Issue 76 - June 2026

wombat forestcare

newsletter

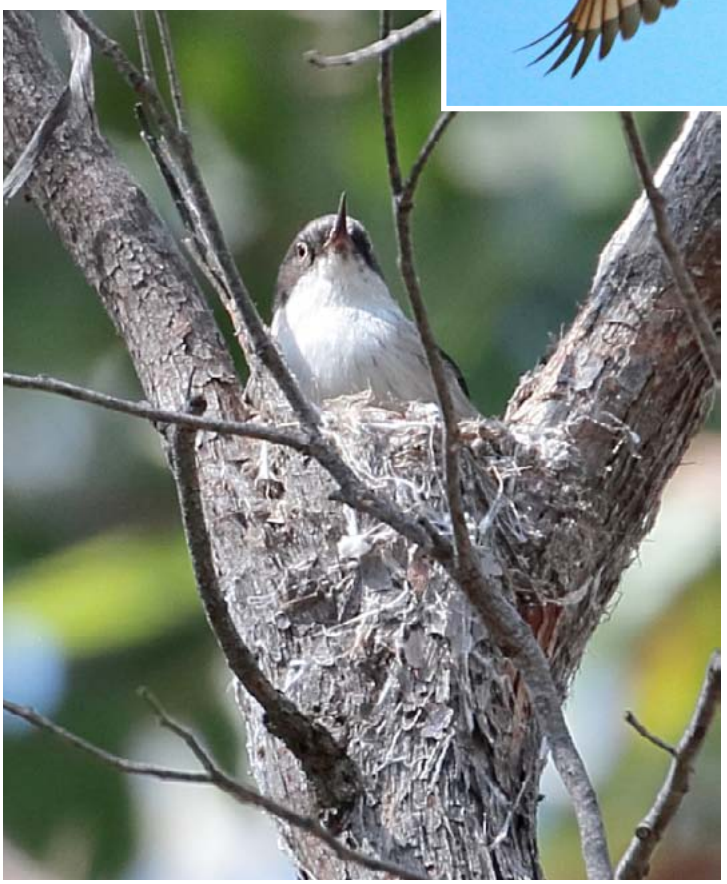
Welcome to our winter edition. The recent rains have created perfect conditions for an amazing variety of fungi. A great diversity of colour and forms are to be found this year. Spend some time in the forest before these delicate specimens disappear. Read about a new location for the elusive *Sarcodon austrofibulatus.*
Gayle Osborne (editor) and **Angela Halpin** (design)

Varied Sittella

By Trevor Speirs

Bird nests come in all shapes and sizes; some can be scrappy and untidy, while others like many of the robin species are quite beautiful with their adornment of mosses and lichens. Not many however are called a masterpiece which is how the highly regarded Australian naturalist, Graham Pizzey described the nest of the Varied Sittella *Daphoenositta chrysoptera* in his early bird guides.

Varied Sittella in flight. Photography © Gayle Osborne



Camouflaged Varied Sittella nest. Photography © Lynda Wilson.

Many birds use camouflage in their nest building but the sittella is possibly a gold medal contender in this department. Usually built into the fork of a dead or living tree, the nest is so well hidden that unless you actually see a bird attending the nest it can be extremely difficult to locate. The excellent accompanying photo by Wombat Forestcare member Lynda Wilson, shows how the nest blends perfectly into the shape of the tree. Built primarily of bark, lichen and spider webs, the bark chosen would be of the same type as on the host tree, giving the nest the appearance of a small wooded protuberance.

Small, compact and rather nondescript, if not for their persistent twittering, Varied Sittellas can be easily overlooked during a day's birding. Although unrelated, the three species of treecreepers that occur in the Wombat forest, the Red-browed, White-throated and less common Brown Treecreeper do

continued next page ...

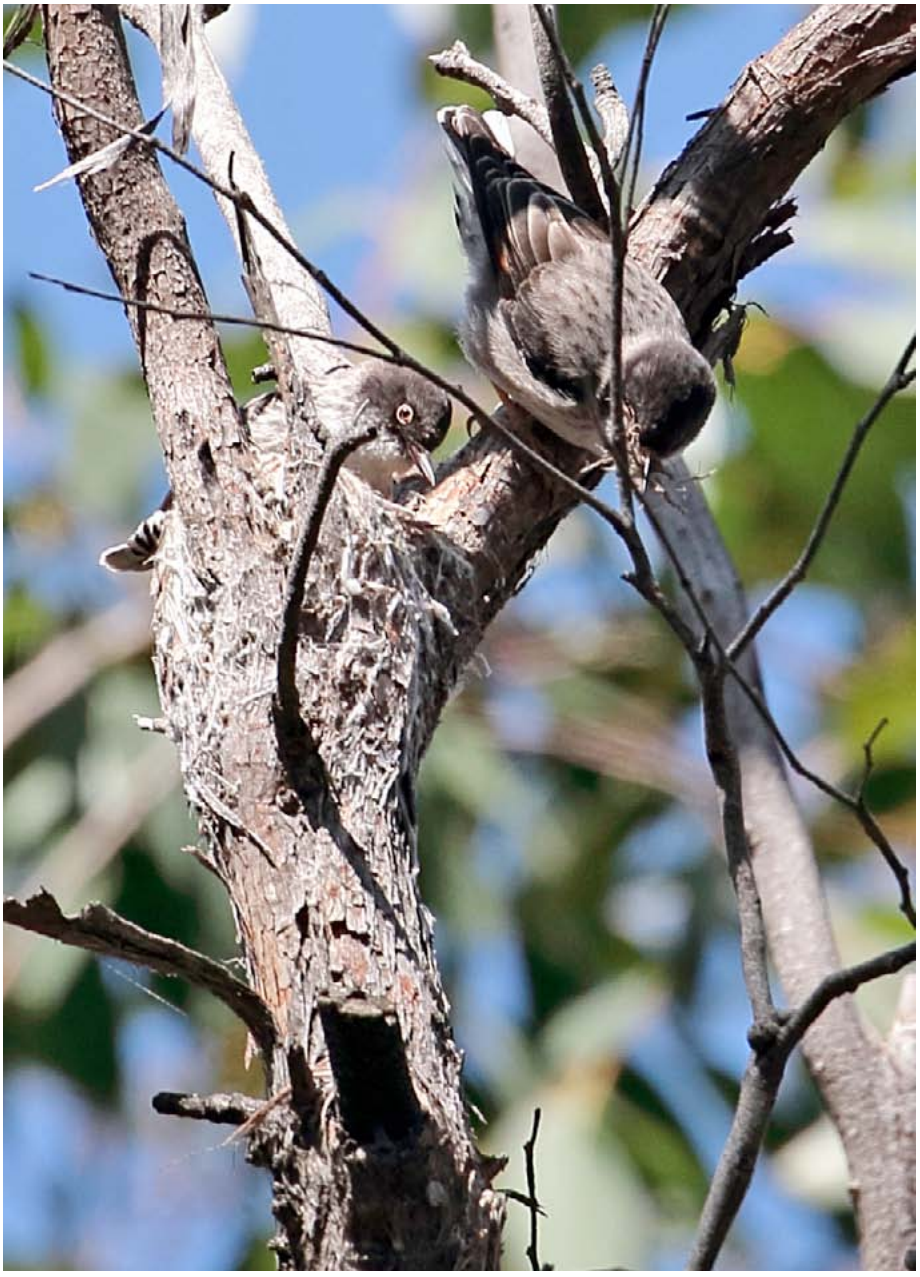
have similar habits to the sittella. All four species have strong, large feet which provide excellent grip but there is a noticeable difference in the way they employ their methods when hunting for food. Sittellas generally start foraging from the tops of trees and work over the branches and trunk in a downwards direction, sometimes in a rocking action with wings spread out. This is in complete contrast to the treecreepers which head up the tree in their pursuit of prey items. Sittellas feed on a variety of small invertebrates and insects but take less ants than treecreepers.

Varied Sittellas and White-throated Treecreepers both show a preference for rough-barked eucalypts whereas Red-browed Treecreepers are usually seen on smooth-barked trees such as mountain gum and candlebark. Brown Treecreepers, unlike the others, spend much of their time on the ground probing stumps and fallen logs. The messmate *Eucalyptus obliqua* is probably the most common eucalypt species in the Wombat area and this is good for our sittellas as it happens to be one of their favourite foraging trees.

The Varied Sittella has a trait in common with the Red-browed and Brown Treecreeper in that they all practice cooperative breeding. Although occasionally only one pair of sittellas will participate in the breeding process usually it is up to half a dozen birds, mainly unmated males from previous broods, that will help in the nest building and rearing of nestlings.

Gregarious in their behaviour, flocks of up to twenty sittellas can travel quickly over the forest canopy in their somewhat erratic rocking movements. Like many small insectivorous birds sittellas can often be seen with a number of other species like thornbills, pardalotes, whistlers and honey-eaters. Maybe it was an explosion of insect life or just safety in numbers but on one occasion, Varied Sittellas were recorded associating with up to seventeen other species which would have tested the best birdwatcher's identification skills. ■

Varied Sittella. Photography © Lynda Wilson.



Nest building. Photography © Lynda Wilson.

Hepburn Conservation Park

Words and images by Gayle Osborne

A new track created through the burn site where an informal track previously existed. Photography © Gayle Osborne.

The northern section of the Wombat State Forest, north of the Hepburn Regional Park contains significant Brush-tailed Phascogale habitat. In recognition of the environmental values of this part of the state forest, the Victorian Environment Assessment Council central west investigation report recommended that this forest be reclassified as the Hepburn Conservation Park.

Conservation Parks are a new category, created under the National Parks Act for areas with high conservation or other values. In June 2021, the then Minister for the Environment, the Hon. Lily D'Ambrosio accepted the recommendation to create the conservation park as well as new national parks, regional parks and reserves. Legislation to create this park was passed in the Victorian Parliament in November 2025. The hand over to Parks Victoria will be completed by early October this year.

It has been a convention, that once the state government accepts recommendations from a Victorian Environment Assessment Council report, the public land is managed in accordance with the new categories. Unfortunately, this government has continued to manage the central west forests as if there was no commitment to create these parks and reserves.

During the wait for the hand-over to Parks Victoria, Forest Fire Management Victoria (FFMVic, a division of the Department of Environment) opened an area for domestic firewood collection in the conservation park in the northern section of the Wombat Forest.

This area is listed for a planned burn and, to protect FFMVic staff from falling trees during the burn, trees that are designated as dangerous on the boundary are felled. It is this timber that was made available to the public. While it is important that FFMVic staff are kept safe, many trees were felled that were a considerable distance from tracks, including trees that showed no sign of weakness or decay that could lead to them being a danger to FFMVic staff during the burn operation.

Boundary trees can easily be hosed down during a burn and in many instances FFMVic staff rake the litter away from the base to reduce the likelihood of it catching fire.

The establishment of a firewood collection area in a soon-to-be conservation park prior to handover to Parks Victoria raises significant environmental concerns, as these parks are typically off-limits to harvesting to protect fragile ecosystems, hollow-bearing trees, and vital wildlife habitats.

The Brush-tailed Phascogale, listed as vulnerable to extinction under the *Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 2019* (FFG Act), is an inhabitant of this drier forest and needs tree hollows for denning and for daytime shelter. Decaying timber on the ground provides habitat for the spiders and insects that are an important component of the phascogales' diet.

Trees pushed over in the creation of the new track. Photography © Gayle Osborne.

The Brush-tailed Phascogale Action Statement is a statutory conservation plan under the FFG Act aimed at recovering this vulnerable species. It identifies key conservation issues such as mitigating habitat loss, controlling predators (foxes and cats) and protecting hollow-bearing trees.

According to the action statement, referring to the eastern Victorian populations, "The major factor in the decline of the Brush-tailed Phascogale in these areas is not loss of forest habitat per se, but a reduction in the quality of the habitat."[1] The importance of habitat quality can be confirmed from our motion-sensing camera surveys.

continued next page ...

A healthy Yellow Gum *Eucalyptus leucoxylon* or Yellow Box *Eucalyptus melliodora* with no discernible damage was cut down. These trees provide essential winter food sources for the critically endangered Swift Parrot *Lathamus discolor* during their annual migration to mainland Australia. Photography © Gayle Osborne.

Brush-tailed Phascogales have not been recorded where the forest floor has been stripped of fallen timber.

The establishment of this firewood coupe is at variance with the management measures detailed in the action statement for the conservation of the Brush-tailed Phascogale in Victoria where it is stated that "At all known Brush-tailed Phascogale sites, planning for prescribed burning operations must ensure that where prime phascogale habitat is identified it is not destroyed."[2]

The impacts of this firewood collection will also affect other wildlife. Fallen trees and decaying wood are essential to healthy, functional ecosystems. Dead and fallen trees provide habitat for insects, reptiles, birds and small mammals. Fungi on decaying trees regenerates the soil and provides food for wildlife.

We consider that the long-term survival of phascogales is greatly threatened by FFMVic's planned burn activities. All through this drier country large numbers of trees are being cut down, both pre and post burn. It would seem that staff enjoy wielding a chain saw and fire damaged trees well away from tracks are being cut down.

In its final recommendations, the SAC (1991) determined that the Brush-tailed Phascogale is:

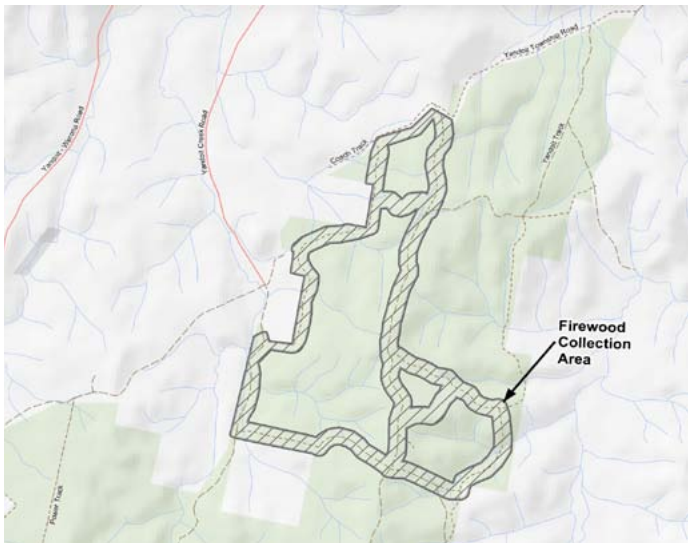
- in a demonstrable state of decline which is likely to lead to extinction; and
- significantly prone to future threats which are likely to result in extinction.[3]

Just three years ago, DEECA Hume announced on its Facebook page "It's National Threatened Species Day, and we would like to introduce you to one of our state's most shy and cryptic native species. While the brush-tailed phascogale is listed as vulnerable, DEECA is working to support this species by protecting and expanding its habitat."

In this video, Jerry Alexander explains how their monitoring, with the help of volunteers, is also contributing to the species' long-term survival.[4]

There is a contradiction here; staff at the Department of Environment are publicising their activities to protect and expand phascogale habitat and on the other hand FFMVic staff are destroying habitat by cutting down hollow-bearing trees (both dead and living) and authorising the removal of fallen timber.

The Brush-tailed Phascogale's unique lifecycle, where all males die after their first mating season, makes isolated populations highly vulnerable to rapid local extinction. Research highlights that planned burns and altered fire regimes constitute a major threat to their hollow-bearing trees and foraging grounds. ■



Domestic firewood collection area map
Hepburn -Yandoit Track.

Notes

1., 2. & 3. Victorian State Government (2003). *Brush-tailed Phascogale (Phascogale tapoatafa): Action Statement no. 79.* Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988. Dept. of Natural Resources and Environment, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia.

4. https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=3563265750607673

Friends of Musk Vale Gravel Reserve:

Caring for the Critically Endangered Yarra Gum

A view of the Reserve from the neighbouring farmland.

By Tim Kingston and Wayne Bowers

Last year Tim made a remarkable discovery in the small reserve behind his home: it supports an abundant population of mature Yarra Gums. Most people have never heard of the Yarra Gum *Eucalyptus yarraensis*, but this handsome native tree is one of Victoria's most threatened species. Found only in Victoria in a swathe from Traralgon to Ararat, it is listed as Critically Endangered. That makes our small local reserve far more significant than any of us had realised.

Following the discovery, Tim attended a Yarra Gum Identification Session run by David Unwin on behalf of the Bald Hills and Creswick Landcare Group. David had already been onto the Yarra Gum situation for some months. During the day Tim let David in on the news of the Musk Vale population and later returned home with knowledge of the definitive test by which Yarra Gums could be positively identified.

Not long after, we were excited to confirm that several of the Musk Vale trees had indeed tested positive. David soon visited to check out our trees and together we conducted an initial assessment, concluding there are in excess of 50 trees. David had already obtained a permit from DEECA to collect seed for germination purposes and departed with paper bags of seed from some of the trees.

Friends of Musk Vale Gravel Reserve.

At around the same time, as the news spread, several local residents with a shared passion for the natural environment came together with the aim of protecting the Yarra Gums and the wider natural values of the reserve. Thus, the Friends of Musk Vale Gravel Reserve was formed.

Despite its unappealing name, "The Musk Vale Gravel Reserve" is an important 9 hectare area of Crown Land, along a seasonal watercourse, at 44 Hogans Lane. Managed by Hepburn Shire Council, the site was heavily altered during the gold-mining era and retains evidence of its history through the presence of well-preserved puddling circles, pits and a water race. According to the owner of the adjacent farm, it gained its name when crushed rock, formed during gold extraction, was later removed and used for road building. Today the Reserve supports a valuable mix of eucalypt forest and grassland, with many more than 50 mature Yarra Gums and several plants of the endangered Creeping Grevillea *Grevillea repens*. The lack of flora or fauna records from the Reserve on iNaturalist rather confirms that it is a well-kept secret. Further flora surveys planned for spring and summer may yet reveal other significant plant species.

continued next page ...

The oldest Yarra Gum in the Reserve will have seen many (and better!) days.

Typical Yarra Gum and habitat, northern part of Reserve.

The reserve has two distinct vegetation zones. The northern section is open woodland and contains most of the Yarra Gums. The southern section has more closely spaced trees and a dense understorey largely of *Bursaria spinosa*; this is where the Creeping Grevillea grows, along the boundary with neighbouring farmland. The two areas have different recent histories: the southern half has remained ungrazed for many years due to the hazard to stock of the mine pits; it was burnt in the 2009 wildfire. The northern half escaped the fire, has few mine pits and has been lightly grazed by cattle for many years. Extensive areas of well-established blackberry, especially in the northern section, are likely to be limiting germination and recovery of native trees and shrubs, so weed control is a high priority for the group.

To identify a Yarra Gum, look for its signature combination of box-type rough bark on the trunk, wide-spreading low branches, glossy green wavy adult leaves, and small diamond-shaped buds, seven in number when complete. It is grouped with the swamp gums and has been reported to prefer gently sloping ground along drainage lines but is now known to also occur at greater distances from these features. Confirming this, in a wide ranging survey Fox et al (2025) located the species in 23 different Ecological Vegetation Communities (ECVs). It has often been mistaken for the similar, more widespread and common Swamp Gum *Eucalyptus ovata*. If you have a tree you suspect is a Yarra Gum, pick two or three leaves (if you can reach them!), tear them into pieces and soak in hot water for a couple of minutes. If it is a Yarra Gum a toxin contained in the leaves called prunasin will, when disturbed, release benzaldehyde and hydrogen cyanide, the latter will be recognised due to its distinct odour of bitter almonds. While there are other Australian eucalypts that do the same, none are found in our region.

In 2025, under Victoria's Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988 (DEECA 2025a, 2025b), the Yarra Gum was classified as Critically Endangered due to its reduced and fragmented distribution, the result of vegetation clearing for agriculture, forestry, mining and urbanisation. The species' listing reports that an inferred population reduction of 60-90% has taken place over the past 240 years. The Atlas of Living Australia reveals that recent distribution records are concentrated to the south of Ballarat, within a radius of about 40km. Records become sparse outwards to the limits of the range, reaching Ararat to the west and Traralgon in the east.

One of the Yarra Gum's greatest challenges is that the trees that remain are scattered across small, isolated pockets of habitat; found in national parks, state reserves, on private land and, quite often, along roadsides. Even within the Wombat–Lerderderg National Park, the species appears only sparsely recorded, with fewer than

continued next page ...

50 records in total, including 30 from just two clusters, one near Telegraph Road and the other south of Barkstead. Research suggests that small populations may struggle to regenerate naturally and are more vulnerable to inbreeding, which can lead to gradual decline. Populations comprising more than 50 mature healthy trees are uncommon and thus of great value to the long-term survival of the species; these clusters are likely to contain significant genetic diversity hence provide local resilience.

Typical vegetation of the southern part of the Reserve.

Encouragingly, during the months since we learned to recognise the Yarra Gum, we have been finding many additional trees within Musk Vale, but outside the Gravel Reserve. An outstanding cluster of mature trees numbering at least 150 individuals has been found by Wayne, extending from his Musk Vale property boundary into the Hepburn Regional Park. Others have been recorded from roadsides along Foxs Road and Shanahans Lane. Such populations lie well within the reported "dispersal capacity" of the species of 32 km (DEECA 2025c) and will thus be vital in contributing to the genetic health of the species.

The Yarra Gum may not be widely known, but it is an important part of our region's natural heritage. Projects to protect and enhance the species being developed by the Friends of Musk Vale Gravel Reserve include weed control and rabbit exclusion to encourage germination and recruitment of young trees, flora surveys, habitat restoration, fire management and the planting of native trees, shrubs and grasses. Once these projects are underway, we intend to develop display panels and to hold open days to extend to the community the value of the Reserve as habitat for native species, whether endangered or not. A longer term goal would be to transition into a Landcare group in order to expand activities to the protection of Musk Vale Yarra Gums, irrespective of land tenure or location. ■

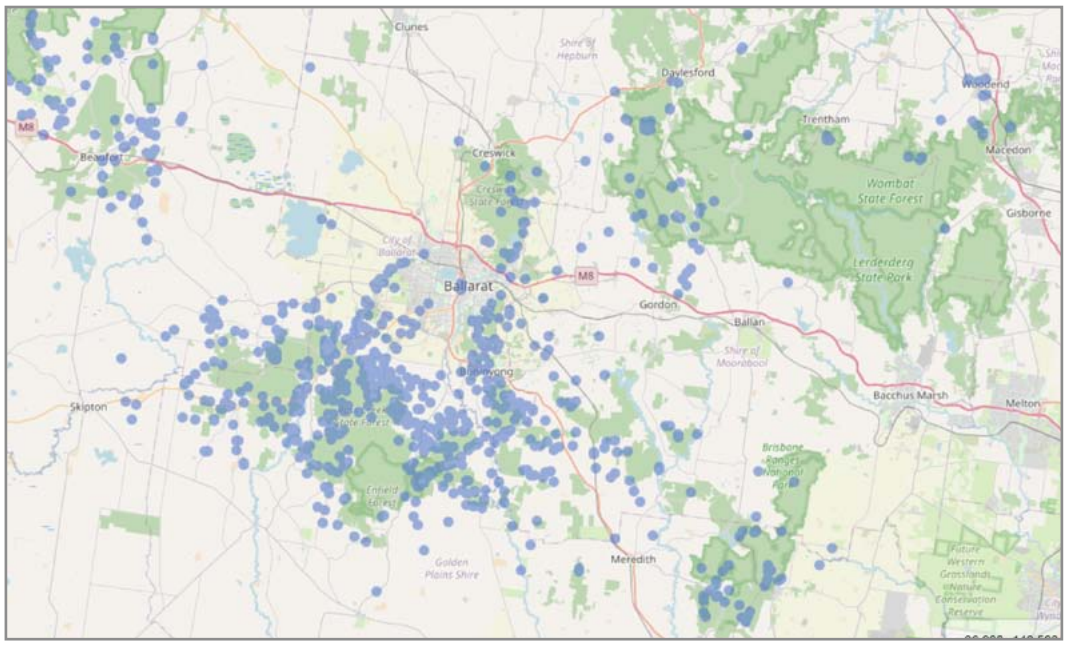
References

Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action (DEECA) (2025a) Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988 Threatened Species Assessment Report – Yarra Gum (Eucalyptus yarraensis) Taxon ID: 501326, June 2021. State Government of Victoria.

Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action (DEECA) (2025b) Action Statement, Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988. Yarra Gum (Eucalyptus yarraensis) Taxon ID: 501326.

Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action (DEECA) (2025c) Yarra Gum Species Forecast Report Taxon ID: 501326

Fox E, Hogan F, Wright W and Schultz N L (2026) "Assessment of the Habitat, Health and Recruitment of Two Critically Endangered Eucalyptus Species—E. yarraensis and E. Strzeleckli in Southeastern Australia" *Ecological Management & Restoration* Vol 27. Online at: Assessment of the Habitat, Health and Recruitment of Two Critically Endangered Eucalyptus Species—E. yarraensis and E. Strzeleckli—in Southeastern Australia - Fox - 2026 - *Ecological Management & Restoration* - Wiley Online Library



Yarra Gum records around Ballarat from Atlas of Living Australia.

Creeping Grevillea.

Sarcodon austrofibulatus

It has been a good year for fungi in the Wombat Forest, but the elusive *Sarcodon austrofibulatus* failed to emerge in the areas it was first discovered. In March 2011, John Walter on a walk with Wombat Forestcare found a patch of a rarely seen sarcodon fungus. That year John subsequently found it in three other locations. He searches these locations every year and has failed to find any fruiting bodies.

Instead of traditional gills or pores, the underside of a sarcodon cap is covered in downward-pointing, spine-like teeth that release spores.

For many years this species was known as *Sarcodon* sp. 'Wombat' but in 2024 it was formally named *Sarcodon austrofibulatus*. Formally describing the species assists future efforts to increase understanding of their distribution and ecological requirements. It is also important if the species is so rare that it should be listed as a threatened species so that it can have particular protection.

It was a great surprise that Gael Elliott emailed with photos this April from a new location.

Sarcodon austrofibulatus well hidden amongst the leaf litter. Photography © Gael Elliott.

Sarcodon austrofibulatus with upturned example showing the spines. Photography © Gael Elliott.

Sarcodon austrofibulatus with bite mark and view of the spines. Photography © Gael Elliott.

Sarcodon

Words and images by Gael Elliott

This April we had some lovely bursts of wet weather and warm sun to follow. I had not been in the forest for several days and was keen to see more of the boletes, cortinars and those beautiful little mycena before wet weather and time reduces them to a pulpy mess then just a black spot to show they even existed. A secondary white growth was covering many species and some interesting photos developed. This year I had found a lot of *Grifola colensoi* growing on old cut tree-stumps and I was keen to see if they had been eaten. My time was short on Thursday the 23 April, so I decided on a short walk near Morris's honey farm down the Snake Gully track. Its old cobbled surface and water filled four-wheeled drive tracks require little diversions into the gorse and past the introduced hakeas before heading down the track.

Before the first junction I found many remains of fungus that the wallabies or wombats had half eaten. White marshmallow caught my eye on a bank. Probably just a dropped tissue I thought. I went closer to examine it. At once I knew what it was. It was a fungus that I recognised from the wonderful guide to fungi that Wombat Forestcare has created. The wallaby had exposed the spines which were violet and the cap looks just like the bank it was growing on, brown and black with little creases.

I remembered the article about John Walter finding one in Lyonville so I was hoping that it was the same fungus that he found in 2011 Newsletter Issue 71 March 2025. Many thanks to Trevor and Margaret for helping identify it and for John to take proper photos to send to Dr. Tom May the mycologist from Melbourne Herbarium in Victoria.

If the wallaby had not chomped on it, I might never have seen it. . ■

Working in the wet

Words and images by Gayle Osborne

Salvaged logs. Photography © Gayle Osborne.

The saga of the salvage logging continues in the Wombat Forest. Despite the exceptionally wet circumstances, where much of the forest has received in the vicinity of 200mm of rain this month and the soil is saturated, logs are being recovered from a steep slope along Blackwood Ridge Road.

In Victoria, logging should be halted when soils become saturated to prevent severe soil compaction, erosion, and damage to extraction tracks. Harvesting operations are to be suspended if there is a risk that heavy machinery will create deep ruts in the soil.

This is regulated by *The Code of Practice for Timber Production 2014 (amended 2022)*, which has an operational goal that states that "During or following wet weather, timber harvesting operations are modified or suspended as necessary to minimise risks to soil and water quality values."

Mandatory action 2.5.3.2 in the code states that "Timber harvesting operations must be suspended when water begins to flow along tracks, threatening stream quality or soil values, unless appropriate actions are taken." Contractors are required to measure soil moisture levels on site.

Recent salvage works despite heavy rainfall. Photography © Gayle Osborne.

Consequences of working when the soil is saturated. Photography © Gayle Osborne.

These photographs show that there is clearly a large amount of water on the site, and the use of heavy machinery will be causing unacceptable compaction of the soil. When soil is completely saturated, all air pockets are filled with water, and the weight of heavy machinery will squeeze the water out, compacting the soil and creating dense, impermeable layers that restricts root growth.

The operations of VicForests were overseen by the Office of the Conservation Regulator (OCR) who had the power to halt operations in wet conditions; however, the OCR have no powers of enforcement over Forest Fire Management Victoria or its contractors.

This lack of any oversight of FFM Vic activities is very concerning. ■

Muddy waters

Words and images by Gayle Osborne

Throughout the Wombat Forest tracks have been utterly destroyed by 4WD vehicles and we do not see any action taken by Forest Fire Management Victoria (FFMVic) to halt this damage. There are winter closures of some tracks, but these photographs have been taken on a track that is open all year. Many tracks cross creeks, which creates turbidity and the associated problems for aquatic life.

The damage to these tracks is so excessive that FFMVic vehicles would not be able to use these tracks should they need to attend a bushfire.

For four years, VicForests and then FFMVic contractors have been removing tonnes of logs from the Wombat Forest claiming that this will allow them access should a bushfire start. However, FFMVic have ignored a lack of access to many parts of the forest, caused by damage to tracks, that have created a major barrier to accessing fires.

As well as allowing tracks to deteriorate, there are fire access tracks around Trentham that remain blocked by trees that fell in the 2021 storm. The track at the interface of the forest with private property on Cranny's Lane remains blocked as does the track between the Trentham tip and the forest.

Can we conclude that FFMVic is using the windstorm as an excuse to carry out a commercial venture and also to provide work for contractors and their machines?