

Hamilton Field Naturalists Club President's Report for 2017

14th December 2017

Dear HFNC Members,

I present for you the President's Report for 2017: my first as President for this Club – after taking over from our former long-serving President, John Cayley. Sadly, John, our esteemed member and dear friend passed away on Monday 26th, June after suffering a catastrophic bleed on the brain the previous Tuesday night. Unfortunately, Rod and I were unable to offer Glenys much support or to attend the memorial service as we were interstate at the time. We were grateful for the support and kindnesses offered to Glenys by many other HFNC members during our absence.

Generally, our year's activities program followed the pattern established in previous years with special presentation meetings and general business meetings alternating monthly – mostly on the third Thursdays at HIRL starting at 7.30 pm – from February through to November. Excursions alternated over Saturdays and Sundays following the Thursday meetings and included a weekend campout in August. Also included in our program of activities were a number of weed eradication working bees and mammal surveys – also mostly conducted over weekends. Further to these programmed activities, members participated in environmental events organised by other community organisations as they arose during the year. A significant occasion for the Club and for our long-serving member Rod Bird were recognition and awards given by the Glenelg Hopkins Catchment Management Authority for the environmental works undertaken by the Club and by Rod. These awards entitled the Club and Rod to attend the State Landcare awards on 1st September 2017 at Government House in Melbourne – Rod, Diane, Glenys and Yvonne attended the ceremony.

Special presentations: The five presentations this year included presentations made by Club members and by invited guests and covered a range of interesting topics. We started the year with an evening of 'Listening to the Wild' by Andrew Skeoch who demonstrated how he used technology to record and interpret the sounds of animals (particularly birds) in their natural habitat. He further showed how sounds and their corresponding sonographs could be used to identify changes in natural habitats through the presence or absence of particular sounds. The April special meeting featured Ben Gunn and his research into locating and recording the rock art of Indigenous people in Australia, focussing especially on the art sites of the local region and the materials used to create the images/representations. Both these presenters, presented on the Friday nights and attended the excursions on the following Saturdays to further share their knowledges with us. The next three presentations were made by Club members. In July, Dave Munro's presentation was of the trip he and Lyn enjoyed in Western Australia to attend the Australian Naturalists Network Conference and to travel in WA either side of the ANN conference. In September, Rod Bird presented a comprehensive account of the bird and mammal surveys undertaken by the Club during the years 2012 – 2016, and of the correlation between the numbers of birds counted on the wetlands and the rainfall patterns during the different years. At the last special meeting for the year, in November, Reto Zollinger and Yvonne Ingeme presented on their recent encounters with nature in New Zealand and Australia.

Excursions: Day excursions included the annual water bird survey on the Lake Linlithgow and surrounding wetlands in February with a follow up survey at Brady's Swamp in March. Also in March, Andrew Skeoch hosted a bird recording session at Peter Hocking's property on the Wannon River. Our April excursion was to the Red Cave in the Billy Wing. Members variously walked different sections of this long walk – the furthest members got to was the Hollow Cave with a view across the valley to the Red Cave. In May, Ben Gunn escorted us to the Aboriginal rock art sites in the Black Range.

A working bee excursion at Kanawalla Rail Reserve was our June excursion. This was part of our contribution to the Southern Grampians Shire Council's Greater Grants Program of 2016, where we obtained \$2500 to clear overhanging branches from the line and grade the trail. A contractor had finished the grading and our members removed large stones and some of the over-hanging vegetation. Members also checked the status of the legless lizard population under the tiles especially laid out. The July, mid-winter, excursion ventured to the nearby Wannon Flora Reserve and Wannon Scenic Reserve.

A special campout weekend at Cape Otway was held for our August excursion. Yvonne and Reto made the accommodation arrangements for us at Bimbi Park within walking distance of the Cape Otway Lighthouse. Nine members attended and occupied two adjacent cabins in the Park. This was a most enjoyable weekend of socialising, walking in the bush and along the coastline and enjoying the natural history of Victoria's southern rainforest region, the coastal heathland and coastal landforms shaped by the wind and sea. We thank Yvonne and Reto for their organisation for this successful weekend.

September's excursion was to Deep Lead – a former goldmining region – to visit the Flora Reserve. Many native orchids and other native flowers were there for us to enjoy. In October, Daryl Delahoy escorted us through his farm property to the Wannon Rapids to once again enjoy the spring flowers on display here. The November excursion to the Nigretta Flora Reserve was both an excursion to see the late spring flowers and a return working bee to remove any newly emergent African Weed Orchids. The recent rains meant that members could not cross the river to inspect the northern site worked on in the previous month; instead members inspected the reserve on the southern side of the Wannon River where they found (and removed) more AWOs in places not previously inspected.

Working bees and fauna surveys: Weeds species (Sparaxis, Cape Tulip, Gladiolus and African Weed Orchid) in our local reserves continue to occupy much HFNC time in Spring. Fulham Streamside Reserve, Nigretta Flora Reserve and Back Creek Reserve are the main reserves that HFNC focuses on. Members use two main methods of eradicating these weeds – by shielded directed-spraying with back packs and wiping with specially adapted tongs so that only the weeds are touched by the herbicide – thereby protecting native species during this work. Rod Bird, Peter Hocking and Diane Luhrs attended to Cape Tulip and Sparaxis at Fulham Streamside Reserve; Rod Bird, Peter Hocking, Diane Luhrs, Reto Zollinger and Roger Thompson attended to African Weed Orchid at the Nigretta Flora Reserve and Dave and Lyn Munro worked on the Back Creek roadside reserve. Rod Bird also spent time at Kanawalla Rail Reserve spraying the graded trail and patches of invasive weeds, and erecting wallaby-proof guards around 60 Silver Banksia, Sweet Bursaria and Drooping Sheoaks that HFNC members planted in 2006 and 2007 but had been trimmed by wallabies.

Aside from the waterbird surveys early in the year, HFNC has 5 large and 5 small fauna nest boxes attached to trees at five sites in Bear State Forest. These were inspected in late November by Peter Hocking, Reto Zollinger, Yvonne Ingeme and Dave Munro. Sugar gliders (3 and 2 animals) were found in two of the five small nesting boxes. One sugar glider was found in one of the five large nesting boxes.

Submissions and involvements with other groups: There has been considerable investment of time by members with other groups and in preparing submissions for presentation at public fora and in response to environmental issues in which the Club has an interest. Much of the formal submission work has been undertaken by our secretary Rod Bird and we thank him for his time and expertise in preparing and submitting these documents. Specifically, HFNC has been engaged in submissions relating to clarifying the status of Lake Linlithgow and the surrounding wetland with regard to duck-hunting and in presenting the case for reverting the status to that of sanctuary status that precludes duck-hunting because of the presence of brolga, blue-billed ducks and freckled ducks – all protected species – on and around these lakes.

HFNC has previously assisted through a donation (\$2500) and continues to support Nature Glenelg Trust in its bid to purchase/restore more wetlands for the protection of waterbird populations. Mark Backmann outlined plans and progress for these projects at the November meeting.

HFNC members attended the opening of the western end of the Coleraine-Hamilton Rail Trail to support the efforts of Coleraine residents to create this section of the trail – a trail for both recreation and conservation that could provide great benefit to the region when it is completed.

Diane Luhrs attended the annual Grampians Fire Conference 18th October 2017, Laharum – a day-long event that combined both information about fire prevention and recovery in the northern Grampians and a morning excursion to four sites affected by the 2009 fires.

Diane Luhrs and Yvonne Ingeme attended the Upper Glenelg Landcare Trust for Nature Day north of Balmoral. This event was to showcase 2 properties in the area which had land set aside for conservation. Members of this group have asked that HFNC demonstrate in 2018 its weed-wiping methods and tools used to eradicate Cape Tulip – a major invasive weed of this region.

Peter Hocking has been keeping watch over events that threaten the native flora and fauna of the 4-Posts Quarry region and communicating with the Southern Grampians Shire over issues such as illegal activity on the roads and in the reserve.

Issues for the HFNC: A major issuing coming up is HFNC's response to the proposed amendments to the Southern Grampians Shire's Panning Scheme Significant Landscape Overlay C36. HFNC feels that the proposed overlay does not provide sufficient protection to the geology of the Harman Valley lava flow. HFNC has submitted a response to the proposed amendment C36 and will present its case at the Planning Panel hearing in early 2018.

Active membership continues to present as an on-going issue for the Club – particularly as the average age of members increases each year and as members find they have other demands on their time that compete with participation in club activities. While our actual membership remains in the 30s, the number of active members is reducing and hence the amount of work that can be achieved through working bees and surveys is also declining. This decline appears to reflect the general decline in the local population overall – and is not peculiar to our Club. It does mean, however, that as a Club we must be mindful of our expectations of active members and to not demand more than what people can give – and, if possible, we do need to spend time recruiting other active members (a seemingly difficult task). This is our challenge.

Acknowledgements: I wish to thank all members who have in some way contributed to the successful functioning of HFNC during the year – whether by way of attending meetings and excursions, writing excursion reports, making presentations for our special meetings, hosting special guests, organising HFNC events (working bees and excursions) and sharing data and images that can be used in HFNC reports, submissions, newsletters and the HFNC website. In particular, I thank Janeen for taking over the role of quartermaster, Peter for attending to the minutes and sightings reports, Dave for preparing the news releases and advertisements for our special meetings and for running meetings in my absence, Glenys as treasurer for keeping a watchful eye over our finances and presenting clear and accurate bi-monthly accounts of HFNC's financial status, and Rod for the time-consuming task of attending to the mail/emails/other printed matter that arrives each week and for his regular up-dates via email to keep us all informed of club matters.

Thank you everyone

Diane Luhrs (HFNC President)

14-12-2017