



Berg
Mt Martha

Caring for the Balcombe Estuary Reserves

THE CREEK

Volume 19 No 6, December 2015

ART IN THE ROTUNDA

The historic Rotunda in the old campground, where people have gathered for decades around fires and barbeques, is receiving a wonderful facelift, courtesy of our local primary schools. BERG Mt Martha has commissioned Red Hill artist Michael Leeworthy to work with four schools to create mural panels to hang there.

Each school is focusing on a different aspect of the Reserves' ecology. Osborne Primary Years 3-4 have chosen 'Under the Water'; for Bentons Junior College Year 5s, it is birds of Balcombe Creek; Balcombe Grammar Year 5s chose indigenous flora; and Mt Martha Primary Year 4 students have each researched a local animal to paint.

The project is funded by a Placemaking Grant from the Shire.

Join us for the Launch!

The newly decorated Rotunda will be opened by Cr Bev Colomb on Monday 14th December at 10.00 am – all welcome!



Above: Will from Bentons Junior College working on the 'Birds of Balcombe Creek' panel

Photo Samantha Cooney



Above: Balcombe Grammar students working on their panel on Indigenous Flora Photo Pamela Moore

Below: Kodie & Neeve, Osborne Primary, working on 'Under the Water', with Michael Leeworthy

Photo Julie Oldenburger



DONATION MADE EASY

Giving to BERG Mt Martha can now be done easily and securely through a link to **GiveNow** on the home page of our website. (www.berg.org.au).

GiveNow, set up by the not-for-profit Our Community Foundation, is a free and secure online donations service for community organisations. There are no fees or commissions – your full donation is forwarded straight to BERG MM.

You can learn more about GiveNow at www.givenow.com.au.

COMMITTEE RE-ELECTED

At the BERG Mt Martha AGM on 7th November all Committee members were returned unopposed, other than Geoff Kaye, who resigned after many years. (The committee, as always, is set out on the back page of this newsletter.)

THANKS GEOFF

Geoff Kaye was elected to the inaugural BERG committee, where he represented the Rotary Club of Mt Martha. An architect by profession, Geoff was the driving force behind Rotary's installation of the wonderful board walk, as well as substantial work to upgrade facilities in the old campground – work that began in the 1980s.

He was then one of the drivers of the 2001 Centenary of Federation Project, a joint project by BERG and Rotary, which transformed the entrance to the reserves. Geoff resigned from the committee in 2001, but he re-joined it in 2011 when his Rotary successor, Andy McGuigan, retired. And his name is, of course, immortalised on the Geoff Kaye Bridge, built originally by Rotary (since upgraded by the Shire).



Geoff Kaye presiding over the sausages at a BERG volunteers' barbeque at the old campground in 2001

THE FAMILY IN THE BOX

Thanks to BERG MM members Kevin & Jill Conlan for this article and photos. They live just above the Hopetoun Creek reserve

Three years ago some Rainbow Lorikeets showed interest in a large possum box in our garden, so we bought a box sized for lorikeets. They took to it and reared several chicks there. And we installed a camera for a live view of the family on our television. Friends and family enjoyed watching ‘parrot TV’!

We removed the camera for the winter and did not re-install it as the lorikeets showed no further interest in the box. We thought it was empty.

Then, one evening last January, while watering a Staghorn fern nearby, some water entered the box and out came a wet and unhappy Sugar Glider. He was even more unhappy when a Kookaburra tried to catch him, and we protected him by spraying water at the Kookaburra. We had to continue until dusk!



The Sugar Glider box with a pool view room. The lower box is home to long-term resident ‘Pierre’ the brushtail possum.

From observing the box, we guessed there were two Gliders using it at that time.

During winter, the box looked loose on the tree so one night I checked with my phone camera that it was empty, then re-secured it – and I reinstalled the camera. I had to wait for a mild night as the Gliders do not leave the box on cold nights.

Now able to watch the Gliders in the box again, we found we had four using it most nights.

Then in late September we saw a pair of tiny joeys, and a few days

later, another pair; two females had youngsters. I have been taking photos at night when the adults leave and we have watched them grow. Daytime photos just show a bundle of fur with legs and ears here and there.

Unfortunately the camera recently stopped working and I cannot fit another until all the Gliders can leave the box for an hour. The joeys are still too young for this.

The box

The box is 50cm high, 15cm wide and 15cm deep. The entrance started at about 6cm, but was enlarged to about 10cm by some Galahs! The camera one evening showed us a Ring-tailed Possum in the box after the Gliders had left, so once he moved out I reduced the entrance hole to about 5cm and the Gliders returned.



The Sugar Glider joeys on 4th October (above) & 28th October (below); and (bottom) an adult leaving the box for the evening



Our children Declan and Chloe get a thrill from checking in on ‘Glider TV’ to watch the goings on! We watch them preening each other, climbing up and down to peek out of the opening, wrestling, playing. Best of all is all watching the joeys grow. We feel blessed to have them share our garden.

FIELD NEWS

Field Officer Liz Barraclough reports

We have had a most successful on-ground year, particularly with weed control. This is partly due to the help given us by the Green Army, but owes much our many dedicated helpers at the monthly Sunday working bees, the weekly Friday Group and the monthly Tuesday Group. With six working bees a month, we are achieving lots!

Working-bees, Sundays and Fridays

In October, the Sunday working-bee mulched the western side of Hopetoun Creek opposite Balcombe Preschool. In November, we weeded, mulched and tidied the beds in the old campground – the public face of our reserves.

The Friday Morning Group has continued its work in the Uralla Bridge and quarry area, mostly weeding, re-guarding plants and whipper-snipping long weedy grasses.

For summer working bee times, see the box on last page.

Green Army

Our last Green Army crew joined us for four days in November, to tackle woody weeds and Cape Ivy down the La Trobe St drainage line, and to follow up control of the Tradescantia on south side of Balcombe Creek, tackled by our first Green Army crew. Thanks to Eric Smalley and David Street for helping with the group.

Grants

We have applied for a Melbourne Water grant to work on Hopetoun & Balcombe Creeks and a Support Grant for training in survey & bushland evaluation, and insurance.

Thanks!

... to all the BERG MM volunteers who have helped and done a really terrific job this year.

TUESDAYS IN THE BUNYIP

Jenny Selby reports

In October five of us worked under the supervision of Pia and Amy, from Naturelinks, near Daly's Dell to liberate indigenous Lomandra, Dianella and grasses from *Ehrharta erecta*. We also attacked the Smilax. Meanwhile Eric Smalley worked with Liz and the Green Army to remove weeds around the 'cubby village' beside the preschool and the indigenous grasses along the fence line. We continued this weeding around the Preschool in November, and a team also swept through the nature strip along Latrobe Drive and Watson's Road, searching out woody weeds, especially Berry-flower Heath missed in September.

NESTING BOXES FOR ROSELLAS AND DUCKS

By Mt Eliza Secondary College year 7/8 students: Flynn, Oliver, Balin, Sebastien, Ava, Trinity, Benjamin, Floyd, Kira, Charlie-Rose & Ashbeka. Each Thursday this year, in the Real Time Learning Program, they have worked with teacher Narelle Debenham on environmental projects at Tony O'Connor's property beside Balcombe Creek in Century Drive.

Artificial tree hollows are very important to the conservation of Australian hollow-nesting animals. Old natural hollows in trees take hundreds of years to form. There is lots of competition between bats, possums, gliders, owls, parrots, ducks, kookaburras, rosellas and kingfishers as well as many species of frogs, snakes and skinks searching for the few nesting spots available.

We decided to help our local wildlife. We worked with Sean, Bertil, Paul, Bill, Mic, Richard, Tony



Above: Moving mulch at the October Sunday working bee. L-R Jason Gura & Sally McLeod (Naturelinks), Ian Croker, Graham Hubbard, Christo Viljoen, Barbara Thraves, Tom Le Cerf Photo Angela Kirsner.

Below: Tuesday morning tea at Mary's seat: L-R Annette Klein, Lindie Critchley, David Chalmers, Tara Dempsey, Bronwyn Street, Suzanne Ryan, Jenny Selby, Eric Smalley, Pam Hearn (our bird expert), Lorraine Lamb, Patricia Nelson Photo Pia Spreen



and Geoff from the Mornington men's shed to construct nesting boxes for our local Eastern Rosellas and Wood Ducks. Using marine ply kindly donated by Bunnings Mornington, we got to practise the new skills we learnt from our great mentors to make the bat and sugar glider boxes.

After lots of drilling and screwing the timber templates together, we added some shredded bark and wood shavings into the bottom of the parrot box to make it attractive to the nesting adult Eastern Rosellas, who partner for life. Four to eight eggs are laid by the female Rosella, who is fed by the male while she

incubates them. The birds forage on the ground for seeds, grasses and insects and in the trees for nectar. We aim to plant native grasses and shrubs under the nesting boxes at Tony O'Connor's Landcare property and within our school to attract more ground-feeding native birds. We can't wait to sit our nesting boxes snugly in the forks of trees; we will secure them with wire threaded through old garden hose.

We also built two much larger nesting boxes for Australian Wood Ducks. They are often found in grasslands, open woodlands, wetlands and pastures foraging for grasses, clover, other herbs and occasionally insects. They lay up to ten eggs in tree hollows near water. We plan to place the duck nesting boxes around the wetlands at Tony O'Connor's,

We are so happy to be contributing in these small ways to help our local natural environment. You can too! For a copy of the nesting box patterns, contact our teacher Narelle Debenham at ndebeham@mesc.vic.edu.au



The Mt Eliza Secondary College students with the Mornington Men's Shed crew and the finished nesting boxes, ready to be installed

SAVING OUR EUCALYPTS

Ecologist Dr Jeff Yugovic was the speaker at BERG Mt Martha's AGM on 7th November. Jeff has extensive expertise in assessing and managing native vegetation, with over 30 years professional experience and many publications. Photo by Richard Kirsner

What happens when you remove all top predators? – those creatures that keep populations further down the food chain in control and the ecology in balance? This was the subject of Dr Jeff Yugovic's talk; his focus was Common Ringtail Possums on the northern Mornington Peninsula, particularly Mt Martha and Mt Eliza.

With all indigenous predators now gone from these areas, a vast overpopulation of ringtail possums is causing massive loss of indigenous eucalypts. Before European arrival, possums were controlled by seven predators, all now locally extinct: Powerful Owls and Grey Goshawks from the air; Lace Monitors and Spot-tailed Quolls, climbers that took possums in the trees; at ground level, Dingoes (and Koories); and Tiger Snakes, which envenomated possums in their nests then waited for them to fall to the ground.

The fox – our only remaining option

Today, the only effective possum predator is the introduced Red Fox. The implications, said Jeff, are shocking: a novel ecosystem with a novel predator. But every ecosystem needs a predator; where you have vertebrate herbivores, you need a vertebrate predator. Koalas, for example, were released at Cape Otway in 1981, where they increased without sufficient predation. They have destroyed Manna Gum canopies, and large numbers of starving koalas have had to be put down.

In Mt Martha and Mt Eliza, the overpopulation of ringtails is affecting all our indigenous eucalypt species. Swamp Gums and Narrow-leaf Peppermints are being killed first, and the prognosis for our remaining eucalypts is very poor.

Interestingly, ringtails do not eat Coast Manna Gum *E. viminalis* subsp. *pyroriana*, and they largely ignore some trees of the half-barked grassy woodland form of Manna



Gum, particularly narrow-leaved ones that resemble *pyroriana*. These are the ones we should be collecting seed from for bushland regeneration.

Once the eucalypts are dead, starving ringtail possums switch to species such as Sweet Bursaria, Silver Banksia and Coast Tea-tree.

Strong evidence that possums are responsible for tree death comes from banding affected eucalypts. If done in time, the tree recovers in only a few months, and Jeff spoke of the 'real buzz' you get from saving a 200-year-old eucalypt. The Shire is now putting possum bands on affected roadside trees, to good effect, but with thousands of trees threatened, it is impossible to band them all. (While the problem also exists on the southern Peninsula, Jeff said that the northern areas are much more affected.)

The only answer open to us is to exploit the one existing predator, the fox which, Jeff argues, is everywhere, has proved impossible to eliminate, and partly replaces the dingo as a predator. And while foxes certainly should be controlled for fauna on the state threatened list, there are none of these left around Mt Martha and Mt Eliza. It is our eucalypts, and all those species dependent on them, that are threatened.

Opening up the undergrowth

The other contributing factor is the dense understorey vegetation throughout much of the affected areas, which enables possums to avoid their predators. This is a relatively recent phenomenon. Photos and accounts into the mid-20th century show that the northern Peninsula was largely open grassy woodland, probably due to Aboriginal burning, wallaby browsing and kangaroo grazing. Possums were forced to the ground to reach food trees, exposing them

to ground predators, and they had limited physical shelter.

Some understorey is essential to provide habitat particularly for the many mid-storey birds, but a continuous, dense understorey is a problem. As well as protecting possums, it shades out the ground layer (where the greatest biodiversity is found) and it contributes substantially to fire risk.

The answer to the tree decline, then, is simple and effective – thin the understorey, by physical thinning or fuel reduction burns. This reduces possum shelter and forces more possums to the ground to reach their food trees, where they are exposed to foxes, their only remaining predator. And as a spin-off, it also reduces fire risk. Culling possums is not an option, reintroducing the native predators is impractical, and we can't band all the trees.

What about brushtail possums?

While researchers found few Common Brushtail Possums in bushland reserves, Jeff said they browse significantly on trees in gardens where they are near buildings with shelter. They eat adult leaves, which thins the foliage throughout trees, while ringtails, being smaller, can reach their preferred shoots and young leaves at the end of branches.

Interestingly, Jeff pointed out that conservationist Tim Flannery has suggested reintroducing the Tasmanian Devil to mainland Australia where it could help control foxes, cats and possums. Devils have been responsible for the failure of attempts to introduce foxes to Tasmania, as the devils go down fox dens and eat the cubs. There are moves to reintroduce devils to Wilsons Promontory but no program has been formalised.

Protecting individual trees

To protect an individual tree, Jeff advised installing a possum band and isolating the tree from connecting vegetation. If this is possible, trees generally recover very well.

You can read Jeff's analysis in detail at <http://www.spiffa.org/do-ecosystems-need-top-predators.html>, along with practical tips on diagnosing possum damage and installing possum bands.



Cathy Dowling from MEAFEC (Mt Eliza Association for Environmental Care) with a possum-damaged eucalypt, diagnosed by the eaten out top and hanging branches with uneaten leaves (possums do not climb down branches)

Photo Jeff Yngovic

BIRD SIGHTINGS

The December edition of *Birdlife Mornington Peninsula*, the local Birds Australia newsletter, reported three recent Mt Martha bird surveys.

Balcombe Estuary Reserves Species recorded: 39

Pam Hearn led a walk on 9th September, with a number of BERGers swelling the ranks. The group followed the boardwalk upstream from the estuary as far as the Briars. Reporting the walk, Larry Wakefield wrote:

'This locality sandwiched between the houses in Mt Martha village is quite remarkable for the numbers of smaller bush birds. At the end of the morning the group had collectively seen between six to twelve each of

Superb Fairy-wren,
White-browed
Scrubwren, Brown
Thornbill, Eastern
Spinebill, Yellow-faced
Honeyeater, Grey
Shrike-thrush, Grey
Fantail and Eastern
Yellow Robin.

'Even the two pardalote species put in an appearance. Of note was the gathering of six Striated Pardalotes all calling and posturing at the top of a dead tree in the old quarry. Rarer appearances were put in by a solitary female Golden Whistler and a single Red-browed Finch. A quick look under the Nepean Highway road bridge for Welcome Swallows revealed only two. Overhead was the passing parade of Straw-necked Ibis on their way to and from the wet pastures on the peninsula.'

Mt Martha Park Species recorded: 30

Roger Standen, who led this walk on 14th October, reported that Crimson and Eastern Rosellas and Red

Wattlebirds were in abundance, and the group regularly heard the calls of White-eared Honeyeaters, and also heard both Golden and Rufous Whistlers. Also sighted were a Laughing Kookaburra, Grey Butcherbirds and Grey Shrike-thrushes. But, Roger reported, 'it was to some degree the birds that were not there which puzzled some of the group. There were no cuckoos and very few smaller bird species like scrubwrens'.

The Briars Park Species recorded: 55

This gratifying number of species was recorded at Birdlife Mornington Peninsula's 'What Bird Is That?' morning of bird and habitat displays held at The Briars in September.

Currawongs

BERGer John Rawlins, in the same newsletter, reported Pied Currawongs in his garden near the Ferrero Ovals – a first in his 11 years in Mt Martha. He heard some calling a month earlier, then three turned up in his garden and, unable to get into the parrot feeder, were picking up the spilled seed off the ground. It is the first time John has known of them eating seed.

Bird movements

Steve Yorke, recently retired ranger at The Briars, commented in the July/August issue of The Briars Volunteer's newsletter that forty years ago there were no Cockatoos on the Peninsula, no Galahs, Corellas and Crested Pigeons. They were inland birds and rare local sightings caused great excitement. Now they are also in Tasmania. Could it be climate change?

EUCALYPTS ON THE SOUTHERN PENINSULA

Environmentalist Malcolm Legg (as reported in *Peninsula Speaks*, Winter 2015) blames the severe die-back of eucalypts along southern Peninsula roadsides on habitat change resulting from weed invasion – Monterey Pine, Sweet Pittosporum, Karamu, Blackberry and others. These weeds, says Legg, change the soil pH and kill off the under and middle storeys, which then weakens the immune system of the eucalypts, leaving them susceptible to insect and fungal attack and sudden death. This has been occurring for 20 or so years, but has greatly accelerated over recent years.

LOSS OF BUSH CUBBIES

Both BERG Mt Martha and the Shire's Natural Systems team were devastated to find that a fire control team from the Shire had removed the wonderful bush cubbies built by the Mt Martha Preschool children. It seems this happened as a result of a misunderstanding between fire control teams.

We will make sure that next year's preschoolers are able to build more bush cubbies – AND that they are not removed.

A SIZZLING SUCCESS

John Trevillian reports

BERG MM's October's sausage sizzle at Bunnings Mornington raised some \$1100. With fine weather on our side, a slow start to business gradually turned into a steady stream of hungry customers.

Bunnings as always provide a well equipped venue. Thanks also to our great team of BERGers: Andy Davis, Charles McDonald, Peter & Deb McMahon, John Rawlins, Bev & Colin Fryer, Edwina McLean, Gay Briggs, Troy

Arnott, Bill Weston, Karin and David Chalmers, Jan & Andrew Jones, Geoff Kaye.

Special thanks to Linda McQueen who had the unenviable task of slicing 12kg of onions, and Jenny Selby for all her help in organising the day.

**BERG Mt Martha
welcomes new members**
Fiona Crabb
Roger Brown

THANKS TO OUR TRADER DONORS

Terry Bateman Pharmacy
Higher Ground Coffee Shop
Bell's Gourmet Meats
Farrell's Bookshop, Mornington
Main Exposure Fashion
Mt Martha Veterinary Clinic

Many thanks also to
Farrell's Bookshop and
NewsXpress Mt Martha
for stocking and selling *Up the Creek* at no profit to themselves.

| BERG Mt M Working Bees | Other BERG Mt M Activities | Other Groups |
|---|---|---|
| <p>❖ Sunday working bee: monthly, 3rd Sunday (except Dec), between 9am & 12noon. Next is 17th January. Details emailed a few days ahead, or call Liz Barraclough, 0408 388 430.</p> <p>❖ Tuesday working bee: monthly (except January), 2nd Tuesday, between 9.00 & 12 noon, meet at the end of Latrobe Dve. Call Jenny Selby 0432 719 288.</p> <p>❖ Friday working bee: weekly till 11 Dec, between 9.30 and 12 noon. Resuming after January, depending on weather – call Sue Betheras for exact date, on 0408 808 201.</p> | <p>❖ Waterwatch testing: 4th Sunday at Augusta St Bridge. Call John Inchley, 5974 1095.</p> <p>❖ BERG Mt Martha Committee meets monthly at Mt Martha House, 9.00am on the second Saturday, Feb-Nov. All members welcome. (In January, the Committee holds a planning day.)</p> | <p>❖ Fairbairn Bushland Reserve Friends Group: Call Judith Whittaker 5974 8174 or John Stoker 5977 1397.</p> <p>❖ BirdLife Mornington Peninsula bird-watching 2nd Wednesday and 3rd Sunday. Enquiries to Max Burrows 9789 0224, mornington@birdlife.org.au or www.birdlife.org.au/locations/birdlife-mornington-peninsula.</p> <p>❖ SPIFFA 1st Monday, 7.30 pm, at Parks Vic, Hinton St, Rosebud. Enquiries 5988 6529, or www.spiffa.org.</p> <p>❖ Sunshine Reserve working bee 9.30am, last Thursday of month. Call Pia Spreen, 5974 1096</p> |
| <p>BERG Mt MARTHAs COMMITTEE</p> <p>PRESIDENT GRAHAM HUBBARD • VICE PRESIDENT JOHN INCHLEY • SECRETARY DI LEWIS • TREASURER RICHARD KIRSNER FIELD OFFICER LIZ BARRACLOUGH • NEWSLETTER ANGELA KIRSNER • ROTARY CLUB LIAISON JOHN TREVILLIAN COMMUNITY AWARENESS BARBARA THRAVES • SCHOOLS LIAISON JENNY SELBY • BRONWYN STREET</p> | | |
| <p>Balcombe Estuary Reserves Group Mt Martha Inc. No. A0034645Y ABN 50 224 628 623 Mail: PO Box 433 Mt Martha 3934 Email: info@berg.org.au Mob: 0447 160 288 Web: www.berg.org.au</p> | |  |

THE CREEK

Print Post Approved pp100003761
If undelivered, please return to:
BERG Mt Martha, PO Box 433
Mount Martha 3934

**SURFACE
MAIL**

**POSTAGE
PAID
AUSTRALIA**

THE CREEK is proudly
printed & supported by