

Hello everyone and welcome to the summer edition of our newsletter. I'm pleased to report that we now have over 90 members and we had a great response to our information display at the Trentham Fair. Thanks to all that contributed. Meanwhile, back in the forest, the flowering has finished and the seeds are maturing. Young birds are fledging, learning to fly, learning to feed themselves, and starting to become independent. Young possums and gliders are leaving their mum's backs, but it's still too early for the koalas to leave their mother's backs. Males are cruising their territories... Summertime... Happy New Year... **Tibor Hegedis** (editor)

Silver Banksia (*Banksia marginata*)

By Murray Ralph

Silver Banksia (*Banksia marginata*) is the only naturally occurring Banksia in this area. It is relatively common in some parts of the Wombat Forest, where it grows on less fertile soils as a low, often straggly, shrub 1-2m tall.

On more fertile soils Silver Banksia grows as a small tree, usually to about 6m tall. I'm not sure whether this tree form is genetically different from the shrub form. However, the small tree form of Silver Banksia is now very rare. During the mid to late 1800's it was extensively cut down as a favoured tree for burning in bakers ovens. As it occurred in areas that were very suitable for agriculture, it was also more generally cleared for this purpose.

Several years ago Trentham Landcare organised a seed collection day in the Springhill area, near the historic Springhill cemetery. Whilst wandering around, to our surprise, we discovered a Silver Banksia about 8m tall with a very large trunk. In fact it was the largest Silver Banksia I'd ever seen. A bit more of a look revealed another 3-4 plants, although not nearly as large.



A very large Silver Banksia near the Springhill cemetery. It's size is made clear by the figures standing in front of it. (photo by Tibor Hegedis)

It appears that this small population of Silver Banksia is all that remains of what would have been a far more extensive population in the Springhill area. In the early days of white settlement, Silver Banksia was widely referred to as Honeysuckle, and there is a Honeysuckle Lane in Springhill.

From a conservation viewpoint this population of Silver Banksia is very important. Due to its large nectar rich flowers the Silver Banksia is a great habitat plant for a variety of native fauna, including insects, birds, Eastern Pygmy Possums and Sugar Gliders. Encouragingly, a number of seedlings are coming up at the site. Seed has also been collected by Trentham Landcare and plants are being grown for replanting in the area. ■

The Trials Of Trail Bikes

By Angela Halpin

Inappropriate trail bike use in the Wombat Forest is a big issue right now. Trail bike sales are increasing and conflict between trail bikers and forest residents is also increasing. The appalling noise and erosion from trail bikes near my own home is really annoying. I was keen to discover what the current rules for trail bikes are and what action can I reasonable undertake to preserve my sanity?

Thirty years ago, just as the cheap, reliable trail bikes first hit the scene in the early 70's, owning a trail bike was the coolest thing to do at my school. I rode bikes for many years and still have a soft spot for trail and road bikes. So I'm interested in a positive outcome for both sides in this equation.

The problems trail bikes create affect many locals for a range of reasons. The deafeningly loud noises bikes often make are probably the number one irritation. Glenlyon's 'Horse Riding for the Disabled' group is understandably concerned that a speeding noisy biker could instigate a serious accident. Most of us live in the forest for the peace and quiet, so the noisy bikers present a rude and unwelcome disturbance. But for forest animals this noise could be fatal. Joeys can be thrown from the pouch of terrified marsupial mothers who flee for their lives. All sorts of animal and bird behaviours are compromised as the bikes roar around all weekend, often in the most bio-diverse parts of the forest.

The erosion of tracks and creek banks have an impact on water quality and aquatic life. Sedimentation leads to the deterioration of habitat quality by reducing the availability of food for vertebrates such as aquatic mammals, birds and reptiles. This affects egg-laying and the behavioural patterns of amphibians, fish and invertebrates by reducing levels of oxygen in the water or covering egg masses with sediment. Sedimentation also adversely influences photosynthetic activity in aquatic plants, and affects the quality of attachment sites (e.g. on logs, rocks and the stream bed) for some aquatic invertebrates.

I contacted the DSE to find out if the problems in the Wombat Forest had hit the Department's radar. I am pleased to say that there is some good news to report. DSE has appointed Simon White as South West Trail Bike Project Officer who's job it is to work collectively with the community, bikers and a range of Government Authorities to shift trail bike riding onto a more sustainable footing. Simon rang me for a chat and then emailed several items of



Deep erosion scar through gully caused by trail bikes near Glenlyon (photo by Tibor Hegedis)

interest. Simon is conducting a 'trail bike trial'. This has involved community forums at Ballarat and the Otways, all part of a three year DSE statewide project 'aimed at balancing the interests of forest users and promoting a more sustainable use of forests. Once a balance is found that works in the trial areas, the department would be keen to use that knowledge in other forest areas around the region'. The various government enforcement departments plan to cooperate more, the bikers will get better education and signage as to their rights and responsibilities, and unloading areas will be provided away from built up areas. This will reduce conflict with local residents, but I wonder how this improves the wellbeing of local animals? Simon pointed out to me that this process is not quick. It may be some time before the Wombat is due to be the target of this program – next financial year at the earliest. Don't hold your breath. A positive action to take now is to write to the Minister for the Environment. Make a case that Wombat needs to be next on the list.

All the forested areas of Victoria are experiencing problems with trail bikes. Legally 'vehicles are not permitted to create their own tracks through the forest, 4WD's or bikes, and must not be driven OFF formed public roads. Normal road rules apply. Riders must be fully licensed and bikes should be road registered and roadworthy.'

continued next page...

There is lots of information on the internet that is of interest.

If you do choose to tell bikers that they are out of line – stay calm and present a friendly face. Best to ensure you have a witness to corroborate your version of events. Take down their registration if you can and be aware that you can expose yourself to harassment. A local Glenlyon resident has been harassed outside the Glenlyon Store and then at their home for daring to criticize illegal bike use. (Harassment is intimidation and is a criminal offence. This was referred to the local police and anyone else who experiences this needs to report the offenders immediately to police.) Better still ring DSE or the local police if you have bikers behaving badly in your area. Most bikers are responsible and it is just a few that are spoilers. With a bit more education, information and enforcement the forest will remain a pleasant place to live.

Contact Simon White, Trail Bike Project Officer – South West on 5336 6810 or to visit the project website www.dse.vic.gov.au/trailbikes and write to The Hon. Gavin Jennings, Minister for the Environment, PO Box 500, East Melbourne 3002 ■

Ecological Vegetation Classes of Wombat Forest

By Murray Ralph

The types of native vegetation that occur across Victoria vary significantly. This variation reflects differences in geology, soil type, aspect, climate, altitude and position in the landscape. Depending on these environmental conditions, particular plant species and groups of plants will tend to grow together. These distinct native vegetation types are called Ecological Vegetation Classes (EVC's).



Sedgy Riparian Woodland near Lyonville (photo by Gayle Osborne)

Within the Wombat Forest approximately 30 different EVC's have been mapped.

Sedgy Riparian Woodland (EVC 198)

This vegetation community has a scattered distribution across the Wombat State Forest. It usually occurs in narrow bands along broad, flat drainage lines, which may be seasonally inundated. However, in some parts of the Wombat Forest, such as south of Trentham, it can cover larger areas. Soils are usually alluvial of varying depths.

The overstorey is usually dominated by Swamp Gum (*Eucalyptus ovata*), although on some sites the rare species Black Gum (*Eucalyptus aggregata*) may be present. Blackwood (*Acacia melanoxylon*) also occurs as an understorey tree.

The shrub layer is usually sparse and open, and includes Prickly Tea-tree (*Leptospermum continentale*), Prickly Moses (*Acacia verticillata*), Prickly Currant-Bush (*Coprosma quadrifida*) and Wiry Bossiaea (*Bossiaea cordigera*).

A very dense sward of Red-fruited Saw Sedge (*Gahnia sieberiana*) and/or Tall Sword Sedge (*Lepidosperma elatius*) often dominates the ground layer. Although sometimes this sedge layer is more open with scattered clumps of Spiny-headed Mat-rush (*Lomandra longifolia ssp. longifolia*) among a layer of small sedges, rushes, native grasses and herbs.

Sedges and rushes include Spreading Rope-rush (*Empodisma minus*), Club-sedges (*Isolepis spp.*) and Rushes (*Juncus spp.*), Native grasses include Slender Tussock Grass (*Poa tenera*) and Weeping Grass (*Microlaena stipoides*), Native herb species include Kidney Weed (*Dicandra repens*), Cinquefoil Cranesbil (*Geranium potentilloides*), Hairy Pennywort (*Hydrocotyle hirta*) and Prickfoot (*Eryngium vesiculosum*).

All EVC are assigned a conservation significance based on the extent to which they have been cleared from their former range. Sedgy Riparian Woodland is classified as being vulnerable. The main current threats to this EVC in the Wombat State Forest include climate change, fuel reduction burning, weed invasion and altered hydrology. ■

Fuel Reduction Burn At Domino Road

By Gayle Osborne

Fuel Reduction Burning is being carried out by DSE in the Wombat State Forest. The aim of these burns is to reduce fuel and according to DSE give fire fighters a better chance of controlling wildfires. We ask whether some of these burns may be causing unnecessary environmental damage for short term protection and result in a more fire prone forest. We are particularly concerned with the impacts on endangered and vulnerable wildlife and ecosystems.

An adjoining unburnt area of sedge has running water but the burnt area has no surface water. We are concerned that burning in these wetlands may be causing long term environmental damage and could eventually result in them being replaced by Shrubby Forest.

Unburnt patches in a burn area are important as they allow areas of refuge for small animals, birds, lizards, frogs and insects.



Domino Road area after fuel reduction burn and remains of a large burnt out tree (photos by Gayle Osborne)

One of these burns is south of Trentham and is known as Domino Road (Burn No WO09). The area is a mixture of Sedgy Riparian Woodland (see page 3) and Shrubby Foothill Forest. Sedgy Riparian Woodland is listed as Vulnerable, meaning that more than 70% has been lost since European settlement. This network of waterways forms the headwaters of the Coliban Catchment.

Australia is a signatory to the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands. Its primary aim is to halt the world wide loss of wetlands and to manage wisely those that remain.

The eastern section of Domino was burnt in autumn 2007 and DSE plans to complete the burn in autumn 2008. Despite DSE achieving a patchy, low intensity burn in the shrubby forest; the sedgy areas, which were extremely dry due to the drought, were severely and extensively burnt.

The sedges and ghanias are already shooting and will eventually grow back, however for a number of years there will be no habitat value in this area.

DSE made an undertaking to protect two very old trees with hollows (probably the oldest trees in the area) by raking the debris away from their bases. While this does not absolutely guarantee their protection it will usually stop them catching fire. DSE failed to act on this undertaking and the trees have been destroyed by fire entering their bases and burning through their cores. Other undertakings were made to protect the riparian areas.

There have been no proper surveys of fauna or flora in this area, and although a Powerful Owl nesting site and a few populations of important plants have been identified in the western section we do not know if there are any endangered frogs or other species present.

continued next page...

Black Gum (*Eucalyptus aggregata*) is listed as Endangered and is present in the area.

Unfortunately fuel management takes precedence over environmental issues, “but techniques to maximise protection of these values should be implemented where appropriate.” We believe that the fire managers concentrate on the fuel issues and pay very little attention to the conservation of biodiversity. We believe that more can be done and that some areas of these wetlands should have been excluded from the burn.

Residents of Trentham fought a long battle to have the habitat of a pair of breeding Powerful Owls protected in a Special Protection Zone which is now to be burnt. The Powerful Owl is listed as Threatened in Victoria. They feed mainly in riparian areas, mainly on a diet of possums and gliders and expert opinion is that they require 300 hectares of undisturbed forest. There is a need not only to protect the nesting and roosting sites of the owls but also their food source.

Despite the requirement for DSE to seek public comment and for “local community knowledge and information to be actively sought, respectfully managed, and used to inform decision-making, where appropriate” we find that we are faced with a very adversarial system rather than a partnership where ecological solutions are found. ■

Hollows

By Gayle Osborne

Where does much of our wildlife live and breed? Hollows in trees provide homes and nests for 17% of bird species, 42% of mammals and 28% of reptiles in Australia (Gibbons and Lindenmayer 1977).



The formation of hollows is a slow process. Hollows can take up to 100 years to form and it is estimated that large hollows can take 250 years. As trees age, storm and fire cause damage to the protective coating of the tree allowing termites and fungi access to the heartwood. Branches are lost and eventually decay (microbial activity) will create a home for many species. Gum species, such as Manna Gum and Candlebark, tend to produce more hollows in a shorter period of time than Stringybarks, such as Messmate.

In the Wombat Forest logging has reduced much of the forest to vast areas of regrowth and is probably one of the reasons for low densities of some birds and mammals. Fire also helps to create new hollows, but destroys existing hollows by entering at the base of the tree and burning through the already damaged heartwood.

Who needs these hollows? In the Wombat Forest the list includes Greater Gliders, Sugar Gliders, Feathertail Gliders, Common Brushtail Possums, Mountain Brushtail Possums, Common Ringtail Possums and Brush-tailed Phascogales. Some bat species use hollows and others roost under peeling bark or in caves.

Throughout Australia birds are the major users of hollows. In the Wombat they include Kookaburras and Sacred Kingfishers, Powerful Owls, Boobooks and Owlet-nightjars, Sulphur Crested Cockatoos, Gang Gangs and Crimson Rosellas, Treecreepers and Dusky Woodswallows.

Hollow logs on the ground are also used by many native fauna species. These include the Spotted Tail Quoll, a native cat which is rare in Victoria, but we believe still exists in the Wombat. Many other small mammals use hollows in fallen timber and Echidnas rest in ground hollows, often in the burnt base of a tree. Some species of native fish use submerged hollows for shelter and to attach their eggs.

Everyone needs just the right size home. The Sugar Glider will choose a hollow with a narrow entrance to deter predators, the White Throated Treecreeper prefers knot holes in tree trunks whereas the less common Red Browed treecreeper prefers to nest in sloping dead hollow spouts. The size of the entrance, the size of the hollow, degree of insulation and position on the tree determines which species will use the hollow.

Many species, particularly gliders use a number of hollows so that their predators cannot predict where they will emerge from to feed. Water also catches in some hollows and provides a drinking source. The protection of hollow bearing trees and those with immediate potential for hollows is very important for our wildlife. Hollow users play a large role in the pollination of plant species. Managing your own property to protect habitat should be a priority.

When walking in the forest, take the time to look for tree hollows. It's not uncommon to see a parrot popping in a hollow to feed its young in Spring. It is a great delight to spot hollows and guess who may live there. ■

Back Page Report

By Gayle Osborne

Trentham Fair

Wombat Forestcare took a stall at the Trentham Fair in November. Our expectations of receiving a good response were not high as we were placing ourselves in a community that had been divided over the logging and is now at odds over the fuel reduction burns.

We were therefore absolutely amazed at the positive level of interest. There were so many people wanting to know about the forest at their doorstep, keen to participate in educational walks and to receive our newsletter. We ended up with several new Forestcare members. A great response.

We were also surprised by the level of concern regarding Fuel Reduction Burns. Many people have recently driven along the Blackwood-Greendale Road and seen the recent burn. We were asked if it was good or bad, what were the effects on the environment and why was it being carried out?

So many complex issues were raised but fortunately much had been covered in our newsletters which we had available as hand outs.



A pleasant setting for the Wombat Forestcare display at the Trentham Fair (photo by Murray Ralph)

Paul Ulrik chose a beautiful grassy site and we set our information display up under a shady tree. Other Forestcare members arrived to help man the stall and it turned into a fun day. ■

Newsletter articles (and suggestions) are most welcome. Please limit articles to about 500 words and send a selection of photos if appropriate. The newsletter is published quarterly in March, June, September and December, with articles due by the middle of the preceding month. Please contact **Tibor Hegedis at wombatoz@iprimus.com.au** for more information or to discuss your ideas.

Wombat Forestcare (Inc.) Membership

Wombat Forestcare Inc. is dedicated to preserving the biodiversity and amenity of the Wombat State Forest by utilising the skills and resources of the community. It will monitor activities affecting the forest and will work with government departments and their officers to improve or correct procedures which may impact on it. By becoming a member you will have input into our activities and projects, and give support to caring for our forests. For memberships and further information contact Gayle Osborne on 03 5348 7558 or gayle.osborne@bigpond.com - Membership Fees are only \$10 Single and \$15 Family.

