

Welcome to our winter edition. It is a year since the Victorian Government committed to a new Wombat-Lerderderg National Park. Read about VicForests' destructive salvage operations in the proposed national park. **Gayle Osborne** (editor) and **Angela Halpin** (design)



By Gayle Osborne

After years of campaigning, the Wombat Forest was acknowledged to be worthy of park status and in June 2021 the State Government promised to create a new Wombat-Lerderderg National Park.

It was also in June 2021 when we experienced the intense wind event that left swathes of fallen trees through sections of the Wombat Forest, blocking many roads and tracks.

We were caught completely by surprise to find that, in early April this year, and without any notice, VicForests had commenced an industrial scale salvage harvesting operation at Babbington Hill. It is obvious that ecologically sensitive management of fallen timber in some areas, particularly road and tracksides is necessary. However, at Babbington Hill it is questionable whether there was a need to intervene, to any great extent, other than track and trackside clearing.

It was distressing to see that about two acres of standing forest had been harvested to create a large machinery depot and an area to store and load logs. New tracks, 4–6 metres wide had been made, the ground disturbed and large heaps of branches and bark left on the ground.

As the works progressed, the damage intensified. The salvage

machinery, that weighs between 20 and 30 tonnes has compacted and rutted the wet soil and destroyed understory vegetation. Some of the habitat trees that survived the storm now have tracks alongside, damaging the roots and making them vulnerable to falling in the future.

All the medium and large logs on the ground have been salvaged by the VicForests' contractor and, in the main, trucked to a sawmill in Gippsland or sent for pulp at the Maryvale paper mill.

A second contractor commenced works on Wombat Creek Road and now a third area is being harvested on Osborne Road, Bullarto. At both these sites forest has been cleared for machinery and logs, and gravel laid.

The government position is that this salvage operation will reduce fire risk, however, the logs that are being removed do not present a major fire risk as it is fine fuels, generally less than 6mm in diameter, that are recognized by many fire scientists as a driver of forest fires. The large logs lying on the ground would have become important habitat for mosses, lichens and fungi as well as insects and small mammals and lizards and are an important contributor to the food chain that supports life in the forest.

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Clearing at Wombat Creek Road for machinery and logs.



The Wombat Forest community express their dismay at the Babbington Hill site. Photography © Sandy Scheltema.

It is not clear how VicForests intends to deal with the heaps of bark and branches, or how rehabilitation of the sites will be carried out. VicForests claims that the operation is for 'forest recovery'.¹ It will be a long time before Babbington Hill and these other sites recover from this salvage harvesting.

Babbington Hill was relatively weed free, except along the Loddon River, where the blackberries are dense. The destroyed understorey vegetation and unnecessarily high levels of ground disturbance will encourage weed colonisation into the future.

So many of us consider ourselves fortunate to be able to experience a natural environment close to where we live. Babbington Hill, an extinct volcano, was one of many favourite places for walkers, particularly in the fungi season,

where a large range of species could be found in a multitude of forms and colours.

Endangered Spotted Hyacinth-orchids *Dipodium pardalinum* grow along the roadside among the tall gums. Wedge-tailed Eagles *Aquila audax* nest on the east side of the hill and Southern Greater Gliders *Petauroides volans* inhabit the forest. There is also a record of the endangered Fuzzy New Holland Daisy *Vittadinia cuneata* var. *morrisii*.

Babbington Hill has not been extensively surveyed for flora, and now it is impossible to know if species have been lost from the site. Have unrecorded populations of Spotted Hyacinth-orchids or Fuzzy New Holland Daisies been bulldozed? As very little of the Wombat Forest occurs on volcanic soils, there is a high *continued next page ...*



Wedge-tailed Eagle's nest on Babbington Hill.
Photography © Gayle Osborne.

likelihood of the presence of flora species that are not found elsewhere in the forest.

The recent discovery of Mountain Skinks *Liopholis montana* in the Wombat Forest shows the importance of the need to survey. This species was found to exist in the Wombat Forest, near Blackwood, hundreds of kilometres from the nearest known population and at a much lower altitude.

The natural world is complex. By scraping and mounding the topsoil and litter, there is a massive disruption to the tiny insects, bacteria and fungi that help the litter decompose, recycle nutrients and provide fertile soils.

This destructive salvage operation has caused great distress to those who love the Wombat Forest and has shown that laws to protect biodiversity completely fail to do so. *The Code of Practice for Timber Production* provides little protection for environmental values. Habitat trees that survived the storm have been damaged by machinery at Babbington Hill, but there is nothing in the code to say that this should not occur.



Spotted Hyacinth Orchids *Dipodium pardalinum* grow along Babbington Road.
Photography © Gayle Osborne.

On 20 June it was reported that the Office of the Conservation Regulator had issued the contractor at Babbington Hill with a notice to provide documents or face a large fine. It is unclear at this stage what this means for the continued salvage works. When we checked, all the machinery had been removed from both Babbington Hill and Wombat Creek Road, however within days the new works on Osborne Road had commenced.

As well as this salvage operation, VicForests have an ongoing Timber Utilisation Plan that allows for commercial firewood harvesting by the thinning of older regrowth forest. At many sites (coupes) this thinning has been excessive, generating thick coppicing from the resulting stumps and creating a future fire risk.

A survey was conducted by citizen scientists in a number of commercial firewood harvesting coupes near Spring Hill, in the proposed national park. The population survey, conducted over three nights in January 2022 and supported by the Victorian National Parks Association, recorded an unexpected 40 Greater Gliders.

The density of the population meets the threshold for protection under the state government's *Action Statement No. 267, Greater Glider* (*Petauroides volans* subsp. *volans*).² It is now up to VicForests to remove these coupes from their harvesting schedule.

In their response to the parliament, the Victorian Government stated that the Wombat-Lerderderg National Park would be used in accordance with the general recommendations for national parks including to "permanently protect the natural environment and natural biodiversity along with underlying ecological structure and supporting environmental processes."³

VicForests should not be allowed to rampage through the Wombat Forest, grabbing logs where they choose and leaving a trail of destruction. Why is the government allowing this damage to a landscape that they consider worthy of being a national park?

Wombat Forestcare calls on the Andrews government to call an immediate halt to the salvage operation and legislate the proposed Wombat-Lerderderg National Park. ■

Notes

1. <https://www.vicforests.com.au/vicforest-forest-management/ops-planning/where-vicforests-operates/tup>
2. https://www.environment.vic.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0019/440371/267-Greater-Glider-2019-Action-Statement.pdf
3. https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/file_uploads/FINAL_-_Vic_Govt_response_to_VEAC_s_CWI_Tabling_WvzfBfLL.pdf

The Hill (Tops) are Alive with the Fluttering of Butterfly Wings

Words and Images by Lynda Wilson

If you were a butterfly, where would you go to find a mate? Apparently, for quite a few butterfly species, you head for the highest point in the landscape. According to John Walter of the Upper Campaspe Landcare Network Pollinator Project, in the Central Victorian region around 20 species are thought to adopt what is commonly known as “hill-topping” behaviour, where males congregate and form territories on ridges.

Late last summer, I became aware of some different looking butterflies – something beyond the more familiar browns, blues and cabbage whites - flying around the top of Kangaroo Hill. Frustratingly I struggled to get a good look at them as they appeared to be consistently airborne. Curiosity drove me to search more intensively and eventually a whole new world of these delightful creatures became apparent.

Males of hill-topping butterfly species are known to defend a territory for weeks on end waiting for females that are ready to mate to come calling. Once mated, the females of some hill-topping species tend not to hang around but head off back down to their feeding and breeding habitat. At Kangaroo Hill, at least one Tailed Emperor *Charaxes sempronius* was observed over a six-week period from mid-February 2022 defending its hill-top territory. Most days it would be seen on its favourite perch about four metres high in a Black Wattle *Acacia mearnsii* or in nearby eucalypts overlooking a small clearing. When other Tailed Emperors ventured into its territory a frantic chase ensued, in and around tree canopies, often with other butterfly species including Imperial Jezebels *Delias harpalyce* and Spotted Jezebels *Delias aganippe* partaking in the frenzy. From an onlooker's perspective, some of these encounters looked quite aggressive which could explain the damaged wings on many observed specimens.

Dainty Swallowtails *Papilio anactus*, otherwise known as Dingy Swallowtails, were also observed consistently through this same period perched either on a tall blade of grass, a wire fence or the leaf of a blackwood, generally about one metre above the ground. They'd regularly patrol their territory with a calm gliding almost floating flight, again, around one to two metres above the ground. But when an intruding swallowtail entered a defended arena, rapid spiralling aerobatic chases would ensue.

Of course, mating wasn't the only game in town. While the resident Tailed Emperor was never observed feeding and the Dainty Swallowtails were only occasionally observed feeding on salvias and citrus, Imperial and Spotted Jezebels – when not mating or chasing the Tailed Emperors – were consistently observed feeding on various flowering plants on top of the hill, particularly on flowering gums *Corymbia ficifolia* and several flowering eucalypts. Notably, both species of Jezebels were also observed feeding on similar plants lower down the hill.



Tailed Emperor *Charaxes sempronius*.



Imperial Jezebels *Delias harpalyce*.



Imperial Jezebels *Delias harpalyce*.

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The level of butterfly activity and the ability to observe them is heavily dependent on multiple conditions. For starters, each species has their preferred perch position so the probability of seeing them depends heavily on their size and whether they frequent positions lower to the ground or at the top of the canopy of the tallest trees.

In temperate regions, air temperature between 21–35 degrees Celsius is considered the ideal range for observing butterflies. As cloud cover and wind strength increase, activity may decrease, but it is also more difficult to observe them. Different species can also behave differently at different times of the day. In my observations of five of the most conspicuous hill-topping species on Kangaroo Hill, some were more active in the morning (Jezebels), some later in the morning and early afternoon (Jezebels, Dainty Swallowtail and Tailed Emperor), while others (the Yellow Admiral *Vanessa itea*) tended to be more active later in the afternoon.

Even though many other butterfly species were still observed on the hill through May, much to my disappointment, once those strong gusty winds arrived in late March-early April, the observed hill-topping activity subsided dramatically. An Imperial Jezebel or two were still observed on most days through to mid-April and there was an occasional appearance of a Tailed Emperor, but none of these species were observed past mid-April.

The relationship between butterfly breeding sites (which support eggs, larvae and pupae and host food plants) and hill-tops or mating sites is not well understood, but hill-tops are considered to be an essential component of the reproductive behaviour of some butterfly species. In 2001, NSW actually listed the “Loss and/or degradation of sites used for hill-topping by butterflies” as a “key threatening process” under the *NSW Threatened Species Conservation Act 1995*.

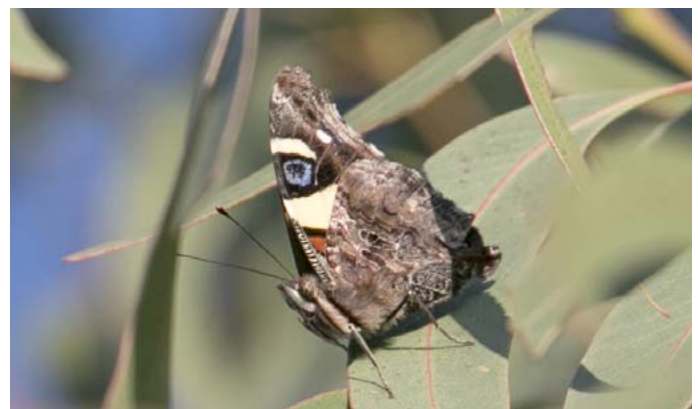
Some other states and the Commonwealth instead list specific hill-topping butterfly species and/or communities for protection under their respective nature laws. Under *Victoria's Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988*, these include the Fiery Jewel *Hypochrysops ignitus* which is listed as Endangered and Butterfly Community No.1 located at Mount Piper near Tallarook which is listed as a Threatened Community. All of this gives us something else to keep in mind when considering the impacts of various activities in and around the Wombat Forest.

I don't know if the top of Kangaroo Hill is a regular destination in the life cycle of at least some hill-topper species, but these encounters with these five very charismatic species have given me a new appreciation for the ridge tops in the landscape and I'll certainly be keeping a closer look-out on any hill-top I happen to visit during the warmer months. ■

If you are interested in contributing to research on butterflies or want a handy field guide for identification, download the Butterflies Australia App onto your device.



Spotted Jezebels *Delias aganippe*.



Yellow Admiral *Vanessa itea*.



Dainty Swallowtails *Papilio anactus*.

References

- Australian Museum (2008) Hill-topping Butterflies of the Hawksbury-Nepean CMA. Australian Museum, Sydney
- Braby, M.J. (2020) The Complete Field Guide to Butterflies of Australia Second Edition. CSIRO Publishing, Melbourne

Brown Treecreepers

By Trevor Speirs

At just under 50,000 hectares the Wombat Forest is a sizeable area of public land by any standards and has a variety of forest and vegetation types within it. The north-west parts of the forest are drier and generally more open than the wetter south-east with its deep gullies and creeks, denser understorey and taller eucalypts. As far as I'm aware, although I could be wrong, there is only one section in the Wombat, around Welcome Track in the north-west, which supports a resident population of the Brown Treecreeper. Unlike other treecreepers, the Brown Treecreeper spends a large part of their day on the ground, foraging around logs in search of prey items; spiders, beetles and ants etc. The bush in this part of the forest is pretty good habitat for this species, dominated by rough barked eucalypts with plenty of fallen timber and a grassy, light shrubby understorey. Studies have shown breeding success rates are higher where there is a greater amount of fallen timber, which increases the insect biomass. The human need to clear and tidy the forest floor, for whatever purpose, is one reason that has led to a decline in many of our woodland birds and mammals and the food sources they depend upon. The bush around Welcome Track was subject to a fuel reduction burn a couple of years ago but fortunately the fire treatment through the Brown Treecreeper area was relatively light.

In Victoria, there are two Brown Treecreeper subspecies; one is *Climacteris picumnus picumnus* found mainly on and north of the Great Dividing Range, the other *C. picumnus victoriae* (Brown Treecreeper (south-eastern)) is mostly on and south of the divide but the ranges of both subspecies do overlap. The Welcome track population is a little to the north of the divide. *C. picumnus picumnus* although declining like many woodland birds, is still quite common in suitable woodland in Northern and Central Victoria and it would be very unusual not to see several in a morning's birdwatching in suitable habitat. *C. picumnus victoriae* on the other hand has declined more quickly and is currently being assessed by the Threatened



Brown Treecreeper photographed at Welcome Track, Basalt and possibly *Climacteris picumnus victoriae*.
Photography © Gayle Osborne.



Brown Treecreeper photographed near Bendigo and probably *Climacteris picumnus picumnus*.
Photography © Trevor Speirs.

Species Scientific Committee as to whether it should be added to the EPBC Act and listed as vulnerable to extinction. The population of the south-eastern subspecies is believed to have declined by between 30% and 50% over the last three generations, which equates to around fifteen years.

Anyone who has spent a day on the coast, especially early in their birdwatching life, will know how head-scratching and frustrating it is trying to determine which wader or tern is which, and would possibly agree that it is about as difficult as it gets in the birdwatching caper. These two treecreepers are very much in this category as the differences in appearance are extremely small, to say the least. Probably the main thing to look for in the south-eastern subspecies (*victoriae*) is a dull cream-white eyebrow with a reduced dull cream throat compared to the dull greyish white to clear white eyebrow and greyish cream to brightly white throat of the *C. picumnus picumnus*. The south-eastern subspecies is slightly larger although that probably doesn't help much in the field.

Many readers would be aware of the lovely grey box forest *Eucalyptus microcarpa* adjoining the settlement of Eynesbury, south of Melton. Many of these trees are very old with an abundance of hollows and lots of fallen timber throughout. It is an excellent birding area and a bit of a hotspot for the Brown Treecreeper and because of its southerly location, I tend to think these birds will be the subspecies *victoriae*. Comparing photos of the Eynesbury birds with Gayle's photos of our Wombat birds, they look almost, if not identical and obviously DNA analysis would be needed to be absolutely sure that the Wombat population is the south-eastern subspecies.

Whether or not these treecreepers are the south-eastern subspecies, the forest around Welcome Track is always worth a visit,

especially in summer and autumn, which is a good time to look for the treecreepers and there is also the possibility of seeing a White-throated Needletail *Hirundapus caudacutus* or a Square-tailed Kite *Lophoictinia isura*, both threatened species that have been seen here in recent years. ■

Why I care about what's happening

By Lou Baxter

Like most of us, I respond more to immediate threats and changes than to abstract discussions. Yet sometimes the realisation that 'it is not just us' means we must quickly join together in united action, and we now know a biodiversity crisis, like climate change, is already upon us. Without swift action our human species also risks destruction if biodiversity - the range of different species present in an ecosystem - finally crashes right across the planet.

However, even before Covid, the UN was researching the scale of the looming biodiversity disaster and how to prevent it. International conservation treaties and conventions, like trade agreements, were agreed upon, with more and more countries becoming signatories over time.

Why do these matter? I'm 73 and could honestly say I'll be dead before my life is drastically affected. But how could I look into the 11-year-old eyes so dear to me and not worry? How could I see her brothers, at 9 and 7, and not panic, knowing what will happen if we don't stop the greed and destruction? We must preserve our natural heritage for the sake of future generations. While it would be easier to ignore the worry and



Photography © Gayle Osborne

Gang-gang Cockatoos *Callocephalon fimbriatum* are reasonably common in our area but have been assessed by the Threatened Species Scientific Committee and found to be eligible for listing under the national EPBC Act as Vulnerable.

It's not just that loss of beauty and natural experience causes heartache - who would do without any birdsong, or the inability to ever see a fern gully - but our species actually needs other species (and healthy ecosystems that help biodiversity to flourish) if we are to survive over time. As individuals our hearts are often uplifted by nature but, increasingly, we know nature itself is under threat. "The world...need(s) a robust plan for protecting nature, so that nature can protect humanity." The greed of a few individuals, and of large corporations, must be reined in if our planet is to remain liveable for the many. Their desire for ever more money should not be allowed to destroy what we both need and enjoy. This is why laws exist nationally and internationally, to try to stop the total destruction of all natural areas. People are fighting back. After two years of pandemic, we now know natural biodiversity is not just balm to our wounded hearts but necessary for our own continued mental, physical and economic well-being.

say 'some-one else's responsibility', those young eyes stop me doing it. And it would be so much easier to just turn away and have fun!

Instead I simply intend to emphasise the enormous responsibility we have to stop the rush towards extinction currently being experienced by Australia's indigenous flora and fauna. The scientific data available as to the perilous state of Australia's indigenous flora and fauna is extremely extensive and goes back many decades. Unfortunately, despite this knowledge, little effective action has been undertaken to stop our indigenous species sliding ever closer to extinction.

Along with this continual, frequent, and clear documentation that many of our ecosystems are at immense risk of collapsing, with our Victorian forests being in particular danger, we have both national and international obligations to prevent the loss of our indigenous biodiversity. *continued next page ...*

Obligations, I might add, that we seem determined to ignore. That VicForests can carry out an environmentally destructive salvage operation in a proposed national park clearly displays either total ignorance about, or disdain for, the massive extinction problems currently being experienced by Australian flora and fauna. Therefore I intend to inform or remind you about why conservation concerns should take priority in these discussions.

Firstly, after the Earth Summit of 1992, in Rio de Janeiro, Australia became a signatory to the Convention on Biological Diversity and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, making both officially operative for this country. Unfortunately, neither convention has been strongly acted on. Our biodiversity continues to decline whilst the 2019/2020 fires, which burnt billions of animals to death, and the current flood crisis, shows climate action should also have been taken much earlier and more strongly than it has been. In both cases instant profit for a favoured few has trumped future well-being or community wishes.

Moreover Australia continues to lead the world in mammal extinctions, with recent reptilian extinctions also following mammalian, bird, and invertebrate disappearances. Indeed the federal government was forced to admit in 2021 that extinctions were still happening over the previous decade. We should be trying to better protect our indigenous species rather than seeking to destroy important proposed national park habitat - habitat crucial for the survival of our critically threatened wildlife.

That Australia continues to have yet more species slide into extinction is a sobering thought. The 2021 UN Convention on Biological Diversity, held in Yunnan, China argued for at least 30% of land, especially those areas of particular importance for biodiversity, to be conserved through effective, equitably managed, ecologically representative and well-connected systems of protected areas (and other effective area-based conservation measures).

Despite Victoria already being the most cleared state, we are continuing to damage and remove our natural heritage from our children's knowledge. Governance in Australia does not seek to preserve our indigenous flora and fauna and certainly does not value it highly.

This has been officially acknowledged by so many reports and consultations over the decades that it would be tedious to list all of them. There is no dearth of information as to why our extinction rates, the world's highest, continue to simply increase. Indeed many reports have continually criticised the

lack of any effective governmental action at state or federal level to reduce our extinction rates. Unfortunately, even though our flora and fauna may not be able to speak, others have often spoken for them and been ignored.

Indeed, released in October 2020, a major report examining Australia's situation with respect to its indigenous species was the Graeme Samuel review of the EPBC Act. It is important because, once again, it stresses how poorly protected and managed our indigenous biodiversity is (and remember Victoria has the worst record of all the states). Among Samuel's recommendations was the establishment of new independent bodies to not only be responsible for monitoring the environment but to enforce compliance with the law.



Critically endangered *Bossiaea vombata*.
Photography © Gayle Osborne.

As Professor Samuel states, environmental standards alone are not enough: "Standards need to be backed up by strong, independent oversight and increased accountability." His recommendation for an independent oversight of government decision making can be seen as indicating how often the Victorian government has betrayed its conservation responsibilities, a do-nothing attitude also indicated by the ongoing court rulings against VicForests' activities.

And, remember, Victoria continues to lead the way. It is the most cleared state but the Andrews government, despite its many years in office, has done little to stop our indigenous species sliding ever more rapidly into extinction. This is entirely due to the lack of political will, desire or effective effort to do so, even though the overall community continually states that it wants our indigenous species to be saved.

It seems to me that we are all busy and stressed in modern life. But we need nature, and it is the political will to save it that is lacking. No matter how busy you are, for your grandchildren's sake, spend half an hour to compose and send an email to politicians of both parties (federal and state). They only listen if you say you CARE - otherwise political donations and corruption rules! If you can afford it donate to an environmental organisation - even \$5 or \$10 a month helps and, when we are busy with jobs, family etc., they'll do the hard, necessary but slogging work for us (but Google up their credentials!).

You wouldn't hesitate to protect your children - realise that now we have to protect the world they need! ■

Note

1. <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/biodiversity/>

New homes for Greater Gliders

By Gayle Osborne

In May, we were pleased to be invited to watch the installation of ten nest boxes for Greater Gliders *Petauroides volans* on a property along Kangaroo Creek in the Spring Hill area.

The sturdy wooden boxes are 350mm deep x 300mm wide x 500mm high, with an entry hole and are insulated. Professional tree climbers used ropes to haul the boxes into position and then attached them to the tree trunks. The boxes need to be at least 15 metres from the ground to be most effective.

Greater Gliders have been observed in this section of forest and the aim of the project is to secure current habitat and extend the range of the glider habitat. To our delight a Greater Glider was spotted in a hollow during the installation.



Greater Glider in hollow photographed by Jason from Tree Tactics.

The nest box installation is the first step in a restoration project that is coordinated and managed by Biolinks Alliance with invaluable support from the Great Eastern Ranges initiative and the WWF Australia.

The loss of trees in the June 2021 storm highlighted the need to look at the effects of the storm on Greater Glider habitat trees. Greater Gliders use hollows in trees for breeding and to shelter during the day. Ideally each glider has a number of hollows, however, in the Wombat Forest, when resurveying sites, we see gliders emerging from the same hollows. We suspect that this is due to the low number of available hollows.

Hollow dependent fauna species rely on using a number of hollows as they are vulnerable to predation if they emerge from the same hollow every evening. An owl can just sit on a branch above the hollow and wait for the animal to emerge. Being able to rotate their hollows also helps to keep parasites in check.

Sections of the Wombat Forest contain Greater Gliders in considerable numbers. It is likely that dispersing juveniles are unable to find hollows to live in. If we want these beautiful creatures to persist and to thrive, we need to increase their housing stock.



Want to learn more about the project.
<https://biolinksalliance.org.au/kangaroo-creek>

Insect crisis

Words and images by Gayle Osborne

Not only are scientists recording that insect numbers are crashing, there are those of us who remember that on any trip to the country, our windscreens used to be covered with smashed insects. A rare occurrence now.

Insects are critical to a functioning natural world. They are pollinators, decomposers and part of the food chain. Habitat destruction and land clearing are causing them to disappear from the planet.

Insects are often extremely beautiful.



Wasp Family Aulacidea.



Firetail Cicada *Yoyetta* sp.



Wasp *Pseudofoenus* sp.



Gum-leaf Katydid *Torbia viridissima*.



Cerdistus rusticanoides.



Jewel Beetle.



Sphaerophoria macrogaster.

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 - www.wombatforestcare.org.au

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