

Spring is arriving in the Wombat. Read about our Red Robins and the Crescent Honeyeater. It is breeding season for many birds and animals, but what are the Barking Owls up to? **Gayle Osborne** (editor) and **Angela Halpin** (design)

How much longer?

By Gayle Osborne

VicForests continues to salvage storm fallen timber in the Wombat Forest. Unfortunately, there are few protections for commonly occurring species and so we see mass destruction of vegetation and compaction of soil such as has occurred recently at this salvage coupe at Barkstead.

That a government agency can cause such environmental damage and claim "It's important to us that anyone who buys timber products harvested by VicForests can be secure in the knowledge that it has been harvested responsibly, sustainably and with care and respect for our forests"^{1.} is breathtaking.

It is our understanding that the Minister for Agriculture, the Hon. Gayle Tierney has said that VicForests will continue to have access to the Wombat Forest until the end of the year. What is the reason to continue to salvage fallen logs of questionable commercial value for a further four months, causing further habitat damage? VicForests' Forest Recovery TUP should be cancelled without delay.

Now that the soil is drying out after the winter rains VicForests' contractors have returned to the Wombat Forest to salvage more fallen timber. A machine is operating in a coupe in the headwaters of the Werribee River. Another log landing is being created, vulnerable Wombat Bush-peas are being destroyed and there is the potential to pollute the creek.

What can you do?

Write to:

The Hon. Ingrid Stitt, Minister for the Environment ingrid.stitt@parliament.vic.gov.au and

The Hon. Gayle Tierney, Minister for Agriculture gayle.tierney@parliament.vic.gov.au and demand an immediate end to the VicForests' salvage operations in the Wombat Forest.

Note

1. https://www.vicforests.com.au/aboutus/about-us-home

Mass destruction at the Barkstead South - Simpsons Track coupe. Photography © Gayle Osborne.



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The red, red and red robins in and around the Wombat Forest

Words and images by Lynda Wilson

A visit into the Wombat Forest is rarely complete without a splash of brilliant red or a flicker of white-flashed wings. These features are most regularly associated with the very handsome Flame *Petroica phoenicea* and Scarlet Robins *Petroica boodang*. In the northern drier parts of the forest a double splash of the fiery Red-capped Robin *Petroica goodenovii* could catch your eye.

These 'red' Australasian robins are part of the Petroicidae Family along with other local robins such as the Jacky Winter *Microeca fascinans*, the Hooded Robin *Melanodryas cucullata*, Pink *Petroica rodinogaster* and Rose Robins *Petroica rosea* and of the course the Eastern Yellow Robin *Eopsaltria australis*. Scrub-robins and Flycatchers are also in this family. New World robins in the Turdidae family and Old World or European robins in the Muscicapidae family are quite different both genetically and morphologically and are only distantly related to the Australasian robins. Colonial European ornithologists decided that it was a good idea to call the Australasian version robins anyway, most likely due to their similar appearance, behaviour and adaptations to similar ecological niches.

Looking back further into the Dreaming, it's been reported that according to the Noongar people of south-western Australia, the Scarlet Robin known as Karlimoot got its brilliant red colour when, in a fight over hunting rights, Chitty-Chitty (the Willie Wagtail *Rhipidura leucophrys*) hit him in the face making his beak bleed forever staining his chest red. Based purely on numbers, it would appear that Chitty-Chitty still manages to claim the best hunting grounds.

As the males of all three of these red Petroica robins sport a bright red breast, determining the species of the males, let alone the females, can be challenging. The distinguishing features of each species are outlined in the following table and images.

Feature	Flame Robin Petroica phoenicea	Scarlet Robin Petroica boodang	Red-capped Robin Petroica goodenovii
Male			
Size (length and weight)	Large and slender 14 centimetres 11-15 grams	12-14 centimetres 8-15 grams	Smallest 10-12 centimetres 6-11 grams
Forehead spot (above bill)	Small white spot	Large white cap	Large red cap
Upperparts	Dark grey	Black	Black
Throat	Orange-red	Black	Black
Underparts	Orange-red from chin to belly Tail black with white tips	Scarlet-red breast with white sides and lower belly	Fire-red breast with white sides and lower belly
Female			
Forehead spot (above bill)	Tiny pale spot	Large white spot	Rusty cap – no white spot
Upperparts	Sandy brown	Greyish	Grey-brown
Underparts	Light grey-brown breast	Pale brown with red-tinged breast	Off-white sometimes with faint- red breast
Wings	Small off-white patches on wings	Dark upperwing with pale panels	Brown-black wings barred buff to white
Conservation status	Vulnerable in both SA and NSW BirdLife International regraded from Least Concern to Near Threatened in 2004 due to population decline over the previous 25 years The Australian Government classified as Least Concern but noted evidence of decline at the edges of its non-breeding range	Vulnerable in the ACT and NSW Rare in South Australia	Least Concern
IUCN Red List of Threatened Species: 2022	Least Concern	Least Concern	Least Concern

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Flame Robin Petroica phoenicea



Scarlet Robin Petroica boodang



Red-capped Robin Petroica goodenovii



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The Red-capped Robin *Petroica goodenovii* can be found in most inland habitats that have tall trees or shrubs. It is mainly sedentary preferring semi-arid scrub or lightly timbered habitat and is regularly recorded in mixed-species feeding flocks with other small insectivorous species such as thornbills. Its widespread range spreads across most of the continent apart from the northern most latitudes and with fewer sightings in the southern wetter parts of Victoria. The eBird database shows a few observations in the northern regions of the Wombat Forest and diminishing further south. I was very surprised to observe one perched in one of our paddocks near Denver back in October 2017 and I haven't seen one here since.

The distribution range of both the Scarlet and Flame Robins is much more limited extending from the south east corner of Queensland, through eastern NSW, right across Victoria and west to south-east South Australia and down to Tasmania. A sub-species of the Scarlet Robin is also found in south-west Western Australia.

Both Flame and Scarlet Robins tend to inhabit upland moist eucalypt forests and woodlands particularly in the vicinity of shrubs, logs, coarse woody debris and native grasses. While they can be seen seasonally foraging in agricultural regions, they are generally absent from open areas where there are no trees or shrubs.

Both Flame and Scarlet Robins employ the perch-andpounce method when foraging for ground-dwelling prey. The frequent flicking of their wings and tail of these robins, while indicating a level of agitation, could also assist in foraging activities perhaps by disturbing potential insect prey.

While the Flame and Scarlet Robins can be seen in the Wombat Forest pretty much all year round, I tend to notice Flame Robins and the occasional Scarlet Robin in nearby agricultural areas only in the cooler months, generally from around May into August. Studies suggest that this short distance and altitudinal migration pattern of Flame Robins from breeding grounds in the Great Dividing Range to lower warmer areas in the cooler months is all about food availability.

While in their upland breeding sites Flame Robins forage more for flying insects close to the ground while Scarlet Robins snatch arthropods from bark and foliage substrates and forage for grounddwelling prey. We all know how flying insects are far more abundant in the warmer weather, so there's plenty of food for breeding in the warmer months. The Flame Robins may struggle to find flying insect prey in the cooler months so will migrate to more open lowland habitats such as grassland with scattered trees and open woodland where they more commonly feed on the ground or from low perches. Ground dwelling arthropods tend to be less seasonal so the Scarlet Robin may not have the same need to move from breeding grounds though some will still disperse to find more accessible prey in more open grassland, farmlands and gardens in winter.

While all three red-breasted Petroica robins are considered quite common in Victoria, as with many other small woodland birds and as reflected in the listing of both the Flame and Scarlet Robins as Vulnerable in other states, these robins face the ongoing threat of loss and degradation of their forest and woodland breeding and foraging sites as well as their wintering habitat. This includes reduction of habitat complexity by the removal of standing dead timber, logs and coarse woody debris that support invertebrate prey. Their nesting success in fragmented and degraded eucalypt woodlands is considered to be relatively poor. These small robins are also vulnerable to predation by larger birds and introduced predator species as well as being victims of brood parasites such as the Fan-tailed Cuckoo *Cacomantis flabelliformis* and Pallid Cuckoo *Cacomantis pallidus*.

Research documented in the Climate Change Adaptation Plan for Australian Birds (2015) predicted that the Scarlet Robin is likely to contract southwards by about 50% in total area by 2085 due to climate change. This suggests there is no room for complacency when it comes to the currently healthy Victorian populations of any of these robins.

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Chitty-Chitty (the Willie Wagtail Rhipidura leucophrys). Photography © Lynda Wilson.

Crescent Honeyeater

By Trevor Speirs

Crescent Honeyeaters *Phylidonyris nigra* are generally considered an altitudinal migrant meaning that during winter the bulk of the species moves from higher to lower altitudes. However, here in the Wombat State Forest there are always some Crescent Honeyeaters that over-winter and this is especially so in the well-treed gullies south of Trentham where its loud striking call is heard throughout the year. September onwards is a time when their calling really starts to ramp up and in the Wombat they have a particular preference for habitat containing mature forest. High in the canopy of large Mountain Grey Gums *Eucalyptus Cypellocarpa* seems to be a real favourite of these honeyeaters.

With its clear, far carrying two-note *Eee-Gyp* call, it's easy to see how this once led it to being known as the Egypt Honeyeater. The second note is louder than the first and generally speaking it is the call that alerts you to its presence in the forest, as these are small birds and are hard to locate high in the treetops. In this part of the world, eucalypts are not usually known for their abundant winter flowering, which suggests there must be enough insect life and honeydew to sustain at least a small population of Crescent Honeyeaters throughout the year. A very reliable winter flowering shrub is the Mountain Correa *Correa lawrenceana* and in the Wombat should you find a nice patch there is every likelihood that a Crescent Honeyeater or two will be amongst it, feeding on the steady supply of nectar. There are several locations throughout the forest containing Mountain Correa, with the Lerderderg River valley being well represented. However there is a large stand along Yankee Road, a few kilometres south of Newbury, where Crescents will often be found in competition with Eastern Spinebills over the colder months. The shape of the correa flower obviously suits the long curved probing bills of these two honeyeaters.

Although they spend a lot of time during the warmer months in the forest's canopy, when it comes to breeding the opposite is the case with nests built quite low down amongst shrubs and ferns in the understorey. Bird guides have the Crescent Honeyeater breeding throughout the year but with a near total reliance on insects when breeding, it could be assumed that here in the Wombat most breeding will occur during spring and summer.



Crescent Honeyeater amongst a Mountain Correa. Photography © Trevor Speirs.

Court challenge to legality of planned burns

By Bertram Lobert, President, Save Our Strathbogie Forest

Community group, Save Our Strathbogie Forest has launched a legal challenge against the State of Victoria to halt several planned burns in the Strathbogie Forest, pending a review of these burns under Australian Government law, the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation (EPBC) Act.

There is a considerable and growing body of evidence that shows the serious and negative impact planned burning (aka fuel reduction burning) can have on forest ecosystems.



One of the more immediate and

consequential impacts of planned

burning is the loss of hollow-bearing trees (and their hollows) for those fauna species that rely on hollows either seasonally, for breeding, or daily, for shelter. Australia has amongst the largest number of hollow-dependent fauna, over 300 species, of any country.

The Strathbogie Forest is a recognized stronghold for the Southern Greater Glider *Petauroides volans*, a species that relies on hollows in large, old trees and is protected under state and national environment laws.

Between 2016 and 2019, citizen science surveys and government research detected high densities of the Southern Greater Glider across large parts of this 24,000 ha forest, among the highest densities recorded for this species anywhere in southern Australia.

In the 2023–24 fire season, the Victorian government has plans to burn several thousand hectares of forest habitat as part of their annual planned burning program. Much of the forest slated for burning is known to support populations of the Southern Greater Glider. The Save Our Strathbogie Forest community group believes these burns will

1) significantly degrade Southern Greater Glider habitat by killing and burning many of the hollow-bearing trees the species needs to survive and We have enlisted the assistance of Bleyer Lawyers to challenge the legitimacy of these burns in the Federal Court.

planned burn, Strathbogie Forest. Photography © Bertram Lobert.

The Victorian government maintains its planned burning practices in the Strathbogie Forest are exempt from the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act (1999), which we believe is based on two exemptions it has received. The first of these was in 2009 and the second in 2020 (links below). These exemptions relate to activities in the wake of the Black Saturday and Black Summer fires.

Our arguments are that these exemptions are not general exemptions for planned burning. Should our legal challenge be successful, the Victorian Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action should be required to refer future planned burns in the Strathbogie Forest to the Federal Environment Department. That Federal Department should then decide how or if planned burns should proceed given the significant impact of them on the Southern Greater Glider habitat in the Strathbogie Forest. A positive outcome for the Strathbogie Forest is likely to have broader application, for example to other EPBC listed species and habitats in other parts of Australia.

2) directly kill many hundreds of the gliders.

Dales Creek Planned Burn

By Gayle Osborne

South of Greenhills Road there is a creek that runs parallel to Dales Creek and eventually joins it. The gully forms part of an area designated for a planned/prescribed burn, probably in autumn 2024. This gully has a high density of Greater Gliders *Petauroides volans*, Nationally listed as endangered, and in the drier sections of the burn, Brush-tailed Phascogales *Phascogale tapoatafa*, State listed as vulnerable, have been recorded. The burn is also less than 2 kilometres from a record of a Mountain Skink *Liopholis montana*, also Nationally listed as endangered, and to date no surveys have been carried out to see whether it exists within the burn.

The proposed burn is to the north-west of Dales Creek, a small township with a population of 403 and 160 dwellings at the 2021 census. The reason Forest Fire Management have instigated this planned burn is evident, as, in Victoria hot, dry winds typically come from the north and north-west, which could put the township at risk if there were a fire.

A number of eminent forest ecology scientists are debating the wisdom of these burns. Philip Gibbons, Australian National University and Phil Zylstra, Curtin University argue that although planned burns can make bushfires easier to contain in the short term, they are less effective during severe weather events such as during the 2019-20 Black Summer bushfires. In the long term, prescribed burns can make landscapes more flammable unless they are regularly subjected to burns, which is then likely to lead to species becoming locally extinct.

Philip Zylstra and Grant Wardell-Johnson, Curtin University, propose that there is evidence that longunburnt mountain forests in south-east Australia are far less fire prone than more recently burnt areas.

Scientists from Charles Darwin University argue that long-unburnt habitat is critical for the conservation of threatened vertebrates across Australia. Not only is longunburnt habitat needed, but there is also a need to recruit more habitat into this category (von Takach et al. 2022).

There is considerable evidence regarding the futility of using planned burns to assist in controlling wildfires, as well as evidence that these burns are putting additional pressure on threatened species.

The burns result in a highly simplified vegetation structure and the loss of structural characteristics that many fauna depend on. In the Wombat Forest, bracken fern often dominates sites post-burn, shading the habitat, and particularly affecting reptiles. Long-unburned forests and woodlands were disproportionately more important for reptile richness and abundance than areas burned 6 months to 12 years prior to sampling (Dixon et al. 2018).

Brush-tailed Phascogales prefer open forest or woodland with abundant fallen timber, which is also lost in planned burns. They tend not to occupy areas of dense bracken.

A study in Gippsland demonstrated that planned burns significantly increase the risk of hollow-bearing trees collapsing and, by implication, are likely to cause loss of habitat for hollow-dependent fauna in areas where hollows are needed (Bluff 2016).

This loss of hollow-bearing trees in planned burns would significantly affect the population of Greater Gliders and it is likely that many gliders would be killed in a burn. The loss of hollow-bearing trees is listed as a threatening process by both State and Commonwealth governments.

Having obtained a copy of the burn plan via a *Freedom of Information* request, it is alarming to note that the "Burn coverage is expected to be >80%" and that ignition will include dropping incendiaries from the air. No actions are listed to mitigate the effects of the burn on the threatened species. The plan also recommends that the burn be carried out in early autumn (March and April), which is the breeding season for Greater Gliders adding yet another pressure.

Here we have two threatened species in a burn site, with a possibility of a third, all of which will be considerably impacted by the burn. Greater Gliders have already disappeared from a few sites in the Wombat Forest where planned burns have been carried out.

If we want to protect and conserve what remains of our natural environment and the species that inhabit it, we need to reconsider our approach to planned burns.

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Drone warfare

By Trevor Speirs

Unmanned Aircraft Systems, commonly known as drones, are being increasingly used in the Australian landscape, mainly for use in surveys and surveillance, as well as small scale personal use. By all reports drones are very effective in gathering valuable information, saving time and enabling operators to reach places that might otherwise prove difficult. Drones seem likely to become an important tool for fire-fighting agencies in the future in identifying outbreaks. But as with much new technology being deployed in the natural environment there can be negative impacts on wildlife, which to date are being allowed to occur without proper restrictions or oversight.



Black Kite Milvus migrans. Photography © Lynda Wilson.

Ecologists have known for some time that drone use has not been greeted with the same enthusiasm by one group of Australian animals, raptors, as it has been by people.

Birdlife Australia's periodical, Boobook, featured an article a few years ago on some quite amazing interactions between wildlife and drones, mainly from the mining state of Western Australia. On one occasion an \$80,000 drone with a wingspan of just over two metres attracted the ire of a local Wedge-tailed Eagle. Swooping from above, the eagle punched a hole into the drone's fuselage resulting in the machine ending up as "a pile of splinters". Another drone operator said he had lost a dozen drones to eagles at the cost of over \$200,000 to his employer. Wedgies are very territorial and have been ruling the skies a long time before drones appeared on the scene and obviously don't take too kindly to possible new aviation rivals.

While there is a little schadenfreude in reading of these "victories" by these magnificent raptors, there is also the possibility of the birds sustaining physical injuries in encounters with the invasive machines. Black Kites and Little Eagles are two other diurnal raptors that have also been observed attacking drones which have entered their air space and I'm sure there will be others. Feet are an essential part of a raptor's makeup and this is no less so for one of the Wombat Forest's apex predators, the Powerful Owl. Owl feet are structured in such a way that it enables them to perch all day in the one spot, while comfortably holding captured prey, which in the case of a Greater Glider for instance, could weigh around 75% of the owl's weight. Like many diurnal raptors, Powerful Owls are extremely territorial with males especially ready to defend their patch against potential rivals.

VicForests is an organisation that has recently turned to using drones to survey for threatened wildlife. Following recent losses in legal cases in the Victorian Supreme Court, VicForests must now do more detailed surveying for Greater and Yellow-bellied Gliders in proposed logging coupes in the eastern half of Victoria. With the use of thermal cameras attached to drones flying low over forested areas, operators are able to identify and differentiate between species of mammals and birds; an Eastern Ring-tailed Possum from a Greater Glider, for instance. With the advantage of being able to survey large and difficult areas quicker than can be done by humans, it's an obvious benefit for organisations like VicForests. But have the consequences to our wildlife been given adequate consideration?

Agriculture Victoria's branch, Animal Welfare Victoria, reviewed VicForests' project to determine whether a scientific licence was required. In this case, AWV determined that the proposed activity did not meet the definition of a scientific procedure under the Protection of Cruelty to Animals Act, and therefore a scientific licence was not required. This may be so, but with barely any studies done here or internationally on a drone's effect on wildlife, maybe government agencies should err on the side of caution until this matter has been fully explored. Should

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a Powerful Owl clash with a nocturnal drone and damage a toe or tendon it would seriously impact its ability to lead a healthy and productive life.

Most survey work on wildlife will disrupt an animal's behaviour in some way. Spotlighting, especially if torch lumens are too strong and left on the animal for too long, could damage an eye. Trapping and banding, bird playback, remote camera trapping all have some negative aspects but if being used to benefit wildlife and its conservation are considered worth some small disturbance to wildlife. Activities like trapping and camera trapping also require an ethics permit to be issued. While it's possible that nocturnal drone activity may not have any negative effect on forest owls or their behaviour, it really is incumbent on the relevant authorities to do adequate research before giving the procedure the green light.

> Powerful Owl Ninox strenua. Photography © Gayle Osborne.



Spring in the air

Words and images by Lynda Wilson

In Central Victoria the Dja Dja Wurrung recognise six seasons acknowledging Early Winter, Deep Winter, Pre-Spring, True Spring, High Summer and Late Summer.

The glorious winter sunshine this past August seemed to herald the end of Deep Winter and announce that spring was imminent. It's arrival was confirmed for me by my first dragonfly sighting for this season. The large greenish body with glistening wings was observed patrolling the garden approximately a metre above the ground suggesting it was an. I haven't observed any smaller damselflies yet but it shouldn't be long now. It's such a joy to feel the warmth of the sun on your face after a cool winter, and to see not only the brilliant yellow of wattles in the forest and bulbs in gardens, but also the little jewels of colour of the emerging dragons and damsels. Enjoy!





Australian Emperor Anax papuensis. Photography © Lynda Wilson.

Missing in action

By Trevor Speirs

As a rule, Barking Owls *Ninox connivens* are quite predictable in their habits and once a breeding territory is established, they can occupy it for many years. With an available supply of prey and a suitable forest structure providing good roosting and nesting sites, there is probably not much reason to leave. I'm aware of one breeding site in Central Victoria which has been used continuously for about four decades, although no doubt by different partners.

The owls in the photograph have been residing in the same part of the Wombat Forest for at least the last four years. While this pair produced healthy young in our first two years of observation, two then one chick respectively, things don't seem to be quite the same these past two years. Last year, in late June, the adult owls were in their usual roosts and it looked like everything was going to plan for another successful winter breeding event. However, visits to the site in July through to September failed to locate the two owls and it became clear that they had left the area. It wasn't until mid-October that both adults reappeared, but without any juveniles in tow.

The same pattern looks to be happening again this year, with the owls in their usual roosts during autumn and early winter and then vacating in June. If they again turn up later in the year without any juveniles it will prove to be another breeding season that has failed to produce young. This part of the forest was unaffected by the 2021 storm event and is seemingly unchanged in the last few years. Critically endangered in Victoria, breeding pairs would normally be expected to be laying eggs from late June to mid-July, so unfortunately it does look like it will be another missed season.

The last sighting of the Barking Owls in June this year. Photography Gayle Osborne.



Wombat Forestcare

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Wombat Forestcare Inc. is dedicated to preserving the biodiversity and amenity of the Wombat State Forest, Central Victoria, Australia, by utilising the skills and resources of the community.

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, (03) 5348 7558 or email info@wombatforestcare.org.au **Membership fees: \$15 single and \$20 family**. **Visit our website** - <u>www.wombatforestcare.org.au</u>

The Wombat Forestcare newsletter is proudly produced on the land of the Djaara people.