

THE CREEK

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Balcombe Estuary Rehabilitation Group

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SURVEYING OUR BIRDS

Article and photos by Pam Hearn

As part of a Melbourne Water/ADSE initiative, a series of surveys has been conducted around Melbourne's Estuaries and rivers over the past couple of years. On 8th March, I went along with Neil Shelley and Val Ford as representatives of Penboc (Peninsula Bird Observers). Birgita, the organizer with DSE, provided two kayaks and monitoring sheets for the morning's observations.

On the beach at the Creek mouth, we saw Silver Gulls and about eight Crested Terns. Neil and Birgita went up the Creek in kayaks, while Val and I hoofed it along the boardwalk, monitoring in 200 metre blocks with specific GPS positions. We headed off after 9 am, which seemed to be the peak time for walkers and dog-walkers. About half had their dogs on leads, but some dogs were leashed quickly when we appeared with clipboard and camera!

One lady told me they'd seen a 'lizard up a tree'. I discounted a Blue-tongue, as they don't climb, and wondered if the Gippsland Water Dragon mentioned in the last newsletter was still around. A couple of walking gentlemen told us of their bird experiences – one had seen '27 small birds just from his verandah', and another had seen 'Golden Monarchs' – we

think he may mean Golden Whistlers.

In the dense creek-side vegetation, we saw and heard lots of Brown Thornbills and White-browed Scrub-wrens taking advantage of the cover. We heard Grey Fantails, Spotted Pardalotes, and the occasional Silvereye and Superb Fairy Wren. A lone Dusky Moorhen was on the Creek,



Superb Fairy Wren

in the same spot I saw it a week previously. A flock of about ten White-faced Herons flew overhead, and later we saw a larger group of about twenty. Val told me this is not uncommon, as family groups are on the move at certain times of the year.



Spotted Pardalote

Further along the track we heard an amazing number of Spotted Pardalote voices over on the north bank of the creek. It seems they too move in large groups, but it was hard to spot them through the binoculars, as they don't stay still long enough. We saw a female Golden Whistler and a couple of Blackbirds scurrying in the undergrowth. As we continued, Brown Thornbills and Grey Fantails were still evident.

We found a dead Bush-rat, a beautiful soft grey with white-ish underbelly, and later, a dead Silvereye. Val identified it as the Tasmanian variety; beautiful buff markings on its breast, distinguished it from the Victorian

morph. We agreed that it probably died from exhaustion after flying across Bass Strait on its annual migration.

Then, at the last GPS point, we found the impressive Gippsland Water Dragon! It was close to the path, low down, and not concerned at all by passing walkers. Maybe it had been someone's pet? It was large with beautiful markings, particularly on its legs.



The handsome Gippsland Water Dragon

Back at the Camp Ground we learned that Neil and Birgita had flushed two Royal Spoonbills on their return journey (see below).



CAN YOU HELP?

BERG is holding another fund-raising **BBQ/Sausage Sizzle** at Bunnings, on Saturday 14th May, 7.30 am to 5.00 pm.

Can you spare an hour or two to help? Call Hazel Athey on 0419 899 560.

And come and buy a sausage!

BAT ROOST BOXES IN THE RESERVE

We reported in the December newsletter that fauna ecologist Paul Bertuch has recently taken on monitoring the bat roost boxes in the reserve. Paul is drawing on the considerable knowledge gained from the Organ Pipes National Park Bat Roost Box project. This has been guided by Robert Bender since the early 1990s, and Natasha Schedvin's PhD research on the bats is the foundation for the program's ongoing research.

Paul presented his work to the BERG Committee and others after our March 19th meeting.

Bat species at Mt Martha

Mal Legg, in his 2008 fauna survey of the Balcombe Estuary Reserve, identified five micro-bat species:

- *Tadarida australis*, White-striped Freetail Bat (uncommon)
- *Chalinolobus gouldii*, Gould's Wattled Bat (common)
- *Nyctophilus geoffroyi*, Lesser Long-eared Bat (uncommon)
- *Vespadelus darlingtoni*, Large Forest Bat (uncommon)
- *Vespadelus vulturnus*, Little Forest Bat (Common)



White-striped Freetail Bat
Photo Mal Legg

These tiny insect-eating bats – about the size of a mouse –

were found in woodlands along the creek. They frequent open corridors, searching for insects at night – along the creek or a bush-lined track. (You may also see them hunting insects around street lights.) Mal noted that numbers seemed moderate to low, but were highest in summer when insect activity is greatest.

Micro-bats roost and breed in tree hollows and under slits of bark, but with the widespread clearing of old growth eucalypts, such places are difficult to find. We need to provide options if bat

number are to be maintained or increased. Indeed, the Organ Pipes program has seen significant rises in bat numbers since it began.

What do bats need?

The bat roost boxes installed in the Balcombe Estuary Reserve some years ago have been little used, and Paul's first task has been to address this.

The Organ Pipes project has found that micro-bats have very specific requirements. The boxes must be oriented towards the sun, with thick walls and well sealed joints to provide a warm, draught-free and humid environment. The entrance slit at the bottom of the box needs to be narrow, to help to retain warmth, and keep out larger potential inhabitants, such as possums.

The preferred slit size varies from species to species. Both Gould's Wattled Bats and White-striped Freetail Bats prefer a slit larger than 15mm, while Forest Bats are most often found in boxes with entrance slits of only 12mm.

The interior of the box needs to be roughened to enable the bats to hang from it.

Bats need space to drop from the box and fly off, and to allow this, boxes need to be relatively high and free of dense vegetation. In particular, the White Striped Freetail Bat needs space for its very wide wingspan. But the boxes can't



Above: Natasha Schedvin checks a roost box at Organ Pipes National Park. Below: Gould's Wattled Bats in the bottom of a roosting box. Note the roughened sides for roosting. Photos courtesy Robert Bender



be too high, as they need to be monitored from a ladder. Paul is erecting ours at 2-4 metres.

Once installed, the Organ Pipes project found that it may be two years or more before bats will use a box. This may be because of gasses released over time by the liquid nails or solarguard paint used in the box construction.

Monitoring

At Organ Pipes, a group of volunteers led by Natasha Schedvin has monitored roost boxes

monthly since 1994. Every month the bats in every box are captured, identified, counted, monitored, weighed and then released after dark.

This entails first blocking the entrance slit, then opening the lid at the top of the box. The bats all drop to the bottom and can then be removed with care.

Our monitoring program will be less ambitious, at least at first. Paul plans to install about 20 boxes and restrict monitoring to checking for bat habitation, and ensuring ants or bees don't move in, and that the boxes are well



Bat roost boxes. The two at the right are BERG's original boxes. The three to the left are modified similar to the Organ Pipes Bat Roost Boxes. Photo Paul Bertuch

maintained.

This will be done using a micro-inspection camera mounted on a flexible cable, which BERG recently purchased.



Photo Paul Bertuch

Want to be involved?

If you would like to help with the bat monitoring program, contact Liz on 0408 388 430

FIELD NEWS

Field Officer Liz Barraclough reports

Working bees

In **February**, despite the rain, we began the assault on the persistent weed problem in the Uralla Bridge area. The weed in question, which we have mistakenly been calling Nut Grass, is in fact Drain Flat-sedge (*Cyperus eragrostis*). It had sprung up as thick as a lawn, among the recently planted *Carex appressa* along the edge of the creek and the firetrack.

It has not previously been a major problem, but it is an opportunistic plant that likes wet areas, including channels and streams, and the recent wet conditions have suited it perfectly. To the untrained eye it can be difficult to distinguish from young *Lomandra longifolia* and *Carex* plants, as the shape and colour of its leaves are similar. Its seed heads, initially green spikelets that turn a yellow-brown, contain masses of fine seeds. Our aim was at least to remove the seed heads before they ripened, even if we were unable to weed all the plants.



Drain Flat-sedge near Uralla Bridge before and after the assault Photos Sue Betheras

While some of the group worked on this weed, the rest tackled the

prolific Deadly Nightshade, Thistles and Rambling Dock.

The **Friday Morning Group** has followed up this work. Unfortunately last week we saw the result of missing a large patch of Drain Flat-sedge. To our dismay, thousands of tiny seeds were spread all over the bare ground. We wished we'd had an 'enviro-vacuum cleaner' – perhaps an invention opportunity for BERG!



Lost in a sea of weeds at the March working bee Photo A Kirchner

At the **March working bee**, we tackled the easement down the north side of Balcombe Grammar. Students of the school planted lots of trees and understorey plants here last year, a number of which were removed by vandals. Massive weed growth has made it difficult to see the rest. We located and staked the plants, hand-weeded around them, and whipper-snipped the great drifts of seed heads in the remaining areas. The Shire is funding Naturelinks to spray what's left, in preparation for more planting – again by Balcombe Grammar students.

BERG and Balcombe Grammar - Can you help?

BERG will again be part of the Balcombe Grammar's community service program with students from years 7 and 8.

When: Wednesdays from 18th May for 7 weeks, 11.30am – 2.30pm

If you can help with the students on any of these days, contact Liz on 0408 388 430 or email liz.barra@bigpond.com

Clean Up Australia Day

A very big THANK YOU to the 45 volunteers (including 8 children) who helped clean up the beach, parks, creek and roadsides round Mt Martha Village. We filled a two-cubic-metre skip with rubbish, and

a further 15 bags with recyclables – all litter that will now not clog the creek and float into the sea.



A host of Liz's grandchildren ready to clean up Mt Martha – Emily, Luke (green hat), Rebecca and Cameron Van Orsouw with mother Sarah, and Barb Thraves behind the stall Photo Liz Barraclough

Special thanks to Di Lewis and Jenny Rolleston, who inspired about 20 adults and 8 children of the Birdrock Ave Neighbourhood Watch group to clean up Birdrock Beach. Di reports that, as well as bottles, cans, cigarette butts, and polystyrene, they found a broken chair, plastic buckets, a jacket and three pairs of knickers!

While they were busy cleaning the northern approach to Mt Martha, the Sunshine Reserve Conservation & Fireguard Group were working hard at the southern end in the area of Hearn Rd.



Above: Tess and Will McClintock ready to clean up Birdrock Beach. Below: Birdrock Ave residents at work in perfect conditions. Photos Di Lewis



EELS

A note from BERG members Bev and Colin Fryer

On Thursday 3rd February (the day before the deluge), we were walking with friends along the boardwalk when we noticed rippling movements mid-stream in Balcombe Creek. As we watched more closely, we recognised that some short-finned eels were swimming strongly, just breaking the surface of the water. Within a few minutes we had counted eight, two or three of the bigger ones about 750 mm in length. They seemed to be travelling in pairs.

Then rain began to obscure the surface, and interrupted our clear view. It was quite a thrill for us to see the living BERG symbol!



*A female eel in full migratory livery.
Photo from the BERG eel poster*

TUESDAY GROUP RESUMES

After a long break in anticipation of the hot weather which never arrived, the Tuesday morning group has started back. We meet each Tuesday at 9:30 am in the kindergarten car park and finish with morning tea/coffee in Daly's Dell about 11:15.

Newcomers are always welcome. Contact Mary Stemp, 5974 3996.

BERG Working Bees	Other BERG Activities	Other Groups
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Monthly working bee: 3rd Sunday, from 9.00 to 12.00. Next are 9th April & 14th May. Meet at the Rotunda (Mel: 144 K11). If running late, phone Liz Barraclough on 0408 388 430 to find the work site. ❖ Tuesdays 9.00 to 12.00. Call Mary Stemp to confirm, 5974 3996. ❖ Friday mornings. For details call Sue Betheras, 0408 808 201 or Liz Barraclough, 0408 388 430. ❖ Hopetoun Creek Greenfield Reserve. Contact Hazel Athey, 0419 899 560. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Waterwatch testing: 2nd Saturday, 9.00 am, meet at Augusta St Bridge. Next are 9th April and 14th May. Enquiries to John Inchley on 5974 1095. ❖ BERG Committee meets every 7-8 weeks at Mt Martha House, Saturdays 9.30am. Next meeting 7th May. All members welcome 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Fairbairn Bushland Reserve Friends Group working bees. Contact John Stoker, 5977 1397. ❖ Penboc birdwatching 2nd Wednesday and 3rd Sunday. Enquiries www.penboc.org.au or Max Burrows 9789 0224. ❖ SPIFFA (Southern Peninsula Indigenous Flora and Fauna Association) 1st Monday, 7.30 pm, at Parks Vic, Hinton St, Rosebud. Enquiries 5988 6529, or www.spiffa.org.
<p>BERG COMMITTEE</p> <p>PRESIDENT JOHN INCHLEY • VICE PRESIDENT MICHAEL SANDERS • SECRETARY MARY STEMPT • TREASURER RICHARD KIRSNER FIELD OFFICER LIZ BARRACLOUGH • NEWSLETTER, MEMBERSHIP ANGELA KIRSNER • MINUTES SECRETARY PAM HEARN SCHOOLS LIAISON JENNY SELBY • ROTARY CLUB LIAISON GEOFF KAYE • HOPETOUN CREEK GREENFIELD RESERVE GROUP HAZEL ATHEY CO-OPTED MEMBERS: DIANNE LEWIS • PUBLICITY BARBARA THRIVES • CENTURY DVE HABITAT LINK GROUP TONY O'CONNOR</p>		
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