

BUSHWALKS 2010

Our walks are on Sundays. We meet at 9.30 a.m. outside 30 Templeton Street, Castlemaine (Continuing Ed.) and carpool to the start of the walk. Bring water, morning tea and lunch for all walks. Walks normally finish mid afternoon. Non-members welcome. No cost.

Walks are cancelled on Total Fire Ban days in the area.

For more information ring Bronwyn Silver 5475 1089.

21 March White Gum Track – Railway Dam

We'll wander through a few curious gullies near the headwaters of Fryers Creek, and over a ridge to the much depleted Railway Dam. Not a long walk, but there are a few steepish bits. We'll come back along the abandoned water race. c. 8 km. For more information ring Bernard Slattery 5470 5161.

18 April Walk Against Want

Join the FOBIF contingent on this year's Walk against Want. The walk will be through bushlands north of the Castlemaine Botanical Gardens and there will be delicious soup and bread in the gardens afterwards. 10km. *Meet at the Botanical Gardens at 10 a.m.* For more information ring Bronwyn Silver 5475 1089.

16 May Working Bee on the Loddon River

This walk will be a short one to a section of the Loddon River upstream of Glenluce. It is possibly the only section of the river in pretty good condition, with some large waterholes, steep rocky sides, wildlife and rare plants such as Clover Glycine. We will do some weed control work to remove Cape Broom and other weeds. Bring gloves and weeding tools. For more information ring Doug Ralph 5470 5407.

20 June Garfield Wheel & Welsh Village, Castlemaine Diggings NHP

Come on a walk you can do without getting in your car. We'll find a little bit of history and a little bit of bush as we walk across country from Castlemaine to the Garfield Wheel and Welsh Village. 8-10 km easy walking. For more information ring Deirdre Slattery 5470 5161.

18 July The Rise and Shine Bushland Reserve

This reserve is a small area of public land south of Newstead renowned for its rich diversity of birds and understorey. The Newstead Landcare Group with assistance from Parks Victoria has developed a fascinating nature trail in the Reserve that highlights its flora and fauna, geological and cultural history. Short easy walk, 2 hours. For more information visit the Natural Newstead blog at <http://geoffpark.wordpress.com> or ring Geoff Park 0418 138 632.

15 August Walmer

A walk through the diverse and rapidly-evolving landscapes of Walmer taking in revegetation sites, remnant bush and farmland in transition, farm forestry projects, heritage places, high-value roadsides and a nature reserve. c. 10 km. For more information ring Paul Hampton 5474 2189.

19 September Mount Alexander

We will travel to the Toilet Block/Picnic Area adjacent to the old Koala Park on Mount Alexander. The walk will follow the southern end of the West Ridge Walking Track, a section of the Great Dividing Trail and tracks inside the old Koala Park. The walk features glorious views, many huge eucalypts and marvelous granodiorite boulders (and also a detour to an amazing grassy valley). c. 9 km. For more information ring Richard Piesse 0448 572 867.

17 October Fryers Ridge Nature Conservation Reserve

A range of native plants, creekline vegetation, interesting rocks in the bushland behind Taradale. c. 8 km. For more information ring Barbara Johnson 5423 2773.



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Sea Eagles at Cairn Curran, Owllet Nightjar at Chewton

Cairn Curran can be a desolate sight in these low water days, but a look at the sky sometimes brings relief. At the present time, you might see splendid sea eagles in flight in the area around the dam. For photos, consult Geoff Park's excellent blog, Natural Newstead at <http://geoffpark.wordpress.com/>

And Chewton resident Antoinette Birkenbeil was surprised last month by the sight of an Australian owllet nightjar, Australia's smallest nocturnal bird, in her driveway! See the pic in our photo gallery.

Wesley Hill Industrial Estate

FOBIF wrote to Mount Alexander Shire Council in January applauding its imaginative approach to landscaping in this project, which includes utilization of a natural waterway and planting with local plants. We are concerned, however, that the Council's definition of 'local provenance' is lax, and have asked for a tighter definition of what is planned.

While it is not directly our concern, we were disappointed that the works involved destruction of a large old oak tree on the site. Concern for the indigenous environment does not exclude sympathy for cultural heritage, and it is a pity that this beautiful tree was destroyed.

Free public talks on our local environment

Don't miss the 3 free public events being held by Connecting Country on Thursday evenings from 7.30 – 8.30 p.m.

The first is at the Newstead Community Centre, and the other two at the Ray Bradfield Room, Castlemaine:

11 March: Wonderful Woodlands

Renowned landscape ecologist, Dr Andrew Bennett from Deakin University explains what woodlands are and why they are important.

8 April: Cultural landscapes

Researcher Robyn Ballinger will highlight the fascinating history of our woodland environments.

13 May: Creatures of the Night/Woodland Birds

Bat expert Dr Lindy Lumsden will introduce us to some of the hidden critters of our remaining woodlands and Greg Horrocks will talk about woodland birds.

These talks are running in conjunction with Connecting Country's woodlands restoration training program, which has been swamped with applications and is now fully booked. The public talks will be pretty good consolation for those who have missed out.

Pest Survey

The NCCMA is inviting landholders/managers to complete a survey about pest plants and animals. To view a Community Background Paper and complete the survey, visit www.nccma.vic.gov.au or phone the North Central CMA on (03) 5448 7124. The survey is due on 5 March.

Bushfires Royal Commission

FOBIF has made a submission to the Royal Commission on the matter of planning of residential developments in fire prone areas. It will be posted on the documents section of our website soon.

Bracewell Street Bendigo Fire

With the recent news of the arrest of two teenagers over this disastrous fire, our readers may be interested in looking at Bendigo conservationist Richard Goonan's detailed report on the fire, soon to be posted on our website's documents section. Among his conclusions:

- Predominantly (exotic) Grassy landscape attributes contributed the greatest area and most continuous fuel source throughout the fire area.
- Forest fuels (indigenous vegetation) comprised a relatively small proportion of the overall fire area and available fuels, and primarily burnt following the wind change.
- Exotic grasses provided highly flammable fuels capable of rapid spot fire development, allowing the fire to spread across a mosaic of different landscape attributes.
- Pampas Grass provided a significant fuel source that contributed to the escalation of the fire and its more rapid spread across potential barriers.
- Houses most at risk from the fast moving, generally low intensity fire, were situated in isolation from dense urban housing, or were in loosely scattered groups. The presence of localised surrounding fuels contributed substantially to their susceptibility.
- Fuel reduction burns within the fire area contributed little strategic outcomes/advantages, and assets were lost immediately adjacent to these.
- Relatively large areas of existing bare ground substantially reduced the fire spread following the wind change, both directly by reducing the extent of the fire front, and indirectly through increasing the effectiveness of a recent fuel reduction burn.
- The overall fire area comprised both private and public land areas. The most important of these were grassy private land, unmanaged public land, and small areas of Pampas Grass with excessive fuel loads.
- The management of wildfire risk and hazard cannot be effective if confined only to public land. Fire management planning must enforce management zones across all tenures which reflect risks and hazards at a landscape scale.
- The temporal effectiveness of fuel reduction burning is very limited, significantly reducing its value in long term fire management. In some cases fuel reduction burning increases fine fuel loads and facilitates rapid spot fire development.

Richard's report has been sent as a submission to the Royal Commission. It differs significantly from DSE and CFA submissions, and we look forward to seeing how the Commission sorts out the truth of the matter.

Northern Region Water Strategy released

The *Sustainable Water Strategy for the Northern Region* was released in November. The region covers the length of the Victorian Murray from the South Australian border to the Indi (or upper Murray), and much of its catchment, including Mount Alexander Shire. The document is available on the internet at www.ourwater.vic.gov.au/programs/sws/northern or you can get a hard copy by ringing DSE at 136 186.

FOBIF made a brief submission to the draft strategy in 2008, arguing that 'environmental flows' should not be seen as in competition with people's needs, and that the strategy should confront the growing problem of private dams.

On the first matter the document is not hopeful, pointing out that 'environmental flows could be halved in the Murray and reduced by up to 70 per cent in the Goulburn system.' This is not good news for communities on the Lower Murray.

On the second matter, the strategy delicately points out that 'water uses that were once insignificant now represent a larger proportion of total consumption.' The question is whether dams carved out for essentially decorative reasons should be subject to stricter controls. On this matter the final strategy is a little stronger than the draft, offering among other options the prospect of withdrawing the absolute right of land-

owners under section 8 of the Water Act to build small dams, and instead obliging them to apply for a Section 51 licence, as commercial water users are now obliged to do.

This is a sensitive and potentially expensive matter, and has already provoked some controversy in the

local press. It needs to be pointed out that it is not only a conservationist concern. Last year the Nationals MP for Northern Victoria, Damien Drum, took this matter up. Referring to the 'proliferation of small, wasteful dams', he said, 'In our part of the state as much as 124 billion litres of water a year don't make it to our creeks and streams because of the explosion in small, mostly unlicensed dams... We need to move towards eradicating small, inefficient dams.'

There is a lot of useful information in this document, including a detailed and persuasive case against the building of more dams.

Biodiversity White Paper released

On 9 December 2009 the Victorian Government released *Securing Our Natural Future*, a White Paper for land and biodiversity at a time of climate change. You can find a copy at www.dse.vic.gov.au. FOBIF contributed submissions in the runup process to this publication.

The White Paper contains numerous good ideas on such matters as ecosystem resilience and biolinks, and it has been received positively, if a bit cautiously, by conservation organizations. For a summary of their views, see the press release on the subject at www.vnpa.org.au.

There are good reasons for sobriety on the subject of the effectiveness of the paper. Here are two:

First, there is concern that good ideas may not be accompanied by political will. For example, Chapter 6 deals, among other things, with riparian areas. It notes that 'livestock need to be managed to prevent direct access to the beds and banks of streams and wetlands.' (p 92). The government had the opportunity through the licensing system last year to exclude stock from river frontages, but wilted under pressure, and renewed the relevant licences. The White Paper recommends a gradualist policy on this matter, but you wonder just how gradual governments should be when the action to be taken is clear: get stock away from rivers, and compensate farmers accordingly. It is disturbing that the Actions recommended by the paper lean heavily to the bureaucratic: 'Complete the current review... Reform arrangements... identify high priority frontages... Complete the management framework...' (p 93) Such procedures could easily be used to conceal the lack of what really matters: courage and resources, and the need to act on the numerous reviews, etc, which have already been completed.

Second, there is a depressing quota of material in the document which is in fact long standing policy which is not even now credibly implemented. An example is fire, where an 'adaptive management' approach is recommended, based on 'continuous learning and improvement.' (p 79). This has been policy for some years now, and FOBIF and other conservation organizations in this region have been continually frustrated by the fact

that there is very little evidence of 'adaptive management': that is, we do not see DSE operatives adjusting their practices in the light of monitoring and research on previous fire operations.

Time will tell how serious the government is about its White Paper. In the meantime, we will maybe take a copy to our next meeting with DSE managers. In particular we'll be keen to draw their attention to page 88: 'The Government... will build the ecological resilience of formal conservation reserves through an increased emphasis on the management of their natural values and ecosystem processes'.

The paper contains interesting information in its appendices. In a map on page 120 of 'social landscapes of rural Victoria' Mount Alexander Shire is classified as 'amenity farming': that is, as a region where mainstream agriculture has been significantly replaced by other land uses, for example hobby farms or recreational blocks.