

# BUSH TRACKS

Bush Heritage Australia's quarterly magazine for active conservation



## In fiery footsteps

**There are more than 6000 patches of rainforest on Wunambal Gaambera country, for which fire can be both protector and destroyer.**

The sun was low in the sky when Stefania Ondei finally decided to call it a day. An Italian PhD student lured to the Kimberley by a scientific challenge, Stefania, alongside Uunguu Rangers, was looking for a tiny patch of rainforest in the remote savannah grasslands of Wunambal Gaambera country, the Uunguu Indigenous Protected Area, in far-north Western Australia.

Rainforests are a lesser-known feature of this landscape, famed for its rugged coastlines and spectacular gorges. But thanks to Stefania's research, initiated and funded by the Wunambal Gaambera Aboriginal Corporation (WGAC), it's now been revealed there are more than 6000 patches scattered across it.

They had all but given up hope of finding the particular patch they were looking for, until a pigeon appeared nearby. "I was once told that some pigeon species of the northern Kimberley are predominantly found in rainforests," says Stefania.

"So I decided to follow it."

"After no more than a couple of minutes, there it was, behind a hill – the rainforest I was after."

Wunambal Gaambera people call the rainforest on their country 'wulo'. It is home to about 25 percent of northern Kimberley plant species, including food and medicine plants, and threatened or endemic animals like the Golden-backed Tree-rat and Rough-scaled Python.

*Continued on page 4*



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## From the CEO



In Australia, caring for country requires having people on the ground. Aboriginal Australians have been caring for this country for tens of thousands of years, and they have both the knowledge and the skills to manage many of the environmental challenges facing us, from wildfires, to feral animals and invasive weeds. But caring for Australia's vast landscapes requires resources.

The federal government's announcement of \$30 million in additional funding for Indigenous rangers will leverage the contributions that Bush Heritage already makes to many Indigenous ranger groups across Australia. On Wunambal Gaambera country, we are now seeing what is possible when groups such as the Wunambal Gaambera Uunguu Rangers are well-resourced.

The recent five-year review of the Wunambal Gaambera Healthy Country Plan found that Uunguu Rangers are implementing a highly sophisticated

and effective right-way fire regimen. The cover story (p.4) for this edition of *Bush Tracks* explores how that fire regimen is helping to protect more than 6000 patches of rainforest, or 'wulo', from devastating late dry-season wildfires.

On the other side of the country, in far north Queensland, Bush Heritage is contributing to the protection of rainforest by another means – through our work controlling and reducing the spread of one of the world's worst invasive weeds (p.8). Siam Weed has the potential to smother Australia's Wet Tropics World Heritage Area, home to exceptionally high levels of plant and animal diversity. Our long-term, creative and multifaceted approach to Siam Weed control on the adjacent Yourka Reserve has significantly reduced that threat.

As we look to the end of the year, we also look to the end of an era. I would like to thank Louise Sylvan for her service as president of Bush Heritage Australia over the past eight years, and take this chance to welcome our new Board President, Chris Grubb.

Wishing you a safe and happy summer,

Gerard O'Neill, Chief Executive

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Glenn Cocking and Suzi Bond spend two nights moth catching on Scottsdale Reserve to gain an insight into these important pollinators and sources of food.



Opposite: Wunambal Gaambera coast. Photo by Peter Morris.

Above: Chris Grubb (left) and Paperbark Forest (right). Photos by Annette Ruzicka

# Profile

## Chris Grubb, President, Bush Heritage Australia

**Position commenced:** August 2017

**Joined the Board:** June 2011

**Interests:** Keen birdwatcher and naturalist

Bush Heritage's new President, Chris Grubb, has supported the organisation for more than 14 years, six of those through service on the Board and several Board committees. With a background in the investment industry and experience as a director of several other public and non-profit organisations, Chris will guide Bush Heritage's growth and leadership under its new strategic plan. But he also has a strong appreciation for the bush, and is driven by a personal vision to see the natural world protected for generations to come.

### How did you first become involved with Bush Heritage?

About 15 years ago, I was invited to a Bush Heritage presentation. I came away from that presentation feeling totally inspired. It was pretty clear to me then that Bush Heritage was on a path to making a real difference to conservation in this country.

### Are there any particular experiences in nature that have had a lasting impact on you?

There are many, but one that's stuck with me took place on Bush Heritage's Naree Station Reserve, up near the NSW-Queensland border. I was with a group of people walking through the landscape, and we stopped at a Coolabah Tree. Gerard O'Neill, our Chief Executive, said to us, "this tree is probably around five or six-hundred-years-old". The tree was full of swallow nests, spiders' webs, and insects of all kinds. I remember thinking, 'this tree has seen hundreds of years of evolution take place and it's still standing here today – still providing a home for all kinds of birds and insects – and we are helping to protect it so it can continue to do so'.

### Why do you support Bush Heritage?

In supporting Bush Heritage, I am doing something that I think is absolutely vital: protecting the birds, the bees, the bush and the flowers so that our children and our children's children have the pleasure of hearing, seeing and smelling the same things that we have been able to experience in our lifetimes.

*Bush Heritage Australia acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the places in which we live, work and play.*

Cover image: Unguu Ranger Jason Adams. Photo courtesy of the Wunambal Gaambera Aboriginal Corporation. Contributors: Bron Willis, Shannon Verhagen and Amelia Caddy Design by violadesign.com.au

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*Continued from cover*

Many patches of *wulo* are less than one hectare in size. Aside from making them very difficult to find, their small size means those patches are exceptionally vulnerable to wildfire.

For many millennia, ancestors of the Wunambal Gaambera people burned their country in the early dry-season. This practice reduced fuel loads and created fire breaks, which in turn reduced the number and severity of naturally lit late dry-season wildfires – the kind that can destroy a small patch of *wulo*.

Traditional fire walks largely ceased when Wunambal Gaambera people were moved off their land in the early 20th century to missions. But that's now changing. In 2011, Wunambal Gaambera people's native title over their country was recognised and a partnership was formed between Bush Heritage and the WGAC. That partnership supports the implementation of the Wunambal Gaambera Healthy Country Plan for looking after country and culture, which is implemented on the ground by Unguu Rangers.

The protection of *wulo*, one of the ten key targets identified in the plan, is largely dependent on the work that Unguu Rangers are doing to reinstate traditional fire management practices. In effect, they are using 'right-way

fire' to safeguard against the most damaging aspects of wildfire: their size and their ferocity.

"Our ancestors used right-way fire from generation-to-generation", says Neil Waina, Unguu Head Ranger. "They passed their knowledge to us and we will pass it down to the next generation."

Neil says his people feel good doing these burns because they return the country to good health. But late dry-season burns, or wildfires, are different.

**"When you see late season burning, the country isn't looking good. If there's a hot fire, hardly anything will grow in that area... No hunting, no life."**

Since 2011, Unguu Rangers with support from Bush Heritage have more than halved the number of late dry-season wildfires on Wunambal Gaambera country compared to the period from 2000 to 2009, when no traditional burning methods were in place. This has been achieved through combining fire walks with aerial fire drops over less accessible regions.

Tom Vigilante, Wunambal Gaambera Healthy Country Manager, says Stefania's research will help the Unguu Rangers conduct their fire management more conscientiously.

*Left: Unguu Ranger Jason Adams with Healthy Country Manager Tom Vigilante. Photo by Annette Ruzicka*

*Right: Wulo on the Wunambal Gaambera coastline. Photo by Peter Morris*

"Now that the rainforests have been mapped, we can actually have their locations in front of us on a tablet when rangers are doing aerial burning in the helicopter," he says.

"They can have the information right at their fingertips about where they are and how they might apply fire in that area to look after the rainforest."

Speaking over the phone from her office at the University of Tasmania, Stefania reflects on what she's learned about this landscape through her research. Ultimately, she says, its past, present and future are all inextricably tied to the Wunambal Gaambera people.

"The country takes care of them, and they take care of country."

### Take action

This summer, wildfires will threaten many parts of Australia. Bush Heritage is expanding its fire management program to mitigate that risk.

**Donate today to protect vulnerable landscapes.**  
[www.bushheritage.org.au/donate](http://www.bushheritage.org.au/donate)



Left: Jasmin Bourne releases a Flashjack on Avocet Nature Refuge.

Right: A Flashjack joey in the pouch.  
Photos by Annette Ruzicka



## Coming together for Flashjacks

**Bush Heritage volunteers and staff recently had the chance to get up close and personal with Bridled Nailtail Wallabies in what turned out to be a record survey of the translocated population.**

This August, Bush Heritage volunteers and staff assisted the Queensland Government's surveying of endangered Bridled Nailtail Wallabies, also known as 'Flashjacks', on Avocet Nature Refuge, which adjoins Bush Heritage's Goonderoo Reserve.

Avocet, in central Queensland, is home to one of only three remaining populations of this endangered wallaby, which was presumed extinct for 42 years. It was rediscovered in 1973 on a property near Dingo, in central Queensland. Almost 30 years later, an unfenced insurance population was established on Avocet, and today about 100 Flashjacks call the refuge home.

Bush Heritage volunteers and staff spent five nights assisting with this year's survey of the Avocet wallabies, helping to set up traps and collect data.

Jasmin Bourne, a student from the University of Queensland, was among the Bush Heritage volunteers who took part in the survey.

"There was a really diverse group of people involved, from Bush Heritage's Goonderoo caretakers, to students, scientists and other volunteers," says Jasmin.

"It was a really interesting cross section of people bringing together all sorts of knowledge and experience."

Participants checked the traps for wallabies twice every night, at 8 pm and 4 am. In total, 39 individual wallabies were trapped over the course of the week - significantly more than have been recorded in the last three years of surveying.

Once caught, the animals were measured and assessed for health indicators such as weight, the diameter of the base of their tail (a good indicator of body muscle), spine prominence, the number of ticks present, and fur, gum, teeth and ear condition, before being released.

The gender and reproductive status of each wallaby was also determined, and many were found to have joeys.

**"From my understanding, every female of breeding age that we trapped had at least one joey, which is great news - some even had one in the pouch and one at-foot,"** explains Jasmin.

'At-foot' joeys, which have already left their mother's pouch, are kept in a predator-proof nursery on Avocet until they weigh at least 3 kilograms. At this point, they are generally large enough to avoid falling prey to feral cats and so can be safely released into the unfenced Avocet bushland.

The Flashjacks are yet to establish a population on Goonderoo Reserve, but Bush Heritage ecologist Dr Rebecca Diete says the management activities currently being carried out there will benefit the population if it does expand.

"We're trying to regenerate the habitat, control feral predators and get rid of weeds - especially cactus. And we've just repaired a dam so there's now a water source for the wallabies," she says.

"It's definitely on our minds when we manage the place that we could eventually have these endangered wallabies calling Goonderoo home."



# Dealing with the devil

## A long-term control program on Yourka Reserve is saving native animals and plants in Queensland from one of the world's worst invasive weeds.

Moving through Yourka Reserve in tropical far-north Queensland is no easy feat. The vast landscape is a melange of rocky outcrops and eucalypt forests cut through by creeks and billabongs. When those waterways swell during the wet season, much of the 43,500 hectare reserve becomes inaccessible by land.

Paul and Leanne Hales first arrived at Yourka shortly after its purchase in 2007 as Bush Heritage's first Yourka reserve managers. It quickly became apparent to them that the relative inaccessibility of their new home would make one of their highest management concerns – reducing the spread of Siam Weed, also known as Devil Weed – very difficult.

But a decade on, Bush Heritage's long-term and creative approach to Siam control has seen dramatic results. Of the original 14,000 individual Siam weeds recorded in the priority management zone, 90 percent have now been destroyed. Success stories such as this are rare when it comes to dealing with the 'devil'.

"After years of blood, sweat and tears it is very satisfying to see the success that Paul, Leanne and a host of volunteers have achieved in controlling this weed," says Bush Heritage ecologist Terry Mahney.

### A national threat

Native to parts of southern and central America, Siam spread to tropical and subtropical regions around the world thanks to its ability to invade quickly and aggressively.

A single plant can produce over 80,000 seeds a year, each of which can remain dormant for up to eight years. The plant grows up to 5 metres a year and will climb trees to heights of 20 metres. This allows it to smother native habitats.

It was discovered in Australia in 1994 and the Australian government has since declared it a priority because of its capacity to cause widespread environmental and economic (its seeds are toxic to cattle) harm.

Siam's spread in Australia has remained relatively contained to a few infestations in far north Queensland, but it could establish along large parts of the east coast and tropical north.

Preventing that from happening is at the core of Australia's Siam strategy, which is where the work being done on Yourka comes in.

### An integrated approach

Volunteers have been critical in the success of Bush Heritage's Siam control on Yourka. They have put in hundreds of hours of groundwork, helping to record and map Siam's distribution across the reserve as well as helping with the arduous task of physically removing it.

"We have groups of four to six volunteers walking the creek lines at a time. If we had to do that work ourselves we'd have been doing it six times, so our volunteers are a massive asset," says Paul.

Bush Heritage's approach to Siam control has been multi-pronged, involving mulching, burning, hand weeding, herbicides, and even horse-back patrols to find infestation sites. Generous donations and grants have also allowed for the employment of spray contractors and bulk herbicides, freeing up Paul to get on with other tasks.



*Opposite left: Burning Siam on Yourka Reserve.*

*Above: Yourka Reserve Manager Paul Hales inspects Siam flowers.*

Now, Paul says it's possible that some patches of Siam will "completely drop-off" with a few more years of management, as dormant seeds come to the end of their life spans.

"We're working really effectively now," Paul says. "We know the best herbicide to use and we've learnt some other tricks, too, so we aren't having to go back and do as much follow up," says Paul.

### **The flow-on effect**

Bush Heritage's success with Siam will benefit the more than 500 native plant and animal species that call Yourka home, but it will also be felt on a much wider scale. Yourka sits adjacent to Queensland's Wet Tropics World Heritage Area and several national parks, as well as being upstream of agricultural areas where Siam could thrive if given the chance.

"By controlling Siam Weed in the catchment area, Bush Heritage is significantly reducing the spread of Siam Weed into these valuable ecological and economic areas," says Terry.

"Knowing that the control program has made a significant contribution to the protection of Yourka Reserve and the neighbouring World Heritage Wet Tropics makes it all worthwhile."

*Siam control work on Yourka Reserve was made possible through funding from the Australian Government.*



● Current distribution

● Potential distribution



Left: Old fencing on Charles Darwin Reserve, WA. Photo by Albert Wright.

Right: Annie and Ian Mayo on Ethabuka Reserve, Qld.

## Letting the land breathe

### For Annie and Ian Mayo, the rhythm of removing fences from the land gives over to the exhalation of untethered land.

It takes a lot to put up 84 kilometres of fencing: hundreds of kilometres of wire, thousands of wooden posts and star pickets, and countless hours of manual labour. But what does it take to remove it?

If Annie and Ian Mayo are anything to go by, it takes a great attitude, a ready smile, many months of hard, hot work – and retirement. The couple has volunteered at nine Bush Heritage reserves intermittently over the past two-and-a-half years, removing fence after fence.

But their work is not over yet. Annie and Ian have a goal.

“We want to get to a hundred kilometres,” says Annie. “Then we’ll feel like we’ve really achieved something.”

The couple first learnt to pull fences in 2015 at Ethabuka Reserve, Queensland, after driving away from their Bendigo home with camper-trailer in tow. They were headed for the long and dusty roads of the outback to explore the Australian bush and contribute to its protection.

“We started fence pulling because we wanted to volunteer, but we didn’t know what skills we could offer,” says Annie.

It didn’t take them long to get the hang of it. They soon developed a system in which one of them walks ahead to detach the wire from the posts while the other rolls up the wire. The decayed wooden posts are left behind to provide valuable habitat for insects and small reptiles, while the star pickets are usually removed.

According to William Hansen, Reserve Manager at Western Australia’s Charles Darwin Reserve where Annie and Ian pulled 7 kilometres of fencing this year, there are two main reasons to remove fences from a landscape.

“Animals – such as kangaroos, wallabies and emus, as well as some birds during flight, can be impacted or get caught up in fences – they get lacerations, especially from the barbed wire, and can be badly injured or killed.”

“Fences also inhibit migration across a landscape; animals need space to move to water and alternate food sources, or south in the hotter months and then back up north when it cools down.”

This migration is essential for maintaining healthy native animal populations. When fences restrict movement, native animals –

particularly emus, which can’t jump over fences – are forced away from the areas they need to access.

Animals are not the only ones that breathe a sigh of relief when fences are removed. Annie quotes Noongar elder Eugene Eades, a Traditional Owner from the south-west of Western Australia: “When we removed the fences, the land was able to breathe again.”

**“You turn around and look at where the fence is no longer, and it’s like the landscape goes ‘ahhh’...”**

On Charles Darwin, Annie and Ian led a group of volunteers in a fence pulling working bee. As a result, William now has access to a team of well-trained local volunteers who he can call on in the future for the reserve’s annual fence removal week.

“They’re good people,” says Will. “They’ve always got smiles on their faces, they know what they’re doing, and they get stuck into it.”





Left: *Hippotion scrofa* moth.

Right: The moth survey setup.  
Photos by Suzi Bond.

## Like moths to a flame

**As the temperature dropped in the early hours of a May morning on Scottsdale Reserve, NSW, Glenn Cocking's white sheet – wet with dew – began to freeze.**

The sheet was suspended vertically between two metal rods, with a bright light shining on it to attract moths. Glenn, a volunteer curator at the CSIRO's National Insect Collection and self-taught moth expert, was carrying out Scottsdale's first ever moth survey.

The value of moths in nature is often undervalued, if not completely overlooked. But this incredibly diverse insect order, known as *Lepidoptera*, underpins many food chains and ecosystems. From birds to bats, lizards and small mammals, moths and their larvae are important food sources for many species, and they also help pollinate some native plants.

On that first night of surveying, Glenn recorded 99 different moth species, which he calls a relatively "small number" (there are thought to be about 22,000 species of moths and butterflies in Australia). When he returned to Scottsdale this year on a warmer night, he recorded 268 species.

"There are one or two species of moths that will fly around in the frost, but not many, so the difference in numbers is mostly because of differences in season and temperature," says Glenn.

Scottsdale Reserve Manager Phil Palmer says the moth population on Scottsdale is likely supporting the region's woodland birds, as well as reptiles like the recently reintroduced Striped Legless Lizard, small mammals like the Stripe-faced Dunnart, and bats.

**"Scottsdale is increasingly being recognised as quite significant, both locally and regionally, for its very high reptile and mammal diversity in particular," says Phil.**

"A lot of that diversity is probably underpinned by Scottsdale's insect diversity, because insects are a food source for them."

Scottsdale is restoration ecology in practice. Formerly cropped and grazed, Bush Heritage is now returning the 1328 hectare reserve, south of Canberra, to good health from the ground up. As more trees are planted and the landscape slowly transforms, Phil must think about how the ecosystem is functioning on every level.

"What we're trying to create is a rich and resilient reserve that can support many different animals," says Phil. "It is one thing to give those animals habitat to return to, but you also need to make sure they have a food source."

Take the woodland birds as an example, he says. There aren't a lot of flowering plants on the Monaro high plains where Scottsdale is located, which means most of the birdlife in the region is insectivorous. In other words, without moths and other insects, those birds would starve.

"Moths are just one piece of the ecological puzzle," says Phil. "But every piece is important."

*Thank you to Glenn Cocking and Suzi Bond, who assisted Glenn and took photographs, for volunteering their time and expertise to conduct these surveys.*

# Bush Heritage online



You don't have to wait for the next edition of *Bush Tracks* to hear stories from the field about the work you're helping to make possible. Access daily updates, articles, videos and images on our blog, and on social media.

[www.bushheritage.org.au/blog](http://www.bushheritage.org.au/blog)

## Cataloguing the flowers of Nardoo Hills

Bush Heritage staff member Sharon Williams and her husband Michael, of *It's a Wildlife Photography*, are both passionate flower-finders, and they've recently embarked on a project to photograph the flowers of Nardoo Hills reserves. A selection of their initial images, from early Spring, is up on our blog now.

Top: Creamy Stackhousia. Bottom: Northern Golden Moth Orchid.



## Bon Bon bird surveys

About 90 bird species were recorded during the recent annual bird survey on Bon Bon Station Reserve in central South Australia, carried out by Bush Heritage staff and volunteers.

Among those sighted were Chestnut-rumped Thornbills, Pink-eared Ducks, and an immature Black-breasted Buzzard, which has only been sighted on Bon Bon a handful of times before.

Good rains this year meant there was still plenty of water about during the survey period, and lots of water birds were recorded as a result. You can view more photos on our Facebook page.

An immature Black-breasted Buzzard. Photo by Kate Taylor



## Cultural heritage surveys on Red Moort

Planning for the construction of a field station, in the Fitz-Stirling region of Western Australia, has passed another milestone with the completion of an Aboriginal cultural heritage survey on the proposed site and access routes.

Noongar elders and a Noongar ranger training crew were engaged to review the site; they found the development won't impact on any cultural heritage values. Once complete, the field station will provide a research and visitation hub to support our restoration of this incredibly biodiverse region.

Traditional Owners survey the site. Photo by Simon Smale





# 2018 BREAKFAST

Trust for Nature and Bush Heritage Australia's seventh annual Celebrating Women in Conservation Breakfast takes place on **Thursday 1 March 2018.**

Please join us and our special guest speaker **Lesley Hughes** to celebrate yourself, your colleagues and women in conservation.



Lesley Hughes is a Distinguished Professor of Biology and Pro Vice-Chancellor (Research Integrity & Development) at Macquarie University. Her research has mainly focused on the impacts of climate change on species and ecosystems. She was a lead author on the IPCC's 4th and 5th Assessment Reports and a former federal Climate Commissioner, and is now a Councillor with the Climate Council of Australia. She is also a Director for WWF Australia, a member of the Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists, the Director of the Biodiversity Node for the NSW Adaptation Hub and a member of the expert advisory committee for Future Earth Australia.

## 2018 CELEBRATING WOMEN IN CONSERVATION BREAKFAST

- DATE** Thursday, 1 March 2018
- TIME** 7.00 am for a 7.15 am start. Formalities end at 9 am, with optional additional networking time until 9.30 am
- VENUE** ZINC, Federation Square, Swanston Street & Flinders Street, Melbourne
- COST** **Early Bird** - \$70 per person; \$650 for a table of 10. Early bird closes 1 January 2018. **Standard tickets** - \$80 per person; \$750 for a table of 10.

BOOK YOUR TICKETS ONLINE NOW:  
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Left: White-winged Fairy-wren. Photo by Albert Wright.

Right: Volunteers check a camera trap. Photo by Annette Ruzicka.

# Thank you

Thank you to the many supporters and volunteers who generously contribute to our work.

### In memorium

Michael and Robyn Maher, the Klavier Music Association Inc., Margaret Holland, Dianne Miley on behalf of the Australian National Eisteddfod Society, and Anne-Marie Hogan all donated in memory of Doris Rowland; Phillip Cornwell, Jill Phillips, Carol Gardiner, and Mary and Bryan Pennington donated in memory of Mr Ian Winlaw; Samiksha Khanna, Michelle Botosh and Cameron Dougall donated in memory of Mr Peter Ashenden; Lyndal Hegerty donated in memory of Dr Malcolm Stevens; Christina Dedoussis donated in memory of Michael Datounas; Iqbal Ramzan donated in memory of Mrs Dorothy Polden; Debbie S. McKay donated in

memory of Isobel Bain; Alison Siliakus donated in memory of Brian Coghlan and Jim Garteen; Martha A. Henderson donated in memory of Guy Henderson; and Barbara Lee donated in memory of Don Chambers.

### In celebration

James Everitt donated to celebrate the engagement of Travis and Mel; Joe Nicotera donated in celebration of Wendy Atkins' 50th birthday.

### Bequests

We gratefully acknowledge the estates of Kathrin McMiles, Edward Albert Beer, Nathalie Kulakowski, Sheila Forbes Micholson, Colin Hutchinson and Brian Edward Reyecraft Pullen.

## Visitation opportunities

### Self-guided day visits (all year round)

- Kojonup, WA
- Chereninup Creek, WA
- Oura Oura, Tas.
- Liffey River, Tas.
- Reedy Creek, Qld
- Currumbin, Qld

### Camping (booking required)

- Charles Darwin, WA, April to October
- Boolcoomatta, SA, April to October
- Carnarvon Station, Qld, May to September

### Station Stay (booking recommended)

- Hamelin Station, WA, mid-March to mid-October (camping also available)

### Guided Tours (third-party operated)

- Melbourne Birding Tours – details and booking via Melbourne Birding Tours

[www.bushheritage.org.au/places-we-protect/visit](http://www.bushheritage.org.au/places-we-protect/visit)



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