

PARK *watch*



35° 39' 4" S, 141° 9' 23" E



VICTORIAN
NATIONAL PARKS
ASSOCIATION
Be part of nature

DECEMBER 2024 #298

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PARKwatch

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 Wilkerr Dingo pup, Big Desert Wilderness Park, Wotjobaluk Country
 DR DANIEL HUNTER

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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.



COVER IMAGE: SANDY SCHELTEMA

A gift in your Will to VNPA is a simple but powerful way you can continue to help care for and protect nature into the future.

To obtain your complimentary copy of Give nature a future voice, our guide to gifts in Wills, please visit vnpa.org.au/bequest-guide or contact Kristian on support@vnpa.org.au or 03 9341 6506.



From the President



WELCOME TO THE DECEMBER 2024 EDITION OF *PARK WATCH* FROM DAVID NUGENT, VNPA PRESIDENT

In our last issue of *Park Watch* for 2024, we're pleased to bring you a wrap up of nature issues across our state.

Our new regular feature, Unwanted Visitors, focuses on invasive plants and animals, why they're here and what we can do to control or eradicate them.

For some seasonal flavour, we asked VNPA staff what they would love for Christmas in their campaign and program areas. If they're lucky, a generous Santa might drop a donation down

the VNPA chimney this festive season!

Despite loud fringe voices calling for less protection for nature, our recent polling reinforces the fact the vast majority of Victorians love for nature and our national parks (see p. 6). Your continued support and participation in our campaign actions helps our elected representatives hear our voices loud and clear.

Enjoy your summer, stay safe exploring nature in Victoria or wherever your travels take you. 🌿

Park Watch Grasslands Quiz



1. Not seen since 1969, Victorian Grassland Earless Dragons were thought to be extinct. When were they rediscovered?

- a. 1999
- b. 2023
- c. 2004
- d. 2015

2. True or false, Golden Sun Moths spend most of their lives underground?

3. Which of the following statements about Striped Legless Lizards is false?

- a. They can grow up to 2m long
- b. They're endangered in Victoria
- c. They're grassland specialists
- d. The pattern of scales on the back of their head is unique to each individual



4. Where can Spiny Rice-flowers be found?

- a. Widespread across Australia
- b. Only in one grassland reserve in Melbourne
- c. In grasslands across Victoria and New South Wales
- d. Only in grasslands in Victoria

5. True or false, the last remnant population of Sunshine Diuris orchids only has 30 individuals?

6. What was the primary threat that almost led to the extinction of Eastern Barred Bandicoots in Victoria?

- a. Introduced Red Foxes
- b. Habitat destruction
- c. Toxoplasmosis
- d. Feral cats



7. Which of the following is not a grass found in grasslands?

- a. Kangaroo Grass
- b. Wallaby Grass
- c. Wombat Grass
- d. Love Grass

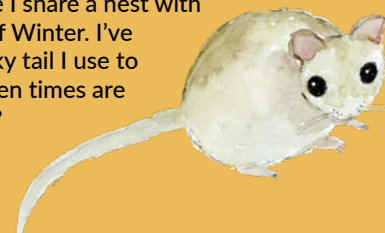


8. Moths, onions and leeks are all types of what?

9. Plains Wanderers are special because:

- a. Unlike most birds, the females are more brightly coloured than the males
- b. They're the only living members of an ancient group of birds
- c. They can survive without permanent water by drinking dew drops
- d. All of the above

10. Weighing in at just 15 grams, I'm pretty small for a marsupial. But that doesn't stop me devouring the introduced mice I share a nest with come the end of Winter. I've also got a chunky tail I use to store fat for when times are lean. Who am I?



Answers on p. 36

ALL IMAGES: JESS RACKLYEFT

Protecting Victoria's Burrunan Dolphins



SHANNON HURLEY, NATURE CONSERVATION CAMPAIGNER, GIVES

THE LOW DOWN ON WHY BOTTLENOSE DOLPHINS NEED PROTECTED AREAS

If you've spent time on Port Phillip Bay or taken the Queenscliff-Sorrento Ferry, you might've been lucky enough to witness a pod of dolphins riding the bow's wake. It's a breathtaking sight that hypnotises some and spurs others to whip out their phones to capture the magic.

Port Phillip Bay is especially important for Bottlenose Dolphins, easily recognised by their tri-colored bodies, stubby noses, and curved dorsal fins. The Burrunan Dolphin (*Tursiops australis*), one of three types of Bottlenose Dolphin, was officially classified as a unique species in 2011. They're found nowhere else in the world but south-eastern Australia.

There are only two known local populations: Port Phillip Bay has 150 individuals, and Gippsland Lakes 60, easily justifying their Critically Endangered status (under Victoria's nature laws).

Until recently, we didn't know much about where they spend their time across Port Phillip Bay. But new research for Australian Marine Mammal Foundation has shed light on how Burrunan Dolphins behave in the bay.

These playful porpoises are active in the northern and southern regions of the bay, a much larger area than previously assumed. They favor depths



↑ Burrunan Dolphin in Port Phillip Bay. NICKI FILBY

of 5–15 metres. The more we know about how and where the Burrunan Dolphins move, the more effective our conservation efforts will be.

Assessing current protections

These new discoveries raise questions about the endangered dolphin's current protections. Are they enough to guard against boating disruptions that interfere with feeding and resting, underwater noise pollution, and the risk of getting tangled in fishing gear?

There are real concerns about the single dolphin sanctuary zone in Port Phillip Bay and whether it truly protects these animals. The Ticonderoga Bay Sanctuary Zone (TBSZ), established in 1996, wasn't based on thorough scientific data.

Marine protected areas are essential, and some, like Ricketts Point Marine

Sanctuary in the north of the bay, are now key habitats for Burrunan Dolphins.

Unfortunately, increasing boating and fishing is putting pressure on these areas. VNPA receives numerous reports from concerned community members

This is one of the many reasons to create two new sanctuary zone, one in the southern part of the bay, and another that would expand Ricketts Point Marine Sanctuary to include areas up to the 15 metre depth contour, increasing the protected area's size.

We urge the Victorian Government to adopt these recommendations. Why wouldn't they use this opportunity to help the charismatic dolphin to thrive, and give every visitor to the bay a chance to be hypnotised? 🌿



↑ Burrunan Dolphins. NICK TALBOT/FLICKR

End the state ban on marine protection!
Add your name if you want more protection for our ocean life
vnpa.org.au/more-marine-protection

Lost in the Great Outdoors – state protection shelved despite community support

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR MATT RUCHEL MULLS OVER HOW PROMISES FOR BETTER PROTECTION AND NEW PARKS BECAME LOST IN THE WILDS OF AN ANTI-PARK ECHO CHAMBER

For years, the Andrews/Allan Labor Government promised 'the largest expansion to our forest reserve system in our state's history'.

But, despite deep, enduring public support for national parks and nature protection, these commitments have veered off track. In May 2023, the Victorian Government planned 'an 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...'

This process, called the Great Outdoors Taskforce, was established to look at the north-east and east Gippsland state forest areas. The first formal communication to nature and community groups, contained a clear back track: '...the Taskforce will not be making any recommendation for large-scale changes to land tenure, including not creating any new national parks'.

Five years ago in 2019, a similar commitment for the Central Highlands was made for '...an 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...' which established an Eminent Person Panel for Community Engagement to look at the Central Highlands and potential for Great Forest National Park.

The public consultation process has been hijacked by recreational interest groups and political posturing from opposition and minor parties. While only representing a small but noisy minority, their theatrics seem to have unsettled the Allan Government.

In June 2024, cracks began to show when the new Environment Minister, Steve Dimopoulos, told ABC Drive that the idea of creating new national parks was a 'myth,' contradicting earlier promises. Although he later softened his stance in a *Guardian* article in July, acknowledging the importance of public input, the damage may have already been done.

We understand the Eminent Person Panel's final report has been submitted, but at time of writing the Allan Government has not publicly released it. This raises questions: by bluntly avoiding considering new national parks is the Taskforce acting independently, or are our elected representatives peddling mixed messages?

Meanwhile, the social media misinformation campaign against national parks is failing to sway the broader community. Support for national parks remains overwhelmingly strong across Victoria, regardless of where people live or their backgrounds.


Recent statewide polling, commissioned by VNPA and The Wilderness Society and conducted by Red Bridge Group, found that 84 per cent of Victorians see national parks as important, and 80 per cent support creating new ones, while only 8 per cent oppose them.

The polling also shows that many voters would reconsider their long-term political allegiances if key nature protection promises aren't met: 34 per cent might shift their vote if Labor fails to establish the Great Forest National Park, and 48 per cent might vote against the Coalition if it opposes new parks.

Over half of all Victorians said that presence of a national park would make them more likely to visit regional Victoria. People support national parks not only for conservation but also for passive recreation, like short walks, birdwatching and photography.

Activities like hunting and trail biking have far less public support, with fewer than five per cent of Victorians participating.

- 

2019
Eminent Person Panel for Central Highlands established
- 

May 2023
Great Outdoors Taskforce announced in State Budget
- 

2024
Eminent Person Panel final reported submitted to government, but not released
- 

June 2024
Environment Minister contradicts earlier promises, saying the idea of creating new national parks was a 'myth'

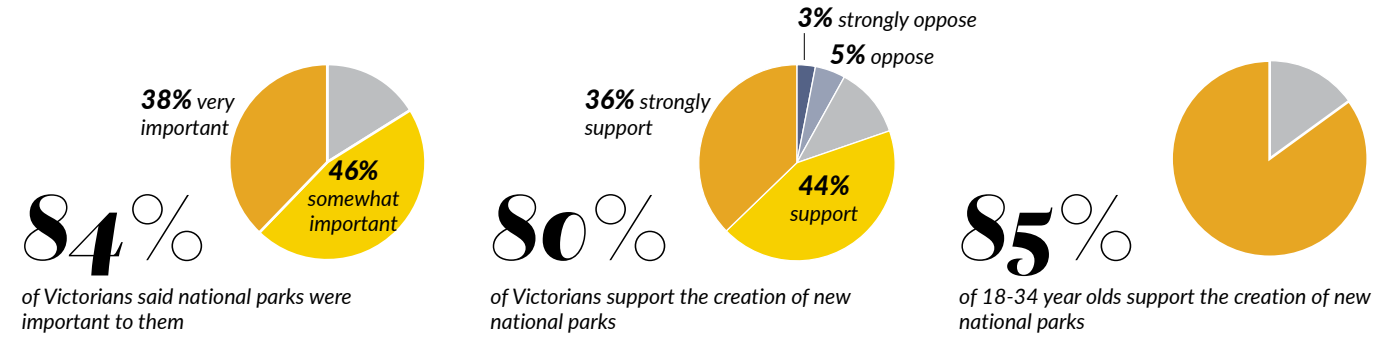
These results are consistent with previous state and national polling, and no surprise to us. But the message seems to be lost on the current Labor Government, who, incidentally, hold the worst record on new park creation in recent times.

Nature protection shouldn't hinge on special interest groups who want to capture 1.8 million hectares of public land to pursue their own, exclusive hobbies. There's room for both, but our most rare and special places, habitats and wildlife need the highest level of protection – and that includes new national parks. 🌿

vnpa.org.au/parks-for-life



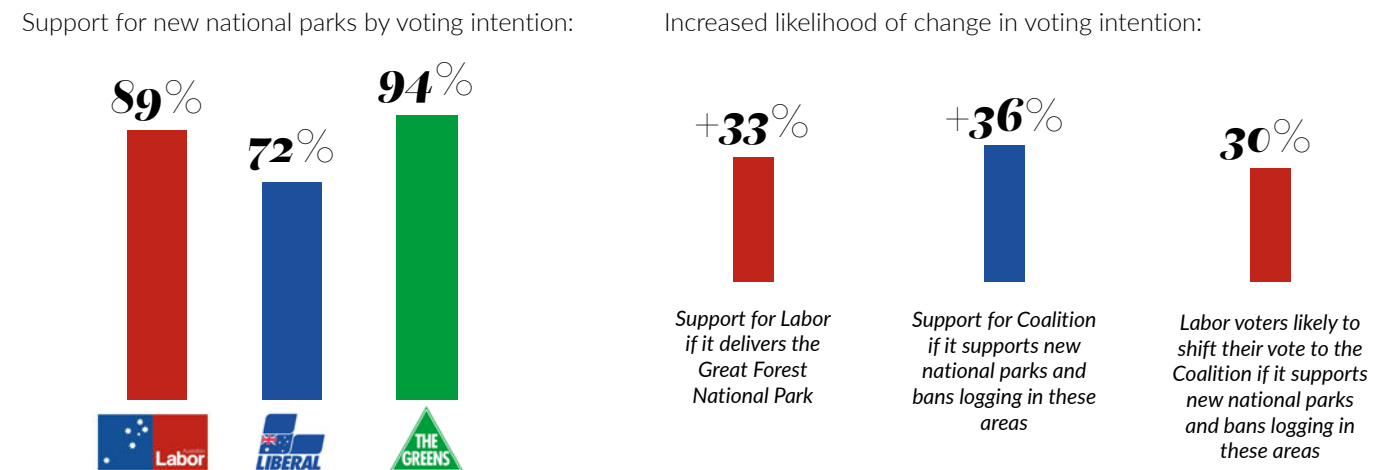
National parks are respected and popular



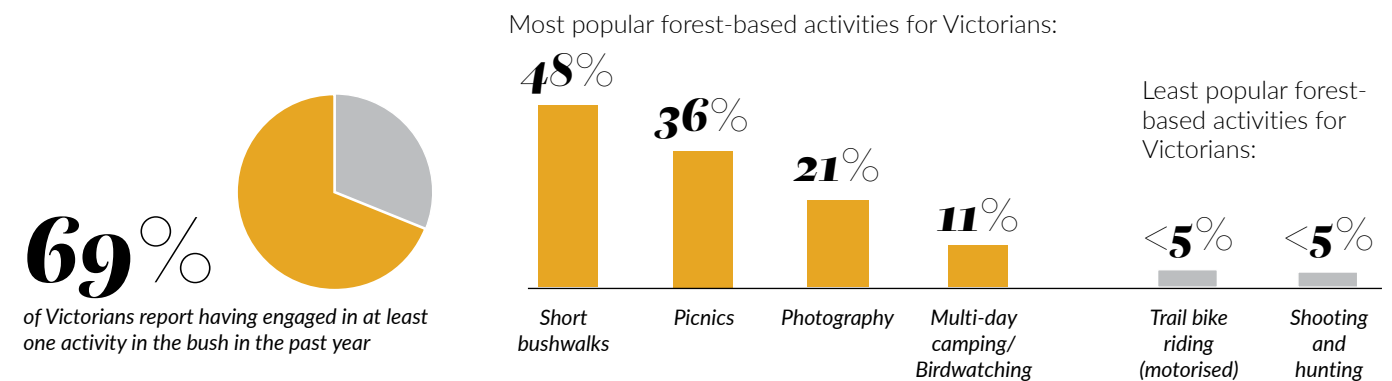
Support for new national parks is largely bipartisan and evenly distributed across the state



National parks are a vote-winner across the board



Victorians love engaging with nature



Source: Victorian Great Forest National Park survey, prepared by RedBridge Group for VNPA and The Wilderness Society, 11 October 2024

Little River community wins big, twice!



GRASSY PLAINS NETWORK'S **ADRIAN MARSHALL** CELEBRATES TWO IMPORTANT WINS

We won – twice! Pacific National has withdrawn their proposal for a giant grassland-smashing rail freight hub at Little River, between Melbourne and Geelong.

And the icing on the cake? Environment Victoria recognised the determination and hard work of the Grassy Plains Network (GPN) and the Little River Action Group (LRAG) with a Campaign Impact Award.

LRAG spearheaded the powerful community campaign to safeguard the verdant gateway to the You Yangs Regional Park. GPN and VNPA bolstered their efforts with evidence-based submissions on the numerous ecological disasters the proposal would unleash.

It was a case of big business dictating de facto government policy for private gain. This distorted the very concept of green wedges and threatened to obliterate significant areas of Critically Endangered grassland.

The plan posed long-term risks to the Ramsar wetlands downstream and would have devastated the amenity of Little River. This region, nestled between the Brisbane Ranges and

Port Phillip Bay, is a natural treasure trove.

The Ramsar-listed wetlands and the rich marine web of life along the western shoreline of the bay are home to more bird species than Kakadu. Here, one can still find stunning grasslands and orchid-rich heathlands. It's where you'd likely find the biggest population of endangered Fat-tailed Dunnarts in Victoria. It's where a Growling Grass Frog might hop to your doorstep. It's where the potentially magnificent Western Grassland Reserve is taking shape.

Yet, a troubling policy blindness prevails. These largely treeless, flat landscapes are seen only as convenient sites for sprawling infrastructure: solar farms, massive batteries, gas pipelines, freight hubs, youth detention centres and quarries.

Important stuff, no argument there, but we must remove the bureaucratic blinders to truly see this landscape with open eyes. Rocky grazing land is grassland home to endangered plants and animals. An unassuming roadside ditch can be a paradise for frogs. A tree line of non-indigenous sugar gums can provide refuge for microbats that skim silently over the paddocks at night.

Last year, along the railway line that runs alongside where Pacific National



↑ Growling Grass Frog. JAMES WHITE ↓ Fat-tailed Dunnart. BERNARD DUPONT



was poised to disrupt nature's delicate balance, something of note emerged. A rare moth, *Neritodes verrucata*, unseen since 1917, was spotted and documented on iNaturalist.

We should know by now these landscapes are too precious to lose to a dark streak of development fusing Melbourne and Geelong.

Policy makers, take another look. This region must not be sacrificed on the altar of dumb thought bubbles. Our elected representatives must strengthen these natural values instead of eroding them. 🌿

The Ramsar-listed wetlands and the rich marine web of life along the western shoreline of the bay are home to more bird species than Kakadu.

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.



↑ L-R: David Ettershank MP, Adrian Marshall, Adrian Hamilton (LRAG) and Councillor Heather Marcus, with LRAG members. COURTESY DAVID ETTERS HANK

The toll of planned burn quotas on nature



FFMV ARE CREATING A SCORCHED FUTURE FOR OUR WILDLIFE AND NATURAL AREAS, SAYS **BEN GILL**, NATURE CONSERVATION CAMPAIGNER

The quietness strikes you first. The once voluminous sounds of nesting birds now all but silent. We stand on the site of a planned burn, home to several threatened plants and animals. The forest floor, so recently a thriving foraging ground for Brush-tailed Phascogales (*Phascogale tapoatafa*), is littered with charred logs and ash. Flames have reached into the canopy, scarring the crowns.

Earlier this year, our citizen science program discovered a healthy population of Brush-tailed Phascogales in this spot in the Wombat Forest. The area, unburnt since the 1983 Ash Wednesday fires, was a prime example of a maturing forest. With hollow-bearing trees, low shrub density, and few fallen trees, it was the perfect for ground-foragers who rely on clear sightlines to detect predators.

After the burn, invasive bracken – a pioneer plant – will likely dominate the forest floor, outcompeting native plants and raising future fuel loads. Despite our discovery of the phascogales and our request for mitigations, Forest Fire Management Victoria (FFMV) proceeded with the burn. Their desktop fuel load assessment said the area was an 'extreme' risk. The on-ground reality showed starkly different conditions. FFMV promised a cool, patchy mosaic burn. What they did was far from that. Many hollow-bearing trees that had survived Ash Wednesday collapsed. Logs that once nourished the forest floor have turned to ash, and the spring breeding season for forest birds

disrupted. It feels like a cruel game, repeatedly stifling the forest's ability to recover until one day, it simply won't. Our only option now is to monitor the effects on Brush-tailed Phascogales and other wildlife. In Enfield State Park, 70 kilometres west, a recent burn reduced from 545 hectares to 55 still resulted in widespread crown scorch, hollow tree collapse, and the destruction of the wildflower-rich forest floor. The once lively forest is eerily silent, disturbed only by the angry squawks of cockatoos.

Sensitivity not quotas

Despite the reduced area, FFMV push on to meet burn quotas, disregarding any long-term consequences on the state's natural web of life. The effects of these burns – fine fuel growth, disrupted forest structure, repeatedly resetting soil profiles – demand robust discussion and considered reform.

We must put the health of the nature we all depend on at the core. The culture wars over land management must be set aside to foster understanding and sensitivity, before our forests are degraded beyond repair, lost forever. 🌿



Burnt hollow-bearing tree. BEN GILL →

Give Brush-tailed Phascogales a chance!

Carnivorous and cryptic with a dramatic love life – Brush-tailed Phascogales sure are interesting little marsupials.

They live in tree hollows. They like open, dry forests. And they have big bushy tails. Like *Antechinus*, the males spend the mating season in a fornicating frenzy. They spend so much of their energy spreading their genetics around that they die soon after. It's definitely live fast, die young for these frisky phascogales.

In Victoria, they're Vulnerable to extinction. They're up against habitat destruction from fire and loophole logging. But we can help protect them. Add your voice to give our phascogales a chance.

vnpa.org.au/action/minister-give-native-forests-proper-oversight



We acknowledge these locations are part of the unceded traditional lands and waters of the **Dja Dja Wurrung**, **Wadawurrung** and **Wurundjeri** and recognise their ongoing role in caring for Country.

Bull ants, bulldozers and the dark side of citizen science



GRASSY PLAINS NETWORK FACILITATOR, **ADRIAN MARSHALL**, PONDERES IF CITIZEN SCIENCE EFFORTS TO PROTECT AN UNCOMMON ANT MAY HAVE LED POACHERS TO ITS PROFITABLE NEST

It turns out ant collecting is surprisingly common, with queens of rare ants worth good money.

Myrmecia nobilis doesn't have a common name and it isn't common. This native bull ant could be a grassland saviour, just like other threatened species that stand, flap, scurry or vegetatively mass in the way of bulldozers. And that's exciting. The little evidence we have suggests it is a rare grassland specialist, limited to the Melbourne region, but we don't know because no one has really looked since the 1940s. Contemporary data is from a handful of citizen science records posted on iNaturalist. You might think having only five known locations would be enough to



↑ *Myrmecia nobilis* in a nest later dug up by poachers GELKIU/INATURALIST

get the ant listed as threatened under Victoria's main nature laws. Sadly, you'd be wrong. To find out more, a few of us from the Grassy Plains Network and VNPA teamed up with some Entomological Society people to learn about the ant. It's an unusual ant. They live in small colonies of only about 20 workers. And the queens are flightless, meaning the ant is unable to disperse widely over the landscape. That's a concern, because it makes the ant more vulnerable to local extinction, especially in highly fragmented grasslands.

To meet the ant, we went looking for the recorded nests, and it's not easy to find an ant in thick grassland. That's when things went wrong. One of the five known nest sites had been dug up! We were horrified. Our nest had been poached. It turns out ant collecting is surprisingly common, with queens of rare ants worth good money. Part of our horror was that our citizen science

Keeping your sightings safe

Poachers of all sorts (ants, orchids, lizards, you name it) use citizen science data to illegally take rare and collectible creatures for profit. Here's what you can do to help: If you suspect wildlife poaching incident has occurred, tell the Conservation Regulator. They are the cop on the beat. If you post observations of creatures likely to be poached to iNaturalist or similar sites, blur your data so the exact GPS coordinates can't be seen. Don't post pictures of orchids in particular on social media.

activities had possibly contributed to the poaching by alerting people to the ant's potentially rare status, encouraging people to look for it. We were in a terrible quandary. Keep on with the citizen science despite fears we were making matters worse, keep working towards legislative protection of a potentially endangered species? Or stop, keep secret the remaining known nest locations, and hope the ant survives without human help? One poacher, an ant collecting 'enthusiast' on YouTube, recently told us via chat that the reserve where the poaching happened has been a known collecting site for years. Our recent interest, in this instance, hadn't had anything to do with the poaching. We'd just uncovered it. Inaction will gain the ant little. We need to move forward carefully and through good rigorous science build a strong basis for FFG listing. Then our bull ant friend can really stand and bellow! 🗣️

Nature's coppers

Office of the Conservation Regulator vic.gov.au/conservation-regulator

Report environmental crimes on public land 136 186

Report wildlife crime to Crime Stoppers Victoria online or on 1800 333 000

Wildlife crime is any illegal activity that involves and impacts wildlife welfare, which include causing pain and suffering to individual animals or acts that could negatively affect species survival. Actions that can harm, scare, or kill native animals, such as hunting, poisoning, or trapping without permission are all wildlife crimes. Other illegal activities considered wildlife crimes include poaching, trading, importing, exporting, keeping native species as pets unlawfully, and destroying wildlife habitat, such as nests and trees.

Glad tidings Nature news to bring a smile to your face



Rascally rabbits removed

A rabbit eradication program on Deen Maar Is. (formerly Lady Julia Percy Is.) looks to have been a great success. Home to Victoria's largest breeding colonies of Australian Fur Seals, Deen Maar lies 8.1 km off the coast between Port Fairy and Portland, in Eastern Maar and Gunditjmarra Country. The 2.4 by 1.2 km island is also an important



nesting site for Fairy Penguins, Short-tailed Shearwaters, Fairy Prions and Common Diving Petrels. Rabbits were introduced in 1898. Native animals like penguins and seabirds that had called Deen Maar Island home for thousands of years could not compete. Many had to relocate to treacherous rocky outcrops to survive. The rabbits had also been degrading cultural sites. DEECA declared war by laying carrot baits, unleashing calicivirus and setting traps. Monitoring for survivors began in December last year and if none are spotted after two years, the island will be declared rabbit-free. Changes are already beginning to occur, with native animals reclaiming empty rabbit burrows. 'To hear stories about penguins and seabirds reclaiming areas previously overrun with rabbit warrens, or even using empty rabbit warrens as nests is just amazing,' DEECA's Richard Hill said. 😊 Source: Yahoo! News, 10 Oct 2024



↑ Bald-tip Beard Orchid, JEFF JEANES

Friends save beard orchid from extinction

The Critically Endangered Bald-tip Beard Orchid received a late reprieve after Kinglake Friends of the Forest threatened legal action against FFMV, prompting it to cancel a planned burn of habitat. With fewer than 10 plants remaining in the wild, this orchid was thought extinct until rediscovered in 1968 at a site near Whroo. That site was included in a 183 ha area scheduled for controlled burns by FFMV, along with two further burns nearby in areas designated as potential orchid habitat. Ecologist Karl Just, who surveyed the area near Whroo, said the planned burns would have had a 'high likelihood of causing a species extinction'. 😊 Source: The Guardian, 8 Oct 2024

Welcome little one!

We're thrilled! A nursery of baby Mt Cole Grevillea have emerged in the fire-ravaged forests it calls home. After summer bushfires devoured their Mt Cole range, we're over the moon to find seedlings dotting the scorched earth. Despite the skeletal remains of mature plants, these critically endangered grevilleas are showing incredible resilience. The focus is now safeguarding these babes from grazing by feral deer and other pressures. Funding and long-term research initiatives must be top of Environment Minister Steve Dimopoulos's list. Even better - legislate the expert-recommended central west national parks to protect all of our vulnerable plants and creatures! 😊



Dingo decision disgrace – culling continues

JORDAN CROOK,
PARKS AND NATURE
CAMPAIGNER, WITH
THE LATEST ON
DINGO PROTECTION (OR LACK
THEREOF)

In mid-September, the Victorian Government made the troubling decision to extend the culling of Dingoes on public and private land until 1 January 2028. Their media release, disingenuously titled 'Balancing Dingo Conservation and Management,' obscured the serious implications of the decision.

This unprotection order, enacted under the *Wildlife Act*, revokes the Dingo's status as a threatened species under state nature laws (*Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act*). It's difficult to understand what 'balance' means when the culling zone in eastern Victoria has expanded by a staggering 260,309 hectares of private land.

This decision blatantly ignores the evidence of declining Dingo populations and their genetic diversity in eastern Victoria. It disregards research demonstrating that Dingoes are not hybridising with domestic dogs. And it undermines the cultural significance of Dingoes to First Nations communities and their critical role in maintaining a resilient, healthy web of life.



↑ ↓ Wilkerr Dingoes at a water hole, Big Desert Wilderness Park, Wotjobaluk Country. DR DANIEL HUNTER

September's decision did include some small victories, such as ending the discredited bounty program that targeted Dingoes, and a modest investment in non-lethal deterrent trials.

Still, the overall impact is alarming. Melinda Browning, director of the Australian Dingo Foundation, warned that this decision could push alpine Dingoes onto an 'extinction trajectory.'

Last year alone, at least 468 Dingoes were trapped and shot. This is a significant loss of 2,640 individuals.

The estimated population remaining in eastern Victoria is 8,800 animals.

VNPA is deeply concerned about the genetic health of the Wilkerr/Dingo population in the Big Desert. These Dingoes have been removed from state culling programs due to their low numbers and genetic diversity.

We continue to collaborate with Traditional Owners and conservationists to advocate for non-lethal management of Dingoes on private land. Together, we can protect these incredible animals and end the state-sponsored killing programs on public lands. 🐾

**Call on your elected
reps to find a better way
to live with Dingoes, so
they get the protection
they deserve.**

**[vnpa.org.au/
ministers-stop-
persecuting-dingoes](http://vnpa.org.au/ministers-stop-persecuting-dingoes)**



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

Discover how Dr Daniel Hunter captured these amazing photographs and our cover image at [instagram.com/danielhunterfilm](https://www.instagram.com/danielhunterfilm)

Spotlight on Nature with Trevor Speirs



Powerful Owl *Ninox strenua*

With their nocturnal activities and well-hidden daylight roosts, forest owls are often thought of as mysterious creatures, but the Powerful Owl is in many ways a creature of habit. Breeding pairs raise one or two chicks a season, fledging them in late September or early October.

Recently fledged chicks will need a steady supply of high protein meals from their parents; Eastern Ring-tailed Possums are by far the main fare in this forest, along with an occasional Greater Glider and Sugar Glider. A pair of adult Powerful Owls can prey on around 250 to 300 possums/gliders a year and the abundance of arboreal mammals will be a primary factor in determining the extent of a pair's territory.

It's a dangerous time for chicks when they first leave the nest hollow. They are often seen perched on exposed branches close to the nest tree before the parents can find a secure concealed roost. A day spent in the open can leave them vulnerable to attacks from larger birds like Currawongs and Sulphur-crested Cockatoos. Cockatoos are often seen poking around occupied owl nests during daylight hours.



↑ Powerful Owl with chick, Wombat Forest. GAYLE OSBORNE

In the weeks following fledging, the adults often move the youngsters some distance away from the breeding area, possibly to another part of their range which has a more readily available supply of prey. From the time of leaving the nest till reaching independence, anywhere from 6 to 8 months, juvenile owls will have to learn how to hunt and be less reliant on their parents. Independence brings more challenges to young owls, as they must either pair up with a suitable mate or establish a breeding territory of their own. 🦉

Trevor Speirs is a member of Wombat Forestcare

Rock climbing changes to protect heritage

Parks Victoria have put forward changes to the Dyurrite Cultural Landscape (Mount Arapiles-Tooon State Park) Management Plan to protect cultural heritage sites.

This includes \$1.7 million to upgrade visitor facilities such as barbecues, picnic tables, refreshed walking tracks, and trails as well as interpretive signage on the cultural story of the park. Outdated toilet facilities in Centenary Park will also be replaced.

The changes come after extensive survey work by Parks Victoria and the Barengi Gadjin Land Council, the park is home to one of the largest stone quarry complexes found in Australia with rock art and scar trees dating back 3,000 years.

The amendments to the Management Plan will see a reduction in rock climbing routes within the park to 80 sites, the continued use of some of

the climbing sites was jeopardising the integrity of the cultural heritage sites as well as the ecological values of the area with many of the tracks and routes created informally.

The whole purpose of having formal state and national parks is to manage recreation in a way that protects key values of the sites whether cultural heritage or environmental.

The Dyurrite Cultural Landscape in on the lands of the Wotjobaluk, Jaadwa, Jadawadjali, Wergaia and Jupagulk peoples. 🐾

**Public consultation on
the draft management
plan was open to 2 Dec.
Read more at
vnpa.org.au/arapiles**



↑ Rock climbing at Mt Arapiles. ED DUNENS

Marine heroes of Western Port Bay



SHANNON HURLEY

EXPLORES THE WILDLIFE OF WESTERN PORT'S WETLANDS AND THE PEOPLE WORKING TO PROTECT THEM, ALONG WITH UPDATES ON THE FRAMEWORK AND PROPOSED ENERGY TERMINAL

Western Port community series

Our first community webinar broke a VNPA record, attracting nearly 500 participants! This phenomenal turnout highlights the dedication of the Western Port Bay community. The webinar was a collaborative effort between VNPA and the Western Port Biosphere Foundation, with support from Coastcare.

Marine champions shared valuable insights into the seagrass, dolphins, whales, brachiopods, and other marine species that make these wetlands so unique. We learnt:

- There are 18 resident dolphins that hang out in Western Port Bay, in the areas between Somers and Shoreham.
- Western Port Bay has hard corals and is world-renowned for its diversity of hydroids (stationary predators related to jellyfish).
- Seagrass are plants, not algae!

The recording is available at VNPA's YouTube channel (youtube.com/user/VNPATV).

Some of the marine champs include Dave Donnelly and Jeff Weir from the Dolphin Research Institute, and Oli from Deakin University.

Western Port Framework

Our advocacy for the Western Port Bay Framework is gaining momentum.

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.



↑ Eastern Curlew. GRAHAM WINTERFLOOD/FLICKR

The Environment and Tourism Minister has been briefed, and the Marine and Coastal Council have indicated support. Now, we need a public commitment and funding to bring this vision to life.

We've identified the ideal tool to make the Western Port Framework effective and sustainable while balancing diverse interests: a marine spatial plan for Western Port. Despite a commitment under Victoria's Marine and Coastal Policy, there's still no sign of a marine spatial plan being delivered. Time is running out if Victoria is to honor its promises to protect our marine treasures.

Western Port is an exceptional candidate for Victoria's first pilot project. As Victoria's second-largest bay, its rapidly declining wetlands are an obvious choice for prioritisation and protection.

Victorian Renewable Energy Terminal (VRET)

In January, the Federal Environment Minister rejected the Port of Hastings proposed expansion to assemble and transport offshore wind materials. This decision was welcomed by nature and community groups due to the serious risks it posed to the Ramsar-listed wetlands of Western Port.

Now the project is back for a second review. The Port of Hastings, representing the Victorian Government, is preparing an alternative proposal for assessment. We understand that this new proposal aims to reduce the dredging footprint and scale back previously proposed land reclamation.

The revised proposal is expected to be released in early 2025.

It's essential this project is carefully planned to protect Western Port's wetlands. This is why we continue to push for the adoption of a marine spatial plan under the Western Port Framework. 🌊

Ask your elected representatives to back the Western Port Bay Framework actforwesternportbay.au

Salty Science with Kade Mills



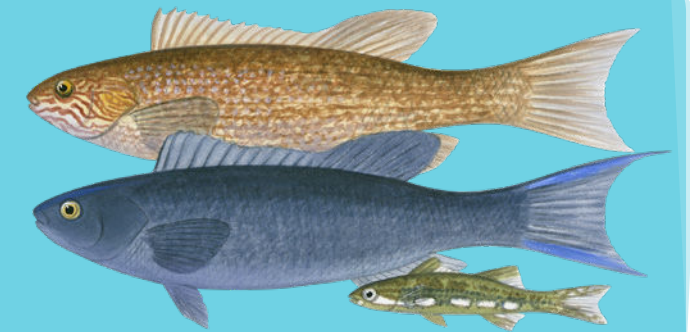
Herring Cale *Olisthops cyanomelas*

Like salt and vinegar, gin and tonic, or cops and donuts, Herring Cale and kelp are a perfect pairing. You'll only find Herring Cale swimming and feeding among the large brown algae that form the backbone of Australia's Great Southern Reef.

These unique members of the wrasse family have fused teeth that give them a beak-like appearance, perfect for nibbling on kelp. Unlike most wrasse, they aren't born female with the ability to change sex later in life. Instead, they are born either male or female – and stay that way. Weird, right?

Males, true to wrasse fashion, are the flashier of the two, sporting a striking blue-black hue with iridescent blue lines and spots. Females, on the other hand, blend in better with their kelp surroundings, showing off a brown-golden colour with white spots.

As the waters warm up, these fish get frisky. Males establish territories and vigorously flick their tails in



↑ Herring Cale female, male and juvenile

hopes of impressing every female that passes their way. Mating is a dynamic affair: pairs swim a few meters above the kelp, spawn at the top of the arc, and then dart back down – or in the case of the male, off to find another mate. Fun fact: one male has been seen spawning with two females in just five minutes!

Spotting them can be tricky but rewarding. Look for large brown algae beds and search the among the blades for the females while keeping your eyes peeled for a flash of blue and black as the males dart about. 🐟

Get fish counting!

From 16 November to 15 December this year, hundreds of divers and snorkellers will plunge into the water to take part in the biggest citizen-science event on Victoria's marine calendar, the Great Victorian Fish Count.

The Great Victorian Fish Count is an annual citizen science event where volunteers and divers work together to record and monitor marine fish species along the Victorian coastline. This event helps scientists track changes in fish populations, identify trends, and assess the health of marine ecosystems, supporting conservation efforts.

The event has been running since 2002, led by VNPA in partnership with Museums Victoria, Parks Victoria, Coastcare Victoria, Redmap, local dive operators and local community groups.

By involving local communities, the Fish Count also raises awareness about marine biodiversity and encourages stewardship of Victoria's unique underwater environments.

The data collected is uploaded to the Atlas of Living Australia (an online store for biodiversity data, currently with over 67 million records) to improve our knowledge of Victoria's marine species. 🌊



↑ ReefWatch Coordinator, Kade Mills, in the GVFC 2024 t-shirt. DESIGN BY NICOLE MERTENS

Get involved in this year's Great Victorian Fish Count vnpa.org.au/fish-count

Cracking the fire code



A REVISED CODE OF PRACTICE FOR BUSHFIRE MANAGEMENT ON PUBLIC LAND IS A GREAT OPPORTUNITY, BUT THE DRAFT HAS MISSED THE MARK, SAYS **MATT RUCHEL**, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Over the last few years, hundreds of large hollow-bearing habitat trees have been cleared on public land, including national parks. Some contained threatened animals, such as Greater Gliders. Thousands of tonnes of potential habitat have been sold for firewood and timber products in the name of fire prevention.

Everyone recognises the critical role services such as Forest Fire Management Victoria (FFMV) play in protecting lives and assets. But does this give them a blank cheque to operate as they like outside of emergency periods?

Like any government department, they should have a high degree of accountability, and aim for best practice in everything they do. Recently we've seen FFMV grow in size and scale. All fire staff from Parks Victoria have been moved to FFMV. Over 300 VicForests contractors and around 80 former VicForests staff have been added to the workforce to manage fire preparation works.

Works conducted under the guise of fire mitigation are not subject to normal forestry guidelines. Not even the minimum standards set out in the Code of Practice for Timber

Production. Not even if the timber is sold. There's no independent oversight of fire-related management on nature, such as when the Conservation Regulator oversaw VicForests. This is despite the same contractors being used. In other words, the storm clean-up and strategic fuel break construction works look a lot like forestry, or – even worse – like permanent land clearing.

The consultation draft of the code of bushfire management explicitly recognises conservation issues but repeats many mistakes and flaws of the previous code. It does little to improve transparency, accountability or oversight, and lacks consistency with national and state nature laws. NSW's Bush Fire Environmental Assessment Code considers threatened plants and animals, weed management and soil erosion. It has detailed rules about what can be done to ease impacts on nature and wildlife. Victoria, with over 2000 threatened plants and animals, deserves at least an equivalent of the code.

The draft code does commit to 'maximise the conservation of native flora and fauna species through a range of actions that support persistence and diversity, and/or minimise loss or extinction (e.g. emergency interventions, extinction prevention)'. While that sounds good on paper, it doesn't spell out how fire managers can achieve these aims. The draft doesn't mention any of our nature laws, such as the *Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act*. And it does not mention the state biodiversity strategy, despite it being run out of the same department.

“Like any government department, they should have a high degree of accountability, and aim for best practice in everything they do.”

The revised code does not include clear commitments, like those in South Australia's Code of Practice for Fire Management on Public Land.

What the code does introduce is a new 'fire sensitive zone' that aims to 'protect fire sensitive species and ecosystems and manage land primarily for environmental outcomes'. This is a welcome addition, but what it looks like on the ground is yet to be seen.

Key problems with the draft code of practice include:

- Lack of transparency, accountability and oversight.
- Clear gaps in the treatment of hollow-bearing trees and threatened plants and animals.
- Missing clear definitions for some key concepts.
- Lack of clarity on the process for site and values assessments.
- Lack of clarity on the role of citizen science.

Every Victorian knows the harm that wildfire can cause, but causing more harm now to prevent future damage just doesn't add up. It's crucial to tighten the rules on fire management outside of emergency times. Any new code of practice should focus on using the best practice in an ecologically responsible way. 🌿

Read our full submission to the Consultation Draft Code of Practice for Bushfire Management on Public Land 2024 vnpa.org.au/submissions



↑ Fire break works, Noojee

Plant Blindness* with Jordan Crook

Plant Blindness is the inability to notice plants in everyday life, to recognise their importance, and a belief they are inferior to animals



Cabbage-tree Palm *Livistona australis*

Tucked along three rivers in East Gippsland is Victoria's only native palm, the Cabbage-tree Palm. It is so loved in the area that the local town of Cabbage Tree Creek is named for it.

While they seem like an inappropriate addition to the towering Mahogany Gum (*Eucalyptus botryoides*) and midstorey of Lilly Pilly (*Acmena smithii*) these tall and lanky palms poke up through the canopy to heights of 30 m! The Cabbage-tree Palm is named for the young shoots growing from the apical stem that look similar to a cabbage. It is a traditional food for coastal First Nations communities. The young and tender leaves can be consumed raw or cooked. It is used as an emergency food or celebratory food, as cutting out the heart destroys the plant.

The Cabbage-tree Palm grows best in moist, organically rich soils, and thrives in both sheltered and well-lit situations. It is also salt, frost and wind tolerant.

Fairly common down the east coast of Australia, the palms in East Gippsland are its southernmost extent. Sitting near the mouth of the Snowy River, it becomes Australia's most southern growing palm species. In Victoria, with such a small and restricted population, it is listed as Critically Endangered under the *Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988*.

The plant is threatened by loophole logging by Forest Fire Management Victoria, feral deer and weed invasion. On a site visit in September 2024, the palms seemed to be struggling. VNPA is working with local groups to understand if the Cabbage-tree Palms are in decline.

A rare but special plant, at home in a special place in East Gippsland. 🌿



↑ Cabbage-tree Palm. MEGHAN LINDSAY

Union goes into bat for Parks Victoria staff

VNPA is concerned about the contraction of Parks Victoria's budget and planned layoffs of rangers and staff.

Nature and our parks are under growing stress from increasing visitor numbers, invasive species and climate change. We need more feet on the ground, not less.

VNPA supports calls from unions representing Parks Victoria staff to

protect jobs and conditions. CPSU is the main union for employees at Parks Victoria. It's significant network of members and delegates across the state are proud of the places they get to work in every day.

'At the heart of these special locations in Victoria are workers, they have a job to do and they care. They deserve to be treated with respect by their employers, by the government of the day and by members of the public,'

CPSU Branch Secretary Karen Batt says.

'When everyone else is on holidays this dedicated workforce is on the job. CPSU works closely with their members who experience the busiest periods over the summer which can be compounded by fires and other emergencies.'

We will have more in the next edition of *Park Watch*. 🌿

Unwanted Visitors

with Feral Beryl 

Feral deer

Reducing feral deer is essential to protect our native wildlife and vulnerable habitats. By tracking their movements, we can focus efforts on where deer cause the most harm in our landscapes. Early detection helps spot new populations before they spread.

Who invited them?

European settlers introduced feral deer to Victoria for game hunting and farming. There are now seven species present: Chital Deer (*Axis axis*), Fallow Deer (*Dama dama*), Hog Deer (*Axis porcinus*), Red Deer (*Cervus elaphus*), Rusa Deer (*Cervus timorensis*), Sambar Deer (*Cervus unicolor*) and Sika Deer (*Cervus nippon*).

Why they're unwanted

Our sensitive landscapes didn't evolve to cope with hard hooves. Ancient peatlands, moss beds, temperate rainforest gullies and wetlands are all magnets for wallowing deer. They crush native plants, spread weeds, spoil fresh water and cause erosion. They chew on ferns and shrubs, harming understorey habitat plants and growing trees.

Deer rubbing, Bullarto South →
FRED CUMMING/INATURALIST



↑ Deer wallow. ALEX MAISEY

Evicting overstaying guests

Deer are listed as a key threatening process under our nature laws. Control strategies to manage them exist at a state and federal level. In Victoria this is hampered by their listing as a game species (see report p. 19).

Evidence of deer

Hoof marks and tracks, muddy wallows (churned mud depressions in the ground, often urinated in), ringbarking and antler rubbings on trunks and branches, droppings (small, dark, cylindrical 1–2cm), plant damage (ragged torn stems and crushed branches, browse lines on woody shrubs).

You can record the presence of deer with the iNaturalist app or the FeralScan app (available at feralscan.org.au/deerscan).

Dealing with feral guests

After habitat clearing, the second greatest risk to our wildlife and natural areas is invasive species.

We've all seen the damage these unwanted visitors have done.

After a feral cat moves in, your Superb Fairy Wrens disappear, doomed to end their enchanting lives in the bellies of purring assassins. A once vibrant grassland meadow is smothered in Chilean Needle Grass. A lush rainforest valley is converted into a giant deer

wallow with dead ringbarked Sassafras trees.

Research by the Threatened Species Recovery Hub reveals invasive pests are a problem for 1,257 threatened plants and animals in Australia.

We need to reduce pest numbers and stop new culprits entering the country. If invasives do enter, they need to be eradicated before they spread. This is pivotal to looking after our wildlife and natural areas.

In our new regular feature, 'Unwanted Visitors', we will draw attention to emerging and established pests undermining our biosecurity.

We'll outline how to keep an eye on them when you're out and about in nature.

VNPA is a member of Victoria's Biosecurity Reference Group, and its sole nature conservation group. The group gives community and industry a chance to feed into how our state's biosecurity strategy is carried out.

Jordan Crook, Parks and Nature Campaigner



Deer in Sherbrooke Forest, Dandenong Ranges National Park, Wurundjeri Country
ALEX MAISEY

Dodgy deer protection needs to go



DEER ARE NOT AND NEVER WILL BE WILDLIFE IN AUSTRALIA SAYS

JORDAN CROOK, PARKS AND NATURE CAMPAIGNER

Not a week goes by that I don't dodge a deer on the road, get honked at in the bush or witness the growing mess feral deer are making of our parks and reserves. Trees ringbarked, rainforest valleys decimated, revegetation projects smashed, alpine bogs and fens rutted up.

The obsession with protecting feral deer by a small but vocal group of hobby shooters is only making things worse. Deer are chomping and stomping through Victoria's unique wildlife habitats and threatening agricultural production. More frequent collisions with cars and trucks on our roads is a risk to human safety.

The legislative relic that protects feral deer under state legislation the *Wildlife Act*, harks back to the days of the Acclimatisation Societies of the 1800s. It must go.

This stubborn fixation on listing them as a game species put an extra burden on public and private land holders. It muddies the water for authorities seeking to eradicate feral deer and rules out control techniques

like trapping and biocontrol.

In September, a group of over 100 academics, land managers, farmers, and national, state and regional community conservation groups wrote to the Victoria's Agriculture and Environment ministers demanding proactive solutions to the burgeoning feral deer population. They reiterated the importance of listing them as a pest species.

Every signatory had an example; whether damage to ecological restoration projects, impact on farm animals who compete for feed, to cars written off after on-road deer strikes.

The current policy settings are placing speed humps and brick walls to effective deer removal and control. It's time to manage them as the pest they are. Their hooves and antlers wreck orchards, farms and vineyards. Feral deer spread disease to waterways and livestock, damage property, cause vehicle collisions, and damage national parks and gardens. They ruin sensitive and recovering habitats like Endangered Cool Temperate Rainforest and alpine meadows.



↑ Damaged car after a collision with a feral deer, near Orbost

Our elected representatives need to seriously look at the science, the devastating effects on nature, community and livelihoods, and finally list feral deer as the pest they are.

Read the joint letter calling for the unprotection of feral deer and instead list them as a pest
vnpa.org.au/joint-letter-stop-protecting-feral-deer

All I want for Christmas is...



If Santa really is checking who's naughty or nice this year, our crusading campaigners and passionate program staff will be the most gifted of all!

Help us sleigh into 2025 with projects that protect our most treasured lands and bring people closer to nature. From enchanted tours of our precious grasslands to stocking the Great Forest with dreams of national park status.

Supporting these initiatives helps us wrap up resources for nature-loving families, train young citizen scientists, map out vital East Gippsland forests, and more. Give the gift of a healthier, more resilient nature! If their wishes do come true, we'll deck Victoria with even more conservation magic.

If you would like to help one of our staff have their Christmas wishes come true, please contact one of our elves (aka Jane, Kristian or Matt) by email at support@vnpa.org.au, or call 03 9341 6500.

Image: Mt Cole Grevillea, Mt Cole/Bereep Bereep, Djab Wurrung Country. JORDAN CROOK

Sera
NATURE WATCH
If one of Santa's helpers gave me \$5000 I could purchase more high-powered spotlights and other wildlife monitoring equipment.

Matt
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
Now that native forest logging has ended, I'd like \$25,000 for the mapping of East Gippsland forests to inform the government of identified high value conservation areas.

Shannon
MARINE CAMPAIGNER
I'd like \$15,000 to increase our activities that bring together local communities and advocate for the Western Port Bay Framework.

Jordan
NATURE CAMPAIGNER
I'd like \$18,000 to update our Western Port Woodlands report emphasising the importance of biolinks through the precious remnant vegetation for threatened animals, and safeguard them from sand mining.

Glade
REEF WATCH
A gift of \$20,000 would help us plan for the return of Giant Kelp forests in Victoria through the collection of oral histories.

Blake
NATURE CAMPAIGNER
The Central Highlands is a magnificent forested landscape of rare, threatened and remarkable creatures. I'd like \$25,000 to rev up our campaign for a Great Forest National Park.

Adrian
GRASSY PLAINS NETWORK
I'd like \$15,000 to run five additional community engagement tours of our precious grasslands.

Caitlin
COMMUNITY LEARNING & ENGAGEMENT
I would love \$12,000 to develop a new set of resources that help families uncover the wonders of nature together.

Michael
NEXTGEN NATURE
I'd love \$6000 to run two training workshops for young adults in citizen science.

Tips for talking to your cranky uncle at Xmas

You're about to swallow a mouthful of plum pudding when Uncle Kevin says 'I've had a gut full of national parks. The bush is more stuffed than this roast chook'. Or maybe 'When we camped as kids in the high country there weren't any weeds'. Or if you're really unlucky, 'bloody woke inner-city greenies are trying to lock us out of our bush'.

While none of Uncle Kevin's statements are factually correct, countering with facts is unlikely to win you the debate. Or change his mind.

Scientific reasoning relies on critical thinking, evidence and logic to test ideas and reach conclusions. But it's human nature to filter logic through emotion to form opinions.

Studies show we accept information that supports our existing beliefs or values, and how we think things should be. We're reluctant to give up, even if faced with solid proof contradicting it. Misinformation isn't born from what is right and wrong but fuelled by resentment and indignation over how the world works. It's why Kev and Karen accept 'fake' news – it's a more comforting version of their truth. Kev might be your uncle, but the values, culture and perspectives of his networks and algorithms influence and reinforce his social identity. Just hop online for an endless catalogue of people emotionally rejecting arguments despite a meatier evidence-base than a glazed ham.

So how do you talk to Kevin, Karen or anyone sharing misinformation about nature conservation? And how do you do it without spitting out your pud, spilling your beer or ruining your summer holiday? Here are a few of tips to keep your trifles light and your spirits festive.

1. Lead with empathy

Shame is a powerful emotion. Try and avoid calling out falsehoods by belittling the person. Empathy means finding common ground, looking for shared values. What can you agree on? You both love nature. You love spending time in it.

You: 'Yeah Kev, it's hard watching the places we love get wrecked. They've been hit hard for too long. Protected areas are one of the best ways to keep the stuff we love safe. And yeah, I agree, they need way more experienced rangers on the ground like they used to and way more funds to help look after them.'

2. Ask a lot of questions

People like being heard. Start with connection, not a correction. Tease it out, lean into curiosity and find out the source.

3. Avoid 'but'

In response, make sure you avoid the word 'but'. Cognitive research has shown that information that chases 'but' or 'however' is disregarded. Try 'and' instead.

4. Avoid negation

Contradiction sticks, according to cognitive studies. Don't say 'national parks do not cause bushfire'. The word 'not' gets detached in memory, leaving the listener mashing 'national parks' + 'bushfire' together.

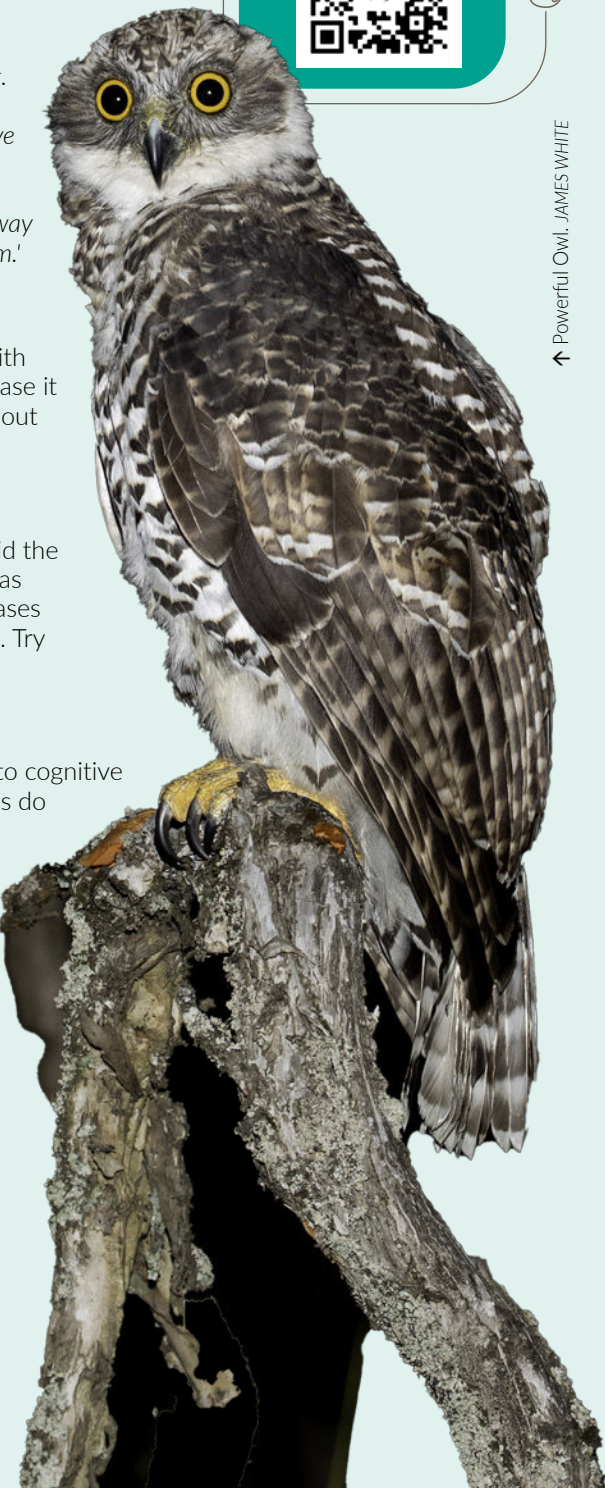
You: 'Weeds are a problem everywhere and national parks should have more resources for getting rid of them.'

Maybe you like a robust discussion, maybe you're a peacekeeper or maybe these kinds of situations give you intolerable indigestion. Either way – our FAQ is here to help.

Read more at
vnpa.org.au/nationalparksfaq



↑ Powerful Owl, JAMES WHITE



Where we went in Spring

WE WERE BUSY DURING SPRINGTIME WITH SURVEYS, WALKS, WEBINARS AND MORE



Citizen scientists surveyed for threatened wildlife and assessed fuel loads (pictured, below) in the soon-to-be Wombat-Lerderderg National Park and the Central Highlands.



Grassland lovers explored grasslands at Deer Park, Parwan, Woorndoo, Epping, Darebin, Sunbury, Little River, Taylors Lakes and celebrated at the annual Spring Fling Grassland Festival.



Marine citizen scientists searched for sea slugs at San Remo.



Nature enthusiast learnt about Dingoes, marine life of Western Port Bay, the Great Victorian Fish Count and feral deer at webinars.



Bushwalkers enjoyed walks at Werribee Gorge, Mt Buffalo, Mornington Peninsula, Bunyip State Park, Wilsons Prom and the soon-to-be Wombat-Lerderderg National Park.



Nature lovers learned all about their local wildlife, climate and geology at Nature Stewards short courses.



Grassy meadow enthusiasts learnt all about grasslands and fire, the importance of soils and grasslands of the Wimmera at Grassy Plains Network monthly meetings.

Great Victorian Fish Counters

A snapshot of our Summer activities calendar

- Great Victorian Fish Count**
18 November – 17 December
How many fish will you spot on a snorkel or scuba dive?
- Great Victorian Fish Count Snorkel with NextGen Nature**
Friday 6 December, 4-7pm
Take part in some fishy citizen science with other young people at Crystal Steps in Williamstown.
- Wild Families at the beach**
Various dates in January – check our Activities Calendar in the new year!

Join our Summer activities!

Our online Activities Calendar brings opportunities to get into nature through bushwalking, citizen science, short courses and events for all ages. Right now, there are plenty of opportunities to join us for an adventure in nature.

Check out the online calendar for the latest opportunities to get into nature. New activities are added regularly.

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

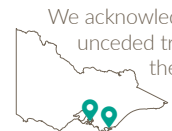
Discover more at
vnpa.org.au/activities



Global study warns of risk to mangroves

 A HEALTH CHECK FOR OUR VITAL MANGROVE ECOSYSTEMS RAISE SIGNIFICANT PROBLEMS, BUT SOLUTIONS EXIST, SAYS SHANNON HURLEY, NATURE CONSERVATION CAMPAIGNER

In their first global assessment, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List reports that 50 per cent of the world's mangrove ecosystems are at risk. A further 20 per cent are Endangered or Critically Endangered. The study identifies the mangroves in Western Port and south-east Australia as endangered, mirroring Victoria's threatened species list. These complex webs of life, along with seagrass and saltmarsh, are vital for blue carbon sequestration. They provide significant benefits to both marine and human communities.

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

The mangroves of Western Port Bay form a vital habitat within its unique, tidally dependent wetlands. Here, you'll find the southernmost population of White Mangrove (*Avicennia marina*), also known as Grey Mangrove, with the most southerly occurrence located in Corner Inlet. Mangroves help protect coastlines, serve as nurseries for fish, and store carbon up to 40 times faster than land ecosystems. However, past clearing for agriculture and coastal development has led to a five per cent decline in mangrove habitat in Western Port since European settlement.

Western Port Bay and eastern Port Phillip are powerhouses of coastal blue carbon. They hold a quarter of Victoria's blue carbon habitats and nearly a third of the state's total blue carbon stores. A recent Deakin University report (Blue Carbon Opportunities at a Local Scale, conducted in partnership with the Western Port Biosphere and local councils) revealed a huge opportunity to restore nearly 800 hectares of historic mangrove forests and saltmarsh. This could be even more if we manage rising sea levels effectively.

Restoration efforts have taken place in Lang Lang, Jam Jerrup and Grantville, with university researchers and Landcare groups testing various methodologies.

A 2018 Melbourne Water study recommended further research into Western Port's mangroves, including:

- Biodiversity of mangroves in Western Port with a focus on invertebrate fauna.
- Understanding on the effects of sedimentation and erosion on mangrove recovery and seedling survival.
- Connectivity between mangroves, other habitats and wildlife.

Learning more about these factors is essential to safeguarding and strengthening Western Port's incredible natural wonders. The next step is to protect these mangrove habitats from climate disruption and coastal development with a comprehensive and collaboration strategic plan (see article p. 14).

Let's protect what we love for generations to come! 🌿

Fun Fact

Blue carbon refers to the carbon captured and stored by coastal and marine ecosystems and can store carbon up to 40 times faster than land ecosystems!

Not all dandy in the ranges


 BLAKE NISBET, NATURE CONSERVATION CAMPAIGNER, PROVIDES AN UPDATE ON OUR CAMPAIGN IN THE DANDENONG RANGES

It's been three years since the 2021 storm event impacted areas of the Dandenong Ranges National Park. In April this year, Forest Fire Management Victoria (FFMV) began work to salvage fallen trees from the park.

Nearly half the areas listed have since been impacted by off-track heavy machinery disturbance, hazardous tree removals and the destruction of critical wildlife habitats. The effects on the ground are intensive and shocking to see.

But let's take a step back for a moment. Back in May last year, FFMV committed to a suite of nature protections. The promises were:

- The retention of areas of refuge in the understorey and midstorey connectivity.
- The protection of canopy trees.
- The exclusion of works from Riparian areas and around water bodies.
- Protections for all hollow-bearing, den, sap feed trees and tree ferns, as well as exclusion zones around nesting trees during breeding season.

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

- No machinery disturbance in areas of dense, swampy vegetation in gullies and other damp areas where threatened and protected species have been recorded.
- The identification, marking and protection of nest and roost sites.

These all sounded positive in writing, but what was actually done on the ground?

So we visited the site in June to assess the area. The result was a list of broken promises. We identified five hollow-bearing trees that had been felled or removed. One contained a wildlife nest that appeared to have belonged to a Mountain Brushtail Possum. We observed widespread heavy machinery disturbance to threatened plants such as the Powelltown Correa and Victorian Flat-pea. VNPA and Southern Dandenongs Landcare Group had previously alerted FFMV to the existence of these populations.

Tree removal operations threaten and impair the forest's recovery. Regardless, FFMV are planning further damage, in the form of post-log removal burning. Other operations are expected to recommence over Summer, following a hiatus due to wet weather and community protests. FFMV's operations continue to fall short of community expectations, with VNPA holding them accountable. We continue to monitor upcoming works and push for better oversight and transparency.

More broadly, we are calling on the Allan Government to commit to the highest standard of assessment, consultation and nature protections for planned fire management works outside of emergency periods. Most crucially that these principles are embedded in a new Code of Practice for Bushfire Management on Public Land, currently under review (see article p. 16). 🌿



↑ ↓ Hollow-bearing tree marked for removal at the Kalorama, Track 13 site. This tree exhibits signs of arboreal mammal occupancy for denning and nesting (indicated by the claw scratch marks around the hollow), yet is still marked with an X for removal
MEGHAN LINDSAY



40 years of Namadgi



Inspired by nature



JORDAN CROOK,
PARKS AND NATURE
CAMPAIGNER,
VISITED CANBERRA
TO CELEBRATE 40 YEARS OF
THIS WONDERFUL PARK

down below, it is truly spectacular, with wildlife in abundance.

The park sits in the northern section of the Australian Alps. It is one of 12 parks and reserves stretching from Victoria through NSW and into the ACT, protecting 1.6 million hectares of predominantly iconic alpine ecosystems.

In October, I drove up to Namadgi to celebrate the 40th birthday of the gazettal of this iconic national park. And what a great day it was! A guided bushwalk and a shorter walk led by Kamilaroi man Aaron Chatfield of Dreamtime Connections demonstrated uses of plants used by First Nations peoples. A barbecue was put on by the

Canberra Lions Club, and what would a birthday be without a birthday cake? Thank you to the National Parks Association of the ACT for putting on a great day, for a great park and for your years of advocacy for the ACT's plants, animals and parks. 🐾

From a community meeting in 1960 to the final the gazetting of the Namadgi National Park in 1984, the campaign for 'a national park for the national capital' was certainly worth it. The Australian Capital Territory's only national park, Namadgi is a breathtaking landscape. From the mountain tops covered in Snow Gums and alpine meadows, to the wetlands

Read more about the 40th anniversary of Namadgi National Park in the NPA Bulletin
npaact.org.au/npa-bulletin

WE SPOKE WITH
JESS RACKLYEFT,
CREATOR OF THE
ILLUSTRATIONS IN
OUR HIDDEN WONDERS
OF THE GRASSLANDS
CAMPAIGN



What are you working on at the moment?

I am currently working on four picture books: one non-fiction, two stories written by other authors and one is a book I have written. They are all at different stages, so my day flies by working on them all in little chunks of time!

Explain your practice and media

I am a picture book author and illustrator, working primarily in watercolours and tinkering in Photoshop. I used to work at home but have recently joined the lovely community at the Abbotsford Convent with my first studio out of the house, which has been a wonderful new chapter. Now I can have lunch while hanging with baby lambs! Sometimes, I paint massive canvases, when I need a

breather from the tiny painted details of picture books.

How does nature inspire your work?

Nature is my biggest inspiration – I love the awe it brings me, and my challenge is to try and capture that feeling on paper. I grew up spending my time by the sea in Western Australia, have lived in the Californian mountains, have an obsession with the national parks around Melbourne and now I'm not far from Merri Creek. All these places are sprinkled in background environments in my books. I love to travel and be absorbed in the environments of new places, lodging memories, taking photos, drawing sketches.

How do you hope your work will affect others and their relationship with nature?

I think the more beauty we find in nature – and the more we are educated and understanding of the impact of our own decisions and our effect on it – the more gentle and caring we become for our environment. So, my

hope is I create work that readers find some spark of curiosity or beauty in, and it somehow helps them feel protective of its future.

Where can people see more of your work or get in touch?

I am online at jessesmess.com and at [instagram.com/jessesmess](https://www.instagram.com/jessesmess). 🐾

ALL IMAGES JESS RACKLYEFT



↑ Cutting Namadgi's birthday cake. JENNIFER C



↑ Kamilaroi man Aaron Chatfield leads party on walk behind Namadgi Visitor Centre. ROSEMARY H

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



Powerful research

↑ Powerful Owls. NICK CARTER



↑ Powerful Owl chicks. GAYLE OSBORNE



NICK CARTER
DESCRIBES HIS
RESEARCH INTO OUR
ENIGMATIC APEX
PREDATOR, THE POWERFUL
OWL

PhD PROGRESS
REVEALS THE LATEST
EXCITING UNIVERSITY
RESEARCH INTO
VICTORIA'S NATURAL
WORLD



↑ Powerful Owl. NICK CARTER

What's the elevator pitch for your PhD?

In my thesis, I investigated threatening processes such as habitat fragmentation, poisoning, movement barriers and protection discrepancies. This research is now being used to help further conserve Powerful Owls (*Ninox strenua*) and inform decision-making processes to reduce impacts to individuals and their territories.

Completed as part of the Deakin University Powerful Owl Research Team (DUPORT), my PhD project involved using a mixture of GPS tracking technology and data from deceased owls to investigate how owls responded to various threatening processes across the urban-rural-forest landscape in Victoria.

Powerful Owls (*Ninox strenua*) are Australia's largest owl. Unfortunately, they are a threatened apex predator, declining throughout their distribution of mainland south-east/eastern Australia.

Due to their nocturnal, elusive and highly mobile nature, Powerful Owls are extremely difficult to detect and research which means it is also really difficult to ensure that land managers are effectively mitigating impacts and protecting habitat for conservation. Although Powerful Owls

are completely reliant on tree cover to survive and establish territories, they are one of the few Australian apex predators that are able to occupy spaces in rural and urban habitat fragmented areas provided enough resources are available. However, does their ability to occupy habitat along the landscape gradient inadvertently also create additional challenges that threaten their survival?

What led you to do this PhD?

I did my Honours research on Powerful Owls back in 2017, and was lucky enough to be offered a PhD position by my supervisors to continue working on them in 2021. Powerful Owls are a seriously awesome and mysterious animal – being able to work with them is truly so special, so how could you say no when offered a position like that?

In between honours and PhD, I worked as an ecological consultant at SMEC Australia. I gained many important data, time management, field and communication skills that really helped make my PhD journey a more enjoyable and easier experience. Gaining those real-world experiences outside of academia was really important in diversifying my skillset; I was able to start my PhD running and pretty much start fieldwork on day one.

I never really thought that I would undertake a PhD, or that it would be included in my career plan, but I'm so happy that I undertook this experience – and it really helps when you have such an amazing and supportive team.

What challenges have you had to overcome?

Researching the owls themselves was a massive challenge! Their elusive and mysterious nature is one of my favourite aspects of them, but it really can be a massive challenge. It requires a lot of adaptiveness when fieldwork doesn't necessarily go the way you thought it would.

For example, I was having very little luck during one of my catching seasons and there wasn't much time left to keep trying in the same spot. So, we decided to completely move study areas, which actually turned out great and were able to catch five owls within a short time frame.

What's the most interesting thing you've learnt so far?

I've learnt so much during my PhD and found out some really cool things about the owls and how to support their conservation, so it's hard to choose just one. Thesis chapter by thesis chapter, I found out that:

1. Impact assessment tools are data

deficient, and legislation has limited capability to protect Powerful Owls due to their use of habitat across multiple tenures, with both of these shortcomings likely contributing further to the species decline.

2. Powerful Owls are significantly adjusting their spatial and movement behaviour in response to fragmented habitat – as fragmentation increases, so too does home-range sizes, limiting the amount of territories that can occur in a landscape due to lack of habitat and connectivity.
3. Roads aren't a movement barrier for Powerful Owls, but they significantly adjust their movement patterns to fly over the road network by actively searching for areas of dense tree cover near watercourses to cross roads.
4. Despite not consuming rodents, Powerful Owls are being exposed to second-generation anticoagulant rodenticide poisoning, establishing a new threatening process for this species.

What impact do you want your research to have?

Throughout my PhD and ecologist career, I really have tried to make my research tangible and applicable to a wide audience of decision-makers,

including land managers, government, researchers, industry and community groups. I truly believe that sharing and discussing research and ideas between academic and non-academic stakeholders is integral for species conservation and implementing positive changes in the real-world.

Ideally, I would love for people to be inspired by the research my team has undertaken to do small actions each day to not only help owls, but all the other amazing wildlife that we share our backyards with. Using alternatives to rodenticides and revegetating your property with native trees really does go a long way.

To quote my recently submitted thesis 'to ensure the continued co-existence with humans and reverse population declines of this threatened species, its integral that as a society, we collectively 'give a hoot' and implement effective conservation actions across our dynamically changing landscapes, for the survival of Powerful Owls! 🦉

Get in touch with Nick
Instagram: du_powls
Email:
nbc@deakin.edu.au

WILSONS PROMONTORY NATIONAL PARK & MARINE NATIONAL PARK

IN PARK FRIENDS
IN WE VISIT ONE OF
VICTORIA'S NATIONAL
PARKS TO REVEAL ITS
FEATURES, THREATS
AND FRIENDS

Location



Traditional lands and waters of the **Bunurong & Gunaikurnai**
200km SE of Melbourne
70,000+ hectares for national park, marine national park, marine park, marine reserve & wildlife reserve

Map



History

- Temporarily reserved in 1898
- Permanently reserved in 1905, with further additions between 1908 and 1995
- Marine National Park declared in 2003
- Wilson's Prom in the 70s

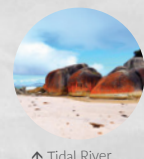


Physiography

- Wilson's Promontory and Gippsland Plain bioregions
- Diverse vegetation communities, including Warm Temperate and Cool Temperate Rainforest, tall open forests, woodlands, heathlands, and swamp and coastal communities
- Half of Victoria's birds
- 21 per cent of Victoria's known vascular flora

Features

- Outstanding natural landscapes including spectacular and diverse coastal scenery
- Excellent opportunities for sightseeing, viewing wildlife, camping and other nature recreation
- Victoria's largest coastal wilderness area



↑ Tidal River
JOHNNY CLOW

Features

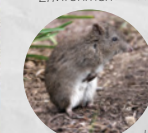
- A climate refuge for many species and ecosystems
- Victoria's southernmost and largest marine national park, and only one within the Flinders Marine Bioregion
- Abundant and diverse marine wildlife



↑ Boarfish
JOHN TURNBULL

Threats

- 77 plants and animals listed as **Threatened** under Victorian legislation *Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988*
- 26 plants and animals listed as **Threatened** under federal legislation *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*



← Long-nosed Potoroo, which is listed as Threatened
LEO/FICKR

Friends

- Friends of the Prom**
friendsoftheprom.org.au
info@friendsoftheprom.org.au
friendsoftheprom
- Main activities:** Running a nursery at Tidal River
Planting and maintaining trees for the Koala Habitat Restoration project
Restoring Hooded Plover habitat by removing Sea Spurge.

WILSONS PROM IS THE JEWEL IN THE CROWN OF VICTORIA'S NATIONAL PARKS SYSTEM

The Prom is arguably the best-loved national park for many Victorians. It has outstanding conservation, recreation and wilderness values, and has been designated by UNESCO as a Biosphere Reserve.

Known as Yiruk or Wamoon, it has long been held in high esteem by several First Nations communities. It is known as the home of Loo-errn, the spirit ancestor and guardian of the Brataualung people and an ancestor of the Bunurong. The middens of discarded shells that are exposed in many of the bays are evidence of First Nations occupation.

About 12,000 years ago, when an ice age greatly lowered the sea level, you could walk to Tasmania along a route marked now by Bass Strait islands between the Prom and Flinders Island. Some plants on the Prom, such as Crimson Berry, are very rare in Victoria but common in Tasmania.

In the 19th century, the Prom was exploited by Europeans for whales, seals, timber and tin. It was first reserved as a national park in 1898, largely through action by the Field Naturalists Club of Victoria. Today, the waters surrounding it are also protected in marine national parks and reserves.

VNPA has led a number of successful protests at the Prom, halting proposed large-scale commercial developments.

The Prom has a great range of habitat types, including tall ash forests, banksia woodlands, rainforests and coastal heathlands. If you venture underwater, you can see a heady mix of colourful marine life, particularly around the tumbled granite boulders off the coastline.

Friends of the Prom, established in 1979, contributes to both formal research and citizen science. Projects range from Koala and Hooded Plover habitat to combatting mange in Wombats, as well as iNaturalist bioblitzing and monitoring of *Phytophthora cinnamomi* and cattle grazing.

With thanks to Karin Ruff and Jim Whelan, Friends of the Prom



↑ Wombat. CHRISTINA HENDRICKS



↑ Emu. JOHN TURNBULL/FICKR



↑ Grass Trees. GOLDBERRY/WIKIMEDIA



↑ Crimson Berry. RON GREER

↓ Wilsons Prom heathland. RYAN JUBBER



COALVILLE BUSHLAND RESERVE



JORDAN CROOK
VISITS A LITTLE GEM
OF A BUSHLAND
RESERVE IN THE LA
TROBE VALLEY



In the once mighty Strzelecki Ranges just south of Moe sits the Coalville G219 Bushland Reserve. It's on Gunaikurnai Country, tucked between a pine plantation and private land.

The reserve is predominantly covered by towering Mountain Grey Gums (*Eucalyptus cypellocarpa*). I visited the reserve in the depths of Winter while the rain was trickling down the trunks of the Mountain Grey Gums, and mist was moving in and out of the valleys.

Prior to the clearing and conversion of the surrounding bush into paddocks and pine plantations, you can imagine Yellow-bellied Gliders (*Petaurus australis*) jumping between their large trunks.

Yet the forest that remains contains many large and hollow-bearing trees with signs of use by cockatoos, owls and parrots. Although small, this reserve has abundant bird life, with Kookaburras calling out to each other.

And the groundstorey is prolific with stunning fungi. It goes to show you can never doubt the importance of even the smallest patch of remnant native vegetation!

A welcome surprise at that time of year I visited is the iconic pink form of the Common Heath (*Epacris impressa*), Victoria's floral state emblem. It was found across the whole reserve. Its pink trumpet-like flowers poking out

← Coalville Bushland Reserve
Fungi →
↓ Common Heath
ALL IMAGES JORDAN CROOK



amongst the other plants biding their time until Spring to flower.

For such a fragmented landscape, the reserve is in great condition, with low levels of weeds. However, it does bear the scars of firewood poaching that is cursing many of our parks and reserves.

Next time you're in the La Trobe Valley, duck down to Coalville G219 Bushland Reserve, you won't regret visiting this grouse park! 🌿

Coalville G219 Bushland Reserve,
Mills Rd, Coalville
145 km/2¼ hour drive
south-east of Melbourne

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



↑ Coalville Bushland Reserve. ALL IMAGES JORDAN CROOK

Glad tidings Nature news to bring a smile to your face



🐝 Ghostbusting in the Top End

Wildlife photographers Lucyna Kania and Nick Volpe have discovered a previously unrecorded wasp hiding in plain sight near a popular swimming spot in the Northern Territory's Nitmiluk National Park.

It has been named the Mam-Burumurl Wasp, a translation of 'ghost wasp' in the Jawoyn language, the Traditional Owners of the park. The name captures the wasp's distinctive floating flight pattern, reminiscent of a ghost. They lay their eggs in the nests of Leaf-cutter Bees where their larvae will eat the bee larvae and its food.

Lucyna and Nick first found the wasps in 2022. In collaboration with Dr Ben Parslow from the South Australian Museum they described it as a new species to Western science, *Gasteruption mamburumurl*. 😊

Follow Nick @nvolpe.wild and Lucyna @lucynak.wild for some excellent nature content.



↑ INSTAGRAM

Bushy Bob

LEGENDARY BIRD LOVER, FORMER PARK RANGER AND LONG-TERM VNPA MEMBER BOB SEMMENS, AKA 'BUSHY BOB', SHARES SOME OF HIS REMARKABLE STORY WITH *PARK WATCH*

Bob Semmens' lifelong passion for birds started as a childhood hobby recording birds in Leach's 1911 Bird Book with his father on the family farm. Having grown up in Sedgewick south of Bendigo, and now a Mallacoota local, 92 year-old Bob still bird watches most days. His love of nature was the driving force behind a mid-life career change to become a park ranger – something he describes as 'The best move I ever made.'

In 1978, Bob started a three-year stint as a ranger in the diverse and stunning Croajingolong National Park. 'I remember conducting surveys for birds like the hooded plover all up and down the coast. You would walk 25 km one way, and you would seldom see anyone except for the Sea Eagles, and occasionally you would hear a Dingo's call. I had some spectacular adventures. It was just you in the wilderness.'

It was around this time that Bob became a member of VNPA and got involved with our bushwalking program, then known as BWAG. Bob recalls enjoying a dozen walks, assisting with one along the Genoa River down towards Mallacoota, and a coastal walk over the NSW-Victorian border through to Nadjee Nature Reserve.

'VNPA members were good organisers and walkers, and sometimes I'd be tested! However, I'm sure our time spent in the natural environment was good for our wellbeing.'

Since retiring from the National Parks Service, Bob has continued to dedicate himself to the conservation community around Mallacoota – so much so he's known locally as Bushy Bob. Bob continues to conduct bird surveys seasonally across six varying habitats (as he has been for over 30 years), sometimes recording up to 100 birds in a month and providing key data on the area to Birdlife Australia.

'You never know what you're going to find here... But bird life, even before the fires, was slowly declining. There's less



↑ Bob with a VNPA group in Nadjee Nature Reserve, NSW, 1992
← Sacred Kingfisher. BOB SEMMENS



insects with the effects of climate change upsetting the balance of things, and then the fire of 2019/20 came and devastated wildlife. On my bird counts the forest was so quiet. There were one too many choruses gone. However, bird calls are more frequent this Spring – I trust this continues.'

For his efforts, Bob received a Distinguished Service Award from BirdLife Australia and an Outstanding Achievement Award for his ongoing volunteer weeding from the Victorian Coastal Council in 2015. Bob also remains active with local groups like Friends of Mallacoota, protecting key habitat and species. 'We're mostly retirees who are keen to protect the special environment here – they recognise it's magic too.'

Bob's enthusiasm for nature and everything in it is infectious. 'Where would we be without birds? Without their song, colour and activity to enhance your day about town or on walks.'

We're delighted to have someone as passionate and determined to help people appreciate nature as Bob, as part of the VNPA community.

'I appreciate that VNPA keeps presenting the government with information on significant areas to add to existing parks, and lobbying to create new national parks. I'm happy making a monthly donation to support VNPA, and I hope to leave a little extra when I shuffle off! In the meantime, I'll keep doing my bit to preserve habitat and nature's world.' 🌿

Change of guard for NextGen Nature

FAREWELL TO **CONSUELO QUEVEDO** AND WELCOME TO **MICHAEL LOO**, THE NEW CONVENOR FOR NEXTGEN NATURE, OUR YOUNG PEOPLE'S ENGAGEMENT PROGRAM

VNPA offers a huge thank you to Consuelo Quevedo, who finished up as NextGen Nature (NGN) Program Convenor in October, and welcomes Michael Loo into the role.

As the first convenor, Consuelo led the development of the program. This included much 'behind the scenes work' such as establishing the program name, objectives and communication methods and developing targeted activities.

Thanks to Consuelo's leadership style, participants would always leave smiling, having learnt and contributed to conservation, but also connecting with other young adults who are into nature too.

Thanks Consuelo for putting down the roots for the program which will continue to grow from here!

VNPA is excited to introduce Michael Loo as the new NextGen Nature Convenor. Michael has a number of



↑ Consuelo Quevedo



↑ Michael Loo

years of experience in conservation, and has previously worked for Parks Victoria and the ACT Public Service. Michael is highly motivated to engage young adults between the ages of 18-35 into NextGen Nature Program and VNPA.

If you or someone you know would be interested in joining an activity, or volunteering on the Advisory Group, please email Michael. 🌿

We're on the lookout for new volunteers join the NGN Advisory Group.

Anyone interested can contact Michael Loo

michaelloo@vnpa.org.au

New Nature Stewards development role

ANDREW KEAST TAKES ON THE NEW ROLE OF PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT FOR NATURE STEWARDS

Andrew Keast is an entrepreneur, connector, listener and lover of life. He's also a change agent, advocate and champion for social and environmental conservation, health, wellbeing and regeneration. He's most at home in the magic of the mountains.

With over 20 years' experience in business across a wide range of sectors, Andrew has dedicated

the past ten years to the social enterprise sector including most recently supporting Refugee Talent, a social enterprise supporting refugee employment. He was co-founder of Wayfairer.coop, piloting Australia's first regenerative community-owned tourism platform.

Andrew's role as Development Officer with our Nature Stewards Program represents an exciting opportunity to build on the success of the current program. His work will help continue to grow the ecological literacy of the Victorian community, their connection and care of nature, and confidence to act for nature. 🌿



↑ Andrew Keast

Honorary life memberships for Evelyn and Michael Feller

At our recent AGM we honoured two extraordinary people who have provided outstanding services to VNPA over a significant period of time. Sadly, one was posthumously, to the late Michael Feller who died on 22 January 2024. You can read our tribute to Michael in *Park Watch* #295, March 2024.

The other was to Michael's wife, Evelyn Feller, and was presented by former President and long-term supporter, Bruce McGregor for Evelyn's exceptional service to VNPA. Evelyn has been engaging people with nature through bushwalking leadership, research and education activities and on VNPA committees for over a decade.

Evelyn has long been a bushwalking leader for VNPA. In 2013 she first led a walk, from Donnelly Weir to Mt St Leonard, and has since led a diversity of engaging walks for members and supporters. This included leading a two-week hiking trip in Canada with husband Michael. One of her favourite places for leading walks is the Cathedral Ranges.

Evelyn recently played a significant role in the refresh of the Bushwalking Program through providing valuable feedback, engaging with and seeking feedback from previous bushwalking leaders, stepping up and leading walks and demonstrating that there is strong support for the program.

Evelyn has provided her extensive outdoor education and teaching skills to VNPA as a volunteer researcher, contributing to committees in discussions on key issues, and in providing feedback on reviews of the NatureWatch and ReefWatch programs. She was pivotal in writing articles on our 2013 Nature Conservation Review so that readers of *Park Watch* were provided with clear summaries of that massive report.

Evelyn has also collaborated to run education activities including activities for high school students at Yarra Bend, Wild Families at Toolangi, took a leadership role at large VNPA events including welcome to VNPA picnics, participated in countless

NatureWatch citizen science activities, and contributed to Shine a Light at Wilson's Prom in 2013, which is one of her VNPA highlights.

Evelyn has done the hard yards by contributing to VNPA committee governance. In 2011, she brought her skills in outdoor education and teaching to the Marketing and Community Engagement, Education and Events Committee where she was an active contributor until 2022. In 2022, she joined the Bushwalking Program subcommittee where she is an ongoing contributor.

For your selfless dedication to VNPA and to protecting nature in Victoria we honour Evelyn Feller. 🌿

Jane Crouch, Fundraising Manager



↑ David Nugent and Bruce McGregor present Evelyn Feller with a framed photograph of a Crimson Rosella, one of Michael Feller's favourite birds, at the 2024 VNPA AGM. PAUL CLIFTON

Quiz answers from p. 4

- b)** Ecologists found Victorian Grassland Earless Dragons in a small grassland reserve in Melbourne in 2023.
- True.** After their eggs hatch, Golden Sun Moth caterpillars tunnel underground and spend and spend up to three years feeding on grass roots. Once they turn into moths they can't eat so they only live a few days above ground.
- a)** Striped Legless Lizards are endangered grassland specialists with unique scales on the back of their head like scaly fingerprints. But they can only grow up to 30 cm long.
- d)** Spiny Rice-flowers are critically endangered and can only be found in grasslands across Victoria.

- True.** The last 30 remnant Sunshine Diuris are wedged between railway lines in Sunshine. But these beautiful purple orchids are making a comeback, being bred in captivity and slowly reintroduced to their former homes.
- a)** Introduced Red Foxes are thought to be the primary cause of the almost extinction of Eastern Barred Bandicoots in Victoria. But habitat destruction, predation by feral cats and toxoplasmosis infection (spread by feral cats) are other threats that compounded to almost wipe out these small marsupials.



↑ Spiny Rice-flower. JESS RACKLYEFT

- c)** Kangaroo, Wallaby and Love Grass can all be found in Victorian grasslands. Wombat Grass, unfortunately, does not exist. But if it did it would surely be robust, square and cute!
- If you said **food** you'd be right. But moths, onions and leeks are all also types of **orchids** that can be found in Victorian grasslands.
- d)** All of the above. Female Plains Wanderers are more vibrant than males, they drink dew drops for refreshment and they're the only bird in their ancient family *Pedionomidae*. They're also inherently special, just because they exist.
- I'm a Fat-Tailed Dunnart!** These tiny yet ferocious marsupials are vulnerable to extinction in Victoria.

Finding frogs fascinating

Fabulous Frogs, by Katrina Germein
Illustrated by Suzanne Houghton
CSIRO Publishing, 2024, 32pp, ISBN 9781486317875

In the pandemic days, an Eastern Bango Frog (*Limnodynastes dumerilii*) moved into our drain. His pobbles and bonks reverberated through our pipes in gusts, an amphibious windchime.

Billie was two-years-old at the time and the magical being making music in our plumbing became a source of wonder. The frog eventually moved out, but only down the pipe into a nearby water garden, where he jams each night with mates, for mates.

Billed as a 'celebration of Australian native frogs, and their fascinating features and behaviours', the text easily fulfils its brief.

Katrina Germein has nailed the content for the target age group five

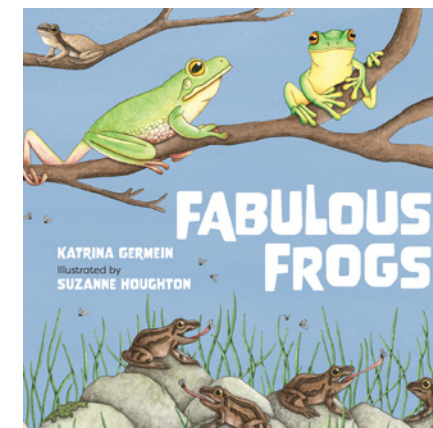
to nine-year-olds. The playful rhyming format elevates the educational elements. This makes the information accessible while bubbling nicely along on the tongue.

Billie's favourite frogs are now Little Red Tree Frogs (*Litoria rubella*). These water-loving ribbits can change colour in response to light. On a side note, a good place to bump into one is in caravan park shower blocks in the outback or the tropics.

Suzanne Houghton's spectrum of illustration, from life cycles to camouflage, are lovely and engaging. There's a guide for creating a frog-friendly garden and glossary, further deepening the learning journey.

Fabulous Frogs hits all the right notes – creativity, conservation and great communication! 🌿

Jessie Borrelle, Digital Engagement & Communications Manager, and Billie (age 6½)



A backyard Britannica

Living with Wildlife: A Guide for Our Homes and Backyards, Tanya Loos
CSIRO Publishing, 2024, 190pp, ISBN 9781486316946

Possums in the roof, an Echidna in the pantry? *Living with Wildlife: A Guide for Our Homes and Backyards* explores commonly asked questions and issues about encounters with wildlife. Taking a wildlife-friendly approach, Tanya Loos provides practical information, advice and solutions, based on current guidance from wildlife rescue organisations and the latest research. Tanya is an ecologist, educator, and science communicator living in central Victoria who is passionate about wildlife.

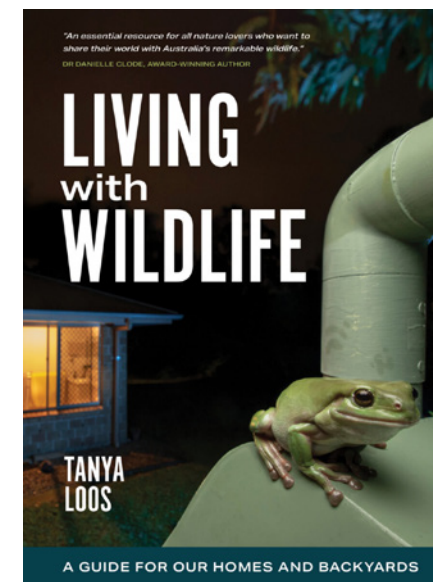
Living with Wildlife features helpful advice on wildlife rescue, as well as common issues such as feeding wildlife, pets and driving. As urbanisation and climate change effects intensify, Australian wildlife

need our help now more than ever, making this a timely guide for successfully living alongside our wild neighbours.

The first part covers wildlife around your house: bats in the roof, birds hitting windows, and how to remove rats and mice without harming other wildlife. Next up is how to deal with encounters in your backyard, from little lizards to venomous snakes to bandicoots digging your lawn. And how to protect your chooks from predators.

The final section contains practical advice and tips on helping injured wildlife, how to be a wildlife-friendly driver on our roads, and asks if it okay to feed wildlife (hint: no!).

With plenty of beautiful photos and a clear layout, *Living with Wildlife* is a compact but powerful tool to teach people of all ages how to care for wildlife, and interact safely and positively with those animals we are



fortunate to have living nearby. With much wildlife is under threat, living in harmony with them is vital.

The book offers simple steps and solutions to ensure peaceful coexistence with Australian wildlife. And it's information you can trust, as it has all been checked by experts in wildlife and ecology! 🌿

Wild Families



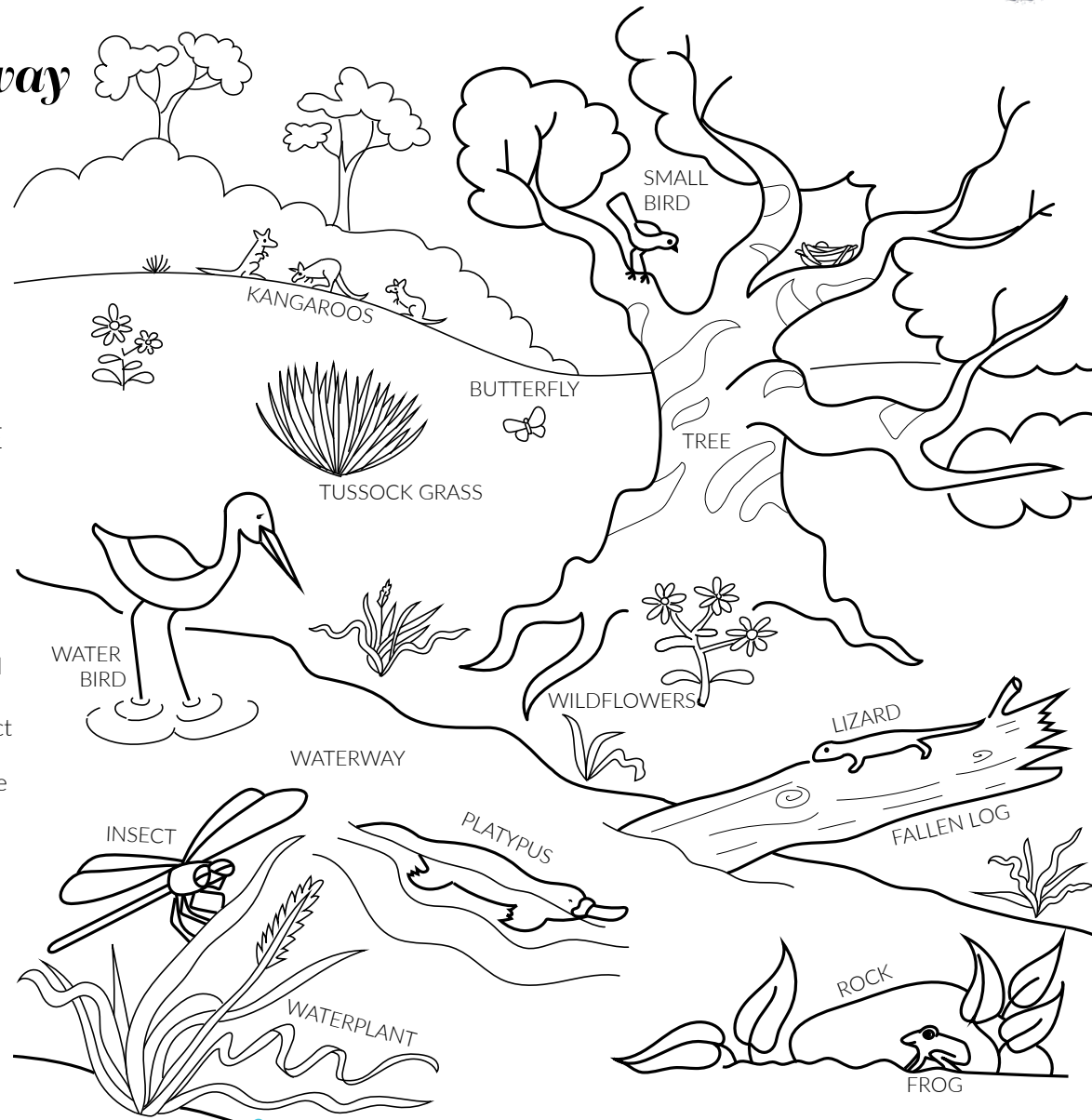
Waterway spotto

VISIT A WATERWAY AND COLOUR IN THE THINGS YOU SEE OR HEAR THERE

Waterways are an important part of our web of life. They're home to many birds, fish, frogs, insects and mammals.

Waterways collect rain, clean water and carry it to the ocean.

Rivers, creeks, lakes and wetlands are all types of waterways.



Explore your waterways

How fast is the water flowing?
Where has the water come from and where is it going? (Look at a map to find out)
What sounds can you hear?

Thinking about recent and forecast weather, do you think the water level will be the same, higher or lower in a few days?

Is the water clear or murky? Why might that be?

What am I?

I have a mouth but never speak.
I have a bed but never sleep.
I run smoother than any rhyme.
I love to fall but cannot climb.
What am I?

Download all our Wild Families activity sheets
vnpa.org.au/wild-families



Explorer's Corner

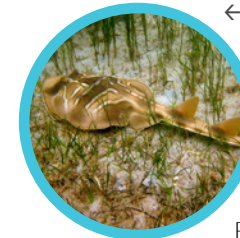
TIPS & TRICKS FOR GETTING INTO NATURE FOR EXPLORERS OF ALL AGES



LOOKING FOR A REFRESHING NATURE ACTIVITY TO BEAT THE HEAT? HERE'S SOME PRIME SNORKEL SPOTS NEAR MELBOURNE YOU CAN GET TO BY PUBLIC TRANSPORT - LEAVE THE CAR AT HOME!



← Fiddler Ray, Jawbone Marine Sanctuary. ANDREW CHRISTIE



Jawbone Marine Sanctuary, Williamstown

The Jawbone Marine Sanctuary has been unintentionally protected for over 100 years thanks to the Merritt Rifle Range. It's now intentionally protected as part of a system of marine parks and sanctuaries that cover 5.3 per cent of Victoria's coastline. The sanctuary features White Mangroves, sea grasses, underwater boulders and kelp forests. You might even spot some Pipefish among the seagrass.

Getting there: Head to North Williamstown Train Station then catch the 415 bus to Laverton. Jump off at Merrett Dr/Kororoit Creek Rd and walk 800 m to Jawbone Flora and Fauna Reserve, the gateway to the sanctuary. Alternatively, if you're up for a longer walk you can hop off at Williamstown Beach station and reach the sanctuary in 1.6 km.

Close-by Crystals Steps is another great and easy place to snorkel in Williamstown. You could stop there on your way back to Williamstown Beach train station for snorkel number two!

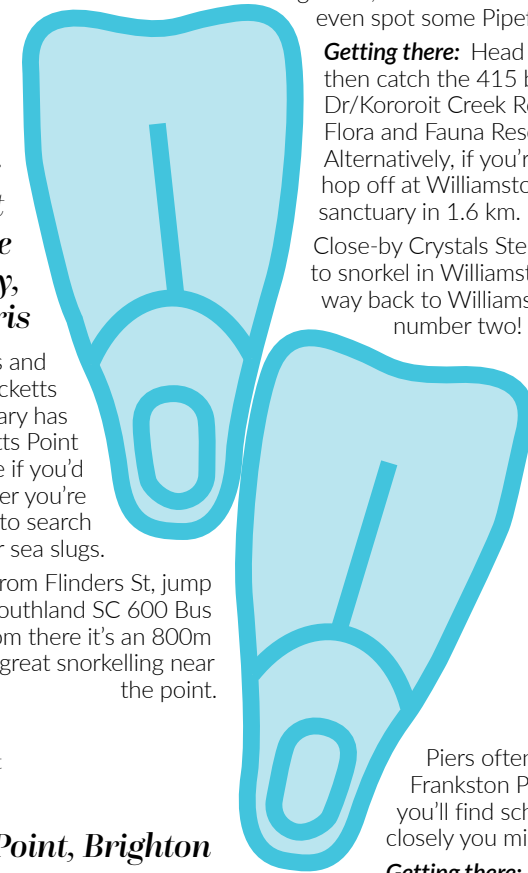


Ricketts Point ↑ ALLI HORTON

Ricketts Point Marine Sanctuary, Beaumaris

Featuring sea caves and offshore reefs, Ricketts Point Marine Sanctuary has some diverse underwater landscapes. Ricketts Point is also a great spot for a rock pool ramble if you'd rather only adventure ankle deep. Whether you're snorkelling or rock pooling, it's a great spot to search for sea slugs.

Getting there: Using the Sandringham Line from Flinders St, jump off at Sandringham. From here, get on the Southland SC 600 Bus to Reserve Rd/Holding St Beaumaris. From there it's an 800m walk to the Surf Life Saving Club which has great snorkelling near the point.

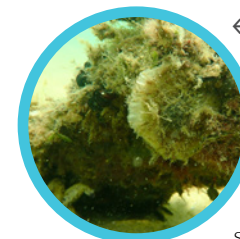


↓ Globe Fish, Frankston Pier KADE MILLS

Frankston Pier

Piers often make great places to snorkel and Frankston Pier is no exception. Under the pier you'll find schools of fish and if you look very closely you might even spot a tiny seahorse.

Getting there: Jump on a train to Frankston station and then walk 1.4 km to the pier. Or exit the train a tad earlier at Seaford Station and catch the 780 Frankston bus to Nepean Hwy/Playne St for a shorter 800m walk.



← Oysters at Green Point

Green Point, Brighton

Take the short trip from Melbourne to Brighton Beach for an easy snorkel along a lovely reef. It's a great spot to search for leatherjackets, cowfish and crabs.

Getting there: Jump on the Sandringham train line and hop off at Brighton Beach train station. From there it's only a 500m walk to the northern end of Brighton Beach where you can dive in and swim north to explore the reef.

Parks Protector

Euan

Moore



When I joined VNPA in the 1980s, I knew very little about its important role in the conservation of the natural environment in Victoria. I quickly learnt just how effective the organisation is.

In the years since I have supported VNPA in a number of ways, as a walks and activities leader, on several committees, including Council, and during the 1990s as a volunteer editor of the monthly newsletter.

VNPA is a tenacious organisation. The talented staff run many effective campaigns that have resulted, in the creation of new national parks on land and at sea, seen the removal of cattle from the high country, and many other achievements.

As a trained forester, I have fully supported VNPA's campaign to end the environmentally destructive and unsustainable native forest logging in Victoria. And the work that VNPA has done on fire management has been insightful and professional.

Supporting VNPA with monthly donations

I am proud to support VNPA with monthly donations and ad-hoc donations, and as a volunteer on committees or as a walks leader because of the great work that the organisation does.

Volunteering gives me the opportunity to talk to people about the natural environment and show them why the work of VNPA is so important.

I would urge anyone with an interest in the natural environment to support VNPA. You may not be able to do this financially but there are opportunities to contribute as a volunteer or to simply be the eyes and ears in the community alerting VNPA to threat to our natural environment.

We can all help in some way. 🌿



Join the Parks Protector community!

As a Parks Protector monthly donor, you're at the heart of our work safeguarding parks, wildlife and nature across Victoria.

Your regular support means we can keep nature protection on the agenda.

To join the Parks Protector community, please visit vnpa.org.au/support/parks-protector or call us on 03 9341 6500.



IMAGE: SANDY SCHELTEMA