbourhood, local parks or in nature.

Most aluminium, glass, plastic, and liquid paperboard (carton) drink containers between 150mL and three litres are eligible for a 10 cent refund. This includes plastic soft drink bottles, glass beer bottles, soft drinks and alcohol sold in cans, and small fruit juice cartons.

Find a refund point near you. There are hundreds of refund points across Victoria. They include:

- Reverse vending machines: insert containers into machine to be scanned and verified (lids encouraged). Best if have under 200 items.
- Depots: walk-in or drive through to get your containers counted and refunded on the spot. Best for large loads.
- Over-the-counter: some small businesses or organisations provide an over-the-counter service.

How do I donate my refund to VNPA?

The easiest way to support us is to take a photo of the VNPA barcode and scan it at your refund point.

Alternatively, download the app:

1. Search Container Deposit Scheme Victoria from the Apple Store or Google Play.
2. Download one (or more) of the three operator apps (CDS Vic West, CDS Vic East & CDS Vic North) and register.
3. Search Victorian National Parks Association under 'Charities' and press 'Set as Payout'.

At a reverse vending machine:

1. Insert your eligible bottles or cans.
2. Scan the barcode or enter VNPA's donation partner ID C2000008806.
3. Confirm your donation.
4. Boom! 100 per cent of the refunds will be donated to us. Thanks for your support.

If you have any questions, please email us at support@vnpa.org.au

Eligible ✔

- ✔ Aluminium cans
- ✔ Plastic bottles
- ✔ Glass bottles
- ✔ Paperboard cartons (under 1L)
- ✔ Steel bottles/cans

Most beverage containers (between 150mL and 3L) made from aluminium, glass, plastic, steel and liquid paperboard are eligible.



Find out more about the scheme
cdsvic.org.au

Find your nearest refund point by using the interactive map
cdsvic.org.au/locations

GEOFF DURHAM'S FAVOURITE PARKS



FOR HIS FINAL 'IN PARKS' COLUMN, GEOFF DURHAM TAKES US TO HIS THREE FAVOURITE NATURAL PLACES TO VISIT IN VICTORIA

It is said that everyone loves the Prom, and I certainly do. I have many fond memories extending back to my first visit in the 1950s.

I believe every parent is under a duty to introduce their children to the Prom and we have had many happy family camps at Tidal River. One of my most rewarding experiences was when an adult daughter, on returning from

two years overseas, said to me when driving from the airport – 'Dad, there is one thing I want to do – visit the Prom. Will you do the circuit walk to the lighthouse with me?' So Wilson's Promontory National Park is very special.

But this article is about the three 'parks' – by which I mean land held for bushland conservation – with

After an extraordinary 88 articles over 23 years – from #204 in March 2001 – Geoff Durham is pulling up stumps on his popular *Park Watch* column, 'In Parks'.

In 2001, after many decades working with VNPA across bushwalking, Friends groups, the administration of national parks, as President (1984-87), and Honorary Life Member, former solicitor Geoff Durham began writing about his visits to Victoria's natural protected areas.

Each article saw him visit a different park, describing its history, wildlife, topography, attractions, accessibility and other practical information to enhance the visitor's experience.

The first park covered, and returned to three times, is one of Geoff's favourites, Wilsons Prom. In this first article, Geoff told of

a backpacking holiday of the circuit walk with his daughter. In much later columns, the energy of bushwalks was replaced with finding parks accessible to those with less mobility.

'In Parks' covered the entire state: from the Prom in the south to Barmah on the Murray, from Lower Glenelg National Park in the south-west to the Box Iron-bark forests of Chiltern-Mt Pilot in the north-east.



Only half of the locations covered by In Parks were national parks. Geoff visited most of the other types of parks in Victoria: 15 state parks, 16 metropolitan parks, five coastal parks, and various regional parks, nature conservation reserves, historic parks, scenic reserves and more.

In a special feature on national parks in Canada, Geoff wrote:

Five weeks tourist-type time in Canada, including a few days travelling through a few parks, and I am bold enough to submit this 'In Parks' article! I am like the visitor whose experience of Victoria is the Phillip Island Penguin Parade and Captain Cook's Cottage.

On behalf of all *Park Watch* readers over the last two decades, we thank Geoff for his extraordinary contribution. 🌿

Left: The first 'In Parks', March 2001

Opposite: Scorched River Red Gum, Wyperfeld National Park, Wotjobaluk Country. GEOFF DURHAM

Tee-tree Fingers, Wanderslore Sanctuary, Launching Place, Wurundjeri Country ATILIO DEMICHELI/INATURALIST

which I have been most involved, and they cover the spectrum. The first is Wyperfeld, the third-largest Victorian national park; the second is not a park reserved under the *National Parks Act*, but private land owned by the Trust for Nature; and the third a tiny fragment of a metropolitan park.

Wyperfeld National Park

North of Rainbow and west of Hopetoun in Wotjobaluk Country, Wyperfeld is big – 361,770 hectares. It is part of the Big Desert that is not a desert; it has lakes with no water, massive River Red Gums, but no river, and Mallee 'scrub' that is a botanical treasure.

A bitumen road leads to the spacious Wonga Campground in the south. Sandy four-wheel drive tracks include the North-South Track from the campground to Pine Plains. There is no east-west track; in the west, through the Big Desert, is the remote Murrayville Track. Slender Cypress Pine has regenerated naturally following extensive plantings by the Friends of Wyperfeld and management of rabbit and kangaroo populations. A feature of the park is its superb bird life.

On my first visit in the 1960s, we were greeted by the legendary ranger, Rudd Campbell. I was there in 1976 when Outlet Creek, a continuation of the Wimmera River, was in flood and filling Lake Brambruk, and I have visited nearly every year since then with the Friends group.

To quote from *Wyperfeld – Australia's first Mallee national park* published by



Red Gum Triangle, St Kilda, Bunurong Country. PAUL CLIFTON

the Friends, this is a park of contrasts. Each part of the park has a special character. Every visit is a new experience – the place is never the same. Wyperfeld is fascinating and sublime.

Wanderslore Sanctuary

This sanctuary is ten hectares of remnant bushland in the Yarra Valley at Launching Place, in Wurundjeri Country, surrounded by housing to the east and west, farmland to the south and the Lilydale to Warburton Rail Trail to the north. It was donated to the Victorian Conservation Trust (now Trust for Nature) in 1987 by artist/schoolteacher Constance Coleman as 'a sanctuary reserve for the preservation of wildlife and native plants'.

There is remarkable diversity in such a small area with three vegetation types – Dry Sclerophyl Forest, Damp Sclerophyl Forest and Riparian Forest. It features a grassy-woodland ridge with flanking fern gullies and has resident Black Wallabies, wombats, echidnas, possums, native rats, antichinus, bats and many birds. It has not been burnt since 1926 and is notable for the large number and variety of fungi, including the extremely rare Tea-tree Fingers, the only fungus listed as Critically Endangered by the IUCN.

The bush is virtually weed-free thanks to the dedication of the Friends group over more than 25 years. Open to the public only once a year, Wanderslore is a true bushland haven.

The Red Gum Triangle

Less than a hectare in Albert Park, at the corner of Queens Rd and Lakeside Drive behind the Junction Oval, this spot was a car park until the Grand Prix arrived in 1996 when it was planted with native species to complement its feature River Red Gums.

This was part of the Native Bushland Regeneration project at the St Kilda end of the park. These trees are not as old as the nearby famous Ngargee/Corroboree Tree but nevertheless are impressive. There are also Yellow Box, and a grove of Weeping Sheoake.



The middle storey includes Boobialla thickets, Blackwood, Lightwood, Hedge Wattle, Sweet Bursaria and Kangaroo Apple. The ground flora includes various native grasses.

If you ignore traffic noise, within the triangle you can have a bushland experience. This small area is habitat for both Brush-tail and Ring-tail Possums, and there are birds including Magpies, Mudlarks, Ravens, and when the gums are in flower, Lorikeets. Always, there are Noisy Miners, and I have been dived-on when they are nesting. Weed control has resulted in natural re-generation of native species, including Red Gums. This is the only part of Albert Park, the 'People's Playground', that is managed by Parks Victoria as bushland.

Value of Friends

Each of these parks has a volunteer Friends Group, and as a Friend I have not only contributed to management and enhanced my knowledge and appreciation, but I have made friends of many dedicated and interesting people. Being a Friend is a worthwhile, rewarding and beneficial experience which I commend to everyone, especially retirees.

Helping maintain healthy parks certainly helps maintain healthy people. 🌿

Friends of the Prom
friendsoftheprom.org.au

Friends of Wyperfeld National Park
friendsofwyperfeldnp@yahoo.com.au

Friends of Wanderslore Sanctuary
Janet Sowden 5967 2698

Friends of the Red Gum Triangle
Sue Stafford 0419 217 203

MT STIRLING & FALLS CREEK

ALPINE NATIONAL PARK



ANNIE PRESTON FROM VNPA'S NEXTGEN NATURE COLLECTIVE SHARES HER SUMMER VISIT TO VICTORIA'S HIGH COUNTRY



Heathy Spur Hiking Track, Falls Creek
ANNIE PRESTON

I've lived in Victoria my whole life, yet I've never explored the Victorian Alps. This summer, I was lucky to visit both Falls Creek (part of Alpine National Park) and Mt Stirling, in Taungurung Country.

Established in by the Cain Labor Government in 1989, after a long and hard-fought campaign by VNPA and fellow environment groups, it comprises 647,400 hectares stretching from central Gippsland all the way to the New South Wales border where it adjoins Kosciuszko National Park.

Everyone knows the Alps are fantastic for skiing, snowboarding, and all things winter. But as the seasons change, the place becomes a whole different world.

The Victorian Alps have extensive hiking trails, camping sites, as well as roads and other accommodation, allowing you to explore whichever way you want to.

My mornings included walking in the fresh air to collect water from nearby streams and waterfalls, and having a slow start with some breakfast and hot tea or coffee before moving off hiking for the day. Starting the day this way was so refreshing, yet relaxing,

that it has inspired me to implement elements of this into my home morning routine, like eating breakfast outside or going for a walk in nature.

Every hike you do or road you drive in the Alps includes incredible views of the landscape. You can't help taking photos constantly!

Being an extreme environment, alpine ecosystems generally have a lower diversity of plants and animals than other ecosystems. But that doesn't mean you don't get to see an amazing range of flora and fauna.

On my trip, I was very excited to get to see many Nankeen Kestrels (*Falco cenchroides*) and the remarkable Flame Robins (*Petroica phoenica*). Skinks were darting in and out everywhere (blink and you miss them!), and in Falls Creek I saw Blue Planariums (*Caenoplana corulea*), which I'd never seen before. I even saw a couple of snakes – but don't worry, if you stay out of their way, they'll stay out of yours!

There is a strong historical element to the Alps, from the land and food sources they provided for many First Nations peoples, to the various other land uses over the years, evident



Top: Mt Stirling Summit Tree. Above, left: Snow Daisy (*Celmisia sericophylla*), Falls Creek. Above, right: Near No.3 Refuge Hut, Mt Stirling. ANNIE PRESTON

through the many explorable huts throughout the region.

There's so many incredible plants in the Alps. Having to survive such harsh conditions in the winter means that many species have developed specialised adaptations to survive. Shrubs are very common, so the more than 300-year-old Mt Stirling Summit Tree, a 51m high Snow Gum (*Eucalyptus pauciflora*), stands out as

the only tree within the 23 hectare range of the summit. Flowers brighten many areas of the Alps, including Triggerplants (*Stylidium sp.*), Bitterpeas (*Daviesia sp.*) and the iconic Snow Daisies (*Celmisia sp.*).

I highly encourage anyone of all ages to explore the Victorian Alps, whether you've never been or you've been a thousand times – there is something to see for everyone! 🌿

For more information on visiting Alpine National Park

parks.vic.gov.au/places-to-see/parks/alpine-national-park



We acknowledge this location is part of the unceded traditional lands and waters of the **Taungurung** and recognise their ongoing role in caring for Country.



Heathy Spur Track towards Edmonsons Hut, Falls Creek. ANNIE PRESTON

Farewell to Michael Feller – a gentle giant for forests

All the of the team at VNPA were deeply saddened by the news of the death of Dr Michael Feller. Michael died unexpectedly and peacefully just shy of his 78th birthday on 22 January. Michael's career as a forest fire scientist and forest ecologist was long and successful. He worked for many years in academia, both in Australia and Canada, where he had been a Professor Emeritus at the University of British Columbia. Fortunately for us, Michael joined VNPA as a member and supporter in 1976. In the 48 years since he built an incredible legacy – one we are honoured to be part of.

Like most nature lovers, Michael's passion for the outdoors was borne from the endless hours he'd spend immersed in nature. He was a keen bushwalker, a mountain climber and he loved skiing and kayaking.

Michael has made an enormous contribution to the protection of nature in Victoria at VNPA. His service on the Conservation and Campaigns Committee, of which he was co-convenor and VNPA's Council since 2013, was invaluable, as was his representation on the Parks Victoria Falls to Hotham Track Stakeholder Committee.

Michael was also involved in supporting and contributing to many campaigns over the years including drives for new national parks such as the Alps and Otway Ranges, and he was active in the endless forestry wars.

Michael had so many wonderful characteristics that enhanced both his personal and professional relationships. The first of these was academic integrity. Michael was an academic of the highest integrity. Nothing was ever woolly, guessed or estimated. He was a scientist's scientist. In a world of compromised studies, purchased opinion pieces and self-serving endorsements of conveniently selective evidence,

Michael was rock solid – staunchly committed to the scientific truth, and nobody was going to sweet-talk him to a position he had not verified!

Michael was a generous teacher and mentor. He spent time explaining forest ecology to many, with patience and gentleness. This same manner would of course have characterised his lectures to undergraduate classes through to his supervision and mentoring of his many students, but also to many in the forest movement. The horrors of Australian forestry practice, the misrepresentation of such devastation as 'scientific' and Michael's deep love of the forest environment fuelled a sense of moral indignation and outrage, that drove him to work in many demanding and often simultaneous high-pressure projects on behalf of the forests. He was persistent in his advocacy for forests and other special places – a trait we all respect and hope to mirror.

For years Michael was the 'go-to' person on forest and fire knowledge and his passion meant long hours of work for long periods. He was a true forest activist and scientific source, as well as a gentle human being.

Michael's passing is a great loss to his wife Evelyn, to all of us and to the forests and mountains he loved. His contribution to nature protection will continue to live on.

Thank you Michael, for your work, your wisdom and your knowledge. You will be sorely missed. 🌿

Matt Ruchel, VNPA Executive Director & Gerard McPhee, VNPA Councillor



Michael Feller

Welcoming new staff

We welcomed three new staff in important positions over the last few months.

Brendan Kelly joined us in late 2023 in the position of Finance and Operations Manager. He has over 40 years' experience in Finance and IT and has spent the last eight years working in the not-for-profit sector.

Earlier in 2023 we welcomed our new accountant **Michelle Klaric**. Michelle has background in financial and commercial roles across a wide range of sectors, including at the Royal Children's Hospital and mental health promotion organisation SuperFriend.

In December we were joined by **Matt Small** as Fundraising Executive. Matt brings over 20 years of fundraising experience and a passion for empowering people to protect nature. He is a Certified Fundraising Executive (CFRE) and winner of a Fundraising Institute of Australia award for innovation.

In other staff news, we wish Nature Stewards Coordinator, **Maddy Willcock**, all the very best as she heads off on a year of parental leave. Her replacement is a returning face, **Nicole Mertens**, previously ReefWatch Project Officer. 🌿

Jeff Nottle retires from PICS

After 10 years of leadership with the Phillip Island Conservation Society (PICS), Jeff Nottle has stepped down from his role as President. His tireless efforts are well deserving of a good wrap.

Locals have long battled to protect our precious Western Port and Jeff has been a champion for the betterment of its wetlands. Jeff is passionate, dedicated and knowledgeable.

Of his many achievements, a standout was his election as chair of the Preserve Western Port Action Group, a subgroup of PICS set up in response to the State LNP Government announcing the industrialisation of Western Port. With the Port of Hastings slated to be Australia's biggest container port, Jeff led the successful four year long campaign.

In his 2015 Bass Coast Citizen of the Year award, the Mayor stated:

Jeff has worked tirelessly to promote the significant natural assets Bass Coast has to offer, with a view to preserving our coasts, flora and fauna for the community to enjoy into the future.

In 2019, he was jointly awarded the Environment Victoria 50th

Anniversary Community Environment Award 'for resilience in the face of repeated attempts to destroy the local environment at Western Port.'

And what an exit! On the eve of his last day as PICS President and delivering a Western Port presentation to members, Federal Environment Minister, Tanya Plibersek announced the rejection of the Port of Hastings Renewable Energy Terminal due to risky wetland impacts. This is further validation of the Western Port protection movement that now exists and which Jeff helped to foster.

VNPA has worked closely with Jeff and PICS on many campaigns to protect Western Port, the most recent being in the development and advocacy of the Western Port Bay Framework together with Save Western Port and the Western Port Biosphere Foundation.

We wish Jeff all of the happiness for his future and thank him for his dedication to protect Western Port now and into the future. 🌿

Shannon Hurley, Nature Conservation Campaigner

In the next Park Watch, we will celebrate the outstanding contribution of Mark Rodrigue from Parks Victoria



Thanks to long-term business supporters

The **Wilderness Shop** in Box Hill has closed down after 43 years in business. Over the years, VNPA members have benefited from generous discounts on outdoor gear, and fabulous in-store events at their former premises in Carrington Road and since 1996 in Whitehorse Road. The store's closure is part of Mary and Neil Blundy's path to retirement.

We thank them for the many years of offering fantastic service to VNPA members and wish them well as they find more time for their own outdoor adventures and other interests.

Jenny Lawrence from **Gippsland High Country Tours** has advised us that after 32 years, her business has now

closed. Many VNPA members and supporters have had the pleasure of joining these wonderful, guided nature and walking tours over the years.

The tours had required Jenny to be away from home regularly, and during the two-year break from tours due to Covid, Jenny found she rather enjoyed having more time at home. So, despite having thoroughly enjoying sharing nature experiences with so many enthusiastic clients over the year, it was time for a change in direction. Jenny continues to work part-time for Parks Victoria, but can now begin to ease her way towards retirement.

Thanks Jenny for your marvellous support of VNPA! 🌿

Honours for Leon and Gidja

Two wonderful friends of VNPA received well deserved recognition in the 2024 Australia Day Honours list with the award of the Medal of the Order of Australia (OAM) in the General Division; for service to conservation and the environment.

Leon Costermans – botanist, geologist, author and former academic. Leon has also contributed as a leader of various nature-based activities for VNPA and is an Honorary Life Member. He is very well known as the author of many fabulous books, including *Stories beneath our feet*, *Exploring the geology and landscapes of Victoria and surrounds*, *Trees of Victoria and adjoining areas* and *Native trees and shrubs of south-eastern Australia*.

Gidja Lee Walker – ecologist, educator and artist. Gidja is well known to the VNPA team, lending us her ecological knowledge and expertise on many occasions, particularly on matters pertaining to the Mornington Peninsula and Western Port regions. We are also very fortunate to have Gidja as a most engaging presenter on VNPA's Nature Stewards program. 🌿



Above: Leon Costermans EUCALYPT AUSTRALIA/X.
Below: Gidja Walker



Vale Bob Steel

1942-2024

Bob Steel joined Melbourne Bushwalkers in 1961, opening up a new world in nature that he quickly came to love. Bushwalking also led to Bob's awareness of the need for conservation, and as a result he joined VNPA in 1963. Bob and I were strongly opposed to a plan to develop a hotel on the Prom – something that VNPA was leading the opposition to. The campaign was successful, and Bob maintained his VNPA membership until his death.

Bob travelled extensively in Australia and overseas. As a bushwalker he walked in many parts of Victoria and led many trips for the Melbourne Bushwalkers. For a while he worked in Wangaratta and explored the Warby Ranges extensively, using this knowledge to lead walks there. But Bob's main love was the Bogong High Plains, where he was a frequent visitor to the Wilkinson Lodge, affectionately known as 'Wilky'.

Bob did many trips to Wilky, including work parties, ski trips and using it as a bushwalking base. Bob attended many working bees organised by the bushwalking community and park rangers, and like so many, was devastated by the loss of Wilky in

2004 to an accidental fire. Parks Victoria's refusal to allow the lodge to be rebuilt was made especially bitter by their proposed scheme for developments on the Falls to Hotham track.

Bob started doing less weekend walking but more day walks and base camps. He was very well set up for base camping with extra tarps for shelters and comfortable chairs. Many people remember his specialty, apple pie cooked in his camp oven. There was always enough to share.

Throughout his life Bob struggled with the black dog of depression nipping at his heels. During times when his fitness declined, he stayed involved with bushwalking by having social walk leaders ring him so that he could meet the group for lunch, and Bob also spent much time around the Men's Shed in Croydon.

Later in life Bob had a couple of falls, and after a diagnosis with pancreatic cancer, his doctor saw it fit to prescribe him with Dying with Dignity medication. I saw him in his last days and we had a long talk. I was impressed by his attitude and courage, and it seemed he had a



weight lifted off his mind. Bob passed away peacefully with his sisters by his side. 🕊️

Doug Pocock

Bob was VNPA member for an incredible 60 years, and also made the thoughtful decision to leave a gift to VNPA in his Will. We would like to thank Bob for his contribution to the bushwalking and conservation community, and pass on our sincere condolences to his family.

Legacy trees Quiz answers

from p. 4

- b)** The woolly underside of Blanket Leaf leaves are soft, like a blanket.
- False.** Snow Gums do grow in alpine areas covered in snow throughout winter, but they also grow in places that aren't regularly covered in snow, like Mt Buangor, Mt Cole and Grampians (Gariwerd) National Park.
- Yellow-bellied Gliders** cut V-shaped incisions into Manna Gum trees and feed on their sap.
- They are all giant legacy Mountain Ash trees**, between 200-400 years old.
- False.** Mountain Ash not only tops the list as tallest tree in Victoria, it also has the largest circumference, with the Mt Fatigue Giant measuring a whopping 18.85m circumference. That would take about 11 people to circle the tree, fingertip to

fingertip. River Red Gums can get to an impressive girth, though, with some trees in Victoria measuring a massive 14m circumference.

- a)** Tree Geebung is endemic to Victoria and can be found from Toolangi across to Mt Baw Baw.
- True.** Whilst some towering giants like Mountain Ash can grow over 100m tall, the widespread Mountain Grey Gum grows up to 65m.
- d)** Red Ironbarks are known for their thick furrowed bark and forming lignotubers. They typically have white flowers, but sometimes have pink flowers.



The Mt Fatigue Giant, the widest known tree in Victoria. NATIONAL TRUST OF AUSTRALIA/FACEBOOK

- True.** Strzelecki Gum populations have been decimated and fragmented by widespread timber harvesting and habitat destruction. They are now largely restricted to small stands in farm paddocks and along roadsides.
- 10.** Sweet Bursaria is integral to the lifecycle of the **Eltham Copper Butterfly**. Adults lay their eggs on the roots and stems of Sweet Bursaria. When the larvae hatch, ants guard them and in return the ants get to feed on sugary larvae secretions (larvae poo).

Butterfly. Adults lay their eggs on the roots and stems of Sweet Bursaria. When the larvae hatch, ants guard them and in return the ants get to feed on sugary larvae secretions (larvae poo).

Meet the critters of Victoria's south-west

Wildlife of Victoria's South-West: A Guide to the Grampians-Gariwerd, Volcanic Plains, Melbourne and Surrounds by Grant Palmer and Jules Farquhar

CSIRO Publishing, 2024, 416pp, ISBN 9781486313051

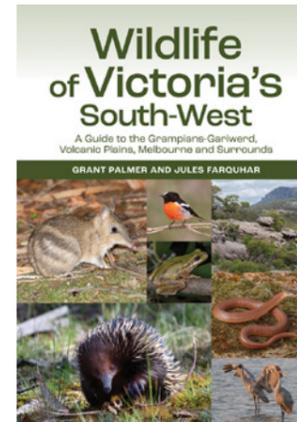
If you love to read about native animals and their natural habitat then you will enjoy this detailed overview of 432 species including mammals (bats and marine mammals included), birds, reptiles and amphibians. Each species profile has a clear map and photo accompanied by a good description of their appearance, distribution range, conservation status, habitat, ecology and their key locations.

While similar to other field guides in this respect, this book goes further, providing a good overview of the main impacts on threatened species. Impacts covered range from habitat loss, changes in land use, disease and predators to the weeds, fire and climate change. Followed

by information on features of critical habitat ranging from old growth forest and grasslands to waterways, wetlands and the use of habitat corridors and supplementary habitat elements.

Palmer and Farquhar equip the reader with useful descriptions of the ecological vegetation types across Victoria's south-west region including key wildlife found within them. There are recommendations for areas to visit to aid in personal exploration of the amazing wildlife found in this region. At the back of the guide a checklist of species is provided to track your discoveries.

As guidebooks go this is more of an armchair or camp chair book and



less of a daypack companion. At just over a kilogram in weight, it is less of a portable field guide, despite the excellent information it provides. Some tighter editing and clear abbreviations in the species descriptions would shave off almost 20 per cent of the book's size. This would make it more appealing for field use and competitive against

the numerous smart phone apps now available.

Overall, this guide is a very interesting read, one you can enjoy at home to learn about the interesting habitats, landscapes and animals of Victoria's south-west while planning your next nature adventure. 🕊️

Sera Blair, NatureWatch Coordinator

Fun facts and farting fish

Sensational Australian Animals by Stephanie Owen Reeder, Illustrated by Cher Hart

CSIRO Publishing, 2024, 64pp, ISBN 9781486316892

If you have fact-loving kids in your family, this book will give them plenty of opportunities to learn new things about wildlife that they can tell everyone about at the dinner table for weeks. Equally, if you have animal loving kids in the family, they will love learning new things about Australian wildlife that they are unlikely to have heard anywhere else.

Beatrix said 'This is an amazing book full of facts and pictures. Some of the pictures were very fun. I liked that it was bright and colourful!'



Did you know that Australian Herrings 'gulp in air from the surface of the water, store it in their swim bladders, and then release it in a series of high pitched farts – accompanied by bubbles' and that it is believed they use these sounds to help them stay together for safety? I did not know that until I read this book. I'll be telling people all about it at my next dinner party!

My favourite thing about this book is how it compares the world of sight, sound, smell, taste and touch of Australian wildlife with these senses in humans. When explaining the world of making and hearing sound there is a simple illustrated diagram of a human ear, the



human larynx and a bird syrinx (note the book does not shy away from hard words, but explains them in fun and effective ways).

This comparison between humans and wildlife makes the content relatable but also shows that humans are animals too, and just how similar we are to our local native wildlife. 🕊️

Caitlin Griffith and Beatrix (aged 10)

Wild Families



SEA SLUGS ARE TINY COLOURFUL CRITTERS THAT LIVE IN THE OCEAN

- 1 Sea Slugs are actually ocean dwelling snails that have lost their shells.
- 2 They usually can't see very well and find their way around by using special noses (rhinophores) to taste and smell chemicals in the water.
- 3 They breathe through gills that stick out of their body. Some can even breathe through their skin.
- 4 There aren't separate male and female slugs - a single sea slug is both male and female.
- 5 Sea slugs can be all kinds of shapes and sizes - from smaller than the eye can see to over half a metre long.
- 6 They can be bright and colourful, to warn off predators, or dull and camouflaged, to hide from predators. They can be smooth and flat or have a body full of cerrata (which look like tentacles).
- 7 Sea slugs eat a wide range of food like soft corals, seaweed, anemones, sponges, sea squirts, small invertebrates and even other sea slugs.
- 8 There are over 4700 different types of sea slugs in the world.
- 9 Sea slugs don't live very long - depending on the type of slug, they live for only a few weeks up to a year.

IMAGES: NICK SHAW, KADE MILLS, SHEK GRAHAM, JAN SCHOLEY

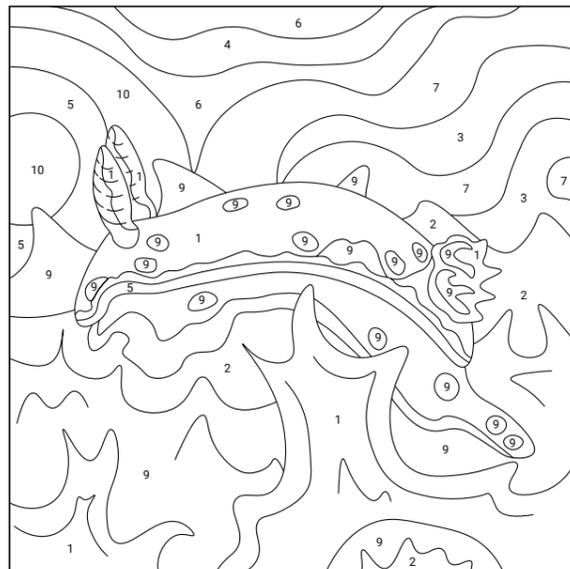
Colour me sluggy!

Many sea slugs get their colours from the food they eat, which helps them blend in and hide from predators.

Some sea slugs are solar powered - they can steal green energy-producing pigment from the seaweed they eat.

Use the number guide to colour in this slug, a *Verconia haliclona*.

- 1 Pink
- 2 Brown
- 3 Light green
- 4 Dark blue
- 5 Yellow
- 6 Light blue
- 7 Dark green
- 8 Purple
- 9 Red
- 10 Orange



Download the 'Superb Sea Slugs' activity sheet, and our full range of Wild Families activity sheets

vnpa.org.au/wild-families



Explorer's Corner

TIPS & TRICKS FOR GETTING INTO NATURE FOR EXPLORERS OF ALL AGES



SIZE ISN'T EVERYTHING WHEN IT COMES TO OLD LEGACY TREES

Old legacy trees can be found right across Victoria. Some, like the Mountain Ash, are towering giants. Others, like Sweet Bursaria, are not much taller than a person. Regardless of their height, legacy trees are old. They have a history. They remind us of what once was.

Here are some legacy trees you might like to visit. When you find them, take some time to absorb the magnificent tree and your surroundings. Imagine what the tree might have experienced since it was a seedling.



Mountain Ash *Eucalyptus regnans*

The Dandenong Ranges National Park is a great place to admire majestic Mountain Ash. One of the tallest trees in the world. To find an old giant, head out on a bushwalk in some of the older areas of the park like Sherbrooke Forest.



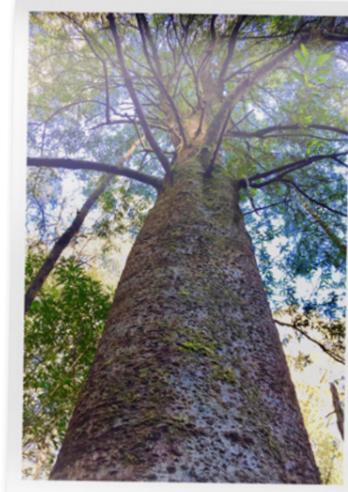
Snow Gum *Eucalyptus pauciflora*

Going for a hike in the Alpine National Park is a great way to appreciate Snow Gums. Places like The Bluff and Mt Howitt are good spots to search for a legendary Snow Gum, plus beautiful places for a bushwalk. You can also look for a legacy Snow Gums at Mt Macedon.

Sweet Bursaria

Bursaria spinosa

Sweet Bursaria is widespread across Victoria, so you won't have to search for long to find it. They are quite variable, growing from a small shrub at 1m high up to a small tree over 10m high. You can search for large old Sweet Bursaria in forests near Daylesford or at the Royal Botanic Gardens in Melbourne.



Tree Geebung

Persoonia arborea

Spread from Toolangi across to Baw Baw, Tree Geebung is confined to a fairly small area of Victoria. But don't let that stop you from searching for one! Head out for a wander at Wirrawilla Rainforest Walk in Toolangi or Ada Tree Walk in Ada and search for an old Geebung amongst the towering Mountain Ash forest.

