Issue 70 - December 2024

# Wombat Forestcare Newsletter

**Welcome to our summer edition. The legislation for the promised national park failed to be delivered.** To get over our disappointment we suggest getting out into the forest. It is a great time of year for bird watching. The gullies are alive with many visiting species such as Sacred Kingfishers, Rufous Fantails and Blue-winged Parrots. **Gayle Osborne** (editor) and **Angela Halpin** (design)

## Broken promise - Failure to legislate the Wombat-Lerderderg National Park

**By Gayle Osborne**

Incredible, how could this happen? Written assurances that the Bill to create the Wombat-Lerderderg and Mt Buangor National Parks would be tabled in the Victorian Parliament this year were received by Wombat Forestcare members and supporters. The final sitting day for the year was Thursday 28 November and the Bill was nowhere to be seen.

Our community has worked so hard to have the Wombat recognised for its remarkable wildlife. For more than 14 years, Wombat Forestcare has campaigned for 'Park' status for our forest; so many people have attended protest events, written letters to politicians and supported the campaign in so many ways. The delay to implement the national and other parks is extremely frustrating.

We are not giving in and will continue to pressure the government to legislate all the promised parks. Surely it is more important to protect the headwaters of the six major rivers that flow from the Wombat Forest, the trees and vegetation that sequester carbon and will continue to do so and the habitat of many flora, fauna and fungi that are facing the threat of extinction, than to pander to those who drive 4WD vehicles and trail bikes, often illegally.


Members and supporters of Wombat Forestcare gathered in the Wombat Forest on Thursday 28 November 2024 to express their dismay that on the last sitting day of Parliament the government failed to table the bill to create the new Wombat-Lerderderg National Park. Photography © Sandy Scheltema.

A recent poll conducted by RedBridge Group established that 80 per cent of Victorians support the creation of new national parks. National parks are the cornerstone of nature conservation but are also a wonderful asset where people can appreciate the environment. At present the Wombat State Forest is managed for its resources, such as firewood production and mining, with very little in the way of walking tracks or infrastructure for those who wish to enjoy nature.

Many areas are dominated by 4WD drivers and trail bikers. This is not conducive to those wanting to bushwalk or birdwatch. Illegal trail bike tracks damage the waterways. Over winter, many seasonally closed tracks are illegally accessed by 4WD vehicles resulting in ever deepening ruts that make the tracks inaccessible by Forest Fire Management vehicles.

It is deeply concerning that this government does not see the necessity of protecting what is left of our natural environment. With the end of native forest logging throughout the state, it is critical to protect as much public land as possible in either national or other park managed land, to ensure that it will not be logged in the future. ■

# The Mountain Skink - an interesting life

**By Trevor Speirs**

To the casual observer the life of small reptiles might seem simple. Soak up some sun, chase some insect prey and try and avoid being eaten by a kookaburra or currawong. The more you learn the more it becomes apparent how many of them live complex and most interesting lives.

The Mountain Skink *Liopholis montana* is the latest threatened species to have been discovered in the Wombat Forest and it is just one of several reptile species that form pairs and live in family groups. After spending the winter in brumation (a type of hibernation) in their system of burrows, as the weather warms in spring it is time for mating. As Gayle's photo shows mating appears to be quite aggressive, with the male skink biting the female's neck, but this helps him to maintain the correct position for copulation. If breeding is successful, the female will give birth to up to 4 live young (viviparous) in late summer.

Newborns can stay for some time within the same burrowing system as the parents before leaving to establish their own territories. However, like some other fauna species there can be fierce rivalry between newborn skinks. The more dominant neonate will compete with its siblings and attempt to push them from the family burrow giving the remaining youngster an obvious advantage for its future. Mountain Skinks have particular habitat requirements and if there is not suitable habitat nearby it will severely limit the survival chances of displaced skinks.

The Mountain Skink's system of burrows is often amongst rocks, near old fallen timber or even below standing trees. Entrances can be so small that they are easily overlooked, and these skinks are real homebodies rarely venturing very far from their tunnels. When feeling under threat skinks can return to their refuge

Mountain Skinks copulating. Photography Gayle © Osborne.

Male Mountain Skink after copulation. Male skinks have a pair of hemipenes, which are intromittent organs that are used for reproduction. They are held within the body and are everted for reproduction. Photography Gayle © Osborne.

The Mountain Skinks resting in the sun after copulation. Photography Gayle © Osborne.

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numerous times throughout the day. Mountain Skinks obviously rely on camouflage and stillness in their pursuit of longevity. The closely related White's Skinks *Liopholis whitii* live to around 15 years so it's quite likely that Mountain Skinks would have a similar lifespan.

The endangered Mountain Skink faces many threats to its long term existence: logging in its different guises, illegal and indiscriminate firewood collection, wildlife trading and even unthinking wildlife photographers moving rocks to get the "perfect shot". Loss and modification of habitat is still probably their greatest threat. Many of Wombat Forestcare's observations of the Mountain Skink have been in less disturbed and long unburnt habitats and it's incredibly important that these places remain "unmanaged" for many years to come.

Thanks to Drs. Anna Senior and Zak Atkins for their invaluable knowledge and fascinating skink information. ■

# Blue-winged Parrot Project

**By Gayle Osborne**

When BirdLife Bass Coast became aware that Blue-winged Parrots *Neophema chrysostoma* were declining across their range they established a working group to collect information about breeding sites. There is an estimated population of 10,000 mature individuals, however, the population has declined 30-50% in 11 years, resulting in the Blue-winged Parrot being listed in 2020 as Vulnerable under the federal government's EPBC Act (1999).

Blue-winged Parrots should be looking for nesting sites from October onwards, and young fledge around January/February.

When nesting:

- Female prepares the hollow and sits on the nest to incubate eggs (20 days)
- Male hangs around the nesting area, often sitting alone
- Male feeds the female morning and evening by regurgitating food
- Both feed the young which fledge in 4-5 weeks

BirdLife Bass Coast would like people to forward information about breeding sites to bwpbasscoast@gmail.com, however if you contact Wombat Forestcare first we can visit the site to photograph the area, hopefully count the chicks and GPS the location. We will also make sure that the breeding site is registered on the state government database. ■

This pair of Blue-winged Parrots was seen nesting in a dead stump in a gully near Trentham. These tall rotting stumps that are vital nesting sites for many bird species are usually lost in planned burns. Photography © Gayle Osborne.

# From tiny yellow eggs to an outrageously bold Jezebel

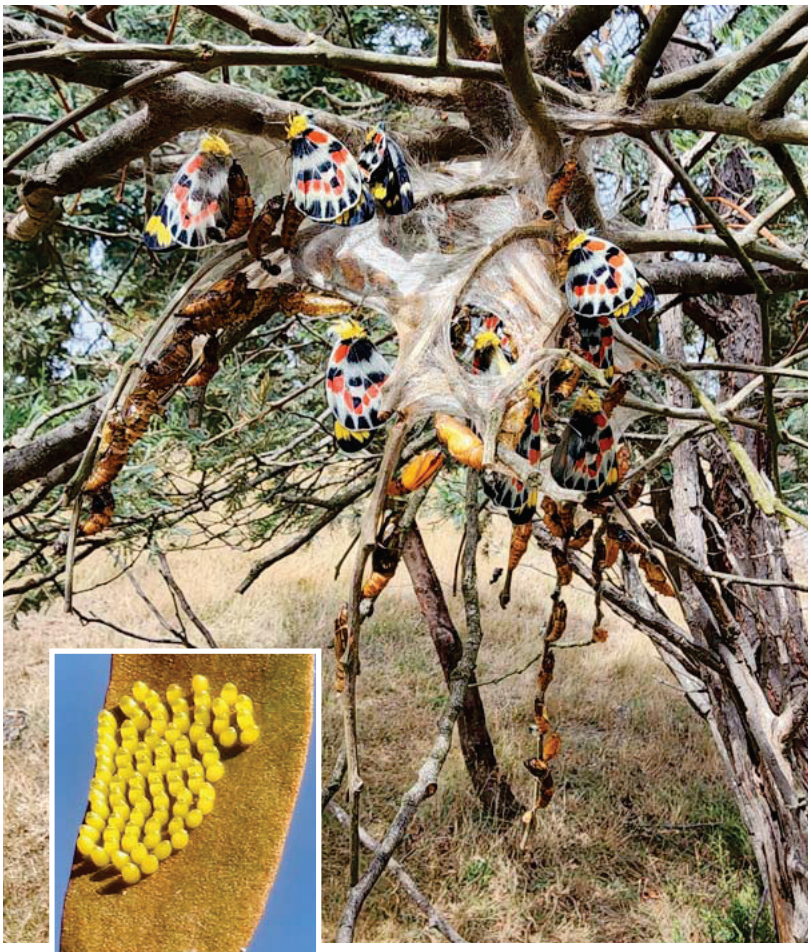
**Words and images by Lynda Wilson**

With spring effectively behind us and the bush and the garden in full bloom, the bees, birds and butterflies are frantically making so-called 'hay' while the sun shines.

All of this frenetic activity led me to reflect on the great fortune I had to stumble across a Silver Wattle *Acacia dealbata* that was hosting a Drooping Mistletoe *Amyema pendula* that was hosting what appeared to be a dense structure of cobwebs with some weird looking lifeforms tightly enclosed.

In the drier late summer month of February 2024, I made a point of regularly visiting this wattle tree wedged tightly amongst a basalt outcrop on the side of one of the region's young volcanic cones. With a bit of rock clambering to enable a closer inspection (observation of the natural world is not always easy), I realised that the silk structure was actually encasing dozens of bright yellow chrysalises, the non-feeding cocoon-like structures created by caterpillars to house the pupal form of butterflies and where metamorphosis into the adult form takes place.

With great anticipation, I'd visit this site each day, waiting to see what might emerge from this silky mass of yellow cases, each visit revealing slightly more detail with a little more colour. The gradual appearance of black and coloured spots resembling the wing patterns of a Jezebel butterfly raised the excitement even further.



A heavily laden Silver Wattle *Acacia dealbata* and Drooping Mistletoe *Amyema pendula*.

Inset: Cluster of yellow, ribbed, bottle shaped eggs about 1.2 to 1.4 millimetres in height on leaf of Drooping Mistletoe *Amyema pendula*, likely to be those of Imperial Jezebel *Delias harpalyce* or Red-spotted Jezebel *Delias aganippe*.

Hairy brown caterpillars, the larval stage of the Red-spotted Jezebel D*elias aganippe*.
Inset: Red-spotted Jezebel *Delias aganippe*

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Butterfly chrysalises, the pupal stage of the Imperial Jezebel *Delias harpalyce*.

Spots on the wings within the chrysalis provide a good indication of the emerging species. The new wings can be seen just breaking through this chrysalis.

Freedom at last! A newly emerged adult Imperial Jezebel busily pumping fluid into its brand new wings.

Nearly there…

Interestingly, the pupae of a Jezebel species can range in colour from orange in summer to black in winter.

Eventually, it was confirmed. The adult Imperial Jezebels *Delias harpalyce* wrapped in their brand new brilliantly coloured wings started to emerge. It wasn't long before, en masse, the Drooping Mistletoe was laden with the red, yellow and black of Imperial Jezebel wings, gently unfolding as they were being pumped with fluid from the butterfly's abdomen to expand to their full adult form. This process known as eclosion can take up to an hour before the wings 'harden up'. The butterflies then hang for a few more hours before they are ready to fly off. Over several days, the bulk of the butterflies had emerged and dispersed to find their first feed of energy-rich nectar.

Now just hanging around waiting for the wings to harden.

On one of the subsequent visits, I just happened to notice a couple of mistletoe leaves supporting rafts of tiny golden yellow eggs. Then there were the hairy brown caterpillars, the larva form of moths and buttterflies. Before too long, the Drooping Mistletoe was bare, not a leaf remaining. Almost in parallel, the host silver wattle started to lose its leaves and was

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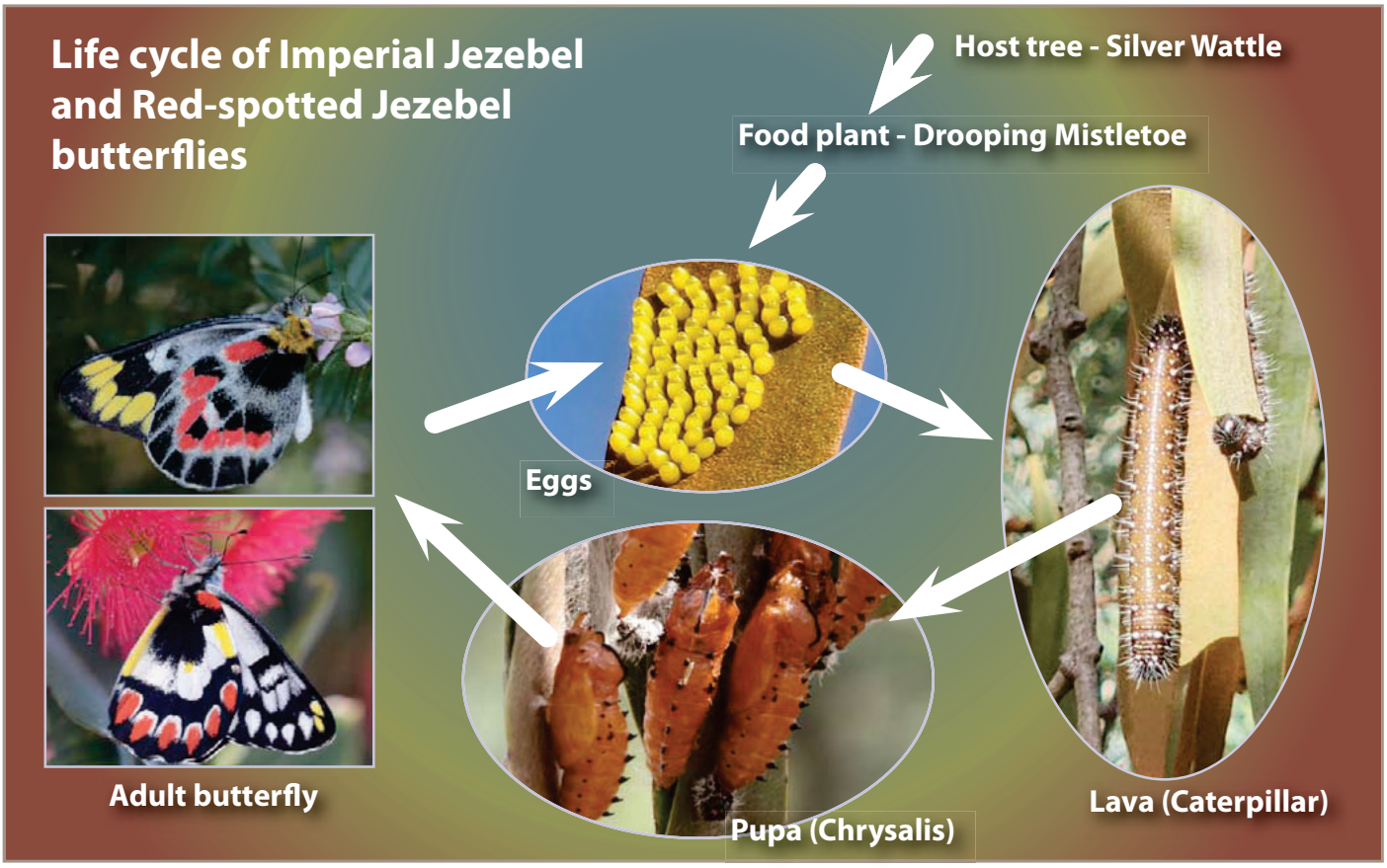
A close up of the veins and chitin scales of a new Imperial Jezebel wing

Some recently emerged Imperial Jezebels on the silken mass created by the caterpillars to protect their chrysalises.

looking quite sad. There is no sign yet that this tree has recovered to face another summer season.

Were these eggs and caterpillars the next generation of Imperial Jezebels? According to INaturalist, the caterpillars photographed on this occasion are those of the Red-spotted Jezebel *Delias aganippe*. The eggs of both the Imperial Jezebel and the Red-spotted Jezebel are very similar, both being yellow, ribbed and bottle shaped and about 1.2 to 1.4 millimetres in height and are laid in clusters on the foodplant, in this case the Drooping Mistletoe leaf. Sadly, the host plants were not in a position to allow these creatures to complete their cycle of life, so I'll never be absolutely sure which Delias species they belonged to. Even if they didn't ever get to develop into the glorious adult Jezebels, I am assuming that they did provide a source of nutrition to some native predator species such as the various insectivorous birds that inhabit the area. We can take comfort knowing that at least one generation of Imperial Jezebels managed to successfully complete their life cycle to disperse, mate and hopefully reproduce, perhaps on another drooping mistletoe on another silver wattle somewhere nearby. ■



# Weeds and the Wombat

## Bright-eyed Brown Butterfly Restoration Project

**By Brian Bainbridge,**
**Hepburn Shire Council Biodiversity Officer**

The Bright-eyed Brown Butterfly. Photography © Brian Bainbridge

A project focussed on helping a local butterfly could help the Wombat Forest through its wide-ranging impact on weeds and on community awareness about weeds.

The Bright-eyed Brown Butterfly Restoration is a three-year project to restore habitat of a wetland-loving butterfly in the upper Coliban. The Healthy Coliban Catchment Project has funded the Hepburn Shire Council to conduct on-ground habitat works in partnership with three community groups in Trentham.

In recent years, the Bright-eyed Brown Butterfly *Heteronympha cordace* ssp. *cordace* has emerged as a flagship species for ecological restoration. Bright-eyed Brown Butterfly populations have been observed to recolonize recovering Sedgy Riparian Woodland habitats following removal of high threat **'transformer weeds'** such as Willow and Blackberry. This response has been observed following two Council-led projects on Wombat Creek in Daylesford and two Community-led projects in Trentham.

The butterfly is a cheerful sign of environmental recovery and endorsement of the hard work of volunteer groups and agencies. For the wider community, the butterfly story brings alive the promise of restoration, especially during the challenging stages of drastic landscape change, machinery and herbicide use.

Under this project, Hepburn Shire has already overseen willow and blackberry removal on Trent Creek at Chinese Spring near the centre of Trentham. This also included removal of **environmental weeds of garden origin** including Silver Birch, Cherry Laurel, Portuguese Laurel, Holly and *Pittosporum tenuifolium* (Kōhūhū in New Zealand but more familiar by its cultivar names including 'James Stirling', Silver Sheen' and 'Screenmaster'). A large infestation of English Ivy will be targeted by skilled contractors in coming months. Project signage, social media and events will be opportunities to raise awareness about garden environmental weeds, treatment options and inspire action by local gardeners to replace the worst offenders.

Three community restoration projects will be supported in the final 2 years of the project at sites with populations of the Bright-eyed Brown Butterfly

- Quarry Street Reserve Committee of Management will restore butterfly habitat to sections of Stony Creek currently dominated by the serious **emerging weed**, Sharp-flowered Rush *Juncus acutiflorus*, Trentham is the only location currently recorded in Victoria for this rampant rhizomatous rush.

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- The Friends of Trentham Creeks and Reserves group will target a sedgy medium-quality remnant, removing common wetland weed species such as Yorkshire Fog and Creeping Buttercup in a site overlooked by Trentham's new community hub - 'The Mechanics'.
- Similarly, the Trentham and District Landcare group will focus on a floodplain site on the Coliban River, incorporating assisted natural regeneration, direct sowing and planting. The group will also target a stand of Black Elderberry- another bird dispersed weed species often fostered in gardens.

The Shire will follow up weed control, support natural regeneration and revegetate where needed at Chinese Spring and also on the Domino trail, focusing on its creek crossings.

Invasive plants in public open space and gardens pose an ongoing threat to surrounding bushland. Through this project, the Hepburn Shire, the Healthy Coliban partners and local volunteers hope to build on the growing culture of environmental stewardship among the neighbours of the Wombat Forest.

See news of working bees and ways to get involved in this project on the socials and websites of the Hepburn Shire and the three Community groups –

Trentham and District Landcare
Quarry Street Reserve Committee of Management
The Friends of Trentham Creeks and Reserves group

The widespread supspecies of Bright-eyed Brown Butterfly is not threatened but is vulnerable to local extinction due to its reliance on wetland habitats, high-altitude distribution and poor dispersal ability.

Bright-eyed Brown Butterfly caterpillars feed only on Tall Sedge, *Carex appressa*, a common wetland plant. It is shaded out by woody weeds but is capable of rapid recovery following weed control. Adult butterflies require nectar during their brief flight period in December and January - with Prickly tea-tree *Leptospermum continentale* noted as particularly valuable. Recovering populations have been observed to rely on nectar of weeds like Bird's Foot trefoil and Creeping Buttercup, so reintroduction of Prickly tea-tree is important to allow for later stages of restoration where these plants are replaced by natives.

The Healthy Coliban Catchment project is led by a partnership of North Central Catchment Management Authority, Djaara and Coliban Water. ■

# Keeping Weeds Out of The Forest

**By Diana Dawson**

Environmental weeds in the Wombat can rapidly change and reduce the diversity of native plants which in turn leads to changes in the diversity of animals. There are some well-known historical culprits - blackberry, gorse and broom - and ones that are starting to take hold such as holly and cherry laurel. Gardens of the towns in and adjacent to the forest are weed sources with some farmlands bordering the forest also of concern. The roads, tracks, electricity lines and even the old railways provide corridors for weed movement into the forest. Moist creek-lines are susceptible to weed establishment. Once the weeds get a hold in the steep gully areas, control is physically difficult and expensive. These are very precious areas of the Wombat Forest.

So how can we keep weeds out of the Wombat Forest? There is some legislation but in reality, it comes back to a willingness to act, starting with your own patch…if you can. And there's the rub; dealing with the prickly, dense, difficult weeds is hard. It takes knowledge, resources, time and persistence.

We are lucky to have in and around the Wombat Forest an emerging collective approach to weed control. Groups are acting on and drawing attention to problem areas, learning and sharing ideas as they go, and their knowledge can help the individual. Here are a few examples and contacts:

- Trentham — Trentham Landcare, Trentham Creeks and Reserves group and the Quarry St Reserve Committee of Management are about to start work on clearing weeds in the two waterways rising in Trentham with associated revegetation activities. Collaborative funding for the 3 groups is from North Central CMA.
- Bullarto/Musk — Residents along the headwaters of Kangaroo Creek, Werribee River and Cooper Creek/Lerderderg River are working with The Holly Project through working bees, the engagement of contractors and Melbourne Water's Liveable Communities Liveable Waterways program. (contact: weedcontrol200@gmail.com)

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- Lyonville — A new working group has started in Lyonville to address local pest plants and animals by building community awareness, knowledge and skills. The focus for the coming year will be blackberries, the most prevalent weed in and around the town. Next in line will be broom, hemlock, periwinkle and gorse. First step is an audit of weeds to work out where to start the work. A field day/info session is planned for Autumn next year. (contact: dwbruce2@gmail.com)

- Blackwood district — Crown reserve areas such as the Blackwood Mineral Springs and Caravan Park area are being tackled by the Blackwood and Barrys Reef Landcare Group. The group is helping the Ballan RSL Sub-branch restore the Avenue of Honour site at Barrys Reef. Down Simmons Reef Road, the group has removed many holly plants in Jack Cann Reserve, adjacent to the Garden of St Erth. A DEECA Landcare grant is assisting landholders in the Bullarto South area with holly. (contact: 3458landcare@gmail.com)

- Wheatsheaf — The Friends of Kangaroo Creek are linking landowners along Kangaroo Creek for weed control. A recent field day saw ideas for blackberry control demonstrated including mulching, goats, spraying with drones and biocontrol. See their Facebook for videos of the day. Funding assistance from Vic Blackberry Taskforce, Hepburn Shire and North Central CMA. (contact: weezac@yahoo.com)

- Hepburn Gardens for Wildlife — Trained mentors are available for free home consultations across the Shire for residents who wish to improve the habitat values in their gardens. A recent free publication* "Native Screening shrubs & trees in Hepburn Shire" (2024), is a supplement to "Grow Wild..." and focuses on local native plants which can be grown to create boundary or privacy screening, pollinator corridors or Biolinks, and shelter belts which increase biodiversity values. These aim to counter the prevalence of large plantings of environmental weeds such as holly, Portuguese and cherry laurel. *Published in conjunction with Wombat Forestcare.

- Moorabool Gardens for Wildlife — A team of volunteers is available to discuss plant choices in free garden visits to local gardeners. There is a section on the website about some of the garden plants that have a high likelihood of being spread from gardens into bushland. Better planting alternatives are suggested. Gardeners are also encouraged to ask questions when buying plants to reduce the chance of introducing potential weeds. (https://www.mooraboolgardensforwildlife.org.au/)

- The Holly Project — A collective approach by a number of groups to focus on this weed which is known to be a problem but its extent is not fully understood nor is it on the CaLP Act weed lists. In March 2024, a Wombat Forest Weed Forum funded by a storm recovery grant resulted in the formation of The Holly Project. Activities include holly mapping, working bees, community engagement and technical advice about holly control options. (contact: weedcontrol200@gmail.com)

Public land managers such as Melbourne Water, North Central CMA, Central Highlands Water are active on the ground too and are great supporters of the community-led groups. The councils (Hepburn, Moorabool and Macedon Ranges) vary in their capacity to control roadside weeds, but all are highly supportive of community efforts. Somewhat missing is the Department of the Environment, although there is possible removal of holly in the Bullarto South, Camp Road area soon.

We hope this overview provides ideas and inspiration. Do get in touch with any of the contacts. Future articles will highlight some of the great work going on in more detail. ■

Arie checking a holly thicket in a Bullarto South creek line. Photography © Diana Dawson.

# Owl update

### By Trevor Speirs

Another Powerful Owl breeding season has come to an end in the Wombat Forest and readers might be interested to know how some breeding pairs have fared this year. While the season actually continues for several more months, with owlets being dependent on their parents for food well into autumn, once the youngsters leave the nest hollow our observations usually come to a halt.

With so much management occurring or being planned to occur in the forest lately, it's important to locate and document owl breeding trees so the relevant authorities are properly informed and any activities do not negatively affect breeding or nest trees. While owls, especially Powerful Owls *Ninox strenua*, will use different trees for breeding from one year to the next, they often return to previously used hollows.

This was the case for a pair of Powerful Owls southeast of Trentham that have been breeding in the same gully on and off now for a number of years. The hollow chosen for this year's breeding was last used nine years ago when unfortunately it proved unsuccessful as a chick was found dead at the foot of the tree. It was extremely late in the season, 19 November, and it appeared the owlet, probably stricken by disease, had fallen to its death when finally trying to leave the nest. No such problems this year, with two owlets seen roosting with their mother, well hidden in a messmate, shortly after both had fledged

The Bullarto area is home to at least one pair of adult breeding Powerful Owls and last year this known pair had one chick successfully fledge. This year, two healthy chicks fledged and both were seen roosting close to the breeding tree for a couple of weeks after they had left the nest. The whole family moved from the area shortly after. This part of the Wombat was heavily impacted by the 2021 storm event with the loss of many large hollow-bearing trees. Fortunately the forest here is reasonably mature and there are still a number of potential breeding trees still standing. Importantly many of these trees have small hollows which provide homes for Greater Gliders which are in reasonable numbers here. One would think that living so close to an apex predator would be a rather precarious existence however the number of gliders has stayed steady here over the last couple of years.

In 2023 a medium-sized mountain gum was the preferred nest tree while this year a large messmate, roughly 200 metres away, was the tree of choice. The most noteworthy thing concerning this year's breeding was the time that the chicks fledged. Last year's sole chick left the nest in late September, however this year's two chicks fledged at the start of September, over three weeks earlier than last season. All our previous observations of Powerful Owl breeding in the Wombat has seen chicks fledging around the end of September or very early October, so this was out of the ordinary. It's difficult to know what brought this about, maybe a new adult partner or weather related, but it will be most interesting to observe what happens next year should breeding occur again in the same area. ■

Female Powerful Owl with two young in gully southeast of Trentham. Can you see the second chick barely visable next to its sibling? Photography © Gayle Osborne.

## Wombat Forestcare research • education • action

**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.**