PARKwatch



38° 26' 19.88" S, 145° 2' 46.37" E

VICTORIAN
NATIONAL PARKS
ASSOCIATION

NOVEMBER 2026 #306

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PARK*watch*

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KAYDEN VERHAGEN

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VICTORIAN NATIONAL PARKS ASSOCIATION

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.

Nature protection is going backwards in Victoria. Forests still being logged.
National parks defunded. Marine life protections gutted. Wildlife homes carved up.
Ferals protected and running free. **We're keeping track. And pushing back.**

PUT NATURE BACK ON THE AGENDA THIS NOVEMBER

VICTORIANSFORNATURE.AU

From the President



MARILYNE CRESTIAS, VNPA PRESIDENT, WELCOMES YOU TO A STATE ELECTION EDITION OF *PARK WATCH*

Welcome to the Summer issue of *ParkWatch*. This month is the Wurundjeri season of Buath Gurru, the time of grass flowering, followed by Garrawang, the Kangaroo Apple season. I hope you're enjoying all the colours, flavours and aromas that abound.

We're a month earlier than usual to get *ParkWatch* to you before the Victorian state election. We believe this election is about the kind of relationship we want with nature, so we've put together nine ways to look after nature: policy proposals that would make nature a priority for whoever forms the next government. Matt Ruchel also looks at the state of nature policy, and the absurd election promise to bring back native forest logging.

Elsewhere, we learn how planning controls are being used at the expense of nature, how introduced fish are threatening locals with extinction, and why Wilkerr Dingoes deserve our respect and recognition.

In recent weeks, we've celebrated the opening of three new national parks, welcomed hundreds of grassland enthusiasts to our annual Spring Fling Festival at Iramoo, and hosted concerned Victorians at our Living with Dingoes event.

This issue's cover is our fourth macro-photography marvel for the year: a tiny sea slug photographed by nudibranch researcher Kayden Verhagen. Continuing the salty theme, we learn about Kayden's work in PhD Progress, meet a community of nudi nerds helping piece together the puzzle of these enigmatic animals, and visit the incredible Jawbone Marine Sanctuary.

I wish you and your family a happy and safe festive season and new year, and hope you enjoy plenty of quality time in Victoria's glorious parks. Please also check the back page and consider giving a VNPA gift membership to friends or family this year to spread the love of nature!

ParkWatch Nudi Quiz

with student interns Felicia Foo & Geertruidha Latumeten

1. Approximately how many species of sea slugs live in Victoria?
a. 50 *b. 100*
c. 300 *d. More than 500*

2. What are the antenna-like structures (aka rhinophores) on a sea slug's head mainly used for?
a. Seeing *b. Finding food*
c. Swimming *d. Stinging predators*

3. Some sea slugs, like those in the genus *Elysia*, can survive for months without eating. How?
a. They store large fat reserves in their tail
b. They can store parts of their algae food sources to become solar powered
c. They absorb dissolved nutrients directly through their skin
d. They enter a hibernation-like state

4. Most sea slugs get around by crawling on a muscular foot. What's another way they can move around?

5. The bright, bold colours of many sea slugs are mainly thought to function as:
a. Camouflage
b. Temperature regulation
c. A warning to predators
d. Attracting to mates

6. Sea slugs commonly lay their eggs in what distinctive shape?
a. A spiral *b. A straight line*
c. A round, solid ball *d. Scattered across rocks*

7. Sea slugs are also known as nudibranchs. True or false: the word 'nudibranch' means 'naked gills'.

8. True or false: All sea slugs can regrow a new body from just their head if necessary.

9. Some sea slugs can produce a cloud of purple ink when attacked. What's the ink cloud for?
a. To poison predators
b. To blind predators permanently
c. To distract or confuse predators
d. To attract other sea slugs for help

10. Some nudibranchs eat animals with microscopic stinging cells. What can they do with some of the stinging cells they swallow?
a. Digest them to make their own venom
b. Turn them into eggs
c. Store them and use them as weapons against predators
d. Use them to help them swim

Answers on p. 40



↑ *Elysia coodgeensis* | NICK SHAW

Major nature policy falls in a pothole



MATT RUCHEL, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, SAYS THE ELECTION CIRCUS IS UNDERWAY, BUT NATURE POLICY MIGHT AS WELL HAVE FALLEN INTO ONE OF VICTORIA'S MUCH-TOUTED POTHOLES

In recent state elections, major parties have been lacklustre with polices relating to nature, either drip feeding micro-announcements in specific seats or saying nothing at all.

Party announcements

While the National Party is flagging the potential return of native forest logging *(see p.6)* and reviving the destructive, failed and impossible to achieve statewide prescribed burn target of 5 per cent of public land per year, not a much else has been announced from the Coalition at the time of writing. However, the Liberal Party has said it will release an environment policy.

Labor has made some small but significant announcements on invasive deer: an additional $1.7 million to target feral deer in key areas, including $1 million across Melbourne's eastern fringe (Dandenong Ranges) and $500,000 for Sambar and Hog Deer control at Wilsons Prom. But there's been no moves from either of the two major parties on removing protections for feral deer or broader statewide control at the time of writing.

Labor MP for Williamstown, Melissa Horne, importantly announced a small (41 ha) extension to the much-loved Jawbone Marine Sanctuary off Williamstown, overturning a long running ALP position on no new marine national parks (yes, that's right, Labor had a policy ban on even talking about them!). Labor also announced $1 million to help define the proposed wallan wallan Regional Parkland boundary and how it plans to deliver it.

The Greens have a comprehensive policy suite on nature, covering a wide range of issues including new national parks, protecting grasslands, improving funding for parks and closing logging loopholes.

Animal Justice has a clear and comprehensive policy on closing logging loopholes, and did some important work in parliament on this front over the last term.

One Nation has a series of policies against renewable energy including stopping offshore wind projects and flagging they want a return to native forest logging in Victoria. Interestingly, they have a policy to reinstate sacked fisheries officers, and the local candidate for Point Nepean has announced opposition to the luge development at Arthurs Seat State Park.

The Coalition and One Nation have also said they would rip up Treaty with First Nation Victorians, which is deeply disappointing.



↑ Spring in the proposed wallan wallan Regional Parkland | *MERRI CREEK MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE*

Other policy calls

Outdoors Victoria, the peak body for outdoor education and recreation in Victoria, is calling on the future Victorian Government to invest $100 million in a healthier, more active and connected state through greater access to outdoor experiences.

They're calling for every school student to have the opportunity to attend at least one camp in nature during primary school and one during secondary school, alongside increased support for disadvantaged students. They're also calling for increased investment in parks and state forests to improve access, upgrade facilities, and support a growing range of outdoor activities for schools, domestic and international tourists, and all Victorians.

The Wilderness Society has released a new report prepared by Mosaic Insights and Natural Capital & Climate. It's the first comprehensive account of what nature is worth to the state's economy since a 2015 study. It found:

- More than a third of Victoria's economy, $210 billion or 35 per cent of Gross State Product, depends on healthy nature.
- Victoria's forested water catchments in the Yarra, Thomson and Macalister rivers supply water worth $1–1.7 billion every year.
- Forests in Victoria protect 646 towns and localities from flooding, a service valued at $123 million a year.
- Pollinators are worth up to $11.4 billion a year to Victorian farming.
- Time spent in parks saves $356 million a year in avoided health costs.

These economic benefits are some of the many reasons why we need good polices for nature, not just for fixing potholes.

Email your local candidates today!
vnpa.org.au/what-nature-needs-this-election

Promises to bring back native forest logging are absurd



ELECTION COMMITMENTS THREATENING TO RETURN THE DESTRUCTIVE PRACTICE ARE A PIPE DREAM SAYS **MATT RUCHEL,** EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



↑ Old growth native forest in eastern Victoria | *JUDITH DELAND*

Both the Coalition and One Nation have said they want to return native forest logging. There are many ecological, financial and regulatory barriers to returning native forest logging in Victoria. Here are some of the reasons why native forest logging should never return.

Impacts to habitats and wildlife

Repeated studies have shown logging native forests is catastrophic for wildlife, particularly those that depend on tree hollows, like Greater Gliders and Powerful Owls. Logging fragments and degrades habitat, pushing threatened wildlife closer to extinction. It disrupts water systems, reduces carbon storage and once forests are logged, they take hundreds of years to recover.

Native forest logging operates at a financial loss

Native forest logging operated at a financial loss for decades and was largely propped up with taxpayers dollars. At least $1.5 billion has been spent on transitioning the industry away from logging native forests. It makes no economic sense to spend potentially millions of dollars resurrecting an industry that was already completely ecologically and financially unsustainable.

Between 2019 and 2023, the state government owned logging agency VicForests recorded $127 million in losses. Between 2019 and 2024, VicForests relied on $466 million in government financial support.

Native forest logging was propped up by taxpayer funding, and came at a huge cost to some of the most ecologically significant forests on the planet, home to many threatened plants and animals.

Fire and wood supply is gone

Bushfires have repeatedly damaged huge areas of forest in East Gippsland, Central Highlands and across the Victorian Alps, making the area available for logging dramatically decrease if not disappear, a point acknowledged by the Victorian ALP in 2023, and since repeated.

That's not to mention the impacts on habitats and wildlife those fires and historic logging practices have caused, and that reintroducing logging would exacerbate.

Forests that have been logged are failing to regenerate at an alarming rate. Bringing back native forest logging in a world increasingly impacted by ever more damaging climate change-fuelled events is nonsensical.

Special regulatory treatment no longer exists

The native forest industry always depended on special treatment, especially under national nature laws, and these exemptions have now been removed. Most of the enabling legislation at the state level has also been taken away. While significant loopholes do exist, it's misleading to announce that the switch can easily be turned back on.

The courts have also repeatedly found native forest logging in Victoria breaches nature laws, despite the significant exceptions it was afforded.

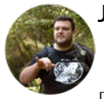
Victoria's timber industry is strong and vibrant without native forest logging. Before native forest logging ended, the plantation industry already made up 94 per cent of Victoria's timber industry, with 19 out of 20 trees cut in Victoria already coming from plantations.

The plantation industry continues to grow and it contributes enormously to Victoria's economy, particularly in rural and regional areas.

There seems to be a purposeful conflation of the native forest industry and plantation sector, yet the two need to be kept very separate if we are to have a coherent approach.

Political parties should focus on polices to achieve a well-managed, ecologically sensitive plantation industry. They need to promote farm forestry, not resurrecting a flawed, damaging and divisive past.

Threatened Dingoes deserve respect and recognition



JORDAN CROOK, PARKS & NATURE CAMPAIGNER, REPORTS ON PROGRESS IN PROTECTING WILKERR DINGOES



↑ Wilkerr Dingo, Big Desert | *DR DANIEL HUNTER*

Wilkerr Dingoes have called the mallee and Big Desert region home for thousands of years, keeping kangaroo numbers in check, evolving to the harsh conditions and living with First Nations people.

The federal government recently indicated their intention to assess this iconic and genetically distinct population for listing under federal law (the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*).

The Threatened Species Scientific Committee will advise the federal environment minister about the status of Wilkerr Dingoes, and whether they meet the criteria for federal protection. This process will happen over the next three years.

A unique population

The Wilkerr Dingoes of the Big Desert region are one of eight genetically distinct populations on mainland Australia, due to their isolation and adaptation to the mallee region. They're the living embodiment of the mallee, alongside the Lowan/Mallee Fowl and Mallee Eucalypts.

The chance of having the population listed as threatened under federal law must be supported, to secure their future and usher in a new era of cooperation with native wildlife.

The protection of Wilkerr Dingoes must also be matched by support for landholders. Such support could include investigating and installing predator-safe farming methods such as trained and suitable guardian animals, improving fencing, trialling improved shepherding methods, and paying landholders for loss of livestock if there's a demonstrated impact by Dingoes.

Moves by the Victorian Government to protect Wilkerr Dingoes are welcomed and supported, but cuts to the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action's biodiversity teams have seen much of the initial ambition left floundering.

Coexistence is possible

In Africa, predation of stock by Leopards, Lions and Hyenas, and by Wolves, Grizzly Bears and Mountain Lions in North America, has been mitigated and reduced through coordinated and supported non-lethal control programs. All of these animals are much larger than Australia's Dingoes.

Rather than driving an iconic mallee animal to extinction, it's time to encourage farmers to live with Wilkerr Dingoes and investigate and initiate methods to keep Dingoes and stock separate in a non-lethal manner. This would make sure these animals keep playing their critical ecological role in the landscape.

We have the tools. We have the First Nations knowledge and the scientists waiting to help. Now is the time to look after Wilkerr Dingoes.

Congratulations to the Australian Dingo Foundation and Big Desert Dingo Research for putting forward such the important submission for federal protection.

Event shows we can live with Dingoes

THE 'LIVING WITH DINGOES' EDUCATION EVENING WAS A BIG HIT

In mid-October we were lucky to co-host a 'Living with Dingoes' event at Menzies Creek at the base of the Dandenong Ranges following a rise in lethal management of Dingoes in the region.

Co-hosted by VNPA with the Australian Dingo Foundation and Wildlife of the Central Highlands, the event highlighted the importance of Dingoes to local ecosystems, their biology and practical non-lethal management tools.

Professor of Wildlife Ecology and Conservation at Deakin University, Euan Ritchie, presented his work on Dingoes across Australia and the different management tools used by farmers and land holders to reduce predation of stock.

Non-lethal tools include guardian dogs such as Maremma and Anatolian Shepherds, as well as donkeys, improving fencing designs, installing sound devices and fladry (a line of brightly-coloured flags hung along the pasture perimeter).

Living with Dingoes is possible with non-lethal tools that are feasible and useful for landholders. Education is the key to looking after Dingoes and keeping them in the landscape.

Jordan Crook, Parks & Nature Campaigner



↑ Meeting a Dingo at the Living with Dingoes evening | *JORDAN CROOK*

A park declared is not a park protected

BEN GILL, NATURE CONSERVATION CAMPAIGNER, ON GETTING THE CENTRAL WEST PROTECTED AREAS DELIVERED IN FULL

It's hard to put into words what it means to see every park promised in the central west delivered in full. For years they were lines on a map, recommendations in a report, a promise we refused to let anyone forget. Today they're law, and they belong to all of us.

A hard won VEAC process; a terrible wind storm; an assault on the forest by a dying timber industry; discovering new species – these are all milestones in the long journey of the central west parks. All of this has happened in a period where government has been ignoring the importance of nature protection.

We now have three new national parks – Wombat-Lerderderg, Mount Buangor and Pyrenees. Plus Cobaw, Hepburn and Mirboo North conservation parks, seven new or expanded regional parks (including Wellsford Forest, added to Bendigo Regional Park) and almost 30 nature conservation and bushland reserves. Great news for habitats and wildlife in Victoria, and the local communities who worked so hard to protect them.

Back in November 2025, parliament passed a law to create the national parks, but it didn't come into effect immediately. It had a start date built in, Monday 6 October 2026.

Working together

Our partnerships with Wombat Forestcare, Bendigo District Environment Council and other Bendigo environment groups, and in more recent times Mount Cole Pyrenees Nature Group, have been the backbone of this campaign. These groups brought deep local knowledge, patience and sheer determination to every meeting, every submission and every walk through the bush with a decision maker. We could not have asked for better allies.

To our supporters, and to every Victorian who wrote a letter, picked up the phone or turned up: thank you! At a time when parks and protected areas have been under sustained attack, and staffing cuts have stripped away the capacity of those charged with caring for them, you proved that many voices, raised together, still move governments.

Time to heal

We must also be honest about what these forests have been through. For five years, loophole logging tore through the very areas recommended to become national parks.

Old trees were felled, new tracks were bulldozed, and habitat that survived the storms was damaged in the so-called recovery. Those scars will take generations to heal, and they stand as a warning of what happens when protection is delayed.

That's why this celebration comes with a clear message. A park declared is not a park protected. Without rangers, weed and pest animal control and genuine community involvement, these places risk becoming paper parks: lines on a map with nobody to look after them.

The Victorian Government must now allocate proper, dedicated funding to develop management plans, prepared with Traditional Owners and the community, and back those plans with ongoing resourcing for the people doing the work on the ground. Anything less would squander the trust this community has placed in the process.

So let's take a moment to celebrate. Walk these forests, look for gliders at dusk, marvel at the birdlife and feel good these areas are now afforded formal protection.

We should all feel proud of what we achieved together. Then let us get back to work, because the voices that won these parks need to be the same voices that make sure they are properly cared for.



↓ VNPA patches celebrating Wombat-Lerderderg, Mount Buangor and Pyrenees national parks, with stickers for Mirboo North and Cobaw conservation parks and the Wellsford addition to Bendigo Regional Park | *MEGHAN LINDSAY*

Central west parks created at last!

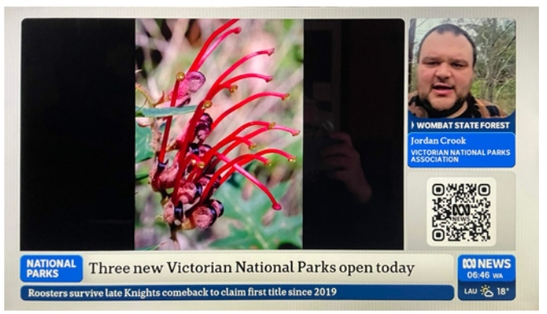
Dozens of people involved in the decades-long campaign to protect the Wombat Forest joined with parliamentarians and Parks Victoria staff on Monday 5 October to see the dream of protection come true.



↑ Macedon MP Mary-Anne Thomas, Labor Macedon candidate Annette Death, Wombat Forestcare founding member Gayle Osborne, and staff from Parks Victoria, FFMV, VNPA, Tourism Midwest, Wadawurrung and Four-Wheel-Drive Victoria at the opening of Wombat-Lerderderg National Park, October 2026 | *PARKS VICTORIA*



↑ Georgie Purcell, Animal Justice Party MP celebrates the new parks with VNPA staff and supporters and Wombat Forestcare members



↑ Jordan Crook joins ABC 24 News to talk about the new parks



↑ Gayle Osborne, Ben Gill, Trevor Speirs and Matt Ruchel pose with a newly installed Wombat-Lerderderg National Park sign | *JORDAN CROOK*

The fast track to wrecking nature

PLANNING CONTROLS AND TRICKERY AID DEVELOPMENT AT THE EXPENSE OF NATURE SAY **JORDAN CROOK, ADRIAN MARSHALL & BEN GILL**

There's good planning, then there's abuse of planning powers. Planning decisions cause destruction of habitats, even in areas supposed to be protected under the *National Parks Act 1975*.

Victoria's planning provisions not only allow clearing in so many painful ways, there's now a trend towards 'fast tracking' developments – even minor ones – through the planning system. The community don't get a say, and nature loses out.

Case study 1: Luge rollercoaster at Arthurs Seat

In 2023, changes to Victoria's planning scheme through the Victorian Government's Housing Statement cemented-in what was promised to be a temporary economic stimulus during the COVID-19 pandemic.

One of those changes was to Clause 53.22 (Significant Economic Development) the purpose of which is 'To prioritise and facilitate the planning, assessment and delivery of projects that will make a significant contribution to Victoria's economy and provide substantial public benefit, including jobs for Victorians.'

The clause also impacts community consultation by trimming down consultation periods and the Planning Minister's requirements on decision making, as well as denying the public the chance to appeal decisions through VCAT.

This planning clause has been used to help developers push through plans for a rollercoaster-like luge within the Arthurs Seat State Park, despite contradictions with the park management plan and objectives of the *National Parks Act 1975* (which also covers state parks).

All this on top of the loss of social licence, which showed up in the fast-tracked consultation periods, that showed only 13 submitters were in favour and 418 objected to the rollercoaster development.

Case study 2: Swann Drive grasslands destruction

There's a grassland in Derrimut in Melbourne's west that sits alongside a biodiverse waterway and a grassland nature conservation reserve. The Critically Endangered Natural Temperate Grassland is home to Endangered Striped Legless Lizards and Critically Endangered Spiny Rice-flowers. It's nevertheless most likely to be cleared.

The Swann Drive site is being fast-tracked under Clause 53.22. It's an easy pathway to qualify for: the project needs to provide a significant contribution to Victoria's economy and a substantial public benefit, including jobs for Victorians. And for a warehouse development like Swann Drive the project has to be worth at least $30 million.

This planning pathway can have dire consequences for nature because it removes scrutiny. There's 'agency consultation', meaning government players like the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action (DEECA) get consulted along with Council. But independent nature conservation organisations don't get a look in. The public don't get consulted.

DEECA has had its expertise slashed and is totally overworked. It's also subject to internal politics, so can't be relied on to inform good outcomes. Sadly, it's not much of a guardrail.

Council are given just ten days to form an opinion, which is generally insufficient to consider all angles. In this case, local council would have pointed out the ways the project failed to meet their local planning provisions, biodiversity strategies and similar policies, but it will likely be ignored

And worse: there's no recourse to VCAT to protest any final decision made by the planning minister.

It also comes down to who has to pay to look after the grassland. The developer should of course pay. It's the one who has been slowly destroying the grassland through poor management over the years it has owned it, letting weeds thicken and overrun habitat.

But this is a Critically Endangered grassland. Developers with a conflict of interest shouldn't be looking after it. It should be publicly owned and properly cared for. And the disappointing thing is that none of our public institutions want to. Parks Victoria certainly doesn't, it doesn't even have the resources to look after the nature conservation reserve next door. Melbourne Water doesn't want to, even though it would strengthen the biodiversity of the nearby waterway. Local councils are strapped for cash.



↑ Arthurs Seat State Park | *JORDAN CROOK*



↑ Striped Legless Lizard | *KYNATURALISTFELLERA*



↑ Spiny-rice Flower | *THEKNIGHTOFWILDFLOWERS/INATURALIST*

Where's the urban biodiversity fund? Where's the incentive to help nature thrive? Where's the leadership from state and federal governments?

Some minister will crow about creating jobs, but this project might only create a handful. That's no reason to clear Critically Endangered native grassland, or destroy the habitat of Endangered Striped Legless Lizards.

The urban planners employed by the developer will claim it is on state-significant industrial land, as if that's an excuse for clearing native habitat. It's not.

Case study 3: Clearing trees at Mount Macedon

In 2022, Parks Victoria applied to Macedon Ranges Shire Council for a permit under Clause 52.17 to clear trees and habitat around the Memorial Cross on Mount Macedon, to open up views. Council refused six votes to three, after 62 objections. Parks Victoria appealed to VCAT.

Then Parks Victoria changed course. Instead of testing its case before the tribunal, it abandoned the appeal and sought a ministerial determination under Clause 52.30, the State Projects pathway. That route takes the decision away from Council and removes third-party appeal rights entirely.

Documents released to us under Freedom of Information (FOI) show the sequence. Parks Victoria had preliminary advice from the Department of Transport and Planning supporting the Clause 52.30 route before it asked other parties to agree to withdraw the VCAT appeal. The Minister's determination was issued on 1 April 2026. Within weeks, Snow Gums, Alpine Ash and Montane Grassy Woodland were cleared. This was not a new project. It was the same 2022 proposal Council had refused, delivered through a different door.

The justification was heritage views. Yet Heritage Victoria soon confirmed the Memorial Cross heritage registration carries no obligation to maintain views. The clearing sits in Zone 3 of the park's own Strategic Management Statement, its highest-protection zone.

Mount Macedon shows how a pathway meant to speed up projects can be used to override local democracy and the protections that apply to everyone else. We're still pursuing the Clause 52.30 application and the department's assessment file through FOI, because the community deserves to know how this destructive decision was made.



↑ Mount Macedon Snow Gums after felling | *BEN GILL*

Committing to protecting Western Port Bay



ACROSS WESTERN PORT BAY, LOCALS ARE TAKING THE CAMPAIGN FOR A HEALTHIER BAY INTO THEIR OWN HANDS, WITH A CLEAR MESSAGE FOR CANDIDATES AHEAD OF THE VICTORIAN ELECTION REPORTS **SHANNON HURLEY**, NATURE CONSERVATION CAMPAIGNER

From dressing up on Phillip Island/Millowl to putting corflutes up around town, the Western Port Bay community is making some noise. There's a fresh campaign logo, a revamped website, open letters and plenty of local energy behind a shared goal: making sure the future of Western Port Bay is on the agenda this election.

Working alongside Environment Victoria, Save Western Port and other local groups and community champions, VNPA has helped launch a new push for a Western Port Bay Framework. A plan to protect the whole bay, rather than having to push back against one damaging proposal at a time.

And there's a good reason locals are putting so much into it.

For years, communities around Western Port Bay have rallied against developments that threaten the bay's wildlife, wetlands and coastal habitats, as well as the homes and livelihoods of people who live and work there. The successful campaign against AGL's proposed gas import terminal at Crib Point showed just what a determined community can achieve.

But how many times should people have to mobilise to defend a place they love? Surely there's a better way?

Planning for the future

That's the thinking behind the Western Port Bay Framework. Rather than responding to each new proposal in isolation, the Framework would bring Traditional Custodians, government, industry, local communities and interest groups together to put the health of the bay at the heart of future decisions. It would also establish a dedicated fund to support restoration and practical on-ground action. Importantly, this isn't a new idea that needs to start from scratch.

The Framework builds on existing Victorian Government commitments. Now, the challenge is to turn those commitments into action.

Putting Western Port Bay on the election agenda

With the Victorian election approaching, the community campaign has a clear goal: make the Western Port Bay Framework one of the key issues candidates are asked to commit to.

We're calling on all candidates in the Western Port Bay area, and their parties, to commit to delivering the Framework, with funding included in the 2027 state budget.

The ask is straightforward. A commitment to $2–3 million to develop the Framework, alongside a separate Western Port Bay Fund to support restoration and practical on-ground action.

It's a relatively modest investment in planning for the long-term health of an internationally significant bay (with a working port!), and in helping protect the wildlife, habitats and communities that depend on it.

Locals are already helping spread the word, with open letters bringing community voices together to show candidates the strength of support for a healthier bay.

continued next page...



↑ Local community members show their support for Western Port Bay | *SHANNON HURLEY*

We're also taking candidates out onto the water. A recent learning cruise gave local candidates the chance to see Western Port Bay's remarkable habitats and wildlife, and some of the pressures they face, firsthand. It's one thing to talk about the bay in a campaign office; it's another to experience the place and understand what's at stake.

There's already strong support for this vision across the community. Now we need political leaders to turn that support into a funded commitment.

Act now for a healthy Western Port Bay

actforwesternportbay.au



↑ *JARROD BOORD*

Salty Science with Nicole Mertens

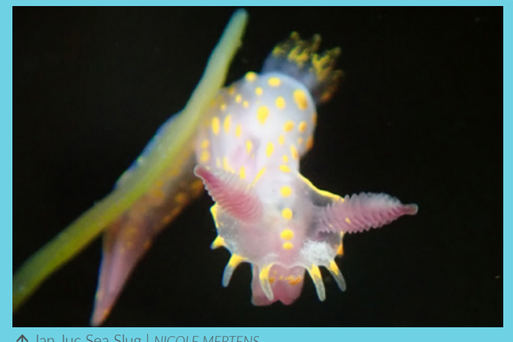
Jan Juc Sea Slug
Polycera janjukia

Cute is a subjective term, but one that neatly sums up these diminutive, colourful little sea slugs.

Polycera janjukia are dorid nudibranchs with bright pink bodies, sparsely decorated with yellow, raised spots. They have a small cluster of yellowy-brown (described as 'ochraceous' or ochre-like) gills, also dotted with brighter yellow spots. Their foot is narrow and tapers into a long tail. On the front of their heads they have a shaggy mane of small, tentacle-like projections.

The cute factor comes in strongly with their oversized rhinophores – the antenna-like chemical sensory organs their head. On Jan Juc Sea Slugs, these can be about a third the size of the whole slug! Their rhinophores have a fuzzy appearance due to the roughly dozen tiny rings (or 'lamellae') running along them. All in all, they look like some sort of alien bunny rabbit.

These slugs were named after the Jan Juc River that opens to the sea just south of Torquay. Nudibranch expert and steadfast Sea Slug Census reviewer Bob Burn first came across them at Point Danger, Torquay back in 1958. Rocky reefs on both sides of Port Phillip Heads seem to be a hot spot for these nudibranchs in Victoria,



↑ Jan Juc Sea Slug | *NICOLE MERTENS*

but they've also been found in rockpools from Portland to Inverloch, as well as along the southern NSW coast.

You'll often find these slugs 'sitting' upright on a bit of brown algae with their head extended, presumably 'sniffing' the water with their rhinophores to find a food source of bryozoans (moss animals). Jan Juc Sea Slugs only grow to about 1 cm long, and are often only a few millimetres, so you'll have to look closely at the tips of those algae fronds if you want to spot this cute nudi on a rockpool ramble or snorkel!

Nicole Mertens is the manager of our Community Learning and Engagement team and a sea slug tragic

Happy grassy crowds at Spring Fling 2026



Over 350 of the grassy and grassland-curious flocked to the 2026 Spring Fling Grassland Festival on a sunny Sunday in October.

The festival brought the diverse communities of Melbourne's west together with conservationists and nature lovers to strengthen understanding and support for the embattled grasslands that are the iconic landscape of much of Victoria's west.

Iramoo Native Wildflower Grassland and adjacent land hosted local legends the Sunshine Street Band, Bhangra dance grasslands-style, and stalls, including the rising grassland activist group the Basalt Buddies, Friends of Kororoit Creek, along with extraordinary Vietnamese paper grassland flower making.

What was most uplifting was seeing so many young people, and people new to grasslands, discovering our marvellous grassy wonderlands.

The celebration, education and building our community will continue next year, with Brimbank Council confirming funding for 2027.

Adrian Marshall, Facilitator, Grassy Plains Network



↑ Rick Van Kuelan leads one of the day's many grassy walks





↑ Stalls at Spring Fling Grassland Festival | *ALL PHOTOS RACHEL VAN KUELAN*

↓ Bhangra dancing was a huge hit at the festival

















ALL PHOTOS RACHEL VAN KUELAN

Protect nature, lose the luge



SAVE OUR SEAT'S **TONY ROBERTSON** GIVES AN UPDATE ON THE CAMPAIGN TO PROTECT ARTHURS SEAT

Approval of a rollercoaster-style luge in Arthurs Seat State Park on Bunurong Country is a shocking case of public land being handed over to wealthy developers, with little or no transparency or community input.



↑ Smart signage at Arthurs Seat State Park | *JORDAN CROOK*

Planning Minister Sonya Kilkenny approved the project through a fast-tracked process, despite 418 objections and just 13 submissions in support. She declined requests to appoint an independent panel and there is no right of appeal to VCAT.

The government also invited the developer, Arthurs Seat Eagle (operator of the existing gondola), to review the draft permit conditions and propose changes. Save Our Seat has asked the Minister to disclose what changes the developer suggested and which of them were incorporated into the final permit, but she hasn't responded.

For these – and many other reasons – we believe the deeply unpopular luge lacks the social licence to proceed. A steel and concrete rollercoaster ride, with non-stop screaming from passengers, is simply out of place in a state park.

Our campaign aims to persuade the developer to abandon the luge and focus on other elements of the development, including a viewing tower and interpretive centre.

In recent months, Save Our Seat, with support and advice from VNPA, has:

- Persuaded Ecotourism Australia to remove a website case study featuring the Eagle gondola, by outlining that the proposed luge is incompatible with ecotourism principles.
- Briefed all declared candidates for the seat of Nepean ahead of the state election, attracting interest across the political spectrum.
- Drawn public attention to the secret process through which the developer was invited to propose changes to permit conditions.
- Continued community engagement through social media and events, including a successful Walk for Wonga from the base to the summit of Arthurs Seat.

We will continue urging the Eagle's owners to 'lose the luge' and leave a positive legacy by protecting the natural beauty – and peace and quiet – of Arthurs Seat State Park.

Find out more at saveourseat.org

Glad tidings Nature news to bring a smile to your face

Ancient bird found in new habitats

That Plains Wanderers *(Pedionomus torquatus)* have recently been detected on Parks Victoria-managed land within the Western Grasslands Reserve for the first time is exceptional news!

Plains Wanderers are the last surviving member of an ancient lineage, with no living relatives in their genus or family. If they go extinct, an entire branch of bird evolution, spanning millions of years, would disappear.

Through collaborative between Parks Victoria and Zoos Victoria, detections were verified from Western Grasslands Reserve sites in December 2025 and April 2026. Calls were picked up by bioacoustics recorders in grasslands that had been ecologically burnt in 2025.

The discovery is a powerful reminder that restoring the right conditions can give even the rarest animal a chance to return and persist.

Read more at parks.vic.gov.au/news/2026 /09/04/04/12/new-signs-of-hope-for-threatened-species-in-the-western-grasslands-reserve



↑ Plains Wanderer | *KENTON REEDER/INATURALIST*

Spotlight on Nature with Kade Mills

San Remo Marine Community
Bunurong Country

There's something special about having a little patch of nature that blows your mind every time you explore it. The fact that 2.8 million people drive over it every year with barely a second glance amplifies this joy.

The San Remo Marine Community (SRMC), tucked beneath the bridge connecting Phillip Island/Millowl to the mainland and extending to the north and west, is one of those places. At low tide, this vast intertidal area reveals a diversity of marine life, from bryozoans (tiny colonial animals that often resemble delicate lace) to opisthobranchs (sea slugs and their relatives, many with tiny or no shells at all). There's over 120 species of sea slugs that call this small area home! And that's just the beginning. There are undoubtedly other groups of animals here waiting for someone to take a closer look.

One of my favourite things about exploring the SRMC with the local community during the Sea Slug Census is introducing people to the diversity living right under their noses. I love that moment when someone spots their first sea slug and then another and another... slowly realising they're surrounded by life. 'I had no idea there was so much here!' is an exclamation I hear regularly. And that's the magic of this place, you don't have to travel to a remote landscape to discover something extraordinary.



↑ Community gathering under San Remo Bridge | *KADE MILLS*

But this hidden gem could have looked very different. Without the work of the Victorian Field Naturalists Club's Marine Research Group, there's every chance it could have become a marina. In 1992, the SRMC was protected under the *Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988*, largely thanks to the group's efforts to document its remarkable marine invertebrate diversity. One dedicated member, David Howlett, visited the site more than 170 times – proof that sometimes it takes a lot of looking to reveal what's right in front of us.

So, next time you're heading over the bridge to Millowl, check the tides and consider stopping at San Remo to explore the shore beneath it. Better still, come back after dark. Armed with a torch and a curious mind, you'll discover a whole new world of marine life hiding in plain sight.

Sometimes the most extraordinary places are the ones we drive past every day.

Kade Mills is ReefWatch Coordinator

Queensland cattle stations become national parks

Almost 400,000 hectares of land will be turned into new national parks in Queensland. Three cattle stations, including part of Westmoreland and Cliffdale Stations in the Gulf Country and all of Cape York's Kendall River Station, will become state-owned.

Nature Conservancy Australia's Mike Roache said while only portions of the land were purchased, those sections were the 'jewels in the crown' of its ecosystems.

'You've got the classic Gulf plains, spinifex and wetlands and rivers that are captured in these properties, that are beautiful to witness and now will become national parks for all to enjoy,' he said.

Endangered Carpentarian Grasswrens, Palm Cockatoos, Grey Falcons, White-bellied Sea Eagles, as well as Swamp Mahogany, Darwin Stringybark and hundreds of significant wetlands will soon be protected.

Read more at abc.net.au/news/2026-10-20/cattle-stations-in-gulf-cape-to-become-national-parks/107284348



↑ Carpentarian Grasswrens | *RIVENDEL/INATURALIST*

Communities count the cost of feral deer



JORDAN CROOK, PARKS & NATURE CAMPAIGNER, REPORTS ON FERAL DEER FORUMS

In the past few months, VNPA has teamed up with the Invasive Species Council and local Landcare groups to highlight the damage being done to nature, farmland and public safety by booming feral deer numbers.

Forums were held with communities impacted by feral deer in Bairnsdale, Orbost, Neerim South and Meeniyan, to hear about the impacts of these invasive pests.

The stories we heard from landholders, Landcare members and other concerned Victorians were dire.

The general consensus was that feral deer numbers have increased in the past few years, with species such as Hog Deer (which are still fully protected under the *Wildlife Act 1975*) turning up in new areas in the Strzelecki Ranges and La Trobe Valley.

Landholders are still left having to apply for an Authority to Control Wildlife (ATCW) to control Hog Deer, despite the damage being done to revegetation projects and water bodies. Farmers are also finding it hard to keep up with the control of feral deer, putting strain on resources, fencing and stocking rates. Concern about the spread of disease to stock was also raised.

What's clear is that the protection of feral deer under the *Wildlife Act* does put up barriers to control, as well as leading to confusion in the community.

Those barriers include:

- Not being able to use trapping or corralling for feral deer, despite other states and territories using it.
- Landcare groups being unable to use funding from the Partnerships Against Pests Program or federal funding to control feral deer, due to *Wildlife Act* protected status.
- Jumping through hoops to control Hog Deer on private and public land despite their growing impact.
- Land managers and holders being unable to use aggregation points facilitating more efficient ground shooting.
- Stopping investigation into other control options such as gene drive technology, baiting and other biological controls.

It's time for the government to remove these barriers by getting rid of protections for feral deer, to support communities and look after nature.

Plant Blindness with Emma Hilton*

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

Necklace (Walking) Fern
Asplenium flabellifolium

The fern genus, *Asplenium*, stems from Greek, meaning without spleen, referencing the shape of the spore-producing sori found if you peer underneath fertile fronds. Its species name, *flabellifolium*, is a reference to *Flabellia* algae, adorned with similar fan-shaped foliage.

Spotted from the peak of Mt Macedon/Geboor (or Geburrh) to escarpments in New Zealand/Aotearoa, these ferns have certainly travelled far. Recent research found spores have crossed the Tasman Sea at least five times.

Though found across continents and able to reproduce asexually via spores, the sexually reproducing plants only occur in southeast Australia and are considered the ancestral population.

Reproduction is not only dependent on prevailing winds. Whilst plants are often considered sedentary, this fern can walk! A small plantlet lies waiting at the tip of some fronds, and when it meets a suitable spot it can take root, 'walking' across the surface.

This ground-hugging, nook-loving plant often spreads its necklace-like fronds between rocks, in caves, under ledges, on cliff edges, or at times, on logs and trunks. Witnessing the life of rocky escarpments can mean a steep bushwalk, but this may not be needed to spot these ferns. The eroded mortar between warm bricks in urban streets is habitat enough at times for them to take root, and reminds us that windy seasons carry spores near and far.



↑ Necklace Fern, Mt Macedon | *EMMA HILTON*

Though not currently listed as threatened, their persistence in the landscape is somewhat precarious. Rocky outcrops with their unique biodiversity are often only conserved due to their sheer inaccessibility for grazing or clearing. The future of these ferns and other rock residing plants should not be overlooked, as they are vulnerable to invasive weeds, encroaching development and altered fire regimes.

Emma Hilton is a Grassy Plains Network intern studying a Master of Urban Horticulture at Burnley

*Unwanted Visitors with Feral Beryl**

Unsolicited nudis

For something a little different, Feral Beryl is diving into the murky world of marine pest management, with a nudibranch flavoured twist.

Crowned Nudibranchs *(Polycera capensis)* are striking sea slugs from South Africa. Their cousins, Hedgpeth's Dorids *(Polycera hedgpethi)* were first described from California but are now found around the world, and their true origins and native range is unknown.

Who invited them?

Both slugs appear to have been introduced by vessel fouling/biofouling, which is where animals and algae attach themselves to the hard surfaces of ships and catch a ride to new destinations. Many marine pests are spread this way, and with sea traffic continuing to increase, this problem isn't going away.

Once introduced, it can take a while for populations to establish. But if conditions become more favourable, arrivals have a better chance of surviving long enough to breed. For example, warming waters may allow visitors from further north to thrive, as we've seen with the spread of destructive urchins down the east coast of Australia.

P. capensis is slowly expanding in Victoria – after their first recorded sighting at Beware Reef near Cape Conran in 2008, they've been found at Metung in the Gippsland Lakes and are occasionally spotted in Port Phillip Bay.



↑ *Polycera hedgpethi*, Rye Pier | *JUSTIN CHAN*



↑ *Polycera capensis*, Blairgowrie | *ALAN TRAVERS*

How do we evict overstaying guests?

This is where Beryl usually talks about the damage being done, and how the ferals can be removed from places they don't belong. The problem with many marine pests is these questions can be difficult to answer.

First, you need to notice the unwanted guest before it establishes breeding populations. While citizen science and education programs aim to arm as many snorkellers, divers and boaters with tools to identify and respond quickly to marine pests, it's impossible to have eyes (and hands) everywhere.

Another issue is our limited understanding of the impact many introduced marine species are having. For these well-travelled sea slugs, we're not sure what damage they're doing to their new home, or if they're replacing locals – though we don't have a lot of baseline data to draw from. In some places, they may even be keeping other biofouling species in check. They eat bryozoans (moss animals), including some that have also hitchhiked to southern waters.

Lastly, many marine species, including nudibranchs and other sea slugs, are 'cryptogenic' – meaning we're not entirely sure where they came from. They may even be native to our shores and just look a lot like a species from a different part of the world. Another reason why we're trying to collect more data, including DNA analysis, on our local nudibranchs and other sea slugs.

If in doubt, don't pull it out! The general rule is don't remove suspected marine pests unless you have a permit or have been asked to do so by authorities. If you see a suspicious plant, animal or algae, snap a photo or jot down noticeable features and report suspected marine pest sightings (including the location and photos) to Agriculture Victoria.

**This edition's Feral Beryl is Nicole Mertens, VNPA Community Learning and Engagement Manager*

↓ Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoo | *JAMES WHITE*

Vote 1 nature

NATURE DESERVES TO BE A PRIORITY THIS ELECTION, SAYS **MATT RUCHEL**, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Victorians love nature. We want to look after it. We want it to be given the respect and care it deserves. Between funding cuts, axed staff and forests left unprotected, nature's copping it. And that's not what Victorians want.

This election is about the kind of relationship we want with the nature we're all part of, and depend on. It's time our elected representatives, and the people asking to become our elected representatives, make nature a priority.

We're part of nature. We depend on it for the air we breathe, the water we drink, and the landscapes and wildlife that ground and restore us. And nature depends on us too, on the choices we make, and the choices our elected representatives make.

Elections are a chance to shape those choices. Every party, independent and candidate is shaping their platform right now. And we need to let them know it's time to start shaping those choices around our relationship with nature.

The following nine proposals are what that looks like in practice. Backing them is a chance to give nature the priority it deserves. Because when nature thrives, we all thrive.

Whoever forms government after this election, and whoever represents your electorate, has the chance to act on what Victorians clearly want for nature.

The rules impacting charities like VNPA in elections are increasingly getting stricter and more complicated. While we are able to focus on advocating for strong policies and highlighting relevant issues, we can't advocate for people to vote one way or another. With these restraints in mind, here's what we're asking of all candidates.

Nine ways to look after nature

1. Properly fund our national parks

National parks protect our unique wildlife, habitats and landscapes. But they're under pressure from invasive animals and weeds, climate change and many other threats. They need specialist and dedicated management so the wildlife and habitats they protect can not only survive, but thrive.

Covering about 18 per cent of the state, national parks and conservation reserves receive less than 0.4 per cent of the State Budget in funding. That's not enough to stop destruction from invasive species, look after threatened wildlife and maintain visitor infrastructure.

National parks need an increase of funding to one per cent of the State Budget. That would see their annual budget almost double and importantly, it would need to be indexed against state growth. This increased funding is needed to make sure these incredibly special and iconic landscapes are looked after to the standard they, and all, Victorians deserve.

Proposed policy:

A public commitment to maintain and enhance the management of national parks and protected areas, including:

- A commitment to fund national parks and other protected areas to at least 1 per cent of the State Budget.
- Making sure park management is guided by the best available scientific evidence and Traditional Owner knowledge of Country and that this is embedded in an official Statement of Expectations for legal purposes.
- Fully funding protected areas to make sure they are managed by properly resourced, skilled professionals, including First Nations managers and that this is embedded in an official Statement of Expectations or legal purposes.
- Properly fund, strengthen and evolve Traditional Owner management of national parks and other public lands to create genuine partnerships.



↑ Enjoying the beauty of nature by the Coliban River, Wombat-Lerderderg National Park | *SANDY SCHELTEMA*

2. Protect the protectors

Park rangers and fisheries officers are the guardians of our forests, mallee, alpine peaks, grassy plains, kelp forests and reefs. They protect wildlife and habitats from damaging illegal activities like firewood theft, over-fishing, animal and plant poaching, and illegal vegetation clearing. There's an urgent need to enhance the capacity in relevant agencies to look after wildlife and habitats and combat crimes against nature.

Proposed policy:

- Commit to reinstating sacked fisheries officers, restoring park ranger numbers and rebuilding specialist capability and capacity in compliance, biodiversity, heritage, recreation management and park planning.
- Commit to a standalone Environment Minister to control all aspects of the portfolio including public land management, without conflicting portfolio responsibilities.
- Commit to managing national parks for the primary purpose of conservation and the quiet enjoyment of nature and amend the Parks Victoria Statement of Expectation to make this explicit and a key performance indicator for senior management and board members.
- Reverse the decision to introduce recreational shooting into Snowy River and Errinundra national parks and align management with the endorsed Greater Alpine National Parks Management Plan.



↑ Rangers at Ricketts Point Marine Sanctuary | *PARKS VICTORIA*

Nine ways to look after nature *continued...*

3. Close logging loopholes

Destructive loophole logging has smashed forests across Victoria, including in the Dandenong Ranges National Park and the new Wombat-Lerderderg National Park. Huge fuel breaks are also planned across the state. On top of that, our forests are vulnerable to the restarting of commercial native forest logging.

We need immediate legislative changes to protect wildlife and forests from industrial and commercial exploitation under the guise of fire management. And to make sure wide-scale native forest logging isn't reinstated.

Up to $1.5 billion has been spent on a logging industry transition, with little spent directly on restoring nature. There's a danger this investment will be wasted if the ban on logging is not maintained and legislative loopholes closed. Given continuing industry pressure, our forests are vulnerable to commercial logging restarting.

Proposed policy:

- Publicly commit to maintaining the ban on native forest logging.
- Commit to a legislative ban on (or legislative amendments to stop) commercial native forest logging on public land.
- Close loopholes which allow native forest logging on private land by amending the relevant state provisions of the planning schemes.
- Establish a standalone regulator to oversee Forest Fire Management Victoria's fire prevention and logging-like activities and establish clear enforceable standards to protect wildlife and habitats, including critical habitat trees.



↑ Loophole logging in the Dandenong Ranges | *MEGHAN LINDSAY*

4. Look after Western Port Bay

Western Port Bay is a magnificent place. It's Victoria's second largest bay, a sanctuary to 65 per cent of Victoria's threatened bird species and over 1350 marine species. It's an outdoor recreation destination and an internationally significant wetland. But right now it doesn't have a whole-of-bay plan to protect and manage it from increasing pressures: declining water quality, population growth across its catchment, climate change and increasing development.

Community concern for the bay is high and there's already broad support for a pathway forward for the bay to survive and thrive – through the Western Port Bay Framework.

Now's the time to adopt this whole-of-bay plan.

Proposed policy:

Commit to implementing the Western Port Bay Framework, the pathway to delivering two practical actions:

- Committing $2–3 million to develop and carry out a marine spatial plan for Western Port Bay.
- Commit to a dedicated Western Port Bay Fund (modelled on the successful Port Phillip Bay Fund), at $2 million per year over the forward estimates.



↑ Somers Beach, Western Port Bay | *PETER BOND*

5. Protect forests in Central Highlands & East Gippsland

The forests of Victoria's Central Highlands and East Gippsland are home to superb wildlife like Greater Gliders, Powerful Owls, Lace Monitors and Long-footed Potoroos along with towering Mountain Ash forests that store vast amounts of carbon and provide clean drinking water for Melburnians. These landscapes need protecting in new and expanded national parks.

Protecting the Great Forest Landscape

The Great Forest National Park, a long running community vision, is supported by Sir David Attenborough, Jane Goodall and Bob Irwin to name a few. The community initiative would protect 360,000 hectares of forest between Healesville and Mount Baw Baw up to Eildon in the north. A modified version of this was recommended by the Allan Government's Eminent Person Panel into Community Engagement.

The park would protect towering Mountain Ash forests, which are slowly recovering from historic logging, and are home to Critically Endangered Leadbeater's Possums, Wedge-tailed Eagles and Sooty Owls.

Forests in East Gippsland

These forests are strongholds for many rare and threatened plants and animals, once common across the state. They're filled with rainforests, pristine rivers, waterfalls and rare plants and animals. With the end of native forest logging in Victoria, there's a clear opportunity to link existing national parks in East Gippsland and parts of the alpine areas to improve habitat connectivity and management.

World heritage listing and Emerald Link

A world heritage listing for forests in eastern Victoria would further protect a sea-to-summit arc of internationally unique habitats. Habitats which are home to over 60 eucalypt species occupying almost every ecological niche from wind-swept mountaintops to coastal lagoons.

World heritage listing would complement and support Emerald Link in East Gippsland, a community-led initiative connecting forests, culture and communities by restoring biodiversity, protecting forests, and creating opportunities for future generations to thrive.

Proposed policy:

- 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 national parks.
- Support Emerald Link, a community-led conservation initiative for East Gippsland.
- Assess and nominate eastern Victoria's forests for UNESCO World Heritage listing.
- Commission an independent statewide assessment – a VEAC-like assessment – into gaps in the protected area estate across land and sea.



↑ Unprotected forest in the Central Highlands | *MEGHAN LINDSAY*

Nine ways to look after nature *continued...*

6. Protect Melbourne's grasslands

Native grasslands, dazzling in their diversity of wildflowers, are found on the volcanic plains that stretch from Melbourne right across the west of the state. Since European settlement this fertile land has had a long history of being destroyed for agriculture and, more recently, urban expansion. Of the grasslands that once covered the Victorian Volcanic Plain, only 0.58 per cent survive.

Large new grassland reserves were promised just out from the western and northern suburbs of Melbourne more than a decade ago as part of a trade-off for urban growth. They still haven't been created and grassland decline and destruction continues across the state. Grasslands desperately need protection, before any more are destroyed.

Proposed policy:

- Commit to creating Melbourne's Grasslands Reserves as outlined in the Melbourne Strategic Assessment (MSA) including the Western Grassland Reserve and Grassy Eucalypt Woodland Protected Area.
- Improve governance and oversight of the MSA program including significantly increased penalties for illegal clearing.
- Improve protection for all grassland ecosystems across Victoria on both private and public land by using all means available, including planning tools such as Environmental Significance Overlays, key tools in the *Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988* and beefed-up responsibilities within the Office of the Conservation Regulator to pursue strategic compliance.
- Initiate a statewide assessment (VEAC-like assessment) of grassland ecosystems, their extent, condition (including changes and drivers of change) and recommendations about ongoing management and protection by both public and private managers.
- Equip fire managers both public (Forest Fire Management Victoria, Parks Victoria) and private (Country Fire Authority and landholders) with appropriate ecological support to expand ecological burning of key grasslands including existing reserves, roadsides and on private land.



↑ Bababi Marning Grassland | *CHRIS CLARKE*

7. Look after marine life

Victoria protects just 5 per cent of its ocean in no-take marine national parks and sanctuaries, despite being home to incredible marine wildlife. At the same time, Victoria has cut its frontline fisheries officer workforce by almost half, reducing our capacity to protect marine life from illegal fishing, enforce fisheries rules and respond to growing pressures.

More of our marine wildlife and habitats need protection, including building resilience. With strong public support for marine protection, a great place to start is extending Jawbone Marine Sanctuary to include the Crystals at Williamstown (a recent Labor election promise), alongside protecting other already identified high-value marine areas across Victoria.

VEAC previously indicated significant gaps in the marine protected area network and twice recommended an investigation to identify areas to fill these gaps.

Proposed policy:

- Commit to reinstating sacked fisheries officers to safeguard our marine national parks and prevent illegal fishing.
- Extend the Jawbone Marine Sanctuary to include the Crystals at Williamstown.
- Undertake an independent statewide investigation and assessment of gaps in the marine protected area network.



↑ Longsnout Boarfish | *SASCHA SCHULZ*

8. Control invasive species

Invasive species are damaging habitats and killing wildlife right across Victoria. Take feral deer for example. Hundreds of thousands of feral deer now occupy nearly 40 per cent of Victoria. They're trashing and trampling habitats and wildlife from the coast to the high country.

Habitat restoration projects are being damaged by feral deer browsing. Farmers are losing productivity and are forced to build expensive fences. Plantation forestry is being impacted. Gardens are being trashed. Dangerous road accidents involving feral deer are becoming more common.

More resources must be put into controlling invasive species including feral deer, feral cats and weeds across Victoria.



↑ Invasive deer in Dandenong Ranges National Park | *ALEX MAISEY*

Proposed policy:

- Fully fund and implement the Victorian Deer Control Strategy.
- Stop listing deer as protected under the *Wildlife Act 1975*.
- Commit to eradicating deer in western Victoria before numbers explode.
- Restore funding and frontline capacity to tackle invasive species across the state.
- Allow broad use of Felixer traps for feral cat control, not just specialised eradication programs.
- Increase funding for pest plant and animal control on public land, including reinstating and expanding the Good Neighbour Program.
- List environmental weeds such as English Ivy and Gazania on the *Catchment and Land Protection Act 1994*.

9. Bring back VEAC (or create a new one)

For more than 50 years, the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council (VEAC) and its predecessors provided independent, transparent, science-based land use recommendations to government. VEAC investigations, guided by expert panels and strong community consultation, shaped millions of hectares of national parks and protected areas across the state including: Grampians (Gariwerd), Alpine, Box–Ironbark, Red Gum and marine national parks, and new central west parks.

Out of the blue, the Allan Government largely abolished this long standing and effective institution, with no replacement. VEAC or an equivalent must be reinstated, to provide crucial recommendations about public land use in the face of climate change, population growth and many other threats that our wildlife and unique habitats are facing.

Proposed policy:

- Create a new Victorian Land Use Assessment and Planning Council, to make recommendations directly to Government for the uses of public land in Victoria, and:
  - Conduct investigations when requested by government on either a statewide or bioregional basis.
  - Base assessments on a thorough analysis of available information, including environmental, economic, climate and demographic forecasts and models, and acknowledge any uncertainties and knowledge gaps.
  - Conduct rigorous community and stakeholder consultation to gather input and advice and test proposed recommendations.
  - Publish a descriptive report, proposed recommendations and final recommendations that include:
    - A systematic review of the status of values and uses, including current and likely.
    - Future impacts of environmental, climate, demographic and economic changes.
    - Recommended land uses, including proposed changes.
    - Estimated economic and social impacts of recommendations.
  - Provide its final recommendations directly to government and the public.
- Abolish the 'Land Access Panel' and/or repeal the *Fishing, Hunting and Outdoor Act 2026*.

↓ Bogong High Plains, Alpine National Park | *ADAM ING*





↓ Shaw Galaxias, Alpine National Park | *HENRY ALBERT/INATURALIST*

Hook, line and stinker



VICTORIA'S FISHERIES AGENCY IS POURING MILLIONS OF INVASIVE TROUT INTO OUR WATERWAYS WHILE THREATENED GALAXIIDS EDGE TOWARD EXTINCTION SAYS **CHRIS SMYTH**

There's a small creek in the Alpine National Park where, upstream of a waterfall, one of the rarest freshwater fish in Australia, Critically Endangered Shaw Galaxias, live.

Prior to floods in 2010–2011, Shaw Galaxias also lived downstream. But predatory Brown Trout invaded as waters rose. Without the waterfall blocking the trout from upstream, extinction would be the galaxiid's fate as their numbers hover around only 80.



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

Trout threaten the survival of 13 galaxiid species in Victoria, with 10 Critically Endangered and three Endangered. In 2024 scientists reported the main threat to 92 per cent of Australia's native fish was invasive species, but very few conservation programs attempted control and prevention.

Research by the Arthur Rylah Institute has shown installing trout barriers, combined with removing trout upstream, can reduce their impact on galaxiids.

Introduced to Victorian waterways in the 1860s, Brown Trout have now been recorded in 26 of Victoria's 29 river basins, with introduced fish exceeding native fish in 20 of those basins.

The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) lists trout among the world's top 100 worst invasive species. Although the Victorian Fisheries Authority's (VFA) Freshwater Fisheries Management Plan 2018-28 states that 'trout have been implicated in the decline of small – and large-bodied native fish, such as galaxiids...', its list of 194 aquatic pest species fails to mention them.

And despite all that evidence of devastating impacts to native wildlife and habitats, VFA are releasing invasive fish by the millions.

Something's fishy

Introducing fish to areas beyond their natural range is a legally recognised potentially threatening process, aka a threat to native wildlife and habitats. However, VFA refers to the trout fishery (trout fishing) as the 'wild trout fishery', seemingly to make it sound harmless and worthy of protection and support.

VFA and its predecessors have released 13.3 million invasive Brown Trout and 11.5 million invasive Rainbow Trout into Victoria's waterways since 1990. In 2024-25 VFA released 1.5 million Brown, Rainbow and Tiger Trout and Chinook Salmon. It also released 8.5 million native fish, seven million of them being Murray Cod and Golden Perch. Improved breeding techniques and the Arcadia Native Fish Hatchery near Shepparton allowed for this dramatic escalation.

Except for a limited breeding program for small-bodied fish at VFA's conservation hatchery, which has led to the release of several hundred galaxiids, native species released are 'sport fish' like Murray Cod, Golden Perch, Australian Bass and Estuary Perch that are targeted by recreational fishers.

While largely to support recreational fishing, native fish releases can build wild populations where conditions are right similar to trout. However, it appears there are few, if any, risk assessments on how the release of native apex predators impacts stream ecology. Predation of macro-invertebrates and smaller fish, such as galaxiids; competition for food and habitat; changes in the genetic structures of fish populations; and the spread of disease are all potential impacts. The release of native fish could also mask the problems of habitat degradation, which is widespread.

Taking it marine

Most releases of native fish in Victoria are in freshwater habitats. However in recent years marine releases appear to have become mainstream. This follows the closure of most Victorian bays and inlets to commercial fishing, which has removed competition for recreational fishers.

The first prawn release took place at Lake Tyers/Bung Yarnda in 2013, when 1.3 million Eastern King Prawn larvae were released. In 2015 and 2016, VFA released Mulloway at Lake Tyers (their first marine finfish release) followed by Estuary Perch in 2017. They released Dusky Flatheads into the Gippsland Lakes in 2021.

In this new marine release program, little attention seems to have been paid to the impacts of introducing vast numbers of hatchery-reared fish to marine habitats for the benefit of recreational fishers.

The warnings were there. In 2010 the University of New South Wales conducted a preliminary and cautious assessment of the capacity of selected Victorian marine or estuarine waters to support release of selected species.

The university's assessment highlighted the lack of knowledge of genetic structures. It recommended a comprehensive environmental impact and risk assessment for each species proposed for release. An online search has failed to find any such assessments, or those required under protocols for translocating live aquatic wildlife.

Along with the transition to native fish, VFA has in recent years focussed more on releasing invasive trout to lakes and ponds, possibly to prevent escapes into rivers and streams. However, some trout release sites connect to waterways, especially during flood times, giving these invaders a chance to spread. Lake Eildon spills into the Goulburn River, Lake Glenmaggie to the Macalister, Lilydale Lake to the Yarra, and Rowville Lakes and Ferntree Gully Quarry to Dandenong Creek.

The million-angler myth

VFA and the Victorian Government appear more concerned about promoting and supporting recreational fishing than looking after threatened wildlife.

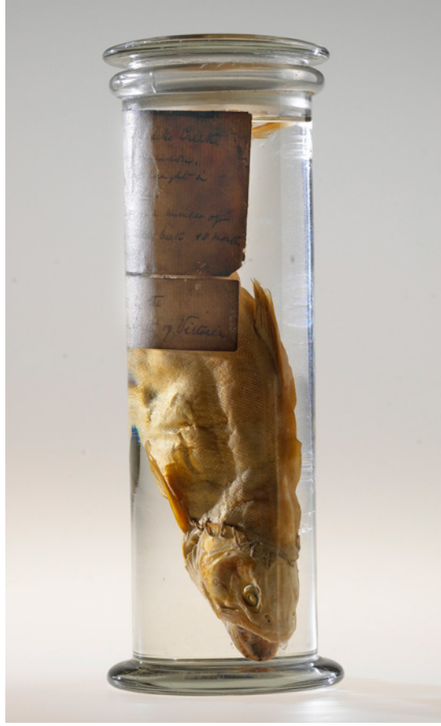
This favouring is largely based on the myth of there being a million recreational fishers in Victoria, which was based on a mid-2019 survey that asked a small sample of Victorians whether they had fished at all in the last year. The result was then extrapolated to represent the Victorian population and at one point estimated that 520,000 women were recreational fishers, even though a VFA survey estimated close to 90 per cent of active fishers were men.

The one million number has allowed recreational fishers to be seen as a powerful voting bloc with the potential to unseat MPs. However, the declining sales of recreational fishing licences (a better measure of fisher numbers) exposes the million-angler myth as false.

The number of fishing licences sold in each of four categories in 2024–25 was: 1-day (102,260); 28-day (9122); 1-year (100,235); and 3-year (33,530). The total of 245,147 is a long way short of one million. Yes, anyone under 18 (they don't vote) and over 70 is exempt from having a licence, but their numbers would not make up the discrepancy.

A *Weekly Times* headline in December 2025 summed it up: 'Victoria's $81m fishing plan fails to lure new anglers.' The newspaper added: 'The state government's plan to attract one million recreational fishers has flopped, with licence sales plummeting by almost 55,000 since the strategy launched.' Giving free fishing rods to children in the Little Angler Kits scheme, the perennial efforts to increase the number of women who fish, and the broader 'Target one million' campaign have not stemmed the decline.

In seeking to reach one million, the State Government and VFA appear to have given little thought to whether their target would be ecologically sustainable. In the absence of effective and comprehensive monitoring and management, it would be hard to prove even the sustainability of current recreational fisher numbers. Especially since recent savage cuts to VFA's on-water compliance and enforcement staff have led to an increase in illegal fishing in marine national parks (non-compliance was at 56 per cent of all onwater inspections even before the cuts).



In 1870, this was the first Brown Trout to be caught in Victoria, after being raised in a dam on a property along Riddell's Creek | *MUSEUMS VICTORIA* →

The VFA has now been merged with the Game Management Authority to form the new statutory authority Fishing, Hunting and Outdoor Victoria, a name that suggests recreational fishers will continue to be prioritised over looking after nature.

As we approach November's state election, all parties should stick up for nature. They should support:

- Well-funded and comprehensive monitoring and management of recreational fishing.
- Actions to significantly reduce the number of trout and other introduced fish in our waterways.
- Independent ecological risk assessments of the release of introduced and native fish in freshwater and marine habitats.
- An official listing of trout as a pest species.
- Reversal of cuts to fisheries officers.

Let your local MP know that.

Chris Smyth is a former VNPA marine campaigner



Sluggin it out for science



FROM MYSTERIOUS MARINE SLUGS TO MUSEUM COLLECTIONS, A COMMUNITY OF NUDI NERDS IS HELPING PIECE TOGETHER THE PUZZLE REPORTS **KADE MILLS**, REEFWATCH COORDINATOR

We often take the names of wildlife for granted. A bird, a tree, a fish, a sea slug – we learn what to call them and rarely give it another thought.

But what happens when you encounter an animal that has no place in the books? Is it a species nobody has described, a familiar animal masquerading as something else, or a creature no one has seen before?

This is the kind of mystery that keeps participants coming back to Victoria's Sea Slug Census (find out more at vnpa.org.au/sea-slug-census). Eight years of searching have revealed an extraordinary diversity of marine life, but also a surprising number of sea slugs (aka nudibranchs) that remain unidentified, unnamed or in taxonomic limbo.

The closer we look, the more we realise how much of the life beneath our waves is still waiting to be understood.

When a name isn't the answer

Over the eight years of the Sea Slug Census, we've recorded an extraordinary diversity of animals. But more than 130 species (almost half of the over 300 found during the census so far) remain only provisionally identified, unnamed or awaiting taxonomic revision. Some may be new to science; others may be familiar to a handful of specialists but remain poorly documented. Either way, the continual discovery prompted a conversation among some of our slug enthusiasts – how do we name the unnamed? What started as a simple question soon grew into a collaborative effort to tackle the taxonomic tangle.

For ReefWatchers Nick Shaw, John Olden and Ian Scholey, simply recording these unusual animals wasn't enough. They wanted to help unravel sea slug taxonomy. We can find these slugs, photograph them and recognise that they don't seem to fit neatly into the field guides, but what happened next? How could these findings be turned into names and contribute to scientific knowledge?

I had to admit I was well out of my depth, so I approached Museums Victoria to find out how we might take the next step. It turned out the right people and expertise were already within reach, and what began as a desire to solve a few sea slug mysteries grew into a remarkable collaborative effort.

A taxonomic basket case

Animal taxonomy – the science of identifying, naming and classifying organisms – can be a bit of a basket case for some groups of animals. Names are always changing, groups are being split up then put back together and taxonomists are known to disagree. DNA analyses turned up with a bigger basket, a few more questions, and a problem which tipped the whole thing upside down.

For centuries, scientists classified animals by examining what they can see: an animal's morphology, that is its size, shape, colour patterns and anatomy. Additional information such as behaviour and development also help. This approach has taught us an enormous amount, but evolution doesn't always follow the neat filing system we've invented for it.

Distantly-related animals can independently evolve remarkably similar features, while close relatives can look quite different. Similarities may reflect shared ancestry or the independent evolution of traits in response to similar environmental pressures – a process known as convergent evolution. Working out which is which can be tough, and it's

← *Madrella* sp. under UV light | *LEON ALTOFF*

Madrella sp. in lab | *LEON ALTOFF* →



one reason why scientists sometimes need genetic evidence, as well as physical appearance, to unravel evolutionary relationships.

Enter DNA sequencing, which has given scientists another way to unravel evolutionary relationships. Genetic evidence can reveal connections that physical appearance alone might miss, uncover cryptic species – distinct species that look almost identical – and help resolve relationships that have puzzled taxonomists for decades.

But DNA is a double-edged sword. Rather than neatly sorting every species into its rightful place, genetic analysis can reveal unexpected complications. Different genes can tell different evolutionary stories, while processes such as hybridisation and the persistence of ancestral genetic variation can make relationships harder to untangle.

And just when scientists think they're getting things sorted, closer scrutiny can reveal even more diversity. What was once considered a single species may turn out to be several. Groups once lumped together may need splitting, while others may be brought back together. Names change, classifications shift, and yesterday's settled science becomes tomorrow's taxonomic headache.

DNA hasn't made taxonomy a basket case. It's revealed just how complicated the basket always was. Our classifications are attempts to make sense of an evolutionary history far messier and more fascinating than the labels we give it. And for sea slug enthusiasts who keep finding animals that don't quite fit those labels, this is where the mystery becomes an opportunity.



↑ *Stiliger smaragdinus* or is it? | *LEON ALTOFF*

A sea slug legend and a fortunate connection

As luck would have it, Audrey and Leon from the Victorian Field Naturalists Club's Marine Research Group were already working to 'download' the remarkable knowledge held in the brain of Bob Burn to update his list of sea slugs found in Victoria.

Bob is something of a sea slug legend. A third-generation builder, he has helped shape his hometown of Geelong through his construction work. Yet, I suspect many of the people who employed him never knew that, in his spare time he's a renowned sea slug taxonomist. He's described many species and published more than 100 scientific papers, including one in *Nature* in 1960, when he was a young naturalist. Bob has also been the taxonomic expert helping identify many of the animals found during our Sea Slug Census.

Combining these efforts was the next step. Earlier this year, representatives from the different groups met at Melbourne Museum to discuss how we could begin documenting and investigating some of these elusive animals more systematically.

The idea was to build a collection that links photographs of sea slugs in their natural habitat with laboratory images, DNA information and preserved specimens. Each contributing a different piece of evidence. Together this creates a resource that can be revisited long after the original discovery.

From reef to research collection

So, what actually happens when we find a sea slug that warrants further investigation?

It starts in the field. A ReefWatcher or member of the Marine Research Group spots an interesting animal and photographs it in its natural habitat. These images record its appearance along with its location and other useful observations like depth and what the slug was found living on. Where appropriate and permitted a specimen is collected for closer examination and transported to the laboratory.

In the laboratory, the specimen is photographed again so we can capture details that might be difficult to see underwater, creating a more detailed visual record of the animal.

Next comes the DNA work. A sample is taken from the specimen and processed to extract its DNA. A target section of the DNA is then amplified – essentially making many copies of that section so there's enough material to sequence. The resulting genetic information can then be examined

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Slugging it out for science *cont...*

alongside the photographs, physical characteristics and existing scientific knowledge to help investigate the animal's identity and evolutionary relationships.

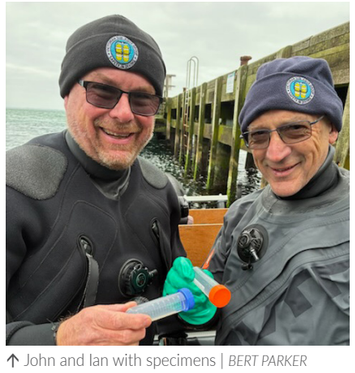
Throughout this process, the specimen itself remains critically important. Once preserved as a museum voucher specimen, it provides a physical reference for future researchers. That way, if new techniques become available, or if it is thought that a species has been misidentified, they can return to the original specimen and reassess the evidence.

The photographs, DNA and preserved animal each tell part of the story:

- The initial photographs document the slug in its habitat.
- Laboratory images reveal finer details.
- Genetic analysis provides a way to investigate identity.
- The voucher specimen allows the evidence to be independently revisited.
- Linking these records together makes the collection far more valuable than any one component alone.

Many hands make light work – and better science

This is where collaboration becomes essential. Getting this done requires permits, an ability to find the slugs, photography, correct specimen handling, laboratory facilities, genetic analysis and taxonomic expertise. No single participant or organisation needs to do everything, but each contributes to move the investigation forward.



↑ John and Ian with specimens | *BERT PARKER*

Museums Victoria prepares the DNA samples for sequencing. The CSIRO National Biodiversity DNA Library does the sequencing, while members of the Victorian Field Naturalists Club's Marine Research Group coordinate collection permits, photograph specimens in the laboratory, and manage specimen preservation and storage. ReefWatchers – all of whom are also members of the Marine Research Group – find the slugs, photograph them and collect specimens under permit. Kayden Verhagen, a Deakin University PhD student studying sea slugs, brings research expertise to the collaboration *(see p. 34)*.

It's a wonderful mix of community discovery, natural history expertise, museum collections, university research and molecular science. Just as importantly, it connects people who might otherwise be working on separate pieces of the same puzzle.

There's still a huge amount of work ahead. Specimens need to be processed, genetic results analysed, morphology investigated and existing classifications checked. Some animals may eventually prove to be species new to western science; others may help resolve longstanding taxonomic questions. Not every find will lead to a new species description and DNA alone won't provide all the answers. The value lies in building a body of evidence robust enough to help researchers work out what they're looking at.

A legacy for future nudi nerds

The real excitement is that this collection will outlast the original discoveries. In the future, researchers may be able to identify an animal that currently defeats us, compare it with a specimen collected elsewhere, or use improved genetic techniques to answer questions we haven't yet thought to ask.



↑ Slugs ready for lab photography | *AUDREY FALCONER*

It's not hard to imagine that a sea slug photographed on a Victorian reef today will become the subject of a scientific paper years from now. The person who first spotted it may never know how significant their find would become. But their photograph, the specimen collected under permit and the information recorded along the way could provide the starting point for a much bigger discovery.

We're building a resource not just for today's researchers, but for future 'nudi nerds' – the people who'll pick up these puzzles long after we've moved on to the next rockpool or reef. By preserving the evidence now we're giving them a better chance of answering tomorrow's questions.

The Sea Slug Census began by encouraging people to look more closely at the life around them. This collaboration is taking that curiosity a step further by connecting community observations with the people and institutions equipped to help investigate them.

It's humbling to continually discover how much remains unknown, even in places we've searched many times before. Reminding us that nature doesn't fit neatly into our categories, and that our understanding is always a work in progress.



← On the summit at the end of the Sydney to Kosciuszko walk | *DI THOMPSON*

Nature wins in Kosciuszko



GREG BUCKMAN ON THE CAMPAIGN TO REPEAL PRO-BRUMBY LEGISLATION

Love them or not, feral horses (aka brumbies) in national parks evoke strong emotions. One thing is clear: there are a lot of them in Australia, over 400,000, the largest population in the world. Up to 25,000 inhabit the Australian Alps (about 80 per cent in Kosciuszko and 20 per cent in the Victorian Alps) doing a huge amount of damage to native habitats and wildlife.

John Barilaro, one-time NSW National Party leader, was a 'brumby' supporter, so much so he had a piece of legislation passed to protect them in 2018. The *Kosciuszko Wild Horse Heritage Act 2018* guaranteed a significant number of feral horses could remain in Kosciuszko.

In contrast, three years after Barilaro's bill, Parks Victoria committed to removal of the feral horse population of the Bogong High Plains and to a significant reduction in their number in the eastern Alps. Barilaro's legislation ignited a passionate campaign to have it repealed, a campaign that finally succeeded last year. This is the campaign's story.

Feral horse legislation

The *Kosciuszko Wild Horse Heritage Act* was always controversial. Opponents said the Kosciuszko National Park simply could not sustain a feral horse population. In 2000, there were about 5,000 in the park but by 2022 there were between 14,501 and 23,535. The first major action of the campaign against the bill was a 36-day/560 km walk from Sydney to Kosciuszko's summit in late 2018 ahead of the March 2019 NSW election.

In November 2021, the first Kosciuszko feral horse management plan was published. It set a target population of 3,000 to be achieved by June 2027. Crucially, it ruled out aerial culling creating scant confidence its 3,000 target would ever be reached.

Inquiry and culling

A major influence in changing the attitude towards aerial culling was a 2023 inquiry by the Senate, 'Impacts and management of feral horses in the Australian Alps'. It recommended the NSW Government allow aerial shooting and that the removal of feral horses from the Victorian Alps be accelerated. It put pressure on the NSW Environment Minister, Penny Sharpe, who, in October 2023, gave the go-ahead to aerial culling in Kosciuszko (soon after the Senate released its report). Aerial culling should also, arguably, be used in the Victorian Alps.

In 2024, parts of Kosciuszko National Park were closed so that the aerial culling could proceed. It induced sharp reactions by pro-brumby advocates. In 2024, one group unsuccessfully sought an injunction against the culling. Again, in 2026, when a second aerial cull was ordered, there was a new wave of pro-horse protests. This brought on a fresh attempted injunction which, like the 2024 one, failed.

Legislation repealed

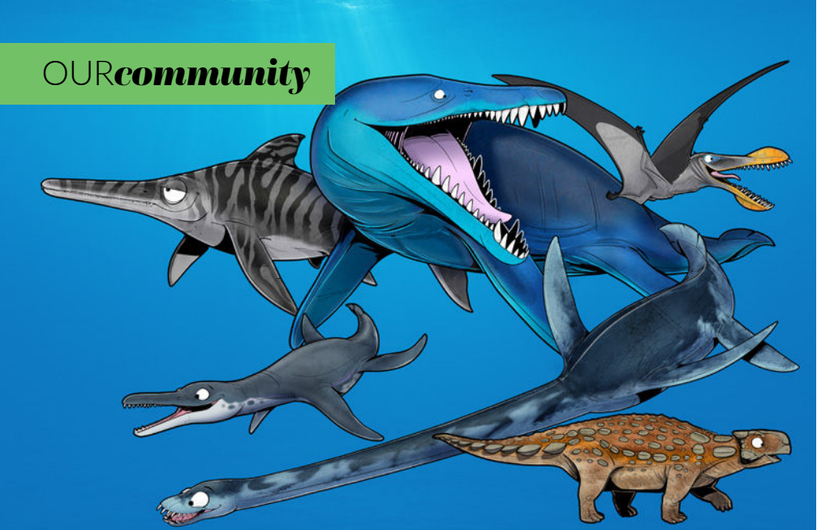
By July 2024, almost 9,000 feral horses had been removed from the park and, for the first time, the NSW Government became confident the 3,000 target was achievable. Pleasing though this was, a third petition was initiated by the Reclaim Kosci campaign, aimed squarely at overturning the 2018 legislation.

Over a 12-month period, 11,300 signatures were obtained: the aim was to reach 10,000 signatures entitling it to be debated in the NSW parliament. In May 2025, Reclaim Kosci supporters attended the petition's parliamentary debate in which Labor, Liberal, Greens and independent MPs spoke in support of repeal. The independent member for Wagga Wagga, Joe McGirr, then sponsored a private member's bill that would finally overturn the legislation.

To beef up its support, Reclaim Kosci volunteers phoned supporters urging them to lobby their local NSW MPs including Liberal MPs who would be key to the bill's success. The Liberals came on board even though it meant breaking with their National Party partners. McGirr's bill passed the lower house in October last year then passed the upper house the following month.

There are more steps involved in ridding Kosciuszko of feral horses and the destruction they cause,, including adoption of a new Wild Horse management plan, and restarting culling after a pause over the 2025/2026 summer, but people-power and nature have largely won out. The Reclaim Kosci campaign showed an effective strategy is crucial. At the end of the day, it had that ingredient in spades and Kosciuszko National Park can finally look forward to a feral horse free future.

A version of this article was originally published by the National Parks Association ACT in its June 2026 *Bulletin* (vol. 63, no. 2).



Bringing nature to life



ZEV LANDES IS AN EXHIBITION AND INTERPRETIVE DESIGNER WHO SPECIALISES IN BRINGING THE NATURAL WORLD TO LIFE

ALL IMAGES COURTESY ZEV LANDES





My background is in cartooning. I love how a cartoon can get a message across quickly, no matter how complex or dry the topic may be. It cuts across ages in the way it can engage, disarm, make someone laugh or get them to think about something in a completely different way.

I've moved from drawing cartoons to using the same principles to create entire worlds through exhibition design, interpretive signage and interactive experiences.

I think visitor centres are such a missed opportunity. Too often they're just facts made to look fancy by a graphic designer, when really we should be getting people curious, excited and falling in love with nature. They should be the portal that transports people from their daily lives to another world, while being open with our audience about the problems and challenges we're working to try to answer.

In an age of AI slop and mass disinformation, I think people are increasingly going to look to institutions like national parks and conservation organisations for authenticity and someone they can trust. A huge part of that is making sure the artwork and experiences we create are genuinely human-made. Emotions and ethics aside, even from a purely business perspective, trust is one of the most valuable things these organisations have. I really hope they don't make the mistake of throwing that away in favour of cheap AI slop. I'm already seeing it happen in real time, and it's devastating.

I'm currently working on a redesign of Kronosaurus Korner, a prehistoric marine museum in outback Queensland. It's an incredible opportunity to bring a prehistoric world to life and link it to important issues facing our oceans today.

I love the first step in the design process, which is joining the scientists in the field, chatting to them and trying to really understand what drives them and the stories they want to tell, and then working out how I can help bring those stories to life in impactful and emotive ways.

How does nature inspire you?

I absolutely love the diversity of nature. The colours, shapes, extraordinary creatures and all the little worlds around us. Nature gives us perspective. It reminds us we're part of something much bigger. But I also love how nature connects people.

We live in a world that bombards us via social media, the news and politics with divisive, angry things that push us apart. Most of you reading this article are actually the antidote to all of this!

People love nature – and the wonder and curiosity you inspire with the work that you do can be contagious and intoxicating. For example, I love the way you can have different people from different backgrounds, all sitting next to each other at the penguin parade, watching them waddle in, and the whole question of who hates who becomes irrelevant.

When done properly, the wonder that nature sparks in all of us connects us.

I want my work to make people feel something. To spark curiosity, break the ice on an issue or get someone to see the world differently.

I see my role as helping people notice, appreciate and connect with nature. From there, conservation organisations can build campaigns, advocate for protection or encourage behavioural change. But without that initial connection, it's incredibly difficult to inspire change.

See more of Zev's impressive work at zevlandes.com

Chris Hibburt

ALL PHOTOS SUPPLIED



CHRIS HIBBURT HAS BEEN A MEMBER OF THE GOVERNANCE, POLICY AND LEGAL COMMITTEE FOR THREE YEARS AND A BOARD MEMBER SINCE OCTOBER 2025

How do you use your experience to help VNPA and nature in Victoria?

I have been a lifelong member of VNPA, and until recently, never had much time to offer on-ground support. When I stepped back from my full-time career in agriculture and business I thought that combining my passion for the bush with my governance experience, I could offer volunteering support to VNPA.

What drew you to support VNPA?

Growing up in Melbourne, my family enjoyed the bush and the Grampians/Gariwerd was our favourite Christmas holiday destination for many years. There I learned about effort and reward climbing mountains and enjoying nature. I became aware of VNPA at university and followed the bushwalking program with interest. I just wanted to support a group that advocated for nature and particularly my home state Victoria.

What messages do you have for other Victorian nature lovers?

There are many nature groups today that are doing a great job at drawing attention to our fragile grip on nature conservation. Which ones to support can be challenging, however, VNPA is the watchdog looking after nature in Victoria, where we are more likely to spend our recreational time when out in the bush. I feel that extra connection to our national parks as a member of VNPA.

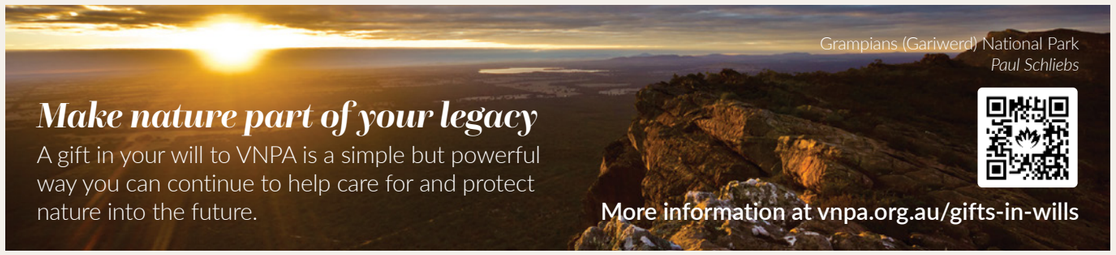
If you were hosting an international visitor to Victoria, where would you take them?

Living in southwest Victoria adjacent to Port Campbell and the Great Otway National Park, we are blessed with an iconic coastline and a wonderful rainforest hinterland. Our visitors will be dragged into the ocean, explore a tucked away rocky beach cove or cycle on endless mountain trails. They may even get to summit some of the peaks of Grampians (Gariwerd) National Park.

What has time in nature taught you?

Apart from the positive effects that being in the bush does for our mind and soul, over time, it is concerning to observe how our tenuous hold on nature is under so much pressure. Increased human traffic, climate change, alternative use and commercial interests continue to erode this hold.

We can't take it for granted that these landscapes will be protected forever. That is why VNPA plays such a vital role.

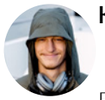




↓ *Baeolidia australia*, Queenscliff Harbour | *KAYDEN VERHAGEN*

IN **PHD PROGRESS** WE DISCOVER THE LATEST EXCITING RESEARCH INTO NATURE IN VICTORIA

SLUG LIFE



KAYDEN VERHAGEN DIVES INTO HIS PHD RESEARCH ON THE EVER-CHANGING SEA SLUG COMMUNITIES IN VICTORIA



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

Sea slugs are globally recognised for their bright colours and novel defensive strategies, but detailed diversity studies are rare, especially within temperate habitats. Within south-eastern Australia, the Victorian Sea Slug Census (a citizen science program run by VNPA) provides crucial baseline data about sea slug diversity across the coast.

My PhD will dive even deeper, analysing details like relative abundances, to figure out the structure and factors that affect sea slug communities. My PhD aims to improve our understanding of sea slug communities in Victoria by exploring how they change over space and time, analysing broad community structures and fine scale concepts using both field-based sampling and laboratory tests.

Through regular field surveys across the Victorian coast over a year, I will describe spatial and temporal differences in sea slug communities using both active (i.e. timed searches) and passive sampling techniques (i.e. deployed settlement structures). I plan to sample both natural marine habitats and urban infrastructure (e.g. harbour walls and floating pontoons). The role of urban infrastructure as important marine habitats remains understudied, despite often hosting diverse sea slug communities and facilitating invasive species introductions.

My initial surveys at Queenscliff have already led to the discovery of several rare species, three potentially new species (to be confirmed by DNA analysis), and a species never before recorded in Victoria.

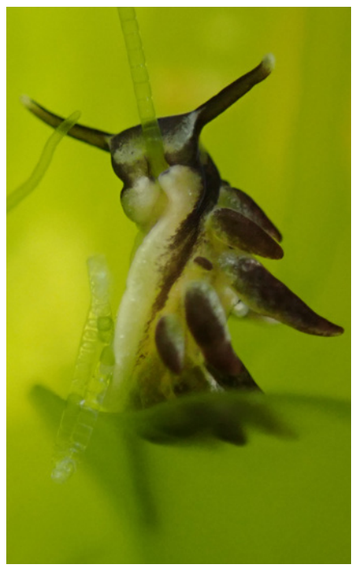
I will also conduct lab experiments on the feeding habits of common pink sea slugs *Verconia haliclona* and interactions between potentially invasive (to be confirmed by DNA) and native species of *Ercolania*.

What led you to do this PhD?

My passion for marine science began with a trip to Heron Island on the Great Barrier Reef when I was four, which eventually led me to enrol in a Bachelor of Marine Science at Deakin University. Sixteen years later, I revisited the same island, this time with my SCUBA diving license, and found my first nudibranch, *Coryphellina lotos*. I decided to try and identify it from the poor photos I had taken, which led to me learning more and more about these fascinating animals.

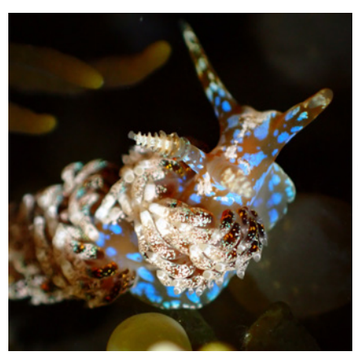
Since then I've spent my spare time finding, identifying and researching all types of sea slugs. This obsession led me to an Honours degree investigating sea slug ecology and once finishing that I knew a PhD would be the best way to contribute to the limited ecological knowledge of these animals.

→ *Polycera janjukia* mating pair, Point Lonsdale
↓ *Ercolania margaritae* feeding on filamentous algae, Point Lonsdale
↘ *Jorunna* sp. RB1, Point Lonsdale
ALL PHOTOS KAYDEN VERHAGEN









↑ *Austraeolis ornata*, Point Danger

What challenges have you had to overcome?

While I am only in the early stages of my PhD, one of the biggest challenges for me has been using coding programs for data analysis. Coding is far from my strong suit and seems to be a common speedbump in the marine science pathway.

Slowly, through a lot of tutorials and assistance from supervisors I have begun to understand it, and how important of a skill it is.

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

There are no shortages of surprises when it comes to sea slugs, with some being able to photosynthesise and other incredible biological adaptations, but the most interesting thing I have learned is how quickly their communities can change.

During my honours research I found that sea slug communities in intertidal rockpools were markedly different between day and night searches, with several species only found during the day or night. Daytime searches often resulted in brightly coloured nudibranchs, perhaps taking advantage of the increased sunlight to advertise their bad taste or toxicity through warning colours. Nighttime searches, however, resulted in many well camouflaged slugs, blending in with their food sources, with little light to expose them.

During regular searches at Queenscliff harbour for my PhD I've already found highly variable communities, with strong species variation, even within the same week.

Such variation across a short amount of time suggests sea slug communities in Victoria are likely starkly different across seasons, a pattern which I will explore in my PhD.



↑ *Flabellina* sp. RB2, Queenscliff Harbour, Wadawurrung Country

What impact do you want your research to have?

I would like my research to contribute to our understanding of sea slug ecology by clarifying some of the factors that influence patterns across the Victorian coast. I would also like to spread awareness about the importance of monitoring urban infrastructure for invasive species.

I want to share my passion for these animals and get more people involved in the wonderful world of sea slugs. By showing how variable sea slug communities are, I hope to inspire people to regularly get out and explore their local marine habitats. You truly never know what you will find.

Kayden Verhagen can be contacted at Kverhagen@deakin.edu.au

JAWBONE
MARINE SANCTUARY

IN **PARK FRIENDS** WE VISIT A VICTORIAN PARK TO VIEW ITS HISTORY, FEATURES, THREATS AND FRIENDS

Location



Traditional lands and waters of the **Bunurong**

15 km SW of Melbourne

30 hectares

Map



History

Proclaimed 2002

No additions to date, but there is a campaign underway to extend the sanctuary to the Crystals at Williamstown.



↑ Jawbone's alga rich basalt reef | *SANDY WEBB*

Physiography

Victorian Bays and Inlets Marine Bioregion

28 species of bony fish

6 species of ray and the Port Jackson shark



↑ Zebrafish (*Girella zebra*) | *JACK BREEDON*

3 species of pipefish

2 seahorse species

Numbers as recorded in the JMSCG Species Inventory

Features

Rocky shore and rocky reef, saltmarsh and mangroves

Seaweed reefs, subtidal and intertidal seagrass beds



↑ Seagrass beds (*Heterozostera nigricaulis*) | *SANDY WEBB*

Features

White mangroves (Endangered in Victoria) established on basalt rocks

Unique supralittoral lichen and limpet communities



↑ White Mangroves | *SANDY WEBB*

Threats

Over-abundant sea urchins causing barrens

Huge waves of the invasive Northern Pacific Seastar

Impacts of human activities, including trampling of seagrass and illegal fishing



← Northern Pacific Seastar | *MICK MORLEY/ INATURALIST*

Friends

Jawbone Marine Sanctuary Care Group (JMSCG)

jawbone.org.au

jawbonemarinesanctuary@gmail.com

Friends of Williamstown Wetlands

friendsofwilliamstownwetlands.org.au

← Rich marine habitat of Jawbone Marine Sanctuary | *JACK BREEDON*

Jawbone's alga rich basalt reef | *SANDY WEBB* →



PARKFRIENDS VISITS A MARINE JEWEL CLOSE TO THE CENTRE OF MELBOURNE

Jawbone Marine Sanctuary protects 30 hectares of coastal waters. Named for its shape, this unspoilt place protects a unique collection of intertidal habitats and is a haven for coastal and marine life right next to Melbourne.

The west of the sanctuary is home to saltmarsh and the largest area of mangroves in Port Phillip Bay – the only Victorian mangroves growing on a basalt coast. Fine sand and patches of seagrass lie offshore.

The eastern side of the sanctuary has rocky habitats, from the high up areas only occasionally touched by storm waves to submerged boulders and ledges that lie beneath the lowest tides. Soft basalt rock has weathered into smaller rocks and pools home to tidal-loving wildlife.

Jawbone Marine Sanctuary Care Group (JMSCG) began in 2008. It connects with the community through activities designed to connect people with local marine areas and foster local stewardship.

Regular activities include the annual Great Victorian Fish Count and Victorian Sea Slug Census, Clean Up Australia Day and school excursions. Local students take part in guided rock-pool rambles, a board walk and litter collection. They learn from local Bunurong elders about First Nations culture and cook food with coastal ingredients used by First Nations people.

In collaboration with local community groups, JMSCG has campaigned for the sanctuary to be extended to include the Crystals at Williamstown Beach, a proposal Labor has agreed to as an election promise. Jawbone and the Crystals share a low-energy infralittoral rocky reef that was originally intended to be fully included in Jawbone Marine Sanctuary, but the Crystals was excluded from the final sanctuary boundary. JMSCG proposes the extension will increase the sanctuary to 42 hectares and better protect the Jawbone Crystals reef.

With thanks to David Speller and Sandy Webb

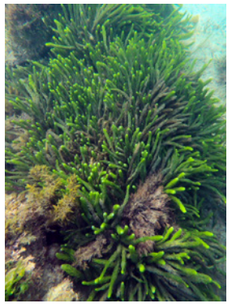


↑ Sandy Webb with students at JMSCG's touch tanks | *ROBERT GARDNER*



↑ Sparsely Spotted Stingaree | *ANDREW CHRISTIE*

↓ Bigbelly Seahorse | *JACK BREEDON*



↑ *Caulerpa crispata* | *STAN WOODHOUSE/INATURALIST*





BENDOC
NATURE CONSERVATION RESERVE



JORDAN CROOK TRAVELS TO VICTORIA'S FAR EAST CORNER FOR A SPECTACULAR LANDSCAPE

This reserve is the southernmost extremity of the Monaro Tablelands and is home to stunning Montane Grassland and Grassy Woodland. It's an iconic landscape with hillsides of tussock grasses rolling into the distance.

It runs along the Victoria-NSW border, about 15 minutes out of Bendoc. When I visited there were wildflowers blooming and some orchids about to open. Flushes of pink and white peaked out between the tussocks.

To get there you have to travel through private farmland. I was luckily able to visit with a Parks Victoria ranger with the Friends of Errinundra National Park as part of the Springtime in Errinundra Weekend.

If you're ever in the area, you can contact Parks Victoria to organise access to this iconic and truly grouse landscape.

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











Bendoc Nature Conservation Reserve, Bendoc

500 km/6.5 hour drive East of Melbourne

↑ Bendoc Nature Conservation Reserve | *ALL PHOTOS JORDAN CROOK*

A tenacious alpine legend

GERARD MCPHEE WAS AWARDED HONORARY LIFE MEMBERSHIP IN OCTOBER

To be eligible for life membership, a person must have provided outstanding services to VNPA over a period of time. Gerard McPhee has clearly put in extensive service on VNPA committees and the board, providing leadership and thoughtful consideration on many issues. Gerard has been a member since 2010, serving on the Conservation Committee (2013–2025), Conservation & Campaigns co-convenor (2018–2024), VNPA Council (2018–2025), and as Vice-President (2018–2021).

In addition, Gerard was VNPA's representative on Mount Stirling Consultative Committee for ten years. Mount Stirling and the Alps are special to Gerard. His work has included:

- Passionately protecting Mount Stirling and promoting the VNPA Mount Stirling link proposal.
- Pushing back against the Stirling Link Road (2014–2016) known internally as the road to nowhere. Working with Charles Street and Environmental Justice Australia, Gerard was a key driver of the rally against the unnecessary plan to seal the link road. It ultimately ended up in an extensive VCAT case, and has still not been built.
- Exposing plans to exclude the public from some of the key viewpoints at Mount Buffalo Chalet, and exposing flawed studies and plans to reduce family camping at Lake Catani.
- Many years forensically highlighting the ill-advised Falls to Hotham Peak Trail (with Phil Ingamells and Mike Feller). Showing up the flaws in consultation, punching holes in business cases (after getting them under FOI) and scrutinising the evolving (and still evolving) Environment Effects Statement process.
- Assisting in citizen science at Mount Stirling and Mount Cole, plus on other forest issues, including in Melbourne Water Catchments.
- Monitoring the various and sometimes dubious plans and positions of the alpine resorts.



↑ Gerard McPhee | *SUPPLIED*

Gerard had a great sense of community fairness and advocated strongly against the exclusive use of national parks and other special places for the wealthy, at the expense of other Victorians.

Gerard is also an expert in his personal capacity (in support or in partnership with VNPA) on Freedom of Information requests. His advice has been invaluable and his approach very successful in escalating and questioning decisions by departments and the Commissioner for Freedom of Information (we joke that there's a filing cabinet named after him in their office).

His commitment has certainly been substantial, with commendable personal input over a significant period of time.

Gerard's contribution has been selfless and has demonstrably and positively helped VNPA in its work.

Matt Ruchel, Executive Director



↑ The beautiful landscape of Alpine National Park that Gerard McPhee has worked tirelessly to protect | *NINA KERR*

Board achievements for 2026

It has been a busy year for VNPA's Board of Directors, including changing its name from Council via our Special AGM in July.

In addition to the recruitment of new Directors and Committee members, one of the most important activities has been the recruitment process for a new CEO and preparing for the Executive Director transition.

The Board set up a Working Group, updated the new CEO position description and contract of employment, advertised the role, and undertook job interviews.

An important governance oversight project was the new Customer Relationship Management database. VNPA contact lists were fragmented and we needed more relevant and targeted communications to members, donors and supporters.

Further work included preparing for a review in 2027 of the VNPA Strategic Plan; considering the results of the VNPA Fundraising Survey; commissioning a staff wellbeing survey; building a list of pro-bono legal advisors to support VNPA activities when required; and updating the Constitution.

We look forward to working with the new CEO, staff and supporters in 2027.

Marilyne Crestias, President

Big crowd at our 74th AGM

Our 74th AGM was held on 20 October in Melbourne. A higher than usual number of members attended in person and online, taking the opportunity to hear long-time Executive Director, Matt Ruchel deliver the main talk of the evening.

Matt did not disappoint, with an entertaining and enlightening speech describing multiple campaigns over his long career. From the Red Gum parks and getting cattle out of the Alps, all the way to the new central west parks, and everything in between.

We awarded Life Membership to Gerard McPhee, a tenacious alpine legend who has spent many years tirelessly supporting VNPA and nature protection *(see p. 39)*.

It's always great to catch up with VNPA supporters and fellow nature lovers and we look forward to more wonderful chats at our 75th AGM next year!









From top: Matt Ruchel; Marilyne Crestias, VNPA President; Wurundjeri Elder, Damien Ross performing the Welcome to Country; Shannon Hurley, Parks & Nature Campaigner.
ALL PHOTOS MATT SMALL

Quiz answers from p. 4

1. **d.** More than 500 species of sea slug live in Victoria, with many more being discovered the more we search for them.
2. **b. Finding food.** Rhinophores are sensory organs that can detect chemicals in the water. This helps sea slugs sense their surroundings and locate food.
3. **b. Some sea slugs can become solar-powered** by absorbing chloroplasts from the algae they eat and using the nutrients produced through photosynthesis from the still-functioning chloroplasts, a phenomenon is known as kleptoplasty. They can use these chloroplasts to survive several months without eating.
4. In addition to their muscular foot, sea slugs can move around by **drifting/rafting**. They can undulate their bodies or drift/raft upside-down on the surface using water surface tension.
5. **c. Sea slugs use their bright colours as a warning to predators, known as aposematism.** Aposematism is a warning strategy widely used in nature, where animals use their bright, bold colours to tell other animals they're dangerous or unpleasant to eat.
6. **a. Sea slugs lay their eggs in spiral shapes.** These coiled 'egg ribbons' pack many eggs into a compact, secure shape so they're less likely to be washed away than eggs scattered loosely.
7. **True.** Nudibranch comes from the Latin *nudus* (naked) and the Greek *brankhia* (gills); nudibranchs shed their shell after the larval stage, leaving their gills uncovered.
8. **False.** However, this extraordinary ability has been observed in a very few sea slugs, where, after injury, young individuals were able to regrow an entirely new body from their detached head, including major internal organs, while older individuals were unable to regenerate.
9. **c.** Some sea slugs can release a spectacular cloud of purple ink when threatened. The ink can interfere with a predator's senses, essentially creating an underwater smoke screen while the sea slug slowly makes a getaway.
10. **c.** Some aeolid nudibranchs feed on stinging animals such as hydroids. Instead of destroying every stinging cell, they can transport undischarged nematocysts through their digestive system and store them in specialised sacs called *cnidosacs* at the tips of their appendages. When threatened, the stolen stinging cells can be discharged against predators.



Extraordinary portrait of a single reserve

***Ecology of native orchids and their pollinators*, Dick Wettenhall**

Dick Wettenhall, 2026, 553pp, ISBN 978-176453666

Take a moment to imagine the time, energy and dedication it would take to create a 553 page book on the pollinators of native orchids in a single reserve. That's exactly what Dick Wettenhall and his trusty four-legged companion Basil did. They spent countless hours watching and photographing the orchids living in the Gurdies Nature Conservation Reserve in West Gippsland, and the tiny visitors that keep them going.

The result, *Ecology of native orchids and their pollinators*, is an extraordinarily detailed portrait of a single reserve. It starts with the habitats. Then introduces the orchids that live there. Then the bees, wasps, sawflies, ants and gnats that pollinate them.

Page after page of photos catch these partnerships in action, with detailed descriptions of interactions between pollinators and orchids.

It's a reminder of the hidden worlds in one small patch of bush you can discover if you bring patience and look closely. It's a great resource for orchid enthusiasts.

Meghan Lindsay is VNPA Communications Advisor





Delighting in the world of colour in the bush

***On a bushwalk*, Andrea Rowe, illustrated by Hanna Somerville**

Hardie Grant Children's Publishing, 2026, 24pp, ISBN 978-1761216473

Little people love to explore little worlds! This beautiful book lets little nature-lovers discover the glimmering colours and hidden wonders of a bushwalk.

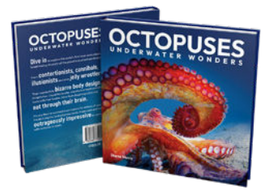
On a Bushwalk is the third book in the series, following *In the Rockpool* and *Amid the Sand Dunes*, with each title encouraging gentle exploration of the world around us. Each book in the series also focuses on a different early learning concept – *Rockpool* looked at numbers, *Sand Dunes* explored sounds and in *Bushwalk* readers can delight in the world of colour.

Mia, mum of nearly-three-year-old Sloane, said her daughter loved the book. Sloane's favourite part was spotting the kangaroos/wallabies and absolutely loved the purple butterfly. She enjoyed pointing out things that were the same colour as the text and then seeing if anything else was in the picture, like a lizard or frog.

Sloane also loved the metallic green on the cover, she liked touching the shiny parts. Overall, the story held her attention well.

Books in this series are perfect for babies, toddlers and young pre-schoolers – our youngest nature-lovers!

Sloane, 3-years-old (almost) and mum Mia with Paul Clifton*, ParkWatch *editor



Eight armed* wonder of the world

***Octopuses: Underwater wonders* by Sheree Marris.**

Sheree Marris, 2024, 120pp, ISBN 978-0980774016

This stunning book celebrates the ocean's most fascinating animals, Octopuses!

The story unfolds with glorious photography and vivid storytelling from Australian award-winning author and marine biologist Sheree Marris. Using the latest scientific research and her conversational writing style, the book explores the biology of these underwater wonders including their ability to change colour (even though they're colour-blind), why they're the most intelligent invertebrate on Earth and how they've managed to survive in our oceans for over half a billion years with no protective shell.

Octopus enthusiast Zeke says 'This book is AMAZING! The photos are so pretty and colourful. The writing is really funny and hard to put down!'

'Did you know that octopuses have arms and not tentacles? I didn't! My favourite part was learning about the seven-armed octopus – it only has SEVEN arms instead of eight. That's pretty arm-azing! The book taught me that octopuses can change colours instantly and have three hearts too. And all their food has to pass through their brain.

'The book had some tricky words, but the funny writing made it easier to understand. I was totally suckered in! Anyone who thinks octopuses are awesome needs this book! It's eight times better than other books!'

Octopuses is a compelling read for nature lovers, ocean enthusiasts and photographers of all ages.

Zeke, 8-years-old, with Paul Clifton*, ParkWatch *editor

*mostly!



Walking in wallan wallan



BUSHWALKING LEADERS **DENISE AND ANTHONY FERNANDO** SHARE HIGHLIGHTS FROM THEIR LATEST 'WALK, TALK & GAWK'

In October, our bushwalkers headed to Wallan, on Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Country, for a guided tour of the proposed wallan wallan Regional Parkland. This Walk, Talk & Gawk, run with BEAM Mitchell Environment Group and Merri Creek Management Committee (MCMC), took in key sites across the area.

We began atop Greenhill Reserve, where our guides pointed out the now-drained Hernes Swamp, surrounding volcanic cones, the Merri Creek and recent housing estates, and explained plans to restore the wetland's natural water flows. Sunshine and light winds made it easy to picture the wetlands in their original splendour, reminding us the name 'wallan wallan' in Woi-wurrung means 'circular place of water'.

At two railway reserves we saw remnant seasonal herbaceous wetlands, a glimpse of what the alliance hopes to achieve on a larger scale. The second also held remnant grassland of the Victorian Volcanic Plain, with Chocolate Lilies, Bulbine Lilies and Milkmaids in abundant flower. We then compared two new housing developments: one making thoughtful room for nature and recreation, the other encroaching on a wetland.

The day ended at Merri Park, a working cattle farm where Kate Looker and her family have spent 25 years restoring their stretch of the Merri Creek. After lunch, we rambled through the Merri Creek Gorge, marvelling at the regenerated riparian habitat, ancient River Red Gums, unusual rough-barked Manna Gums and a coolamon tree. For many, this was the highlight. It was especially striking to learn that before Kate's work with local Landcare groups and MCMC, bare paddocks ran right to the creek. In Kate's words, 'there was not a blade of grass over one inch.' This land is now earmarked for the future parkland.

Thanks to the wallan wallan Regional Parkland Alliance, especially Paul Macgregor for planning the route and sharing his knowledge, Michael Longmore of MCMC for his restoration insights, and Kate Looker for welcoming us onto her property.

Our takeaway from this experience: Truly inspirational to witness first-hand what genuine commitment to environmental regeneration has achieved for a section of the Merri Creek system, and hopeful this can be extended more widely for the proposed wallan wallan Regional Parkland.

Encouragingly, Environment Minister Jaclyn Symes MP recently announced $1m to immediately start work to determine the park boundary, work with Traditional Owners, and formally consider the parkland in current and future planning processes.

Add your voice at wallanwallanrp.org.au





ALL IMAGES ANTHONY & DENISE FERNANDO

Keen to join a VNPA bushwalk? Find out more at *vnpa.org.au/bushwalking*



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

Where we went in Spring

Wild Families explored the Blue Lake at Plenty Gorge with a guided nature walk and nature journalling activity, joined by chatty cockatoos and other birds.

We held a special **Walk Talk and Gawk** with BEAM Mitchell and Merri Creek Management Committee, showcasing the lands and waters of the proposed wallan wallan Regional Parkland and learning more about the community's efforts to make this park a reality *(see p.42)*.

Nature Stewards have been out and about connecting with their local places such as Bolin Bolin Billabong, Melbourne Botanic Gardens, Coranderrk, Lal Lal Falls, bunjil nganga Parkland, Jerringot Wetlands and Lake Connewarre.

ReefWatch broke out the torches and headlamps for the Sea Slug Census. There were slugs aplenty along with sea spiders, octopuses and brittle stars. People stayed out searching, exploring and marvelling and connecting with each other well past bedtime on a beautiful Spring night.

Grassy enthusiasts visited grasslands right across Victoria through just under 30 **Grassy Tours** run by the Grassy Plains Network.



↑ Nature Stewards geology and soils expedition to Gong Gong Reservoir Park, Ballarat | *SIOBHAN ROGAN*



Upcoming activities

Our online Activities 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!

Check out our online calendar – new activities are added regularly.

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

Discover more at *activities.vnpa.org.au*



This Festive Season, give the gift of nature!

VNPA Gift Membership

Individual $65 Household/Family $90 Concession $40

Give the gift that will support nature in Victoria every day of the year, and for years to come.
Find out more at **vnpa.org.au/gift-membership**

IMAGE: MOUNT COLE GREVILLEA