

Easter 2015 on the Errinundra Plateau: tree ferns and giants

Our visit to the Errinundra Plateau, East Gippsland, during Easter this year was an eye opener. The temperate rainforest is stunning in its diversity and richness. Visit Errinundra to feast your eye on the greenery of tree ferns and old growth forest with giant eucalypts that are 600–800 years old. The plateau is part of the Errinundra National Park which we reached via Nimmitabel and Delegate on the Bonang Road to Orbost in Victoria.

We joined the Forests Forever Easter Ecology Camp that Environment East Gippsland Inc (EEG) organized with the Victorian National Parks Association. The camp was ‘among Peppermint and Manna Gums on the Brodribb River’ near the small settlement of Goongerah. Our speakers were botanist David Cameron, naturalist Bob McDonald, and longtime campaigner Jill Redwood, who lives on her organic farm with two faithful Clydesdales, her friendly German Shepherd plus goats, geese, chooks, and guinea fowl. VNPA’s Jenny and Euan conducted early bird walks and night spotting.

The campers were as diverse as the forest and were a mix of all ages and backgrounds.

My favourite outing was on Easter Sunday when Jill led us on a rough path through the old growth forest of Brown Mountain. It’s a forest of enormous Messmates (*Eucalyptus obliqua*), Shining Gums (*Eucalyptus denticulata*) and Mountain Grey Gums (*Eucalyptus cypellocarpa*). These old growth forests were the site of the 1989–1990 protest camp to halt logging of the National Estate forests. The camp was unsuccessful but in 2009 EEG launched a bold legal action in the Supreme Court which successfully sued the government logging agency VicForests which was planning to illegally log valuable habitat

for many rare protected species. Although EEG won the case, these magnificent forests remain unprotected.

As we walked I could smell the fresh eucalypt and bush fragrances. In the moist and gloomy understorey, a white bell-shaped flower (*Fieldia australis*?) twined around a tree looked like a luminescent lamp. Giant eucalypts stood as mighty sentinels, some with bark strips dangling down their sides, others with gnarled bark at their bases.

We saw Crimson Rosella but, unfortunately, no Glossy Black-Cockatoo. At our feet we spotted delicate pale blue mushrooms and shelf-like fungi on branches. Leeches were busy. Blood seeping beneath my watch showed that one had been feasting on me.

On Saturday we explored the plateau following forestry roads. We visited the rainforest boardwalk where David identified vegetation, explaining its characteristics and significance. Many plant species are endangered or heading for extinction increasingly threatened by anthropogenic climate change. Logging coupes have fragmented the rainforest, disturbing nature’s balance; we saw a spongy montane sphagnum bog which tea-tree is gradually overtaking because clear-fell logging in the upstream catchment is reducing flow.

On Saturday evening, another campaigner, Lizzie, with her team, served her homemade soup with bread rolls and then her dessert. The charge was \$9.00, all of which goes to fund the East Gippsland forest campaign.

Bob the naturalist spoke first about the overuse and impact of fire in Victoria and planned burning operations to clear ‘fuel’, alias leaf litter and ground habitat. Government fires destroy leaf litter and dry out the ground vegetation, habitat for the myriad fungi, insects, small

Rainforest creeper.
Photo by Dave Kelly.



Brodribb River at Goongerah. Photo by Dave Kelly.

mammals and the lyrebirds that are nature’s own ‘fuel reducers’. They compost fallen leaves and bark by scratching, converting the litter to humus. Bob referred to the work of former Canberra CSIRO entomologists, Ted Edwards and Marianne Horak in this field.

He commented that it’s a white-fella interpretation that Aboriginal people burnt large tracts. They used fire principally for signaling or defence and on a small scale to procure food. If left alone, wet gullies and rainforest are buffers against wildfires. He mentioned the work of a forester who spoke to NPA ACT about his research into burning native vegetation in the Snowies, where many variables including vegetation type, soil and leaf moisture, fire frequency and intensity must be considered along with climate change.

On Saturday evening David Cameron read an interview by Dahr Jamail with environmental scientist Guy McPherson, provocatively titled ‘Are Humans Going Extinct?’ which raises the serious prospect of human extinction sooner than we think might occur, because of accelerating anthropogenic climate change, resource depletion, and human population growth. The coinciding total lunar eclipse provided an appropriate end to David’s presentation.

The squeak of sugar gliders punctuated the night sounds. Bats flitted past but no rare Powerful or Sooty Owl. Later two brushtails gazed goggle-eyed from a tree near the camp. Another significant threat to Errinundra’s native birds and mammals are feral cats of which Jill has the grim evidence.

Jill gave a presentation on Sunday night with sobering statistics: only 8 per cent of Victoria’s original forests remain

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intact. Campaigners report VicForests is still illegally logging protected conservation areas such as rainforest and threatened species habitat. The industry also has different interpretations of what constitutes “old growth”. Giant eucalypts of 12 metres in girth and 600–800 years of age are considered old growth but are frequently felled, then burned.

Jill has spearheaded costly court cases against VicForests and won. She and her supporters are up against powerful interests. Harassment she’s received includes ‘... everything from my first Clydesdale being shot, to death threats at midnight, to destruction of property and attempts to run me off the road’.

The next campaigns will be to stop logging in the Kuark forest south of the Errinundra National Park and against biomass burning (using native forest as furnace fuel) which is being touted as renewable energy. ‘If that takes off it will make 50 years of woodchipping look like a minor upset on the landscape!’ says Jill.

For more information, see www.eastgippsland.net.au

An NPA ACT trip to see the Errinundra Plateau will be organized sometime next year or you can join the Easter 2016 camp. Think of what you can do to help the campaign. Don’t let a state border stop you.

Judy Kelly

Errinundra forest giant. Photo by Dave Kelly.



A dark night at Gundabooka National Park

Gundabooka is on the Darling River near Bourke. I’d travelled up the endlessly straight and sealed Kidman Way from Cobar, turned left for 20 kilometres on to a blood-red, crack-penetrating, dusty road and after another veer left had

settled into Dry Tank camping area. There was an elevated long-drop dunny, lots of fire scars and fireplaces and a sign about not straying off the walking track to Little Mountain.

The fire was on, the sun slicing away

and a cold leaden blanket settling on my shoulders. ‘Gonna be a beauty tonight, time to get some more wood.’

I circled off in ever-increasing diameters and finally found a decent termite-hollowed mulga log that might burn well into the night. The whole log was too heavy so I pulled off a flitch. There, lo and behold, were two ancient denizens of the outback – lightly clad Miss Jacky Jacky Lizard snuggled up to shiny, dark-plated Mr Shingleback. I stroked them both, but not a flinch or an eyelid roll. They were in torpor for the night.

‘Quick, get the shiny, new water- and dust-proof Fuji-Pix, set it on flash, go in close and grab a shot.’ Here it is (left).

I put the flitch back, carried another log to the fire and watched a million sparkling old suns come close enough to pluck out of the sky.

Next morning my scaly friends were gone.

Klaus Hueneke

