

Castlemaine Naturalist

July 2003

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Oh Dear! Oh Dear!

At the June business meeting John Turnbull commented that if anyone should be thinking of visiting him at night they should look out for kangaroos. Sure enough, on the way home, not far from Sawmill Road, he had to slow down while three crossed the road. A few hundred metres further on he had to stop while five more animals crossed the road. The last was a doe, only it wasn't a kangaroo, but a deer!

Swift Parrot Survey

Saturday Aug. 2

Leave the Octopus (old Tourist Information Centre opposite the Castle Motel

At 8.30 am for a morning only survey.

Bring binocs, if you have them, and morning tea. (Recorders are needed, so, even if you don't feel you know enough about birds, your assistance in this area would be very welcome).

Whether the survey will be continued into the afternoon will be decided on the day.

Former CFNC Junior Member 2002 HASSELL Scholarship Winner

Annette Warner, nee Lee, one of our junior members in the early days of the Club, has won the 2002 HASSELL Travelling Scholarship which is awarded to a student of Landscape Architecture. Annette worked for a number of years in the Australian rainforest area of the Melbourne Botanical Gardens, and gained "an intimate knowledge of the history and function of botanic gardens along the way". She got to know the colony of Grey-headed Flying Foxes very well. Her response to the issues dealing with them, and the philosophy behind botanic gardens was the subject of her paper published in Landscape Australia.

Annette is David and Shirley Parnaby's granddaughter, and Ann Lee's daughter

Ecological thinning – an ecological disaster?

Ecological thinning is being advocated as a management method for box ironbark forests. The aim is to get the forests back to what was supposed to be the pre-European state, by thinning the tree cover by cutting, and poisoning the stumps to prevent regrowth. It is thought that the trees remaining will then grow more quickly.

The Bung Bong Ironbarks. There are some large ironbarks on private land at Bung Bong. The trees are well separated, and have been proposed as a model for the forests. The land had been grazed for many years. Recently stock have been taken off. The area has a sparse shrub and ground layer, as is typical of grazed areas. There are some large stumps, showing that the trees were once more numerous. Since grazing ceased there has been regeneration of eucalypts. I find it hard to see how this greatly modified area could be a model for forest management. The trees are clearly well separated because some have been cut out and regeneration has been suppressed. The land is in stark contrast with the adjoining forest, which has an abundance of shrubs and herbaceous species.

Removing the trees. Most of the existing trees will be removed during the thinning program. What criteria will be used to determine which trees will stay? One of the characteristics of box ironbark forests is the constantly changing mosaic of species. Will the trees that are kept reflect the abundance of existing species? Or will some species be given preference? Will they be tall erect trees, or crooked spreading trees? Where there is coppice growth, how many trunks will be kept? Will trees with hollows be given preference? Will the thinning keep the genetic diversity that is now present? Is the difference in size because of age, proximity to other trees, soil fertility or genetic differences?

Many of the trees are third or fourth generation coppice growth. The trunks may be recent, but the root system may be hundreds of years old, perhaps in senescence when Europeans arrived. Do we have any knowledge of the life-span of root systems? The aged root systems may be a major contributor to the present slow growth rates.

Will the felled trees be used as a firewood and timber source, or allowed to rot, or be burned? Do we know enough about forest ecology to know which would be best for the forests? Certainly, many people who wish to exploit the forest see ecological thinning as an opportunity to obtain large quantities of firewood, and some of these people are strong advocates of ecological thinning.

Wildlife. Many of the small forest birds flit from tree to tree, and appear to require more or less continuous tree cover. Removal of most of the cover is likely to be disastrous to them if the treated area is large. It will make it much easier for predators to prey on the birds and their nests. If the trial

areas are small and surrounded by untreated forest, how will edge effects be assessed in any population monitoring? Will the removal of trees affect the abundance of native and introduced browsers?

Microclimate. The opened up forest will experience more severe weather conditions. More wind, greater heat stress and colder frosts are likely. Plants that require shade are likely to be reduced in number.

Ecological thinning trials. Trial thinning is being advocated. How will the trial be assessed? We are looking at 100 to 200 year outcomes. If the trial areas are burned after clearing, the fire will affect growth for many years. In Castlemaine forests, the areas burned 20 years ago are distinguishable from the adjacent areas. If the fallen timber is left to rot, this will also affect the forest for many years. The bushland has been greatly modified by drought conditions, and has tended to make the understorey simpler and more uniform. It will be difficult to match areas to set up satisfactory controls. Eucalypts will also germinate and will need to be removed if the trees are to remain well-separated.

An increase in the abundance of shrub species may increase the fire risk, and may result in more frequent control burns.

Existing trials. There are many examples of tree thinning to be seen. In the south-east corner of the Kalimna Reserve in Castlemaine, the eucalypts are sparse. The corner is now infested with Cootamundra Wattles, Gorse and pines. In the Castlemaine Botanic Gardens bushland area, the eucalypts are sparse. Over the past ten years hundreds of thousands of Cape Broom and Flax-leaf Broom have been removed. There are also many pines present. In the Kaweka Wildflower Reserve in Castlemaine, where the tree cover has been modified, there is now a massive weed problem, with Cape Broom, Gorse, Blackberry, Bridal Creeper, introduced grasses, Cootamundra Wattle, Soursob and Ixia some of the problem weeds.

Many roadsides have been thinned. These roadsides are subject to weed invasion, and many now have scattered trees with an understorey of introduced grasses and herbs. Gorse, broom, hawthorn, blackberries and briar roses are a few of the shrubby weeds.

Weed invasion is fastest in the places with better soil and moisture. Most weeds find it hard to colonise untouched bushland, but they are better able to where cover is removed. The invasion of weeds may take many years. It is generally a slow process at first, and may not be noticed in any thinning trial. If weeds are found during the trial, will they be removed? If so, and the trial area is kept weed free, then it is not really a trial. Or would it be irresponsible to let weeds spread?

I have heard it stated that grassy and herbaceous weeds are too difficult, and we need to accept that they will be present. These are the weeds that can have a drastic effect on native herbs, such as orchids and lilies. The grassy

and herbaceous weeds are difficult, and perhaps impossible to eradicate, so these weeds are of critical importance.

Conclusion. There has been very little information provided about what will happen in the trials. How many areas will there be, where will they be, and what will the size be? Will there be control areas? What will the final tree density be? How will the selection be made? What will the assessment be, and for how long? Who will do the assessment? Will there be progress reports of the assessment? What criteria will be used to determine the success or otherwise of the trials?

Over the past 150 years the box ironbark forests have been degraded through many activities, including mining, inappropriate (but well-meaning) management practices, timber-getting, apiculture, dumping of rubbish and garden refuse, and the presence of feral plants and animals. Ecological thinning has the potential to do more damage to the forest than all of the previous processes combined. In the worst case, the forests as we know them today would cease to exist

Ern Perkins

Film – Travelling Birds

Coming soon (in 5-6 weeks time) to the Theatre Royal in Castlemaine!

“It’s not just a documentary, it’s like a symphony,” says Jacques Cluzaud, one of the three directors of this extraordinary film. This film was shot by five crews of more than 450 people, including 17 pilots and 14 cinematographers, who flew in specially adapted four wheeled ultralight aircraft alongside many species of birds as they made their annual migratory trips.

Great efforts were made to establish relationships with the birds. They started to talk to the birds when they were still in their eggs and when the eggs hatched and the chicks emerged, people spent time with them talking and walking. For instance the pelican eggs came from Senegal and were taken to Normandy where they were hatched. When they were strong enough to travel, they went back to Senegal with the film crew to film their journey. All the birds were known by name. As a result of such dedicated preparation the birds in this film appear astoundingly at ease often flying within touching distance of the crew and their ultralight machines.

The film speaks volumes about the way birds live in nature and, often in spite of nature. Juxtaposed with some of the great man-made and natural monuments and some of the powerful natural phenomena of the world, this film promises to mesmerise.

Planting in the Drought - Jenni Collier

Biodiversity Project Officer (Threatened Species Network Project)

The main objective of Jenni’s work is to improve the extent and network links of threatened species and threatened vegetation communities.

There are a number of ways this can be done:-

Fencing off areas (a) to control stock access such as creeks and (b) to create exclusion zones where plants can grow without continually being eaten by stock, wallabies, kangaroos, and rabbits etc.

Installation of nesting boxes and monitoring of nests to prevent invasion of bees etc.

Hand weeding in areas that look highly degraded but in fact harbour large numbers of threatened native species.

Surveying threatened species populations using hair tubes mounted in trees to identify what species are present in a given area. Recent recordings showed that six of twenty-two hair tubes in the Exhibition Pass area at Chewton were visited by Brushtail Phascogales

Revegetation of areas with plants grown on from locally collected seeds and cuttings.

Working with local communities and school children to educate them about our own locally threatened species and the need for local conservation and how it can be achieved. Getting communities and school groups involved in hands on activities such as weed control and planting is a very rewarding way of doing this.

There are many issues to be taken into consideration when planting especially in drought conditions. Because funding is on a twelve-monthly basis and seedlings need to be ordered well in advance and planting dates organised and contracted or publicised, planting often has to be done in less than perfect conditions during dry periods. Experience has shown that a commonsense approach is needed. Things to consider include planting styles (tubes or direct), condition of site (drainage, gully or creek site), site preparation (to reduce competition from weeds, wallabies, kangaroos, cockatoos, rabbits etc.), selection of species, condition and providence of seedlings, training in careful planting methods, mulching materials, watering in and follow-up watering plans. Weed control is a major issue both prior to planting and afterwards. While each site has its own peculiarities and success rates vary accordingly, this is a job that requires lots of enthusiasm and dedication and provides plenty of challenges. For Jenni who “loves finding threatened species” it is also a job with lots of rewards and opportunities for discovery and learning.

Geraldine Harris

Observations

- Margaret Badminton tells of 14 Choughs bombing the possum which sleeps in a not very well concealed spot in the big tree in her back yard. They were very persistent, but, beyond looking at them with one eye the possum just settled back to sleep and ignored them!
- Margaret also reports a White-eared Honeyeater has taken up temporary residence around the house. She has only had two other sightings of this

particular species twice since she moved to Yapeen ten years ago. Also a White-eared Honeyeater was heard in Blakeley Road for the first time in about five years on 26/6. They first made their appearance in the district about 1985. Rita Mills

- A large bird soaring above Kalimna up towards the Mount Alexander Golf Course caught Shirley Parnaby's eye early in June. She watched it circling and coming down lower when it was finally caught in the rays of the sun and she was able to identify it as Pelican. She wondered if it might have been attracted to the large dam on the golf course.
- Albert Golden brought along what appeared to be a papery wasps' nest which smelled strongly of honey but no one could identify it. He has sent some to Melbourne for identification so we will have to wait for the report.
- John and Nina Cole brought along an oval shaped grass nest in a gorse branch. It had a small entrance about the size of a 20c piece in the top. There were two similar nests close to each other in the gorse. Any suggestions?
- On Saturday John arrived with another curious find from under his gorse bushes – this time it was a small hollowed out Olympic torch shaped item about 30-40 mm long. It was open both ends and appeared to be made of scales. Our best guess was a tail from a lizard that had been cleaned out by ants?
- Margaret Dunne sent along a large piece of coral like fungi with pale stems and a rusty pink coloured top that Rita identified as possibly a *Ramaria holorubella* – “a robust, short stemmed coral fungus. The crowded branches are buff to light tan in colour, with pink to wine red tips becoming reddish brown with age. A fairly common species of Eucalypt forests.” (Australian Fungi, Bruce Fuhrer)
- Ern and Lesley Perkins have sighted the Regent Honeyeater at Newstead that seems to be attracting a steady stream of sightseers. A visitor from Melbourne had been searching for about an hour and Lesley was not sure if he was pleased or not when she showed him where to look.
- Two Canadians armed with a palm sized computer were pleased to be able to check off the Regent Honeyeater as well as a Noisy Friarbird, a Crescent Honeyeater and a Yellow-tufted Honeyeater with some help from the Perkins family.
- Barbara Maund has had a Grey Currawong feeding on her Common Myrtle.
- Two Southern Boobook Owls are back in the same tree in the Botanical Gardens. George Broadway.
- Ern Perkins recommends the Birds on Stamps exhibition at the Post Office Gallery on the corner of LaTrobe and Exhibition Street as well worth a visit.
- The Barking Owl is calling again at Barkers Creek. Geoff Harris
- Scarlet Robins are about. Jenni Collier and Geoff Harris.

- A pair and two male Scarlet Robins were seen on the Poverty Gully Track between Wheeler Street and the continuation of Ross Drive during the U3A walk on 25/6/03. Also several Bursaria, summer flowering plants, were seen with some flowers not far past the Poverty Gully dam on the Monk side, and Fairy Wax, *Philotheca verrucosus*, was already doming into flower at the Wheeler St. end of the walk. Rita Mills
- Cootmundra Wattle was just starting to flower in Sawmill Road, North Castlemaine, on Sunday 29/6.

FROM THE BUSINESS MEETING, 26/6/03

Welcome to Dr. Mel and Mrs. Valerie Forbes.

Dean Bridgefoot (LandCare Co-ordinator) has asked for a club representative to give a brief **explanation of the work in the Butterfly area** of the gardens when he conducts a Group Training Session at the site in the near future.

Pat Lakey has asked the club for some **suggestions for new Natural History books for the Library**. Suggestions to Ern Perkins, please.

The VFNCA on the internet

The Victorian Field Naturalists Clubs Association now has a web site.

The address of the site is <http://home.vicnet.net.au/~seana>

The Castlemaine Club has a section on this site. Consideration is being given to the club's own site. A sub-committee has been formed to look at future proposals for the CD, “Is it a Native?”, and to develop a clear policy regarding a club website. The CD has been selling well.

A letter has come from the **Victorian National Parks Association** re the future of their Box-Ironbark campaign. It was difficult to precis, but Chris Morris has several photocopies available for those who are interested.

Disclaimer - The opinions expressed in this newsletter are those of the contributors and not necessarily those of the Club.

Reminder - Articles, reports and observations for the CN can be left at Tonks Bros., Barker St. if that is more convenient for you.

*Castlemaine Field Naturalists Club,
PO Box 324,
Castlemaine.
Incorporation #A0003010B*

Castlemaine Field Naturalists Club, July 2003.

Programme

General meetings are held in the Uniting Church (UCA) hall at 8.00 pm on the second Friday of each month, except January.

Excursions are usually on the Saturday following the general meeting, and leave promptly at the times stated from **The Octopus, opposite Castle Motel, Duke Street**. Outdoor excursions are likely to be cancelled in extreme weather conditions. There are **NO excursions on total fire ban days**.

Business meetings are held at 27 Doveton Street on the 4th Thursday of each month, except December, at 7.30 pm. All members are invited to attend.

Visitors are welcome at club meetings and excursions.

Fri. Jul. 11. Snakes in the Hand. Chris Hay, licensed snake handler. UCA hall, 8pm.
Sat. Jul.12. Eppalock – glacial remains. Leave from the Octopus at 1.30pm sharp to meet leader, E. Wilkinson, at the Spillway Carpark, Eppalock, at 2.15pm. R. Mills to lead from Castlemaine.

Sat. Aug. 2 Swift Parrot Survey Ken and Maureen Dredge will lead. Leave the Octopus at 8.30am. For details see P.1

Fri. Aug. 8. History of the Coliban Water Channels. Geoff Russell. UCA hall, 8pm.

Sat. Aug. 9. Coliban Water Channel- the energy dissipater at Sedgewick. Leader R. Piesse. Leave the Octopus at 1.30pm sharp

Thurs. Aug. 28. Broom Pull. Meet at the Mary St./ Froomes Rd. corner at 9am Wear sturdy footwear, gloves, hat, etc. Bring drinks and morning tea.

Fri. Sep. 12. Sri Lanka's Birds. Stuart Dashper, Birds Australia. UCA hall, 8pm.

Sat. Sept. 13 Roadside Cleanup. 8.30am. Wear sturdy footwear. Gloves, garbage bags and red safety vests supplied.

Sat. Sep. 13. Tubal Cain Mine and Sailors Gully. Leader: R. Piesse. Leave the Octopus at 1.30 sharp.

Fri. Oct. 10. Platypus Conservancy. Dr. Melody Serena. UCA hall, 8pm.

Sat. Oct. 11. Mandurang. Leader, Max Stevens. Leave the Octopus at 1.30 pm sharp.

Fri. Nov. 14. Natural History, Outback. Trevor Blake. UCA hall, 8pm.

Sat. Nov. 15. Bendigo Sewerage Ponds. Leader: Chris Morris.

Fri. Dec. 12. Members and Visitors Night. 8.30 UCA hall.

2003 Committee - C. Morris (President) ph. 9885 4221, J. Turnbull (VP and Grievance Officer) ph. 5474 3035, G. Broadway (Secretary) ph. 5472 2513, H. van Gemert (Treasurer) ph. 5472 1082, E. Perkins, R Mills (Newsletter Ed & Public Officer), G. Harris, (Ass't Newsletter Editor), B. Maund, M. Oliver, R. Piesse and J. Cole.

Subscriptions for 2003 - Ordinary membership: Single \$22, Family \$30
Pensioner or student: Single \$19, Family \$24.

The subscription includes postage of the *Castlemaine Naturalist*.