



Welcome to our summer edition. We celebrate the legislation for three new national parks but watch with great distress destructive salvage works that are continuing in the Wombat Forest. Migratory birds, such as Satin Flycatchers, have arrived to breed in our cool, damp gullies. It is a great time for birdwatching in the Wombat.

Gayle Osborne (editor) and Angela Halpin (design)



Lerderderg River. Photography © Alison Pouliot.

National Parks at last

By Gayle Osborne

Our community is celebrating the passing of the legislation to create the new Wombat-Lerderderg National Park. 29,000 hectares of the Wombat Forest will be conserved for its amazing animals, plants and fungi and for future generations to enjoy.

Wombat Forestcare congratulates the State Government for legislating this national park and the Mt Buangor and Pyrenees National Parks, all incredibly important habitat for endangered creatures and plants. The creation of the Hepburn and Cobaw Conservation Parks will safeguard these ecologically important areas.

Wombat Forestcare was established in 2006, at the end of a logging protest campaign, and its members have always been aware that there was a need to protect the Wombat Forest, its threatened species and the headwaters of its

major rivers. The two-year battle to stop the establishment of a gold mine in the headwaters of the Heritage-listed Lerderderg River highlighted the risks to the Wombat Forest while it remained classified as a state forest.

State forests are managed for their resources, such as timber, metals and minerals, with limited protection for environmental values. Whereas national parks are the cornerstone of biodiversity conservation; they protect intact vegetation in which native fauna can exist and thrive. They also provide many opportunities for people to enjoy the natural environment. These new national parks also protect the headwaters of very important rivers, providing water for many rural communities.

National Parks are managed by rangers who not only care about the environment but also know how to balance conservation with public access, how to ensure that the public enjoy nature without impacting the habitat of plants, animals and fungi.

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We should be very proud that the long campaign for protection of these forests has resulted in three national parks. However, seven regional parks as well as 11 nature conservation reserves and 18 bushland reserves throughout the central west are still to be legislated, and we understand that this will be included in a new Public Land Act.

There are 2,947 hectares of the Wombat State Forest to be added to the existing **Hepburn Regional Park**.

Four new regional parks will be created as follows:

Spargo Creek Regional Park 1,693 hectares

Blackwood Regional Park 3,707 hectares

Fingerpost Regional Park 5,442 hectares

Barkstead Regional Park 6,680 hectares

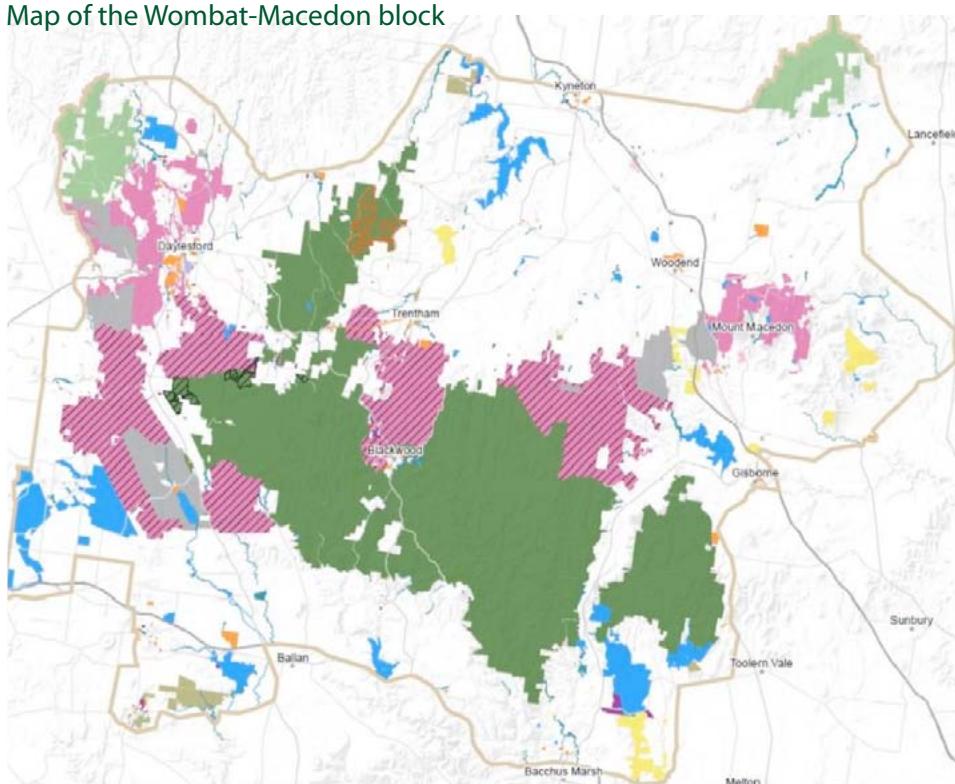
The total area of Wombat State Forest that remains to be legislated is 20,469 hectares, which is a substantial area that urgently needs to be protected. Regional parks will afford protection from logging, however the government intends to allow domestic firewood collection until June 2029.

Commercial mining can occur in a regional park, however it would be highly restricted and would require extensive approvals. We are fairly confident that there would be such opposition to any proposed mine that it would not be approved. It will be interesting to see whether companies that hold exploration licenses continue with their exploration.

We will need to continue to pressure the government to ensure that this legislation is presented to the Victorian parliament early next year.

Our community, together with the Victorian National Parks Association and local environment and field naturalists' groups has worked extremely hard to have the Wombat recognised for its incredible wildlife. For more than 15 years Wombat Forestcare has campaigned for 'Park' status for our forest, during which time many people have attended protest events, written letters to politicians and supported the campaign in many ways – we now celebrate everyone's contribution. ■

Map of the Wombat-Macedon block



Source: Victorian government response to the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council's central west investigation final report.

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Public land use category

National park, State park
Regional park
Nature reserve
Conservation park
Bushland reserve

Satin Flycatchers and other migrants

By Trevor Speirs

There is an old saying in birdwatching circles that on a day's outing the most interesting sightings are often seen shortly after arriving at your destination. Similarly, while there are plenty of excellent spots throughout the Wombat Forest that provide good birdwatching, especially in spring and summer, one of the best and most reliable places is within a short distance of the Trentham township.

Just behind the Trentham tip a creek heads south-east, roughly parallel with Countess Road. By taking some of the rough, but easily walkable tracks heading south off Countess, you will quickly come to this fern rich gully/creek, an area which is a magnet for migratory birds. From mid spring this is an excellent place to observe one of the forest's spring arrivals, the Satin Flycatcher *Myiagra cyanoleuca*, which breed here in good numbers. These damp areas are their preferred breeding habitats and different pairs can often



Satin Flycatcher sits on nest. Photography © Gayle Osborne.



Male Satin Flycatcher. Photography © Gayle Osborne.

be found nesting only a couple of hundred metres apart. There have even been anecdotal reports that pairs will return to the same spot, and possibly the same tree, every year to breed but this is unconfirmed.

Satin Flycatchers are very vocal, especially when breeding, and this definitely is a great help when trying



Female Satin Flycatcher. Photography © Gayle Osborne.

to locate a nest. Generally nests are built on a fork of a dead horizontal branch of a eucalypt. But as Gayle's photo shows, while this nest is on a small dead branch, forks aren't always used. When observing this breeding pair recently, first an intrusive Sacred Kingfisher and then a Pied Currawong had

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to be chased away by a brooding parent after they had ventured too close to the nest. While both sexes tend to nesting duties they can spend many minutes away from the nest, probably in pursuit of insects, meaning this is a time when the nest is particularly vulnerable. The parasitic Brush Cuckoo, another spring migrant to the Wombat, is known to deposit its eggs in flycatcher nests, leaving the task of raising cuckoo young to the unsuspecting surrogate parents. Another Wombat migrant, the Square-tailed Kite, is a well-known raider of small bird nests, often taking the whole nest and its occupants in one deadly swoop.

The vast majority of Satin Flycatchers spend the winter months in New Guinea before embarking on their southerly migration. Although not of the scale of some other Australian migrants; the Bar-tailed Godwit flies more than 10,000 kilometres non-stop to SE Australia after breeding in Alaska, this is still a considerable distance for such a small bird. The almost identical Leaden Flycatcher is also a seasonal migrant to Victoria and while it has been recorded in the Wombat, it is much more likely to be seen in drier and more open country, especially in the east of the State.

Many other migrants, both altitudinal and long distance, can also be found here behind the town tip in the warmer months. These include Golden and Rufous Whistler, Dusky Woodswallow, Rose Robin, Gang-gang Cockatoo and several cuckoo species, with the Fan-tailed Cuckoo being the most noticeable and vocal. As well as resident birds like the uncommon Red-browed Treecreeper, it is also a very reliable spot to observe the Sacred Kingfisher, another breeding migrant that has been recorded as far north as New Guinea and Indonesia. ■



Female Satin Flycatcher. Photography © Gayle Osborne.



As we come into summer, there are two projects we are seeking help with. Can you look out for Blue-winged Parrots and Gang Gang Cockatoos using tree hollows for breeding? Both these species will be investigating hollows for potential nest sites. If you have a sighting please get in touch – info@wombatforestcare.org.au



A stare of owls

Words and images by Gayle Osborne

These young Powerful Owls were photographed with an adult owl roosting above them in October this year. As the location was only 1.5 kilometres west of a pair of Powerful Owls that we have been monitoring for several years, we wanted to establish whether this sighting was of our original owls or a second pair of owls.

We immediately drove to the site of the original owls and there was an adult pair in one of their usual roost trees, but no indication that they had produced young this season. We were surprised that two pairs of Powerful Owls could find sufficient prey to exist in such proximity.

We have other records of a large male Powerful Owl 1.8 kilometres to the east of the original pair and in 2021 we recorded a juvenile and an adult owl at this location.

The VEAC central west investigation draft proposal paper noted that Powerful Owls successfully breed in the Wombat State Forest and that this is a significant indicator of forest health as the owls need a steady supply of food such as possums and gliders to sustain themselves and their chicks. ■

Upper Right: Our latest Powerful Owl chicks.



Below: Two previously known adults 1.5 kms away.



When is salvage logging not salvage logging?

By Gayle Osborne

Senior staff in the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action (DEECA) deny that they are carrying out a timber salvage operation in the Wombat Forest. They claim that the massive volumes of logs that are being removed from the forest are to reduce fire risk.

In the June 2024 issue of the Wombat Forestcare newsletter we explained that "... thick mats of shredded debris that are being left on the forest floor is possibly increasing the fire risk rather than reducing it. The department's Overall Fuel Hazard Assessment Guide 4th ed. for surface fine fuels that are completely connected and thicker than 35mm, rates the fuel hazard as 'Extreme'."

It is interesting that, in response to a letter to the Minister for the Environment, the Chief Fire Officer, Chris Hardman wrote to Wombat Forestcare in April 2024 saying "Significant storm events in June and October 2021 caused widespread damage to the Wombat and Cobaw State Forests. This damage included significant windthrown areas, with downed trees and debris now sitting on the forest floor, creating an elevated bushfire risk, works have commenced to clear finer fuels, **as these will dry out over consecutive years and create higher than acceptable fuel loads**, and to remove larger logs and debris, which will generate significant radiant heat if impacted by bushfire and prevent timely access to the forest for bushfire suppression purposes."

Mr Hardman acknowledges that fine fuels add to the fuel loads and are an issue and that "works have commenced to clear finer fuels", however, we have not seen any evidence that the fine fuels and debris have been removed. Instead, as the large logs are removed, they are stripped of bark and branches, which is spread across the site.

The *Forests Act 1958* (Vic) authorises the Secretary (or the delegated Chief Fire Officer) to carry out fire prevention



Recent salvage works at the Silver Queen coupe by Forest Fire Management Victoria.

works. Section s62(2) of the Act states that *Despite anything to the contrary in any other Act or law, the Secretary must carry out proper and sufficient work in State forests, national parks and on protected public land—*
(a) for the immediate prevention and suppression of fire; and (b) for the planned prevention of fire.

It is extremely frustrating that, in the Act, there is not an explanation of how the Secretary

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or Chief Fire Officer should show that their actions will be effective for the planned prevention of fire. It is sufficient that the Secretary or the Chief Fire Officer believes that an action will reduce fire risk, the action does not have to be substantiated.

In 2022, VicForests commenced a salvage operation of wind-fallen timber in the Wombat State Forest and in September 2023, Wombat Forestcare sought an injunction in the Supreme Court alleging that VicForests had failed to adequately survey for threatened species. The case was confined to the coupe known as Silver Queen.

After several court appearances, on 30 November 2023, The Honourable Justice Richards ordered that “Until further order, the first defendant must not permit any person to conduct timber harvesting operations in coupe 193-538-0008 (Silver Queen).”

We expected to continue with our case, but on 6 December 2023, the Board of VicForests resolved to cease all community forestry operations managed by it by 31 December 2023 and then on 12 March 2024, VicForests advised the Court that it would close by 30 June 2024.

When VicForests closed, Wombat Forestcare lost the opportunity to continue to argue that surveys for threatened species had been inadequate and to refute VicForests’ claim that the works were reducing the fire risk.

The regulatory oversight by the Office of the Conservation Regulator (OCR) of VicForests was also at an end. Unfortunately, the OCR does not have oversight of Forest Fire Management activities and there is not an independent body to ensure that Forest Fire Management adhere to legal prescriptions regarding protection of threatened species or working in wet conditions.

It is quite disturbing that having initiated a case to halt the salvage at the Silver Queen coupe and have VicForests fold, to then find that Forest Fire Management Victoria were able to carry out an intense and environmentally destructive salvage operation in the same coupe.

Issues that we had about surveys for threatened species, including the FFG Act listed endangered Spotted Hyacinth Orchid *Dipodium pardalinum*, remain unresolved.

More than four years after the wind event, DEECA has failed to clear a number of forest tracks in the Wombat Forest. Large fallen trees that would hinder access during a fire remain across tracks near Trentham. It makes a mockery of the claim that it is important to conduct broadacre removal of fallen logs, much of which is carried out a considerable distance from townships.



Recent salvage works at the Silver Queen coupe.
Track uncleared - Blue Mount Road off Domino Road, Trentham.



Mr Hardman claims that “These are not timber harvesting operations and are not driven by commercial outcomes.” Having seen the **extraction of thousands of cubic metres of large and medium logs** over the last few years, we cannot agree with this claim and consider that this operation is to provide employment for ex-VicForests’ contractors while generating a supply of firewood.

Instead of reducing fire risk the operation is creating surface fine fuels that are completely connected and thicker than 35mm, a situation that is defined as an extreme fuel hazard by the department’s own assessment guide.

Not only are there environmental issues with the removal of the logs, but also the cost of undertaking the salvage work, paying the contractors, the full-time security, seven days a week at three sites and the rental of a depot in Daylesford will be exorbitant.

It is disgraceful that this destruction of habitat is being undertaken by the department that is responsible for the protection of the environment. ■

References

Forests Act 1958 (Vic)

Hines, F., Tolhurst, K. G., Wilson, A. A. G., & McCarthy, G. J. (2010). *Overall fuel hazard assessment guide* (4th ed., Fire and Adaptive Management Report No. 82). Victorian Government, Department of Sustainability and Environment.

Lyonville nightlife



Left block from top: This green moth is not an Emerald but is a Stitched Delicate, below it is the male Beautiful Leaf Moth and below that two images of the unrelated Pink Leaf Moth. The bottom left species is a male Black-spotted Epicoma.

Right block from top: Not a male Emperor Gum Moth, but the less frequently seen Helena Gum Moth. The next three species are all Tiger Moths and all have wildly variable wing patterns. First are two specimens of the Dark-spotted Tiger Moth, then the Black and White Tiger Moth which has black marks on its thorax and finally the Crimson Tiger Moth, named for the crimson patches on its hind wings.

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.