

BIODIVERSITY TREASURE UNDER THREAT – MORNINGTON RAILWAY RESERVE

Jeanette Miller reports

When Bunurong elder Uncle Shane Clarke visited BERG, one thing he said has stayed with me: When his people walked through the bush, they would walk in single file, to do the least damage to Country.

It haunts me as I see our state and local governments keen to destroy some of Mornington's last remaining indigenous bushland to carve a 3-metre wide bike path through it. Furthermore, if drawings for the Baxter-Somerville section are a guide, the footprint will be much larger than that.



The planned path is one of the 'missing links' of the Peninsula Trail, the section from Moorooduc to Mornington, beside the tourist railway line used by the Railway Preservation Society (click [here](#) to see maps).. This section is tagged as 'Priority 1'. Another of the missing links, tagged 'Priority 4', is from Safety Beach to Mt Martha, where the plan appears to route bikes along the Balcombe boardwalk. This raises serious safety concerns for pedestrians.

While off-road bike paths are highly desirable, the problem here is the location. Mornington Railway Reserve is a rare and precious remnant of Moorooduc Plain vegetation. This 30m-wide strip between agricultural and residential development punches well above its weight in biodiversity.



Its many Ecological Vegetation Classes include vulnerable and endangered ones. It provides food, shelter and breeding sites for an astounding range of birds, plants, reptiles, frogs, invertebrates and small mammals. Among its flora are species that grow nowhere else on the Peninsula, including some endangered at both State and National level.

Construction works would remove massive amounts of soil containing an ancient seed bank and the mycorrhizal fungi that are vital to the survival of the native orchids that grow here: Sun Orchids, Golden Moths, Leek Orchids, the endangered Purple Diurus. Paved paths will compact the soil, reducing the oxygen available to plants, changing their access to water, and destroying vital soil fungi.



Mornington Peninsula Shire Council proudly displays its Biodiversity Conservation Plan on its website, stating that no native vegetation is to be removed unless entirely necessary. Yet it is championing such destruction with this trail.

Continued next page

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Other routes are available for the bike path. As a BERG member, I have worked with representatives of other environmental groups on the Peninsula to oppose this bushland destruction and to advocate for all living things in the reserve. For more information, email me at millerjeanette09@gmail.com.

And if it's still there this Spring, walk the rail reserve between Bungower Road and Wooralla Drive and be treated to masses of Chocolate Lilies and Bulbine Lilies, nesting birds, wetland areas alive with frog chorus, Grass Tree spires, Golden Podolepis sheltering native bees, stately tall Billy Buttons, swathes of Trigger Plant, and so much more. Once this treasure is gone, it's gone forever.

A THREAT TO THE BALCOMBE ESTUARY RESERVES AS WELL?

By Angela Kirsner

The concept map for the Peninsula Trail suggests, as discussed above, that the proposed trail also goes through the Balcombe Estuary Reserves, following the existing tracks and boardwalk. We understand that the final route has yet to be determined, and there is unlikely to be funding for the Mt Martha section for at least a couple of years. Nevertheless, this is cause for concern.

The BERG Committee will keep a close watch on developments, and will argue strongly for the integrity of our bushland and the safety of walkers.

Notably, the Balcombe Estuary Reserves are covered by a Vegetation Protection Overlay and consist of ecologically sensitive indigenous wetland and bushland. They are an integral part of the biolinks network of wildlife corridors across the Peninsula, which is critically important for the Peninsula's remaining native flora and fauna.

The Reserves are constantly in use by walkers of all ages and abilities, including little kids, prams and wheelchairs. The tracks are totally unsuitable for bikes, which are already a danger to walkers and have caused known incidents and accidents.

There are alternative routes to connect the proposed trails from the Nepean Highway to the Esplanade.

FIELD NEWS

Field Officer Liz Barraclough reports

It has been excellent planting weather. It has also been great weather for weed growth. We can't, it seems, have one without the other! Our priority has been to get plants in the ground and give them time to establish before summer, especially if summer is as hot and dry as forecast.

Rabbit Paddock and nearby

The Friday groupies have planted lots below Kotor Place on Lower Hopetoun Creek, and weeded out the Rambling Dock that was taking over the Goodenias. Below Ferrero Oval we removed Forget-me-nots, English Ivy, Deadly Nightshade and Thistles, and planted 40 *Poa labillardierei*.

Our July Sunday workers did more planting in the Rabbit Paddock, and along lower Hopetoun Creek below Kotor Place. We also removed lots of the Capeweed springing up.

North bank

In late June the Friday Group worked at the bottom of Augusta Street, by the pumping station where, not so long ago, we

removed a heap of old furniture and other 'cubby' rubbish.

Naturelinks followed up after that clean-up (under our Melbourne Water grant). They removed Prickly Pear from the reserve side of the fence line (it is cultivated on private land on the other side), slashed around new plantings, sprayed Angled Onion and Bridal Creeper, and removed Blackberry and woody weeds. Now the Friday Group has done lots of plantings there.

Then in early August we tackled regenerating and flowering woody

weeds in the dense bracken and bushland below Maude St, before they set seed – notably Flax Leaf Broom, Polygala and Boneseed. The regenerating Pittosporums will need our attention soon as well, before they too flower and form berries.

Citation Hill

We spent our July Friday mornings on the slopes below Citation Oval and Pavilion, weeding large and small Polygala, Pittosporums (springing up in quantity) and Boneseed. Plus lots of spot planting to increase the diversity on these already interesting slopes. We also removed a heap of varied rubbish.

Balcombe Grammar students

On 4th August eight Year 11 Balcombe Grammar students, along with their teacher Sharon Rogers, worked with the Friday Group in the Rabbit Paddock. They planted 73 sedges, grasses and small perennials, and matted out lots more of the ubiquitous Capeweed. *Cont next page*



Ansie Tierney is a welcome addition to the Friday Group. She is studying Conservation & Ecosystem Management at Holmsglen – and here, is tackling woody weeds in the dense bushland below Maude Street. Photo Liz Barraclough

It was part of their Outdoor & Environmental Studies course, a Year 12 VCE subject they are taking in Year 11 so they can fit in the many excursions and camps more easily – wonderful things like Wilson’s Promontory, scuba diving, and swimming with whales. (It sounds a great subject. I wish they had it in my day!)

They also did a WaterWatch session with John Inchley and Sue Milton. It was great to have John back, he’s such a skilled teacher.

Other funded works

Working under a **Melbourne Water grant** along Hopetoun Creek, below Greenfield Way, Naturelinks has been controlling weeds in revegetated areas, slashing and clearing round new plantings, hand weeding, ‘cutting-and-painting’ and spraying where necessary. Weeds tackled include Rambling Dock, Inkweed, Arum Lilies, Moth Vine, Bridal Creeper, English Ivy, Dolichus Pea, Wonga Vine and Blackberry. So many weed species!



With **Shire funding**, Naturelinks has:

- tackled ground flora weeds and a few larger ones in the Bunyip,
- planted 150 tubestock along the boardwalk downstream of Uralla bridge,
- removed various weeds below Citation Oval: Tree Tobacco, Rambling Dock, Winter Cherry, and Bridal Creeper, and

Gardens For Wildlife

G4W assessments/visits continued through autumn, though have slowed down over winter as both assessors and clients headed to warmer climes. G4W has been received very favourably, with lots of positive feedback and enthusiastic comments.

Coastal news

Meanwhile Carolin Savage, who is coordinating the Coastal Group while Suzanne Ryan is away, reports that the group has made huge progress over recent weeks tackling woody weeds on South Beach. They have removed lots of very large Bone Seed, Mirror Bush and Polygala bushes, as well as Bridal Creeper, working first along the beach towards the main south beach car park, then towards the end of south beach.

The Balcombe Grammar students,

clockwise from top:
Planting with Friday grouper Verona Rawson
Removing Capeweed,
Assessing turbidity,
with John Inchley &
Collecting samples for WaterWatch with John

Photos: Sue Milton (WaterWatch), Liz Barraclough (planting and weeding)



- in the bush across the creek from Augusta St, targeted ground flora weeds and checked for Bridal Creeper and Buffalo Grass.

Disappointingly, our application this year for a South East Water grant was unsuccessful. Feedback was that, while we met all requirements, this grant round was very competitive and we have previously received a good share of the limited funding.

Melbourne Water meeting

Eric Smalley and I met Kelly Bayton, Melbourne Water’s new Waterways & Land Officer, in the reserves in June. She was keen to see what BERG does and familiarize herself with the area, particularly the sites funded by Melbourne Water through their Liveable Communities Liveable Waterway Grants.



BERG Mt Martha welcomes new members Jess Schubert-Hoban & family, Daniel Chandler, Irene Speiser, Melanie Killian

FORAGER, KNOW YOUR FUNGI!

Angela Kirsner reports

This is the second article based on the two fungi workshops presented in April by Alison Pouliot, ecologist, environmental photographer and fungi guru, for BERG Mt Martha.

There's no simple 10-point guide to fungi ID. The only way to tell the edible from the toxic is to know the identifying features, and consult a field guide or an expert. While you can read or hear about these features, nothing beats having the fungus in your hand, and using all your senses, as demonstrated by the Swiss approach – see right.

Poisoning & edibility

In Australia there are few serious poisonings from mushrooms. Probably fewer than 0.5% of fungi would be considered edible *and* palatable, and probably fewer than 1% are seriously toxic. The vast majority are just too hard or tough or bitter or dry to eat

We do, nevertheless, have deadly fungi (as has been distressingly clear in the news in recent weeks) and in our huge fungi diversity (far more species than Europe) there will be look-alikes to confuse foragers.

Paradoxically the fungi that caused most poisonings in Switzerland over recent years are all edible species. How so? Alison believes that foragers, wanting a full basket, often collect fungi in poor condition, with bacteria starting to break them down – and it's the bacteria, she believes, that cause those poisonings.

There's also the question of how many you eat. Fungal cell walls are largely chitin, the hard substance in crustaceans and insect exoskeletons.

The Swiss approach

Alison told the workshop at Mt Martha House of the elderly expert at the local *Pilzferein*, the mushroom society, in Switzerland, where every little town has its *Pilzkontrollstellen*, its mushroom inspection office. You take your mushrooms there to be checked by generous people who have a phenomenal knowledge of fungi.

The old man took her mushroom, closed his eyes, felt the base of the stipe (stalk), pulled it open and smelled it, like a winemaker or perfumier. Does it smell like food? – cucumber maybe, or radish, apricots, artichoke, olives, garlic, boiling cabbage? Is it chemical, maybe formic acid (squashed ants), or antiseptic? Some fungi smell like an animal, a fish or rotting meat; burnt rubber, burnt hair, hubba bubba; fresh-cut grass or hay. Some smell spermatic. Alison's smelt of bitter almond.

Eyes still closed, he ran his fingers around the edge of the pileus (cap). Fibrous or smooth? Satiny, waxy, buttery, like leather or fine sandpaper, mucilaginous or slimy? If you feel it, the knowledge is in your fingers. Imagine, for example, running your fingers through cold butter, or honey, or down a candle.

He broke off a bit, put it on his tongue to check for bitter or chilli-like sharpness. Then a massive inhalation and he spat it out! (Don't try this until your skill level develops – just 10 grams of a Death Cap is lethal.) He held it to his ear and snapped the stipe. It made a popping sound – some fungi have brittle cells (sterocysts) that snap like chalk rather than breaking in long strands.

Then he opened his eyes and told Alison what it was.

Our guts are not good at breaking it down, so if you eat enough mushrooms, even totally edible ones, you may get an almighty stomach ache.

Moral: Eat fungi sparingly, eat the very best specimens, and eat them the day you collect them, before they start to break down.

And never eat any wild fungi raw. Cooking makes chitin a little more digestible, and helps to destroy any bacteria. Furthermore, some mushrooms are toxic when raw but safe when cooked – Morels, for example, and Blewits, which will destroy red blood cells but only if eaten raw.



Found deep in the Bunyip bushland as we searched for fungi with Alison, this was universally declared a death cap! Liz Barraclough and Alison found it a good container for rubbish collected.

Photos Angela Kirsner



Left: The lethal Death Cap Mushroom, showing different developmental stages. They grow with about 15 species of oak, most commonly with Quercus robur. Paddy Straw mushrooms, very much sought-after, are superficially similar, and for people from parts of the world where Death Caps do not occur, it's a dangerous doppelgänger.

Photo Alison Pouliot



The most common culprit

Yellow Stainers look disarmingly like edible Field Mushrooms, but they cause 90% of mushroom poisonings in Victoria. Their toxin is gastrointestinal. You will recover once it's expelled from your gut, but it's not a pleasant experience.

How to distinguish a Yellow Stainer from its edible look-alike? It's tricky.

The chemical smell, like phenol, is telling if you can detect it (Field Mushrooms smell earthy), but some people can't. To smell a mushroom, break open the base of the stipe and put your nose into it. Alison had us all sniff a Yellow Stainer. Our perceptions ranged widely – rubbery, earthy, grassy, pretty, bad, mothballs, damp towel, melted electrical wiring... Not a super-reliable identifying feature!

Scratch it. Does it produce a tell-tale sulphur-yellow stain? But as Yellow Stainers dry out, they no longer stain yellow. The top of a Yellow Stainer is slightly squared, unlike Field Mushrooms, but this too is not a very reliable feature.

Importantly, note where it is growing. Yellow Stainers grow in *ruderal* environments – edges, paths, golf courses, gardens, nature strips, where the soil has been disturbed. Field Mushrooms, by contrast, do not like disturbance.

Where are you foraging?

A clean environment is important for any foraging. Fungi will mop up anything in the soil, good and bad. Near roads, they will absorb petrochemical and rubber runoff. The dog park is not a great place to forage! In Europe it's said you should not eat (wild) mushrooms more than twice a week because of the high levels of toxicity in both soil and air.

Consider also the person Alison saw foraging downhill from a recently harvested pine plantation. The area would have been sprayed against unwanted regeneration, runoff would carry the spray downhill, and any fungi would mop it up.



Alison challenged us to identify the edible ones in this display. Nobody got it right. In fact, all but one are Yellow Stainers. Photo Angela Kirsner

Does foraging harm the fungus?

Picking fungi is like picking a flower: so long as we don't hurt the organism, it will go on producing sporing bodies. Two big studies have tested this. A Swiss study compared two plots; in one, all mushrooms were harvested, in the other, none. After 27 years the harvested plot still produced as many sporing bodies as the un-harvested one. Harvesting itself, however, causes damage, compacting the soil, introducing pathogens, disturbing the mycelium.

A 10-year study of Chanterelles in North America had similar findings. But this is just one species, and 10 years, or 27 years, is a negligible time when a fungus organism lives thousands of years. As long as its food is available (organic matter – leaves, sticks and the like) and no one builds a road over it or digs it up or burns it or hits it with fertiliser, technically its life is infinite.

INVASIVE FUNGI

It is generally difficult to know whether a fungus is introduced, or when and where from. Both Yellow Stainers and Field Mushrooms are probably introduced, but we need observations and clear identification to be sure, and such records rarely exist, although molecular science is helping us understand relationships.

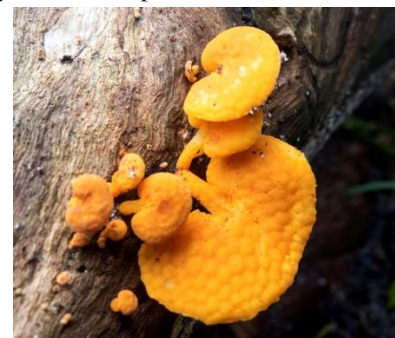
Some fungi *are* known to be introduced, however, and some of these have become invasive.

Orange Pore Fungus

About the size of a fingernail, *Favolaschia calocera* was first seen in Australia in 2004, in Melbourne, come maybe from Madagascar, maybe via New Zealand, probably in packaging or wooden pallets.

iNaturalist now shows thousands of records of it. It grows in wood, and seems to be spreading rapidly in ruderal environments. The concern is that it secretes an antifungal, albeit probably a weak one. But we don't yet know its overall effect on the maybe thousands of fungi that break down the components of a fallen log. Movement of the Orange

Pore fungus is still being tracked: if you see it, report it on iNaturalist.



Above: Orange Pore fungus seen from above & below, in the our reserves, below Village Close.

Below: Fly Agaric Photos Angela Kirsner



Fly Agaric

The classic fairytale mushroom, the Fly Agaric, *Amanita muscaria*, was brought to Australia over 100 years ago to support pine plantations. It forms mycorrhizal relationships with Pines, Birches and Oaks. But in the Otways, in Tasmania and in New Zealand, it has moved into *Nothofagus* (native Beech) forests, and is pulling the pine forest with it. It is now viewed with concern as an invader. A NZ mycologist is studying the Pine root systems to see if the fungus is actually excluding the fungi that naturally grow with *Nothofagus*

SAUNDERS CASE MOTH

By Angela Kirsner

We see these stick-encrusted mobile homes from time to time, but not often have I met the owner/builder, head and shoulders out the top, exploring the world. It's a Saunder's Case Moth (*Metura elongatus*), also called Large Bagworm, and this one (see my photos below) was negotiating a timber seat in our garden beside the reserves.

Found across eastern Australia, they are of the Psychidae family, in the order Lepidoptera. Psychidae occur worldwide, with some 350 species in Australia.

Building with silk

'Bagworm' is a drab name for this ingenious creature, with its strong caterpillar-silk case, up to 15 cm long (females have longer cases than males), camouflaged with bits of leaf and twigs.

The case is pretty much home for life. Only as an adult, a moth, does the male leave to find a mate then die. He has short black wings, hairy orange head and long, black and orange abdomen. The female moth, demure white with brown head, is wingless and flightless. She remains forever in her case emitting enticing pheromones and waiting for his favours. Mating takes place through the hole at the bottom of the case, and she lays thousands of eggs.

The tiny hatching caterpillars (larvae) head out *en masse* on silk threads, often helped by the wind, to build their own cases. Each one will spend up to two years as a caterpillar, shedding its old skin and enlarging its case as it grows.

A particular challenge is adding new twigs as the caterpillar lengthens



Saunders' Case Moth *Metura elongatus* by Arthur Bartholomew, 1861. Drawing commissioned by Sir Frederick McCoy, Director of Museum Victoria, for The Prodrromus of the Zoology of Victoria. Source: Museums Victoria collections.museumsvictoria.com.au/items/1091619

its case. Through the top opening, it chomps off a nearby twig and anchors one end with silk. Then from inside it cuts a slit in the tough cocoon wall, grasps the twig and cuts it free of its tether, then sews it into the wall. Incorporating a single new twig can take 90 minutes.

Armoured to face the world

Only the caterpillar's head and thorax, orange and black and armoured with chitin, emerge from the case. Three strong pairs of legs on the thorax carry it about to feed on a variety of plants. The abdomen, off-white and soft, remains inside. It ejects its droppings through a small opening at the tail of the case, but holds both top and lower opening tight shut unless using them.

When the caterpillar is finally ready to pupate it anchors its case with silk, then turns round so its head points downwards. Here it remains as a pupa for weeks or months, depending on the weather, until it emerges as a moth. *Continued next page*



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Saunders Case Moth continued

Historical sighting

I am indebted to Joan Broadberry for sending me her 2021 paper on Sanders Case Moths (details below). She quotes a delightful first encounter with the species in December 1854 by Sir Frederick McCoy, whom she describes as 'a towering figure in nineteenth century natural science'. It was published in his two-volume *Prodromus of the Zoology of Victoria*, along with the plate he mentions, reproduced on page 6.

Saunders Case Moths, it seems, were abundant in Melbourne at that time, and McCoy's description suggests he was seeing not just individuals but colonies of them.

While numbers have probably declined, Broadberry reports seeing colonies of some dozens of cases over the years, including one on a

McCoy writes:

The extraordinary insects figured on this plate are amongst the most curious and striking of the 'common objects' in Australia, meeting the eye everywhere from the abundance of the conspicuous protecting sacks or cases which the larvae construct and carry about with them, hanging to the trees in all directions, fixed by the uppermost anterior end and swinging loose otherwise.

A young friend, walking with me in Richmond Park [at a bend in the Yarra], the first evening I arrived in the colony, collected a number of these cases from the trees and as they were too strong and tough to be opened, and were perfectly closed, it was taken for granted they were cocoons containing pupae only, when put in his pocket; and no more was thought of the matter until they created a commotion in the drawing-room soon after by crawling actively out over the head and dress of my inquisitive friend; none of the older residents in the room having ever seen the living larvae, or suspected their existence in the well-known cases – so vigilant and timid are the caterpillars in retreating at the approach of danger.

tall cypress tree in Preston, where, she writes, 'The fern-like, curved branchlets... gave the twig shelters a distinctive appearance, as if the caterpillars were wearing skirts'.

But why do they collect in colonies, which effectively make the insects more vulnerable to predation? Broadberry hypothesises that the newly hatched eggs have not dispersed widely, maybe because the pupating female was not able to climb to a high point to aid the dispersal of her hatchlings, and/or when the eggs hatched, there was little or no breeze to spread the tiny caterpillars on their silken parachutes.

Reference:

Joan Broadberry. 'Saunders Case Moth *Metura elongatus* colonies in Melbourne, Victoria.' *The Victorian Naturalist* (Vol. 138, Issue 4) Aug. 2021. The Field Naturalists Club of Victoria Inc.

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