



**Berg**  
**Mt Martha**

Caring for the Balcombe Estuary Reserves

# THE CREEK

Volume 18 No 1, January 2014

## FIELD NEWS...AND MORE

*Field Officer Liz Barraclough reports*

Welcome back! We have lots of plans for this New Year!

### Year of the bird!

This is clearly the tag for 2014 as far as BERG Mt Martha is concerned. First, we have in the pipeline a **bird brochure** with exquisite drawings by BERG member and artist Annie Dowd. It will be launched in early May at the Mornington Library, when we will also be showing examples of Stuart Dawson's beautiful carved local birds, plus a small exhibition of BERG Mt Martha photography of local birds.

Then we have the **Family Estuary Awareness Day** featuring our giant Spoonbill. Some of you will remember this vast and wonderful puppet, BERG's contribution to Mornington's Australia Day procession a decade or more ago.

And finally, a **bird hide** in the Reserve. We are planning a camouflaged simple structure on the north bank just in from the Esplanade Bridge, overlooking the estuary. The plans (drawn up by our in-house architect extraordinaire, Geoff Kaye) and site details will be submitted to the Shire by its Natural Systems Team. John Trevillian and Geoff have organized Mt Martha Rotary to help with the building, which we hope to have completed by the end of April.

### Grant granted

We are delighted, in this tight fiscal climate, to find that our 2014 Melbourne Water Community Grant applications have been successful. Not only successful, but this year we shall receive the full 100% of what we requested!—some \$33,000 for restoration works along Hopetoun and Balcombe Creeks.

## SAVE THE DATE FOR BERG MT MARTHA'S FAMILY ESTUARY AWARENESS DAY

**WHEN? – 30<sup>TH</sup> MARCH, 10AM TO 2PM**

**WHERE? – BY THE BALCOMBE ESTUARY ROTUNDA**

All welcome!

**Put it in your diary, bring your family, friends & neighbours—especially young families with kids**

Here's a taste of what's on:

- Free drawing workshop for kids with famous illustrator Terry Denton
- Informative walks along the boardwalk with local experts and the fabulous Mr Spoonbill!
  - Magical story tellers talking about local plants and animals
  - Moonlit Sanctuary experts showing some of their night animals
- Find critters that live in our creek and get your hands wet, with John Inchley
  - A plant identification table
  - Who lives in the bat boxes?
- Get advice from experts on making your garden go native, and how to attract more local birds
- Fun and educational kids' activities run by Seeds Environmental educators
  - Free indigenous plants for your garden
- Talk with experts about local ecology—the inter-relationships of plants, animals, soils and climate
  - Sausage sizzle...and treats for the kids

At the BERG Mt Martha information table you can learn more about our restoration work in the Reserves, and how to get involved, as a BERG Mt Martha member and volunteer.

We'll send you a reminder email early in March with the latest information about the Day and a printable flyer you can give to friends and neighbours.

And if you'd like to help out on the day, call Barbara Thraves on 5974 2185.

*The Family Estuary Awareness Day is part of BERG Mt Martha's commitment to educating local families about our precious estuary and its environment.*

Thanks to John Inchley, Richie Ball and Sue Betheras for their help in preparing the applications.

### Working-bees

Thanks in part to the change of weather after a week of extreme heat, we had a great turn-up at the January Sunday working bee and completed a stack of chores to set us up for the year. Our storage shed is a show-piece, clean, organized and

rubbish gone; the new working-bee equipment boxes are sorted and ready to go, the interpretation signs washed down and now legible, the footpath on the Reserve side of the Esplanade no longer overrun with weeds, and the prospective bird hide is marked out and mapped.

The Tuesday & Friday groups have not yet resumed after summer's heat, but we will let anyone

interested know once the weather is suitable. Check your emails or texts. **New members are always welcome**—call Sue Betheras (Friday group, 0408 808 201) or Mary Stemp (Tuesday group, 5974 3996).

## STRATEGIC PLANNING

*Graham Hubbard, BERG Mt Martha President, reports*

In January the BERG Mt Martha Committee met for a day to consider the first year's progress on our 5-year strategic plan to preserve and restore the precious ecology of the Balcombe Estuary and Reserves, through our technical expertise, passionate volunteerism and community involvement.

With much achieved during 2013, we chose eight major projects as focus in 2014:

1. Develop (with the Shire) a proactive list of long-term projects/plans for the Reserves.
2. Develop a plan for training our on-ground workers.
3. Establish an active volunteer system.
4. Establish relationships with Mt Martha traders.
5. Complete the bird hide (with Rotary).
6. Consolidate a membership activity program.
7. Get traction on the Estuary Sedimentation project.
8. Establish a clear proactive policy for schools programs.

This is much more than weeding, planting and community awareness! And we are engaged in many, many more activities every week.

We hope you, as members, will be able to contribute to one or more of these projects. Together they will move us closer to achieving our objectives of making the Estuary and Reserves places that the whole community values, is proud of and wants to protect.

**BERG Mt Martha  
welcomes new members**  
Tom Le Cerf,  
Patricia Reilly  
Anna Bryant

## ECHIDNAS!

### .... ON THE MOVE

Early January, as I was driving along Uralla Rd towards Nepean Highway, I saw an echidna on the verge emerging from the soccer pitch area.  
*Hazel Athey*



*Snapped near the Victoria Cres—Maude St corner a few years ago, but not seen since in this vicinity. Photo Angela Kirsner*

### TACHYGLOSSUS ACULEATUS

*This is a shortened version of an article by Norman Hellard in the SPIFFA newsletter, August 2012.*

This little Australian, whose first name means *fast tongue*, clings firmly with only the platypus for company to a solitary dead-end branch in evolution's family tree. We know it as the echidna.

#### Let's get a physical description

Weight, around 3 kilos. Brown / black, half-deflated football in size, covered with strong thick brown spines normally angled backwards and very sharp. The spines grow to 6-7cm, with black hair between, which is thicker and longer in alpine habitats. They are made of keratin, the same as our fingernails.

Front paws point to the front, rear to rear, with five very strong digging claws to each hand.

Small black eyes and a finger-like beak covered with tough skin. The mouth opening at pointy end, is about 5mm wide and from it, true to its name, *Tachyglossus* can shoot a sticky tongue about 20cm and back in half a second. At this rate our echidna can eat up to two kilos of termites, ants and eggs in one sitting. Those sitting at home minding their own business are rudely disturbed by Short-beak smashing into their nests for a real feed. The sticky tongue

means that plenty of dirt is also on the menu but this passes rapidly through the system.

*Tachyglossus* ranges from the hot, dry outback to snow country, but the mild, moister conditions of south-east Australia seem to suit better. They are solitary animals and inhabit overlapping territories. They hunt their food between dusk and dawn.

In alpine winters the echidna can drop its temperature to near freezing for three months or more, then return to normality in a matter of hours. These changes are governed by a relatively large, complex brain with about the capacity of a dog's.

#### Predators

Major predators in the real wild are dingoes and quolls, while goannas will take a young 'puggle' from its burrow. But the biggest threat by far is looming as the feral pussycat. Speed and sharp claw to the echidna's under-parts does the trick.

#### The trivia bit

- Echidnas have the most alluring eyelashes.
- They are capable swimmers, paddling with all four feet and sometimes using their snout as a snorkel.
- Echidnas do not need a daily drink—they take in good amounts of water with their diet of termites.
- Echidnas have some form of electro-receptors and can detect a fully charged battery but not a flat one, even if it is painted to resemble an enormous termite.
- The New Guinea highlands support the other echidna—the long-beaked. An earthworm eater, this monster is about one metre long and weighs upwards of 15 kg.

#### The serious bit

In winter, when a male echidna's fancy turns to romance, he and his fellow suitors seek out a female whose once-in-three-or-four-years season is now. A hopeful cavalcade of 15 or 20 blunders in pursuit. The female signals her readiness by helpfully lying flat on her stomach with spines and claws pointing in all directions.

Desperate males, with grandma's words 'excavate or perish' ringing in their brains, now proceed to gouge out a deep trench around her, while butting and generally molesting all opposition, often for weeks, until one only remains. The survivor must now hold her interest by stroking her spines, which said 'foreplay' may last for several hours. For your average macho monotreme, excavation is usually followed by consummation (three more hours). The 'victor' then staggers back into solitude.

The female lays one tiny egg into a tiny pouch, which she achieves by lying on her back with all edges pointing upwards. The egg is carefully juggled into its resting place and hatches in about ten days.

At about three months the young puggle, having suckled big-time on iron-rich milk from a patch on the mother's stomach, starts to develop spines of its own, and mother rapidly provides a home extension in the form of a nursery burrow. Feeding time is then restricted to one meal per three or four days, but the puggle makes it all worthwhile by drinking almost a quarter of its body weight per session. The youngster is out of its burrow in about six months, and is weaned one month later. Now, about these cats...???!?

### NINE MONTHS AFTER FIRE

Vyryan Stryder, of Naturelinks Landscape Management, reports

Over the past months the prescribed burn site on Maude St in the Balcombe Estuary Reserves been radically transformed—it is bursting with new life.

#### Before last April's burn

The pre-burn vegetation was fairly simple in structure—a dense canopy of Coast Tea Tree, *Leptospermum laevigatum*, over carpets of Moss and thinly spread Sword Sedge. Other species would struggle to establish in the thick Moss and low light.

Where the shade was less dense, especially along the road side, there were more species, giving a glimpse of what might once have been here and a chance to predict, to some extent, how the new plant community will unfold after a major disturbance such as fire.



The Maude St burn site before the trees were felled, straight after the burn, & recently.  
Photos Vyryan Stryder

Before European settlement the sandy soil probably supported a more complex suite of heathy and herbaceous species including Grass Trees, several shrub species, Grasses, Lilies and Orchids, with a canopy of Eucalyptus and Sheoke. But Melbourne's burgeoning industries needed firewood and Balcombe's trees burned well.

With the loss of these canopy species, Coast Tea Tree moved in, replacing the more open structure with increasing stem density, foliage cover and shade. Understorey species struggled for light and many

would have disappeared. Those with seed persistent and long-lived enough to outlast their equally persistent and exclusive competitor needed to wait for just the right opportunity.

#### Fire!

The Maude St burn, with its dual purposes of fuel reduction and ecological restoration, provided just this opportunity. The Tea Trees were felled, piled in rows and burnt in an intense fire that left only fine, black, almost powdery charcoal.

With more light and nutrients and fewer seed predators like ants, there was mass germination and re-sprouting. The large parallel lines of fire had an interesting ecological effect. One indigenous species, Kopata, in the Geranium family, emerged *en masse* in distinct bands. While the most intense areas of fire favoured the germination of the more deeply buried or perhaps more heat resistant Wattles, they seem to have been too intense for Kopata seeds. But where the fire was of least intensity, in the bands subject only to radiant heat, Kopata germination was also minimal. There was, it seems, a 'Goldilocks zone' between the two areas in which conditions were just right to stimulate germination of Kopata, and probably other species as well.

#### What has changed?

Post-burn, we are seeing a moderate increase in the number of different species, and a significant increase in the numbers within a number of these species. Both factors contribute to developing complexity and ecological integrity of the ecosystem.

[continued next page]

### CAN YOU HELP?

#### MORNINGTON PENINSULA SCHOOLS' ENVIRONMENT WEEK

AT THE BRIARS MON 24<sup>TH</sup> TO FRI 28<sup>TH</sup> MARCH

BERG Mt Martha is running the Waterwatch Program, led by John Inchley, with 3 x 40 minute sessions each morning (9.30-11.30) and afternoon (12.15 - 2.15) from Monday to Thursday. Teachers and parents provide supervision but extra hands are valuable to work with small groups of children as they search through creek water for "critters".

If you can help, contact Jenny Selby: 0432 719 288 or Jselby22@gmail.com

#### Clean Up Australia Day, SUNDAY 2<sup>ND</sup> MARCH

Join with BERG and other local groups to clean up the beach, creek and surrounding areas. Register and collect a rubbish bag at the car park at the corner of The Esplanade & Watson Road anytime from 9.30 to 1.00.

Enquiries to Liz Barraclough on 0408 388 430.



Some of the diversity (from L.): dry *Kopata* seed heads, *Twiggy Daisy*, *Running Postman* & *Apple-berry*, plus lots of *Lomandra* & tiny grasses  
 Photo A Kirsner

Species that colonise after a disturbance are there in quantity, particularly *Senecio* sp. (daisies) and ground species such as *Blue Bottle Daisy*, *Lagenifera stipitata*.

We are also seeing a number of coastal species such as *Bower Spinach*, *Coast Beard Heath* and *Climbing Lignum*—not surprising given the proximity to Coastal vegetation communities. *Eucalypts* and *Sheokes* have not appeared, and will need to be re-introduced, as they are an important part of the vegetation structure and habitat.

We shall continue to track the changes from photo points, and manage emerging weeds with careful hand-weeding and minimal spot spraying. BERG Mt Martha is also very much part of the site's management through its monitoring program.

**SPECIAL OFFER!!**

**2014 Peninsula Habitat Management Course**

One funded place available in this gold-standard environmental training for volunteers—12 Thurs evenings at The Briars & 8 Sat'day field trips, between Aug 28 & Dec 6. Call Liz Barraclough on 0408 388 430

BERG Mt Martha Working Bees	Other BERG Mt Martha activities	Other Groups
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ <b>Monthly working bee:</b> 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday, between 9am &amp; 12 noon. Next are <b>16<sup>th</sup> February and 16<sup>th</sup> March</b>. Meet at the Rotunda (Mel: 144 K11) or call Liz Barraclough on 0408 388 430 to find the work site.</li> <li>❖ <b>Tuesdays</b> 9.30 to 11.30 in the cooler months; meet in the Kinder carpark, Watson Rd. Call Mary Stemp on 5974 3996</li> <li>❖ <b>Friday mornings.</b> Call Sue Betheras on 0408 808 201.</li> <li>❖ <b>Hopetoun Creek Greenfield Reserve</b> Call Hazel Athey on 0419 899 560</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ <b>Waterwatch testing:</b> 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday at Augusta St Bridge. Call John Inchley, 5974 1095.</li> <li>❖ <b>BERG Committee</b> meets monthly at Mt Martha House, 9.00am. Next are 8<sup>th</sup> February &amp; 1<sup>st</sup> March. All members welcome.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ <b>Fairbairn Bushland Reserve Friends Group</b> working bees, call Judith Whittaker 5974 8174 or John Stoker 5977 1397.</li> <li>❖ <b>BirdLife Mornington Peninsula</b> bird-watching 2<sup>nd</sup> Wednesday and 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday. Enquiries to Max Burrows 9789 0224, mornington@birdlife.org.au or www.birdlife.org.au/locations/birdlife-mornington-peninsula.</li> <li>❖ <b>SPIFFA</b> 1<sup>st</sup> Monday, 7.30 pm, at Parks Vic, Hinton St, Rosebud. Enquiries 5988 6529, or www.spiffa.org.</li> </ul>
<p><b>BERG MT MARTHA COMMITTEE</b>                  PRESIDENT GRAHAM HUBBARD • VICE PRESIDENT POSITION NOT FILLED • SECRETARY DI LEWIS • TREASURER RICHARD KIRSNER                  FIELD OFFICER LIZ BARRACLOUGH • NEWSLETTER ANGELA KIRSNER • WATERWATCH COORDINATOR JOHN INCHLEY                  • ROTARY CLUB LIAISON GEOFF KAYE • COMMUNITY AWARENESS BARBARA THRAVES • JOHN TREVILLIAN • RICHIE BALL</p>		
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