

PARK*watch*



VICTORIAN
NATIONAL PARKS
ASSOCIATION

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Front cover: Endangered Candy Spider Orchid (*Caladenia versicolor*), near Grampians (Gariwerd) National Park, Djab Wurrung and Jardwadjali Country
MEGHAN LINDSAY

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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.



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VNPA Get Together & Annual General Meeting

6pm, Tuesday 20 October 2026
Melbourne City Conference Centre,
190 Little Lonsdale St, Melbourne
and streamed online



RSVP ESSENTIAL

Please confirm by Tuesday 13 October
via vnpa.org.au/agm-2026
or email support@vnpa.org.au
or phone Lucy (03) 9341 6506



Reflections of 20 years at VNPA

Having recently announced his retirement, this year's AGM will feature a special presentation from Executive Director Matt Ruchel, who'll take a look at some highlights from almost 20 years with VNPA. He'll cover key campaign victories and important memories, as well as looking at how the organisation has grown and acknowledging the dedicated people that made all of this work possible.

From the President

 WELCOME TO THE SEPTEMBER 2026 *PARK WATCH*, FROM **MARILYNE CRESTIAS**, VNPA PRESIDENT

For the Djab Wurrung and Jardwadjali people in the Grampians/Gariwerd, September is Petyan, when orchids and other wildflowers burst forth in colour, including our cover star from that region, the Endangered Candy Spider Orchid.

In this issue, we ponder the state of nature as we head into an election, look at the worrying spread of bird flu, discover how governments are using a COVID-era clause to avoid scrutiny in nature projects, and delve deeper into the *Four Corners* exposé of loophole logging across Bass Strait.

We look at how Victoria could reach our 30x30 targets, hear about promising developments in Western Port Woodlands,

go for a wander in a grassy wonderland, and learn about fascinating research into threatened orchids.

Our longtime Executive Director, Matt Ruchel has decided, after 20 years leading VNPA, that it's time to retire. He'll still be around until early next year, working with VNPA Council and staff to make sure there's a smooth transition.

As Matt prepares for retirement, I want to personally thank him for his years of passionate dedication to VNPA. His warmth, vision, and tireless efforts have reshaped our community and protected so much of the nature we love. He leaves behind an incredible record of wins for nature that we are deeply proud of.

We'll have an earlier-than-usual *ParkWatch* out to you prior to the November state election to cover important topics for the future of nature in Victoria. Until then, enjoy the longer days and colourful flowers! 🌸

ParkWatch Orchid Quiz with Meghan Lindsay



1. All native orchids in Victoria flower in Spring. True or false?

2. How many different species of orchids live in Victoria?

a. 10 b. 117

c. 447 d. Over 600

3. How many orchids in Victoria are threatened with extinction?

a. 0 b. 40

c. 150 d. Over 200

4. Name three threats that orchids in Victoria face.

5. All orchids in Victoria grow on the ground. True or false?

6. How do orchids in Victoria go about getting pollinated?

a. Attract pollinators with delicious nectar or pollen

b. Food deception (pretend to have delicious rewards)

c. Sexual deception (pretend to be a female pollinator)

d. They pollinate themselves

e. All of the above

7. How many flowers do Victorian orchids have on their stems?

a. Just 1

b. Between 1 and 10

c. Between 1 and 100

d. Between 1 and 1000
8. Which of these is NOT a type of Victorian orchid?

a. Koala

b. Donkey

c. Mosquito

d. Spider

9. True or false, all Victorian orchids rely on mycorrhizal fungi to survive?

10. Which of these orchids have no leaves?

a. Potato orchids

b. Hyacinth orchids

c. Lizard orchids

d. Elbow orchids

e. All of the above

Answers on p.24



↑ Critically Endangered Wine-lipped Spider Orchids (*Caladenia oenochila*) | MEGHAN LINDSAY

Bird flu spreading across Victoria

 BIRD FLU IS HERE AND OUR WILDLIFE IS AT RISK EXPLAINS **SHANNON HURLEY**, NATURE CONSERVATION CAMPAIGNER

As of the time of printing, there have been multiple confirmed cases of avian influenza in wild birds across the state, including south-west Victoria, Apollo Bay and Western Port Bay, with cases at Clyde and Phillip Island. Crested Terns have been affected, along with the first confirmed case in a Little Penguin.

Seabirds and waterbirds (including ducks, geese, swans, gulls, terns and penguins) are at much higher risk of contracting and spreading highly pathogenic bird flus such as H5N1 than most land birds.

That's particularly concerning for Western Port Bay, where thousands of birds rely on the bay and its wetlands. And this isn't just a bird crisis, H5N1 can also have devastating impacts on marine mammals like seals, with dolphins and whales also at risk.

Feeling worried, sad or over-whelmed?

You're not alone.

Watching wildlife we love come under threat can bring up sadness, anger, fear and even grief. There's a name for this: ecological grief.

It's okay to take a break from the news, spend time outside and talk to people who understand. Grief and hope can exist alongside each other. We can hold both at the same time.

Caring about nature can be heavy, but it's also what brings us together and motivates us to protect it.

We don't have to carry it alone.

Western Port Bay on alert

Western Port Bay is one of Victoria's most important wildlife refuges. Its wetlands are home to 65 per cent of Victoria's threatened bird species. Its waters home to penguins, seals and dolphins.

Many birds and mammals in Western Port Bay are considered at very high risk from bird flu, including:

- Black Swans
- Cape Barren Geese
- Short-tailed Shearwaters
- Little Penguins
- Australian Fur Seals
- Fairy Terns
- Pacific Gulls

Bottlenose Dolphins are also considered at high risk.

It's hard not to feel worried when you look at that list.

A government response is underway, including a vaccination program for Little Penguins, which is an important step. But we're concerned about all the other wildlife that could be impacted.

We need strong support for frontline wildlife responders. And we need to give wildlife the best possible chance

by reducing other pressures, including habitat destruction and duck hunting.

How you can help

If you find a sick or dead wild bird or animal, please:

- **Avoid** contact with the animal and its surroundings.
- **Record** what you see — photos can help.
- **Report** it to DEECA or the Emergency Animal Disease Hotline on 1800 675 888.

Report an incident when you find any of the following:

- A cluster of five or more sick or dead wild birds of any species.
- Any single sick or dead wild seabird, waterbird, shorebird or bird of prey.
- Any single sick or dead marine mammal, such as a seal, sea lion or dolphin. 🐬

Find more information on bird flu

vnpa.org.au/bird-flu-in-victoria



↑ Little Penguins, Phillip Island/Millowl, Bunurong Country | M KUHN/FLICKR

Blasting, casting and backsliding as nature heads into an election



MATT RUCHEL,
EXECUTIVE
DIRECTOR REPORTS
ON AN ELECTION

YEAR THAT'S SHAPING
UP AS MAKE-OR-BREAK
FOR VICTORIA'S NATURE
PROTECTION

There's certainly an election in the air and change is afoot in more ways than one. Polls bouncing around, cost of living, construction and corruption dominating the headlines, and politicians from all sides still scratching around for announce-ables. The recent changes in premier and environment minister (the fourth in three years!) will hopefully put an end to the string of backward steps we've seen on nature protection in the last few years under the leadership of Jacinta Allan.

We've called on new Victorian Premier Ben Carroll and Opposition leader Jess Wilson to take a fresh approach to protecting nature in Victoria. We also challenged them to come up with some positive policy, for which we've provided some suggestions.

A problematic new panel

We called for the rejection or significant amendments to the Outdoor Recreation Victoria Bill 2026. It was debated and amended in the upper house in June and, unfortunately, passed with amendments in the lower house in early August.

It's a very poor piece of legislation that reflects badly on both Labor and

the Coalition (who also supported it). They seemingly now have an agenda to undermine nature protection, rather than to protect our much-loved national parks and protected areas.

The legislation will create a body with sweeping influence over public land, which could impact nature protection right across Victoria. It was originally flagged as a simple merger of the Game Management Authority and the Victorian Fishing Authority as a cost saving measure. But it went much further.

A new Land Access Panel will be hand-picked by the relevant ministers, with no requirement for nature conservation or ecological expertise, no obligation to publish its advice, and no duty to assess impacts on nature. The panel will act without oversight from the independent Victorian Environmental Assessment Council (VEAC), which was charged with assessing public land use and recently abolished by the government. This removal of oversight is supposedly a cost-saving measure.

VNPA wrote to all Victorian MPs expressing our concern at the Bill. The Bill was debated long into the night in the upper house, with the session finishing at 4 am on Friday morning. A string of amendments were proposed by the Greens, Animal Justice and National parties.

The government opposed many of the sensible amendments from the progressive crossbench, but supported a range of amendments from the National Party, including expanding the scope of the Land Access Panel to aquatic areas and changing the

name of the proposed agency to 'Fishing, Hunting and Outdoor Victoria'.

The legislation was also criticised by the Federation of Victorian Traditional Owner Corporations for being silent on the role of Traditional Owners. They had also requested amendments to the bill.

The new premier and environment minister should take fresh look at their approach to nature protection and this legislation, including abandoning the Land Access Panel.

Meanwhile, we were happy to see the stand-alone portfolio of Outdoor Recreation, which has overseen a long list of attacks and backward steps, abolished in the recent cabinet reshuffle.

New parks on track but not yet delivered completely

The newly legislated protected areas – Wombat-Lerderderg, Mt Buangor and Pyrenees national parks, new conservation parks at Hepburn and Cobaw, and Wellsford Regional Park – will come into effect on Monday 5 October as they are officially handed over to Parks Victoria to manage.

What's missing are a regional park, 30 smaller nature conservation reserves and bushland reserves promised as part of the government's response to the original VEAC report. These were repeatedly promised for delivery this year as part of new *Public Land Act*. It would have also overhauled and consolidated how public land is managed, providing an opportunity to close the existing loopholes which still allow logging on public land.

Time before the election has now run out. The new *Public Land Act*, which has been years in the making, will not reach parliament before the government goes into caretaker mode for November's election.

The other parks in the central west have been promised since 2021 and now they can't be created via new legislation this term. Another approach would be to use a path through the *Crown Land (Reserves) Act 1978* or similar, which would allow the promise to be delivered rather than deferred. This requires a quick gazettal rather than legislation. It can, however, be just as quickly undone.

A new *Public Land Act* could always be implemented later, but of course it depends on who wins the election.

The steep slippery slope of by-products

Largely out of the blue in early May 2026, the Allan Government released a State Forest By-Products Framework. It effectively creates a loophole for a new form of incentivised logging and land clearing, with fewer protections than the industry it replaced, and no public consultation.

It's now clear that the logging industry had the same idea. The election policy platform of the Victorian Forest Products Association (VFPA, who were also represented on the government's Forestry Transition Implementation Reference Group), includes a call for a commitment to 'maintain a formal by-products policy to ensure hardwood from fuel breaks, windthrow and healthy forest maintenance is utilised to its highest and best use.'

This mirrors the language used by the government, or is it the other way round? It's a steep and slippery slope back on the road to native forest logging, and one which is lacking guard rails.



↑ Loophole logging protest, Dandenong Ranges National Park, Wurundjeri Country, May 2026 | LEWIS HASKINS

Victorians were told native logging was over, but the chainsaws and logging machines never really left; they just re-branded. Greater Gliders, Brush-tailed Phascogales and the forest giants they depend on deserve better than having their protection quietly traded away. Currently there's no independent oversight, no enforceable standards, and no transparency about these 'fire preparation' operations such as strategic fuel breaks, clearing trees, and clean up after storms.

We've seen the damage caused by these operations across the state, including in the Dandenongs, Wombat-Lerderderg and Yarra Ranges national parks. More is on the cards with up to 6,000 km of planned land clearing through fuel breaks.

The problem is that native habitats don't make by-products. Logs are part of the ecosystem. Animals like Brush-tailed Phascogales use logs to travel safely across the forest floor. Fungi grow on them. Without them, animals and new seedlings are exposed to invasive species like foxes, cats and deer. The removal of fallen and

hollow-bearing trees from forests and woodlands are both formally listed as 'potentially threatening processes' to a range of wildlife under state nature law (*Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act*), but this is being ignored.

Sticking up for nature

Taken together, these three stories tell us where nature protection really sits on the political agenda heading into November: sidelined, quietly wound back, or left to chance. A parliament that can wave through a Land Access Panel with no nature expertise and no transparency, but can't find time to finish the job on the central west parks or close logging loopholes, is telling us something about its priorities.

That's exactly why this election matters. Over the next few months, we'll be pushing the major parties and every candidate we can reach to commit to real, enforceable protections for parks, habitats and wildlife in Victoria. We'll need your voice too. Watch this space for how you can get involved as the campaign heats up. 🌿

Piecing together the puzzle in Western Port Woodlands

THE PIECES OF THE JIGSAW ARE STARTING TO FALL INTO PLACE FOR THIS ICONIC LANDSCAPE, REPORT **JORDAN CROOK**, PARKS & NATURE CAMPAIGNER, AND **CATHERINE WATSON**, SAVE WESTERN PORT WOODLANDS

The Western Port Woodlands is a forest corridor of five conservation reserves and remnant woodlands on public and private land. It's spread roughly parallel to Western Port Bay across three shires – Cardinia, South Gippsland and Bass Coast – in Bunurong Country. Protecting the Woodlands is no easy task, but after more than six years of pushing for protection, pieces of the jigsaw are at last falling into place. An informal woodlands alliance has been created with VNPA, Save Western Port Woodlands (SWPW), Gippsland Threatened Species Action Group, South Gippsland Conservation Society and Phillip Island Conservation Society. Our long-term ambition is an Environmental Significance Overlay (ESO), which would give protection to the woodlands through the planning scheme and only allow land uses that are compatible with protection. We're working closely with Bass Coast Shire Council to achieve it. In October 2025, the Bass Coast Statement of Planning Policy recognised the Western Port Woodlands as 'an area of outstanding environmental significance' and a 'distinctive attribute' of Bass Coast that must be protected.



↑ Lace Monitor, Adams Creek Nature Conservation Reserve, Bunurong Country | DAVE NEWMAN

It also recognised community concerns about sand quarrying, but left the conflict unresolved, calling for further work to map the woodlands and assess the effectiveness of existing planning and quarrying protections. That work has started, thanks to the commitment of the council to protect these woodlands. Multiple surveys are underway on public and private land. Council and the woodlands alliance have asked Planning Minister Sonya Kilkeny to impose an interim ESO until May 2028, preventing further destruction or fragmentation while the work is completed. We await her response.

Filling the gaps

Another priority is connecting the woodlands in major reserves and public land. Bass Coast's Nature Recovery Foundation, launched in June, provides a potential vehicle to do

so. It's a partnership between Bass Coast Shire Council and Biodiversity Legacy, aiming to bring 30 per cent of land across the shire into active care for nature through philanthropy, corporate partnerships and community donations. Landowners can also donate significant sites. The Western Port Woodlands is a major focus, with the aim of securing strategic sites and rebuilding habitat links between the five major reserves.

A shift on sand

In April, the State Government gazetted new Strategic Extractive Resources Areas (SERAs), identifying major sand deposits on cleared farmland in Cardinia and Baw Baw shires and reducing the pressure to quarry surviving bush in the Western Port Woodlands. In July, then Resources Minister Lily D'Ambrosio visited the woodlands to announce the removal of the



↑ Then Resources Minister Lily D'Ambrosio, Bass MP Jordan Crugnale, Bunurong Land Council deputy CEO Glenn Shaw with Catherine Watson at the announcement of the removal of the EIIA overlay in July | SWPW

Extractive Industry Interest Area (EIIA) overlay from several Bass Coast sites, including the former Holden Proving Ground (home to incredible remnant woodland). This is a significant step. But the overlay remains over most of the Woodlands outside the reserves. The alliance and Bass Coast Shire Council continue to press for its removal or refinement as the industry shifts towards cleared farmland near Lang Lang and Nyora. **A welcome commitment** In mid-2024, the alliance asked Holcim Australia to give up its legal right to quarry 67 hectares of woodland surrounded by Adams Creek Nature Conservation Reserve. The area is home to threatened wildlife including Southern Brown Bandicoots, Powerful Owls and Lace Monitors. Quarrying would severely compromised habitat and connectivity. Two years later, Holcim CEO George Agriogiannis wrote to us, formally committing the company would not seek to quarry in the western section. 'We recognise the significant ecological value of the Adams Creek Nature Reserve and the broader

Western Port Woodlands corridor,' he wrote. This is impressive leadership from Holcim and a big win for the community and the woodlands. **The proving ground** At almost 900 hectares, the former Holden Proving Ground is the central chunk of the Western Port Woodlands. VNPA and SWPW spent several years urging the State Government to purchase and protect it. But they did not. In May, the site was sold to DefendTex, a Melbourne defence technology company. We were nervous about what that would mean for those woodlands. DefendTex's founder and CEO Travis Reddy has since calmed our nerves. 'The site has been well managed over the years, and DefendTex intends to continue the legacy of environmental stewardship of the site,' he told Yahoo News in August. 'There will certainly be no quarrying or land clearing activities on the site.' It's great to see nature conservation leadership from the private sector. It would be great to see more from the State Government. 🌿



↑ Exploring the wonders of the Holden Proving Ground, Bunurong Country | MEGHAN LINDSAY

Find out more about Western Port Woodlands

vnpa.org.au/western-port-woodlands

Glad tidings Nature news to bring a smile to your face

Banksia tougher than nails

An extraordinary 88% of 800 translocated Critically Endangered Mountain Banksia (*Banksia canei*) seedlings in Burrowa-Pine Mountain National Park have survived the harsh Summer. Even more encouraging, most aren't simply hanging on – they're thriving! In August 2025, community members alongside staff from Parks Victoria (PV), DEECA and Royal Botanic Gardens Victoria planted more than 800 seedlings in the park in Victoria's far north-east. 'Our hopes were tempered by the dry Spring and hot Summer that followed planting,' PV Conservation Scientist Flo Meredith said. Given the conditions, the team braced for disappointing results. Instead, the little banksias proved remarkably resilient. Part of the answer lies beneath the surface. Mountain Banksias have dense clusters of roots that form partnerships with microscopic organisms in the soil that help plants access water and nutrients. The health of the nursery-grown seedlings also played an important role. Many arrived with strong root systems, and volunteers carefully formed small earth basins around each plant to capture any rainfall. Ultimately, Flo believes the result came down to many factors working together. 'The community of care built around the Banksias is the real reason any of this could happen. It's a sustained effort, requiring in-depth understanding, commitment and purpose,' Flo said. For now, invasive deer remain the plants' biggest threat. Read more at parks.vic.gov.au/news/2026/06/17/02/54/banksia-canei-translocation



↑ Flowering Mountain Banksia | LAURA SIMMONS

COVID-era clause used to avoid scrutiny



BEN GILL, NATURE CONSERVATION CAMPAIGNER ON THE MISUSE OF THE STATE PROJECTS CLAUSE

Clause 52.30 is a little-known clause in Victoria's planning scheme with a lot of power. It can strip a project of almost every ordinary planning safeguard. When the planning minister decides something qualifies as a 'State Project', local Council assessment falls away, there's no public notice or right of objection, and there's no review at VCAT. The minister alone judges whether public consultation was adequate, and decides the outcome behind closed doors.

The clause was introduced to fast-track projects like the Commonwealth Games and COVID-era stimulus projects. It's supposed to be for time-critical undertakings of state significance.

Now, it's being used to wave through projects that have already failed, or bypassed, the ordinary processes.

How it works and how it was used at Mount Macedon

The clause is broad by design. It can apply to any project carried out by, on behalf of, or funded by the state or a public authority on Crown land. In practice that means it can reach across Victoria's parks, reserves and coastal Crown land, from small-scale work to major undertakings like the approved Great Ocean Road Coastal Trail and its 75 km of new and upgraded walking track.

The trees destroyed at the summit of Mount Macedon in April 2026 show what that reach looks like on the ground. Parks Victoria first applied to Macedon Ranges Shire Council in 2022 to remove trees inside Macedon Regional Park, including Snow Gums, Alpine Ash and Dwarf Silver Wattles. The intention was to open a view line to and from the Memorial Cross. There were 62 objections and it was refused by Macedon Ranges Shire Council in July 2023 because of impacts to nature.

Parks Victoria appealed to VCAT, then abandoned that appeal after advice that another pathway was available. In May 2025, it lodged a Clause 52.30 application instead. Planning Minister Sonya Kilkeny signed the determination on 1 April 2026, and machinery arrived on 13 April. The proposal itself never changed, only the decision-maker did, and with it, the public's ability to have any say.

Justification doesn't hold up

Why did Parks Victoria think a view trumped rare trees? It cited a heritage requirement to maintain sightlines. But on 27 April 2026, Heritage Victoria confirmed no such requirement exists. Separately, Clause 52.30-7 requires native vegetation offsets to be secured before destruction begins, and only the Secretary of the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action (DEECA) can vary that requirement.

The Secretary has now put in writing that DEECA was never asked to consider any pre-commencement requirement under Clause 52.30-7, never asked about varying offset timing, and that impacts of plants previously removed 'have not been required to be assessed as part of a statutory decision.'

VNPA and local groups have also run a long Freedom of Information campaign

The checks and balances in the normal planning process are there for a reason. To make sure projects meet community expectations.



↑ Locals gather at the Macedon Regional Park to oppose the removal of trees | ANNA LANGFORD

to find the paper trail behind the decision. What we've obtained raises real questions about how and why the decision was made, and access to several key documents has been blocked.

Wide-reaching implications

Mount Macedon is the clearest example so far, but the real issue is the mechanism itself. A provision meant for projects of genuine state significance was used here to clear a woodland for a view in a regional park, after that same clearing had already been refused. If Clause 52.30 can be used this way once, it can be used this way again, on any government-funded work on any Crown land. With no notice, no objection and no review.

That's the precedent we're asking government to close off. The checks and balances in the normal planning process are there for a reason. To make sure projects meet community expectations.

What needs to change

We're calling on our elected representatives to close Clause 52.30 as it currently applies to Crown land and protected areas. A loophole this wide erodes public trust and social licence, regardless of which project it's used for next. Emergency and genuinely state-significant projects need a fast-track pathway, but that pathway has to be fit for purpose, not open-ended.

More broadly, this is a test of whether Parks Victoria operates on a protected areas model where nature conservation comes first, or a tourism model where nature is cleared for the sake of a view. 🌿

Spotlight on Nature with Shannon Hurley



Australian Fur Seals *Arctocephalus pusillus*

Australian Fur Seals are the cheeky puppies of the ocean, and the largest of the eight fur seal species found around the world. Beneath those ridiculously cute puppy-dog eyes is an incredible freediving ability. As eared seals, they have tiny external ears and can use all four flippers to move on land, unlike true seals, which have no external ears and can't use their rear flippers to 'walk'.

Australian Fur Seals are most at home in the water, spending weeks at sea feeding and travelling. They're the ultimate freedivers, capable of diving to around 150 metres on a single breath and staying underwater for more than six minutes.

Summer is an important time for seals, with breeding and mating taking place around November and December.

But what I love most is watching them play.

They dive, twist, roll, chase, and explore — seemingly having the absolute time of their lives underwater.



↑ Australian Fur Seal | KATEY SHEARER

And that's what I love about seals. They remind us the ocean isn't just somewhere to visit, it's somewhere to play.

With Australia's first confirmed case of H5N1 bird flu in a seal detected in South Australia in August, these ocean puppies need some love sent their way too.

So watch them dive. Watch them play. Appreciate just how extraordinary they are and why protecting them matters. 🐾

Shannon Hurley is Nature Conservation Campaigner

Melburnians need more parks!

MORE PARKS WILL HELP KEEP OUR CITY AS ONE OF THE WORLD'S MOST LIVABLE

Melburnians have the least amount of nearby national parks and protected areas to visit in Australia. According to a new study, Sydneysiders have more than three times the amount of protected areas close-by than Melburnians, while Canberrans have more than 10 times.

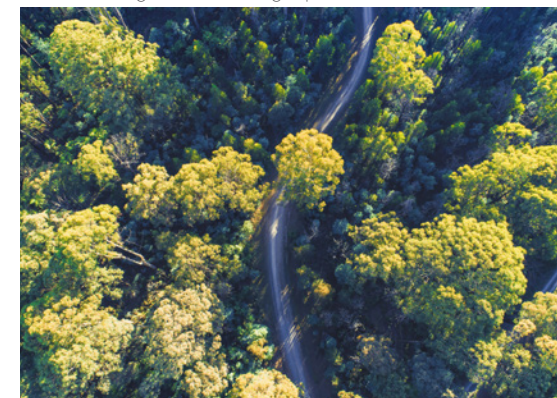
Published in *Landscape and Urban Planning*, a study by Chris Taylor, Maldwyn John Evans, Sarah Rees and David Lindenmayer comes after the Victorian Government legislated three new national parks, two conservation parks and expanded Bendigo Regional Park in 2025. However, the study's lead author, Dr Chris Taylor, said those new national parks were not enough to halt the downward trend.

'Melbourne ranks as the worst of Australia's capital cities in terms of being able to access protected natural areas such as national parks, [and] the new national parks announced last year have made no difference to that ranking,' he said.

'The increasing intensification of urban development is denying more and more Melburnians access to the places that they need for their mental health and their physical health, and so this is one of the reasons why Melbourne in no way can be considered to be Australia's most livable city,' said Distinguished Professor David Lindenmayer.

The authors reiterated their calls for the creation of the Great Forest National Park, which would join seven existing forests and state parks in the Central Highlands, adding another 355,000 hectares to triple the area of protected forests in the region.

↓ Road through the Yarra Ranges | GREG BRAVE



National parks keep our air clean, protect the forests that give us clean water, and offer people places to connect with nature for generations to come.

There's very high levels of support for the idea of national parks. So it's a shame that Victoria's missed that opportunity to establish some really significant parks on our doorstep. 🌿

Read the report in *Landscape and Urban Planning*, vol. 274

Love your bay? Have your say

 THE LATEST IN
COMMUNITY CARE
AND ACTION FOR
WESTERN PORT BAY
FROM **SHANNON HURLEY**,
NATURE CONSERVATION
CAMPAIGNER

Western Port Bay is one of those places that stays with you. It's the penguins scurrying onto the sand as they emerge after days fishing at sea, fur seals hauling themselves onto rocks, migratory shorebirds arriving from thousands of kilometres away, and the people who swim, kayak, sail, fish, walk and spend time around the Bay. It's a place people love. And that love is becoming a powerful force for change. Western Port Bay is under increasing pressure from population growth, pollution, development and climate change. Yet decisions about the bay are often made project by project, through separate agencies and processes. We think there's a better way. And today, we're giving you a little sneak peek behind the scenes.

What you're seeing here is still very much a work in progress. We're developing the campaign strategy with our community, Environment Victoria and partners, and the design and messages are still taking shape. We haven't launched this publicly yet, so consider this your first look at what we've been working on. One bay. One plan. A healthier future. Our goal: secure a commitment from the Victorian Government to implement the Western Port Bay Framework. The Framework would bring together a whole-of-bay plan and a dedicated Western Port Bay Fund. Together, they would help protect important habitats, restore degraded areas, support research and monitoring, and fund community-led projects and Traditional Custodian and community stewardship.

Building a community movement

The message we keep hearing is clear. People want a say in the future of their bay. That community includes Traditional Custodians, nature conservation groups, local businesses and tourism operators,

fishers, recreational users, scientists, researchers and the many locals who care about Western Port Bay. Our role is to bring those voices together and turn that shared care into action. We recently saw what that can look like at a community talk on Phillip Island/Millowl, where around 100 people came together and unanimously voted to support and adopt the Western Port Framework. That kind of support matters. It shows decision-makers the community is on board.

Taking the conversation beyond Western Port Bay

In August, we also headed to the Gippsland New Energy Conference to talk about why nature needs to be part of the conversation as we plan for a new energy future. Because whether we're talking about energy, development or conservation, the same principle applies: good planning needs to consider nature and the communities who live alongside it.

So, what happens next?

We're building the campaign from the ground up – raising awareness, growing our network, creating opportunities for people to get involved and putting pressure on decision-makers to commit to a better future for Western Port Bay. The campaign pathway is to: build awareness, build support, mobilise the community and create political pressure. We want to make Western Port Bay a key election issue and ask candidates and political parties to clearly state whether they support the Framework. Look out in the coming months for opportunities to put signs up, attend events, sign online actions and come together as a community. 🌿

Act for Western Port Bay
actforwesternportbay.au





↑ Somers Beach, Western Port Bay, Bunurong Country | PETER BOND/FICKR

Salty Science with Kade Mills



Elephant Snails *Scutus antipodes*

At first glance they look like a giant black sea slug wearing a shell that's far too small. In reality, Elephant Snails are shield limpets and one of the more unusual-looking residents of our rocky reefs. Their tiny white shells barely covers their backs, making them look as though they're trying to squeeze into a white crop top four sizes too small. Scutus is Latin for 'long shield'. For many people, their first encounter with an Elephant Snail isn't with the animal at all, but with the shell left behind after it dies. As a kid, I knew them as 'dead man's fingernails'. We used to slip the shells over our fingers to creep people out. The common name Elephant Snail comes from their size (they're large for a limpet!) and their long trunk-like head and snout. Add two prominent tentacles that sort of resemble tusks, and the comparison starts to make sense. By day, Elephant Snails usually hide beneath ledges or in crevices, emerging after dark to graze algae from rocks and feed on drifting seaweed. Their slug-like appearance makes them a welcome find during the Sea Slug Census, where they're often first thought to be a giant sea slug.



↑ Elephant Snail, San Remo, Bunurong Country | INNA PRONICHKINA

Growing to around 12 cm long, they're mostly one large muscular foot, which they use to cling tightly to rocky reefs. That foot must also have made a good meal, because Elephant Snail shells are commonly found in First Nations shell middens along the Great Southern Reef. So next time you're poking around rockpools looking for sea slugs, don't be surprised if you spot what appears to be an oversized black slug wearing an undersized white shell. Take a closer look, you've just found an Elephant Snail, one of the reef's most convincing sea slug lookalikes. 🐌

Kade Mills is ReefWatch Coordinator

SUPPORTER PROFILE

Anne Mennell

I've lived on Bunurong Country for almost 25 years. Apart from a few protest marches when younger, I was never an activist but wanted to find a way to make a difference. I first encountered VNPA early in the ongoing push to protect habitat at the old Holden Proving Ground and Western Port Woodlands. VNPA produced an excellent report on the value of these places and continues to support the campaign. Drawing on VNPA's research and advocacy work, I've used my writing skills to support a variety of nature causes. The VNPA team are wonderful people who are passionate about their work. Together, they create a professional, effective organisation doing vital work on our behalf to protect nature and I am very happy to support their efforts with a monthly donation. As the late wonderful Jane Goodall said, 'Together we can. Together we will'. 🌿

Find out more about
regular giving
[support.vnpa.org.au/
donate](http://support.vnpa.org.au/donate)





Wandering in a grassy wonderland

 **ADRIAN MARSHALL,**
FACILITATOR, GRASSY
PLAINS NETWORK
TAKES A WANDER
THROUGH THE WORLD OF
GRASSLANDS

Here at the Grassy Plains Network, we have a big focus on wandering. Writing submissions, poking government about lack-lustre policy and failures to enforce protection is super-important, but so is wandering. This year we have about thirty upcoming wanders coming up. Let me tell you why. There are SO MANY reasons!

1. Looking down

The only way to realise how extraordinary our grasslands are is to

wander in one. Grasses make up the structure of a grassland, but the bulk of the diversity is in between the grass tussocks, in the inter-tussock spaces. You can't see all those lilies, peas, daisies and orchids without looking down.

It's like snorkelling. From the beach, it's just water. Put on a mask and pop your head below the water and BOOM! There's a coral reef. From the roadside a grassland may look like a paddock, from within it's a wonderland.

2. Raising awareness

A wander is an exercise in awareness. Of learning to see the russet of a sward of Kangaroo Grass, or the twining texture of Running Postman. It's frog song, the softness of a leaf, the delicious aroma of a Chocolate Lily.

It's awareness-raising too, as we talk through the issues threatening these wonderlands. The big picture stuff, policy and resourcing, and the local threats.

With awareness comes greater capacity to protect. We need that.

3. Remembering the past

A wander is honouring what has been destroyed, or is about to be. We're visiting the 0.5% remaining of the vast grassy plains of Victoria. We can only imagine what those were like.

Our first walk this year is to Section G Grassland in Cairnlea. Its destruction for a road has been approved by the planning minister. That road will provide developers the access they need to a second grassland, Jonesfield Corner, now also proposed for destruction.

4. Managing the future

We wander to inspect and assess, to understand how well or poorly a grassland is being managed. We do this because poor management or lack thereof is one of the biggest threats to grasslands. Doing nothing is not an option. They need to be grazed or slashed or burnt regularly, otherwise the weeds take over.

This year we're going to one grassland that has die-back from a chemical spill. We're going to places that are the benchmark in management, places that have been ignored, and everything in between. And we always advocate for better management.

5. Networking and conspiring

We wander to network and share knowledge. Everyone gets something out of a wander. Locals can begin to team up, experts argue taxonomy, contractors discover details they were never taught, we hear the history of our conservation efforts, we get to conspire!

6. Community building

Wandering grows our grassy community. Parents, kids, new migrants, scions of settler families, artists, activists, professionals and amateurs, people just wanting to have fun, explorers and idlers. Whoever you are we want you; your wandering helps protect these precious places, and that's what we do.

7 to 32...

We wander to connect, respect and help protect. To celebrate, show care and build local identity. To share

knowledge, play and see something new and something old in a new way. To wonder at the incredible interconnectedness and understand urban, peri-urban and rural systems. To be counted, to find similarities across cultures and to send the planning minister a postcard (yes, we'll be doing that!). To document, create possibilities, help prosper and to work. We wander to apologise, mourn and take strength. To simply be present in nature, pause, to be small and to jump a fence.

33. We wander to stay grassy!

Check out upcoming wanders on our activities page activities.vnpa.org.au



We've got a great new activities registration system in place, with waitlists for tours with capped numbers. If you register but can't attend, please let us know. For some events we're trialling carpooling too. Let us know how it's all working!

↓ Our new postcard for the planning minister, where grassy wanderers can declare 'Please protect our grasslands and stop approving projects that destroy them!'



PHOTOS: LIZ FELTON, S SINCLAIR, CSIRO, JOHN ENGLART, LEO/FICKR, DAVID FRANCIS, IAN SMITH, DALE APPLETON, JAMES WHITE, JUCK TACKER, DAVID EDDY

Plant Blindness* with Meghan Lindsay

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

Sun orchids genus *Thelymitra*

Like most orchids in Victoria, sun orchids can be easy to overlook. Outside flowering season they retreat to an underground tuber, surfacing only as a single strappy leaf just before flowering. Come flowering time, a solitary stem rises, carrying anywhere from one to forty flowers in blue, pink, red or yellow, sometimes with darker spots or stripes.

Victoria is one of the most orchid-diverse places in the world, home to over 400 species across 29 genera. Sun orchids are one of the largest genera, with more than 40 species living in Victoria alone.

They're widespread, living everywhere from coastal heath to the alps, woodlands to the mallee.

Some orchids, like tongue orchids, lure male insects to pollinate them through sexual deception. Sun orchids rely on food deception instead. They mimic other wildflowers, luring pollinators in with a promise of delicious nectar rewards that they don't deliver.

True to their name, sun orchid flowers only fully open on warm, sunny days, closing again at night. If the right



↑ Salmon Sun Orchid (*Thelymitra rubra*) and Spotted Sun Orchid (*Thelymitra ixiodes*) | MEGHAN LINDSAY

conditions never arrive, some self-pollinate without ever unfurling their petals.

So, if you spot a sun orchid flowering this Spring, you've managed to be in the right place at exactly the right time! 🌸

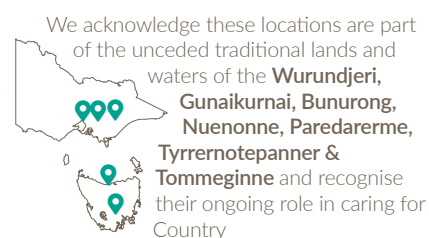
Meghan Lindsay is Communications Advisor



Loopholes and logging trucks



A RECENT ABC TV EXPOSÉ IS JUST PART OF THE STORY OF VICTORIA'S LOGGING 'BAN' SAYS **JORDAN CROOK**, PARKS & NATURE CAMPAIGNER



We acknowledge these locations are part of the unceded traditional lands and waters of the Wurundjeri, Gunaikurnai, Bunurong, Nuenonne, Paredarmerne, Tyrrrnotepanner & Tommeginne and recognise their ongoing role in caring for Country

When ABC's *Four Corners* aired 'Timber Turmoil', its investigation into Australia's native forest logging industry in June, it followed the money. Coinciding with the release of the Environmental Justice Australia (EJA) report *Following the Money: The unfinished transition away from native forest logging*, the report confirmed what we've been documenting on the ground for years. But it only scratched the surface of a much bigger problem.

The show traced how, more than two years after Victoria's official end to native forest logging on public land, trees are still being cut down and turned into timber and paper. The program filmed logging trucks carrying native trees out of Tasmanian forests, across Bass Strait, and into Victorian mills at Heyfield and Powelltown.

Some of these mills had received millions of dollars in state government funding explicitly intended to help them transition away from native forest logging. What the show didn't cover is the trees still being cut down in Victoria.

Following the money

We've spent decades campaigning to end native forest logging in Victoria, and welcomed the state's January 2024 commitment to end it on public land. It was a decision the government described as one of the largest forest protection measures in Victoria's history. But these investigations show that despite roughly \$1.5 billion in public money earmarked for the transition, native forest landscapes are still being smashed.

The Heyfield mill at the centre of the report is 49 per cent owned by the Victorian Government, fuelling criticism that taxpayer funds meant to end logging are instead being used to keep it going. Former Premier Jacinta Allan rejected suggestions that Victoria has effectively exported its logging problem to Tasmania, telling media the government's priority is backing timber workers and regional communities through the transition.

Our concern goes well beyond interstate log imports, however. Thorough though it was, 'Timber Turmoil' didn't have time to cover a series of loopholes that are allowing logging to continue inside Victoria, including within national parks.

Logging by stealth

Not one hectare of the roughly 1.8 million hectares of forest where logging was supposed to have ended has received permanent legal protection. That's despite government promises of what would amount to the largest expansion of the state's public forest reserve system in its history. The new State Forest By-Products Framework, introduced quietly by the Allan Government in April, allows trees to be cut down on public land and sold to sawmills and firewood companies with no independent oversight, no enforceable standards and no public consultation.

Several older laws never repealed after the 2024 announcement are keeping the door open for logging to continue. These include provisions in the *Forests Act 1958* that still allow permits for removing native trees from public land, state planning provisions that continue to allow logging on private land, and the *Forests (Wood Pulp Agreement) Act 1996*, which underpinned decades-old supply contracts giving industry long-term access to forests in the Central Highlands.

...these investigations show that despite roughly \$1.5 billion in public money earmarked for the transition, native forest landscapes are still being smashed.



Most strikingly, these gaps are already causing damage inside protected areas. We've witnessed logging trucks loaded with eucalypts leaving Yarra Ranges National Park, the Silvan water catchment, and the new Wombat-Lerderderg National Park. Greater Gliders and ancient hollow-bearing trees are among the casualties.

Troubled transition

A recent Victorian Auditor-General review, requested by Victorian Greens leader Ellen Sandell, identified significant oversight and monitoring problems with the government's \$320 million Forestry Transition Program. Victorians were told native forest logging had ended, while millions of dollars in transition funding have effectively supported logging in Tasmania.

The Victorian Greens plan to introduce legislation aimed at closing the loopholes, including a bill that would make it illegal for Victorian mills to process native timber sourced from anywhere in Australia. They would repeal laws that leave the door open for a future government to reinstate commercial logging on public land. Sawn hardwood timber consumption in Australia has fallen by close to 80 per cent since the early 2000s, while imports of dressed and rough hardwood have dropped by nearly 70 per cent over roughly the same

period. But Australia has, in fact, been a net exporter of sawn hardwood timber in most recent years. Industry representatives interviewed for *Four Corners* argued that ending native forest logging in Victoria and Western Australia has simply pushed demand elsewhere, and that Australia risks becoming more reliant on imported hardwood if local supply dries up. But this analysis of government forestry data shows that isn't the case.

The takeaway from the ABC and EJA investigations is that Victoria's logging ban remains dangerously incomplete. We encourage Victorians to press their local elected representatives to close loophole logging across the state. Without permanent legal protection for our forests, and the repeal of outdated laws still on the books, the promised end of native forest logging risks becoming a rebrand rather than a real end. 🌿

'Timber Turmoil' is available on ABC iView. Read EJA's *Following the Money* report at envirojustice.org.au/publication/following-the-money

Let your elected reps know it's time for a REAL end to native forest logging
vnpa.org.au/close-the-logging-loopholes

30 ways to reach 30x30 in Victoria



VICTORIA IS
LAGGING
BEHIND IN OUR
INTERNATIONALLY
AGREED 30X30 TARGETS,
SAYS **DOUG ROBINSON**,
VNPA COUNCILLOR

National parks and protected areas are one of the best ways to protect nature, and Victoria isn't pulling its weight.

In December 2022, Australia was one of 188 countries to sign the Kunming Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF), a landmark pact to halt and reverse biodiversity loss by 2030. Its headline promise is the '30 by 30' target: to protect or conserve at least 30% of the world's lands and waters by 2030.

Earlier this year, every Australian jurisdiction signed up to help deliver this target as part of a national implementation plan to look after nature and help fulfil Australia's commitment to the GBF.

The plan commits governments to: expanding number and size of protected areas and; prioritising the places that matter the most for

biodiversity. These are the places that build a representative and well-connected reserve system. It's a goal that lines up neatly with the Victorian Government's own commitment, made in its 2037 Biodiversity Plan, to 'maintain and enhance a world-class system of protected areas'.

So how is Victoria tracking? Not well. By national standards, Victoria is a laggard, ranking sixth out of Australia's eight jurisdictions. As of 2024, only 18% of the state's land and inland waters were protected, a rise of only 0.5% since 2016 (noting recent additions in the central west aren't included). Marine protected areas are also lagging, with no additions since 2002 and a policy ban on creating new ones since 2018.

A reserve system with gaping holes

Protected areas aren't just assessed by size. They're assessed against the National Reserve System's scientific criteria of 'comprehensiveness, adequacy and representativeness.' On that score, the Victorian Government also has a long way to go. The state's own Biodiversity 2037 Plan admits as much, estimating that approximately

2.1 million hectares of additional land needs protecting to achieve the world-class system promised.

The gaps are stark. One in three of Victoria's 29 bioregions fails to meet the national benchmark of having at least 10% of its area protected. And 579 of the state's habitat types have no protection at all.

Victoria's marine parks look better on paper than they are in reality. Many so-called 'marine protected areas' still allow recreational fishing. Strip those out and only 5% of Victorian waters are genuinely protected, the second lowest of any state or territory in Australia. It's also been more than 25 years since Victoria last formally reassessed its marine and coastal areas to look at what needs protecting.

A chance to catch up

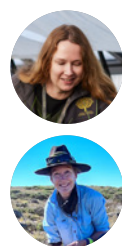
The national 30 by 30 commitment is a rare opportunity for Victoria to close the gap. Queensland and South Australia have both recently released protected area strategies to guide their own progress. Victoria urgently needs to do the same for its land and seas if it's serious about building the world-class reserve system it has promised. 🌿

Toolangi State Forest, Wurundjeri Country | JUSTIN CALLY

30 steps to completing our world class reserve system

- 1 Develop a protected area strategy for Victoria's land and seas to work out key gaps and priorities on public and private land.
- 2 Re-establish a dedicated fund for buying land to help meet protected area targets for highly cleared bioregions and habitats, and to help protect habitat for threatened wildlife.
- 3 Create a dedicated fund to support establishment of Indigenous Protected Areas, as part of Victoria's Treaty commitments.
- 4 Re-establish the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council (VEAC), or similar, as an independent body to oversee and advise on public land use.
- 5 In line with Priority 19 in the Biodiversity 2037 Plan, adopt a whole-of-government approach to delivering 30x30 outcomes, which entails protection and conservation commitments by authorities and agencies.
- 6 Increase Trust for Nature's Revolving Fund capacity with a one-off government contribution of at least \$25 million from the Sustainability Fund or similar.
- 7 Amend existing legislation so land protected under conservation covenants is exempt from local government rates (as in NSW).
- 8 Better protect state forest across eastern Victoria, including:
 - Create a Great Forest National Park or significantly expand and link existing Central Highlands parks, including linking Yarra Ranges, Baw Baw, Kinglake and Lake Eildon national parks and Cathedral Ranges, Bunyip and Moondarra state parks.
 - Expand and link East Gippsland national parks, including Alpine, Coopracambra, Croajingolong, Errinundra and Snowy River.
 - Support Emerald Link, a community-led, conservation initiative for East Gippsland.
 - Assess and nominate eastern Victoria's forests for UNESCO World Heritage listing.
- 9 Implement recommendation 20 from VEAC's Statewide Assessment report (2016) to prioritise investigation into the Southwest region, Strzelecki Ranges and Gippsland Plains bioregions to identify opportunities to expand the reserve system.
- 10 Commit to completing Melbourne's grassland reserves as required as part of the Melbourne Strategic Assessment.
- 11 Increase protection of all native grasslands (and other grassy habitats) across Victoria on both public and private land by using all available means, including purchase, conservation covenants, planning tools and significantly increased penalties for illegal clearing.
- 12 Complete implementation of central west parks including formalisation of promised smaller reserves and regional parks.
- 13 Accelerate the transition to proper protection for state forests across Victoria, including Special Protection Zones and Immediate Protection Areas.
- 14 Implement recommendation 21 from VEAC's Statewide Assessment report (2016) to review the comprehensiveness, adequacy and representativeness of Victoria's marine protected areas and identify additional areas for inclusion.
- 15 End recreational fishing in all existing marine parks.
- 16 Commit to a Marine Spatial Plan for Western Port Bay, backed by a Western Port Fund to deliver it.
- 17 Change existing legislation to recognise designated Ramsar wetlands like Western Port Bay as formal protected areas.
- 18 Commit to a standalone environment minister who controls all aspects of the portfolio, including public land management, without conflicting responsibilities.
- 19 Commit to funding national parks and other protected areas to at least one per cent of the State Budget.
- 20 Implement recurrent funding for Traditional Owner co-management of national parks and other public lands as part of Victoria's Treaty commitments.
- 21 Maintain parks and reserves for the primary purpose of nature conservation and enjoyment of nature – not as opportunities for development.
- 22 Commit to reinstate fisheries officers, restore park ranger numbers and rebuild specialist capacity in compliance, biodiversity, heritage and recreation management, and park planning.
- 23 Fully fund and implement the Victorian Deer Control Strategy.
- 24 Restore funding and frontline capacity to tackle invasive species across the state.
- 25 Create a standalone regulator (or expand the Conservation Regulator's role) to oversee Forest Fire Management Victoria's fire prevention and logging-like activities.
- 26 Make sure the ban on native forest logging is maintained, and that all logging loopholes are closed off.
- 27 Reinstate the Victorian Marine and Coastal Council (or similar) to provide independent advice to government on appropriate use of marine and coastal habitats.
- 28 Make sure the *Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act's* Scientific Advisory Committee is retained, to provide independent integrity for this key piece of state nature law.
- 29 Develop a threatened wildlife strategy and recurrent funding to implement it (as done in other jurisdictions).
- 30 Recognise the wishes of 80% of all Victorians who say they want more parks!

Preventing orchid extinction



SCIENTISTS AT THE ROYAL BOTANIC GARDENS VICTORIA (RBGV) ARE SAVING THREATENED PLANTS, REPORT DR NOUSHKA REITER & DR MEGAN HIRST

There are about 36,000 orchid species worldwide, with Australia home to almost 2,000. Sadly, 45 per cent of all orchids that have been assessed by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) are threatened with extinction. In Australia, 216 of the 1,384 plants listed as threatened under federal nature law (EPBC Act) are orchids. Their effective conservation remains a significant challenge.

Victoria is in a unique position. All native plants assessed under state nature law (FFG Act) use IUCN regional threat categories to determine extinction risk at a state level. In Victoria, 1,622 plant species are listed as Extinct, Critically Endangered or Vulnerable. More than

200 of these threatened plants are orchids. Many of the plants, animals and fungi protected under state nature law only live in Victoria and would qualify to be listed under federal nature laws, which give a higher level of protection. Yet currently, many of them are not. As a result, many populations on private land lack protection. Tragically, orchids such as *Caladenia brachyscapa* and *Caladenia thysanochila* are already extinct.

Victorian orchids can come in a bewildering array of colours and forms, living in diverse habitats from the coast to the Alps. Orchids have evolved specialised relationships with pollinators and mycorrhizal fungi. Their pollination is particularly fascinating, exhibiting an extraordinary diversity of pollination strategies ranging from sexually deceptive orchids that attract male pollinators by mimicking female insect pheromones, to more traditional systems that reward pollinators with nectar. Many orchids rely on only one or a few pollinator species to set seed. Understanding these pollinator relationships and their distribution across the landscape is therefore critical for effective conservation.

Orchid seeds are the smallest of all flowering plants. Unlike many other plant families, orchids do not form a persistent seed bank in the soil, and are reliant on specific mycorrhizal fungi to germinate. In many cases,

these fungi are undescribed by science. Once germinated, orchids face a myriad of threats, including herbivory by invasive species such as rabbits, deer, pigs, horses and goats, as well as impacts from overabundant native herbivores and invasive weeds. These pressures are compounded by climate change, historic and ongoing land clearing and habitat fragmentation, which have left many populations isolated, genetically depauperate and highly vulnerable to extinction.

For many Critically Endangered and Endangered plants, including orchids, addressing threats alone is no longer



↑ Large scale propagation of *Diuris fragrantissima* at RBGV Cranbourne | NOUSHKA REITER

sufficient. Population sizes are now so small that active, species-specific intervention is required to prevent extinction and support recovery.

The RBGV Orchid Conservation Program aims to prevent extinction by:

- Conserving genetically diverse collections of seed and mycorrhizal fungi.
- Propagating permanent ex-situ conservation collections to support seed orcharding and reintroduction programs.
- Reintroducing orchids to permanently protected public or private land where appropriate habitat, pollinators and mycorrhizal fungi occur.
- Engaging landholders, local communities and citizen scientists in these activities to support long-term conservation outcomes.

To date, the program has established an ex-situ living collection of 212 species. The collection contains almost 30,000 plants grown symbiotically from seed with their associated mycorrhizal fungi. The orchid seed bank now holds more than 5,000 samples representing 30 genera and 310 orchid species from across Australia. In addition, the mycorrhizal fungi collection contains almost 3,000 cryopreserved fungal samples. Working with numerous project partners, the program has undertaken reintroductions at more than 40 sites. Despite these achievements, much work remains to be done.

Restoring Robust Spider-orchids to Raymond Island

The Robust Spider-orchid (*Caladenia valida*) was historically known from 17 populations across Raymond Island, as well as Anglesea, Portland and South Australia. More than 16 Victorian populations are now gone. On Raymond Island, Robust Spider-orchids have dwindled from 17 sites and over 575 plants in 1990, to three sites and less than 30 plants.

Emerging research suggests Victorian populations are a distinct evolutionary unit from those in South Australia. With the entire remnant Victorian population being fewer than 30 plants, urgent action was needed to bolster their genetic resilience. EPBC Act listing is warranted to secure them into the future.



On a chilly winter morning this July, a convoy of orchid enthusiasts, conservationists and volunteers descended on Raymond Island with a shared mission: to give one of Victoria's rarest plants a fighting chance. Armed with measuring tapes, plant tags, stainless-steel cages and enough insect repellent to ward off an army of mosquitoes, the team set about returning hundreds of Robust Spider-orchids to the bush.

These orchids have suffered significant declines on Raymond Island, particularly following habitat destruction, flooding events and rising groundwater levels. To prevent extinction, RBGV has spent several years identifying and mapping their pollinator across the landscape. Research revealed that Robust Spider-orchids rely on a single undescribed thynnine wasp, belonging to the genus *Phymatothynnus*. Concurrently, conservation staff developed a genetically informed breeding program, propagated hundreds of orchids from seed collected on Raymond Island, growing them symbiotically with their essential mycorrhizal fungi in specialist conservation facilities at RBGV Cranbourne.

In Winter 2026, approximately 200 Robust Spider-orchids were returned to Raymond Island, providing critical reinforcement of the remaining population. Each plant selected for reintroduction was carefully assessed for size and vigour, measured and tagged before being planted within a protective cage inside a fenced conservation site. These measures were designed to maximise survival and support the establishment of a future self-sustaining population.

The scale of the project relied on an extraordinary community effort. Staff from RBGV worked alongside Gunaikurnai representatives, local landholders, the Australasian Native Orchid Society and the Bairnsdale

Field Naturalists Club, Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action (DEECA) and Trust For Nature to conserve these orchids. The planting day also included renowned orchid experts Gary Backhouse and Jeff Jeanes, Len and Josee Carrigan, and local botanist James Turner. Together, the team laid out planting grids, measured and labelled individual orchids, watered plants, installed protective cages and carefully planted each orchid into its new home. The reintroduction of Robust Spider-orchids was funded by DEECA's Nature Fund.

Looking into the future

Despite the depth of action for Robust Spider-orchids to date, RBGV's work does not end here. The examination of flower morphology, pollinator specificity and genetic differences across the orchids' currently recognised distribution will be used to better understand species boundaries and identify distinct populations that may require separate conservation management.

To improve the chances of the ongoing survival of Robust Spider-orchids, the possibility of additional translocation efforts is being assessed. This includes further reinforcement of known populations with novel genotypes and assisted colonisation into new locations in East Gippsland.

It is hoped that with these actions, the extinction risk for this little beauty will be reduced in the decades to come. 🌱

Dr Noushka Reiter (Principal Conservation Scientist) and Dr Megan Hirst (Seed Ecologist) worked on the orchid program with RBGV horticulturists Jade Bell and Chris Jenek

For further information about RBGV's work, visit rbg.vic.gov.au/science

Tours of the orchid glasshouses run through to October. Go to rbg.vic.gov.au/cranbourne-gardens/whats-on-cranbourne/orchid-conservation-tours

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

KOROROIT CK K36

STREAMSIDE RESERVE

↑ Kororoit Creek K36 Streamside Reserve | JORDAN CROOK



JORDAN CROOK
VISITS A SMALL
RIVERSIDE RESERVE
IN MELBOURNE'S
OUTER WEST

Tucked off a busy freeway and down a slope you will find this amazing remnant habitat holding tight to the river's edge. The river is the Kororoit Creek whose headwaters are up the road at Mt Aitken, between Sunbury and Gisborne.

This is an amazing spot with old overarching River Red Gums shading the creek and walls of native poa grass

**Kororoit Creek K36
Streamside Reserve,
Melton Highway,
Grangefields**

**43 km/45 min drive
NW of Melbourne**

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

persisting through the blackberries. It feels like going back in time.

Underfoot on the creek bed, the volcanic rocks have been turned into pebbles through the abrasion and weathering of the running river.

During my first visit in June, the riverbed was mostly dry between ponds where the local ducks were busy feeding. Walking along the river bed that runs the length of the reserve is quite amazing. You get to experience a view the ducks and turtles enjoy.

When I returned to the reserve in late August, I found the river gushing, with the worn riverbed high in fast flowing water. The addition of water flows brought the reserve to life, with numerous birds calling and the magnificent River Red Gums close to flowering.

Even though the reserve is small and in a highly fragmented landscape, it's a beautiful habitat home to local wildlife. A grouse park and a great place to visit! 🌿



↑ River Red Gum in Kororoit Creek K36 Streamside Reserve | JORDAN CROOK

CEO recruitment update

After almost 20 years at VNPA and 40 years working and volunteering in similar organisations looking after nature, Executive Director Matt Ruchel has decided it's time to retire.

In a retirement announcement email to VNPA members and supporters, Matt said he was looking forward to spending more time on the farm and in the bush enjoying some of the places he's spent many years working to protect.

Matt won't be leaving immediately. Over the next 8–12 months he'll keep working with the VNPA Council and staff to make sure the transition is smooth, while we remain focused on the important work ahead.

I want to acknowledge and thank Matt Ruchel for his outstanding leadership of VNPA for more than 20 years. Matt has been an unwavering champion for national parks, wildlife and habitats in Victoria. His dedication has helped shape VNPA into the respected and influential organisation it is today. On behalf of Council and all our members, I thank Matt for his extraordinary contribution and wish him every success for the future.

One of Council's most important responsibilities is making sure VNPA has the leadership to carry our organisation confidently into the future. I wanted to share an update with you on the recruitment of our next Chief Executive Officer (CEO).

The CEO role was advertised in mid-August, with applications closing on 13 September 2026. Over the coming months, Councillors will be meeting with shortlisted candidates through a combination of virtual and face-to-face interviews. We expect our new CEO to start in early February 2027.

Whenever an organisation experiences a leadership transition, it's natural to wonder what comes next. For more than 70 years, VNPA has been an independent, evidence-based voice for nature, championing stronger protection for national parks, wildlife and habitats in Victoria. That commitment will stay as strong as ever.

We are looking for someone who shares that passion and who has the experience to lead impactful conservation campaigns, advocate effectively for nature, and navigate the complex challenges nature in



↑ Matt Ruchel in Wombat-Lerderderg National Park
| JUSTIN MCMANUS/THE AGE

Victoria faces. At the same time, the next CEO will play a vital role in strengthening VNPA's long-term financial sustainability by growing our membership, fundraising and philanthropic support. A strong and financially resilient organisation is essential if we are to continue delivering advocacy and nature conservation outcomes that matter so much to all of us.

On behalf of Council, thank you for your ongoing support and commitment to VNPA. I look forward to keeping you updated as we move through this important process and welcome a new CEO to lead VNPA into its next chapter. 🌿

Marilyne Crestias, VNPA President

Constitutional changes improve governance

In late July, VNPA held a special general meeting to pass changes to our constitution. Prior to this, the Governance, Policy and Legal (GPL) Committee had recommended a review of the constitution for a number of reasons:

- It was 17 years since it was last reviewed and to be relevant to the organisation's changing environment, it was important to make sure it still met our needs.
- Rules of governance for incorporated associations have recently been updated requiring us to adopt some mandatory new rules.
- The governance of our association has changed significantly since the small volunteer run organisation took shape. Since then, most of the admin work is now managed

by paid staff and the Council is a committee of oversight rather than of operation. Modern governance practices need to be reflected in this change of organisational structure.

The more significant changes are:

- Council was reduced to eight Councillors down from 12 (this reflects the focus on governance, not operation).
- We removed the mandate for a nominee to have been a financial member for at least 12 months. Currently only coopted Councillors avoid that stipulation until the next AGM.
- Councillors are elected for a three-year tenure (currently one year at a time). This is modern practice and gives Councillors a reasonable length term.

- We introduced a maximum of nine years as a Councillor. Beyond this time, dedicated Councillors can still contribute through a committee.

These changes will take place at the 2027 AGM, allowing time for Councillors to decide if they wish to nominate again, and to stagger terms so that not all Councillors roll over at the once. As part of the change, we chose to rename the Council to Board and Councillors to Directors.

VNPA now has a modern constitution that will serve us well into the future. Thank you to the members of the GPL constitution working group, the GPL committee and Council for their support and to all the members who supported these changes at the special general meeting. 🌿

Chris Hibburt, GPL Committee Chair

Vale Muriel Noel Gross

Noel Gross passed away in January 2026 aged 93 years. A decades-long VNPA member and donor, Noel continued to reside at Avonsleigh in the Dandenong Ranges after the death of her husband Dudley. On their property and adjoining Wright Forest Bushland Reserve they lovingly nurtured the remnant hollow-bearing Mountain Grey Gum/Messmate habitat and its colonies of Mountain Bobuck Possums, Yellow-bellied Gliders, Antechinus, Powerful Owls, Krefft's Gliders, Wombats and a beautiful array of birds and insects. Trained as a primary school teacher, Noel cultivated her students' love of the local bushland. She carried on her passion for mentoring adults and children in bush rehabilitation, plant identification and seed collection well into her ninth decade.

Noel and Dudley were passionate explorers and volunteers across many national parks of the Americas,

UK, Europe and New Zealand/Aotearoa. They committed to nature conservation as active volunteers with park managers and friends groups across Victoria and several parks in South Australia and New South Wales. In Victoria, Noel and Dudley volunteered with park managers and friends groups at Wyperfeld, Wilsons Promontory, Dandenong Ranges and Churchill national parks, Lysterfield Park, Bunyip and Gembrook state parks, Kurth Kiln Regional Park and several municipal bushland parks throughout the Dandenong Ranges. This included a long-time association with the Friends of the Helmeted Honeyeater at Yellingbo. Noel was a passionate supporter of community indigenous plant nurseries and Superb Lyrebird habitat conservation for over 40 years.

In 2017, Noel co-authored and self-published a book with fellow Friends of Johns Hill Landcare Group



members, *Ferns of Emerald*, a field guide, which included many of her photographs. She never wavered from her love of nature and hands-on work to redress the adverse impacts of European settlement on nature and from her ability to share her passion and knowledge with others. Noel was proud to support the advocacy and achievements of VNPA, Birdlife Australia and Bush Heritage. Her legacy will continue to help support the combined work of these and other groups in maintaining a critical role in looking after nature. 🌿

Garrique Pergl

Recent submissions

VNPA campaign staff have been busy writing submissions on important topics: *Response to Preliminary Documentation: Industrial Facility*, 276 Rex Road,

Campbellfield, VIC EPBC 2021/8934, June 2026
Submission to Updating the Dyurrite Cultural Landscape Management Plan, August 2026
Read these and all previous submissions on our website. 🌿

Read all our reports and submissions

vnpa.org.au/publications

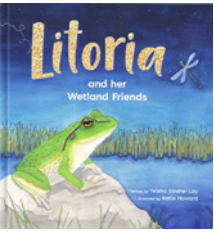
Quiz answers from p. 4

1. **False.** Many orchids in Victoria flower in Spring, but some flower in Winter, Summer and Autumn.
2. **c.** 447 species of orchids live in Victoria, making it one of the most orchid-diverse places in the world.
3. **d.** Over 200 species of orchids in Victoria are threatened with extinction.
4. Orchids in Victoria are threatened by:
 - habitat destruction
 - invasive weeds
 - grazing by invasive species like rabbits
 - illegal poaching
 - climate change
 - altered fire regimes.
5. **False.** Most orchids in Victoria grow on the ground, but some like Southern Butterfly Orchids (*Sarcochilus australis*) are epiphytic and grow on twigs and branches in trees.



6. **e.** All of the above. Some orchids can self-pollinate. Others attract pollinators using nectar and pollen, food deception (pretending to have nectar or pollen) or sexual deception (pretending to be a female pollinator to attract a male).
7. **c.** Victorian orchids can have anywhere from a single flower to up to 100.
8. **a.** There's no such thing as a Koala orchid, but if there were it would no doubt be very cute!
9. **True.** Victorian orchids form relationships with soil organisms (mycorrhizal fungi) to help their seeds germinate and some even need mycorrhizal fungi to grow.
10. **e.** Some orchids including Potato, Hyacinth, Lizard and Elbow orchids have no leaves and completely depend on mycorrhizal fungi for all their nutrients.

←Southern Butterfly Orchid, West Gippsland | MIKE & CATHY BEAMISH/INATURALIST



Leap into Litoria's wetland world

Litoria and her Wetland Friends, Teisha Sloane-Lay. Illustrations by Katie Howard
Busybird Publishing, 2025, 28pp, ISBN 978-1923591331

Dive into nature with beautiful illustrations in *Litoria and her Wetland Friends*. Written by Teisha Sloane-Lay and featuring gorgeous watercolour illustrations by Katie Howard, it combines story with facts, challenges and ways we can help protect our local wetlands.

Litoria isn't just any frog, she's an Endangered Growling Grass Frog (*Ranoidea raniformis*), who shares a home with turtles, fish, and other wetland friends. But when rubbish piles up and machines move in, her home is in danger and she needs our help. What follows is a fun, rhyming adventure that shows how even small actions can make a big difference.

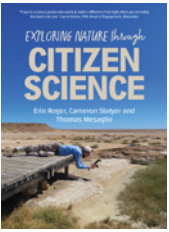
Teisha Sloane-Lay is a wildlife ecologist and author with over 20 years of experience in the environmental field. She co-founded Frogs Victoria and runs a blog promoting nature-based learning for children. She's created a delightful and engaging story that inspires children to care for and protect nature.

Frog enthusiast Hector, aged 7, said: 'I would definitely recommend this book to other kids. I really like that this book got the inspiration from things that happened in real life and the authors changed it up a little bit.'

'I liked in the story that they didn't disturb the wetland because the animals lived there and they didn't want to disturb the animals.'

'This book would also be good for kids who don't like reading much because it's an easy read.' 🌿

Paul Clifton, ParkWatch editor, and Hector S, aged 7



Get into citizen science in Australia

Exploring nature through citizen science, Erin Roger, Cameron Slatyer, Thomas Mesaglio
CSIRO Publishing, 2026, 144pp, ISBN 978-1486319763

This new book aims to encourage more people into citizen science so they can understand their surroundings through a scientific lens and share that knowledge with their communities. It does a great job covering the what, when, how and where of citizen science.

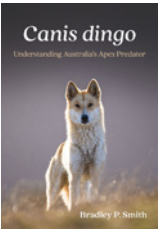
With a primarily Australian focus, *Exploring nature through citizen science* gives an overview of the growing interest and acceptance of public participation in scientific projects, highlighted through several successful examples. Online tools like iNaturalist make it easy for people to get involved, sharing observations about animals, plants, fungi and even threats like invasive species and plant pathogens.

The book profiles several projects and shows how they're making a difference in nature conservation. It also outlines how to create a project, what to consider, how to use common scientific research methods and tips for a range of Australian habitats.

This book is a good starting point for building your own citizen science research project, and for inspiring people to get involved with existing projects. Both are a great way to get more people involved in science and to improve knowledge and awareness in our rapidly changing world.

I recommend this book for individuals or groups looking to understand citizen science and the range of ways you can get involved. And for anyone interested in building their own projects so they produce useful, high quality scientific information and bring positive change to their communities and nature. 🌿

Dr Sera Blair, NatureWatch Coordinator



Understanding an Australian icon

Canis dingo: understanding Australia's apex predator, Bradley P Smith
CSIRO Publishing, 2026, 296pp, ISBN 978-1486318506

Dingoes (*Canis dingo*) hold a special spot in Australian life, revered as kin by First Nations communities, enthusiastically researched by ecologists, and loved by many of us.

A growing body of research is adding to our understanding of Dingo's importance in our web of life, from the top of the Alps to rolling desert plains. Bradley Smith explores the historic, genetic, cultural and political world of Dingoes in *Canis dingo: Understanding Australia's apex predator*.

The book answers a plethora of questions about Dingoes and their place in Australia. How did they get here? How did they interact with carnivores such as Thylacines and Tasmanian Devils when they got here? And how do they adapt to such harsh and varied conditions across the continent?

Dingoes' place in the landscape and society is hotly contested by vested interests who continue to play politics. Many of these interests fabricate untruths about Dingo behaviour, instead of learning to live with these iconic and unique animals.

If you're looking for a read to sink your teeth into on one of the most important animals on mainland Australia, this book is for you. 🌿

Jordan Crook, Parks & Nature Campaigner



Giving back to nature



MADDY WILCOCK,
NATURE STEWARDS
COORDINATOR,
REFLECTS ON THE
PROGRAM'S PROGRESS AND
IMPACT

It's been seven years since the first Nature Stewards courses were held in the cities of Melbourne and Melton. The program has now delivered 54 courses for 23 host organisations spanning local councils, healthcare, statutory authorities and schools. Participants have heard from over 200 specialist and local nature volunteers, higher education and industry guest presenters, and have been guided through their courses by our passionate and knowledgeable team of over a dozen fantastic facilitators to date (and counting!).

Over 950 people have graduated from a Nature Stewards course since 2019. From our pre- and post-course surveys, as well as our recent long term impact study, we know participants get a great deal from their time on a course, including:

- Greater understanding of Victorian and local ecology.
- More time spent in nature.
- Increased confidence in personal knowledge and skills to support nature.
- More pro-environmental behaviours.

- Increased feelings of community connection.
- Increased feelings of wellbeing.

They also give a lot back. Many graduates go on to do further study in environmental fields, or volunteer their time in hands-on or supportive roles with Friends groups, Landcare, citizen science projects and other community organisations.

Nature Stewards alumni have also become VNPA volunteers and activity leaders, gone on to new employment in the sector, continue to bring their new passions and skills to their colleagues and friends, and through their course projects brought inspiring ways for their local communities to connect with nature. It's always a delight attending a course graduation and hearing about all the inspiring ways people are planning to use the curiosity, confidence, and connections they've gained on a course.

So far in 2026, we've run courses in Ballarat, Mornington, Knox, North-West Melbourne (Merri-bek, Moonee Valley and Hume), and Inner-East Melbourne (Stonnington, Monash, and Whitehorse). In Winter we launched a hybrid course combining online classes with face-to-face field trips.

Spring will again be busy with courses in Geelong (Barwon Health and City of Greater Geelong), Whittlesea and Ballarat, as well as a hybrid course focusing on the waterways in Melbourne's east. 🌿

↑ Nature Stewards Inner East Hub participants, Autumn 2026 | H CHARLES

“The underlying spirit and intent of the program, the facilitators and the participants... the regular outings were also fantastic.”

“A great opportunity to connect with practical and informative ways to enhance the natural environment with other like-minded people.”

To find out more or apply for a Nature Stewards course
vnpa.org.au/nature-stewards

Where we went in Winter



Our Winter **Sea Slug Census** rambles at San Remo were a hit among locals and those travelling from afar to meet these marvellous molluscs.



We meandered along **Cowies Creek** on two separate walks in June and August, listening out for frogs and birds and chatting about the issues facing our urban waterways.



We joined the fantastic team at **Grow West** for their annual community planting day, where over 200 people came together to plant 3,500 native seedlings at Bald Hill Reserve, Darley.



A special event during the **Phillip Island Whale Festival** saw over 120 sea slug novices and enthusiasts searching the shore. Our stall was hugely popular, with staff and volunteers running activities for curious kids and adults non-stop throughout the weekend.



Our **Grassy Talks** over Winter covered topics including the soil microbiome and grassland health, delicate grassland plants and their relationships with invertebrates, EPBC offsets and grassland grazing.



↑ ReefWatch Coordinator Kade Mills at the Whale Festival



Our newest **Nature Stewards** completed courses in Ballarat, Mornington Peninsula, Inner East Melbourne, Knox and NW Melbourne. Winter Nature Stewards course kicked off in July, with online classes and field-based activities focusing on waterways in metropolitan Melbourne.



Our friends at **Woorndoo-Chatsworth Landcare** hosted a roadside restoration planting day for green thumbs wanting a grassy twist.

What's coming up in our activities calendar

Spring Sea Slug Census Friday 11–Sun 20 Sept See vnpa.org.au/sea-slugs for information on how to get involved.	Woorndoo Wonders Saturday 17–Sunday 18 October This overnight trip is worth the drive! There will be several activities across the weekend. Further details to come, register now and we'll keep you posted.
Blue Lake at Plenty Gorge Thursday 24 Sept, 9:30–11 am Explore Blue Lake on a family-friendly guided walk. We'll discover local wildlife and take in the wonderful views. We'll stop, look and listen, get creative, and record what we've found in a nature journaling activity.	Great Victorian Fish Count 21 November–20 December Divers and snorkellers across the state will be once again taking part in our annual event.
A Terrick Terrick weekend Friday 2–Sunday 4 October Join us on an overnight trip to see the magnificent grasslands of the Murray Valley Plains. A free, activity-packed weekend with wildflower walks, wildlife spotlighting, and talks from grassland experts.	Braeside Park walk Saturday 21 Nov, 10:30am–2:30 pm Come and explore this metropolitan park in Braeside, with its three distinct landscapes: heath, grassy woodlands and wetlands. An easy 11 km trail, it includes a short trip on public transport (bus), and an option to head home at the 8 km mark or continue on to the Rowan Woodland Flora & Fauna Reserve.
Spring Fling Grasslands Festival Sunday 11 October, 12–4pm Spring Fling is a celebration of our special native grasslands and awesome local community. With food, music, Bhangra dance (grasslands style!), stalls, plant giveaways and kids activities including the famous Grassland Games and a free tour of the Iramoo Wildflower Grasslands.	More Grassy Talks and Tours We have a whole heap of visits to some truly special grasslands on offer throughout spring – far more than we can mention here! Find them in our online calendar.

Upcoming activities

Our online Activity Calendar has a new look! You can filter the list of upcoming activities by program and whether they're in person or online, as well as searching for keywords or by location.

The calendar brings opportunities to get into nature through bushwalking, citizen science, short courses and events for all ages.

Come and join us for an adventure in nature!

activities.vnpa.org.au

Subscribe to our mailing list to receive activities updates
vnpa.org.au/get-our-latest-news

Discover more at
activities.vnpa.org.au



Together

we're a force of nature!

There's an election coming. Decisions made over the coming months will shape the future of our forests, wildlife, coastlines, rivers and grasslands for years to come. Nature deserves to be a defining issue. But that won't happen by itself. It will happen because enough of us insist it does.

- Together, we speak with a stronger voice than we could alone.
- Together, we're asking every prospective representative to commit to practical action for nature.
- Together, we're showing leaders Victorians expect nature to be a priority.

Your gift helps us gather evidence, work with communities, defend habitats, strengthen partnerships and bring people together.

Every action matters. Every gift matters. And when enough of us come together, change becomes inevitable.

SHOW YOUR SUPPORT AT
[VNPA.ORG.AU/TOGETHER](https://vnpa.org.au/together)

