

HFNC Excursion to Lake Condah

Saturday 12 November 2011

Leaders: Rod Bird & Ken Grimes.

Attendees (10) : Rod Bird & Diane Luhrs, David & Lyn Munro, Meri Macpherson, Yvonne Ingeme & Reto Zollinger, Jane Hayes & a visitor (Gerhardt from Point Lonsdale).

This beautiful (and once bountiful) lake was progressively drained from 1875 until 1954. Gunditjmara's plans to partly restore the waters began in 2002 when a general committee of Gunditjmara, supporters and government bodies was formed. The work was accomplished in 2010 when a weir was erected on the outlet drain. The object of this excursion was to look at one of the eel trap positions on the lake and to survey the waterbird population. We had visited the area in August 2009, when shallow water covered about a third of the modern lake bed.

We met at 9 am at the Hamilton Visitor Centre (0 km) and then travelled via Pt Fairy Rd, past the Harmans Valley Lookout to Old Crusher Rd (~24 km), past the Wallacedale Tumuli (~29 km) and left at the next intersection (~31 km). After crossing the Byaduk-Wallacedale Rd and the MacArthur-Heywood Rd (~37 km), the dirt road veers right up a hill (~39 km) and on to the intersection with Brians Rd (~42 km)(road sign currently missing). The 'Alambie' pedestrian gateway to the stone house and eel-trap site is at ~43 km along Brians Rd. Further along is the Bluestone Quarry on the right (~44 km) and we passed through the gateway onto a bush track. The next gate is at ~45 km, the point of contact with the Budjbim Trail. The cycle track heading left (shortly to pass along an old seismic track bulldozed across a contorted wilderness of lava flows) returns to Mt Eccles. We continued south then turned left at a very rough side track (~46 km), passing an old stone house and walls (~48 km) and then (~50 km) dipping down a rough barrier (4WD only) onto the former lake bed. The track then leads along the lake to Murphys Hut (~51 km).

On this trip we stopped at Alambie to view the remnants of the stone huts and noted that the water had drained away from the local wetlands in the stony barriers. White-winged Trillers and Horsfield's Bronze-cuckoo were calling. At the lake, we stopped shortly after passing through the gateway and viewed the waterbirds from the vantage of a stony outcrop. The grass on the lake frontage was very high and we found, on passing back along our short trampled path to the vehicles, that it contained a healthy population of leeches! We noted that several Great Egrets were working the grassland area – hopefully leeches were on their menu. As expected, there were thousands of Black Swan and Eurasian Coots feeding among the dense mass of Water Ribbons that covered most of the lake. The water level had dropped perhaps 60-70 cm from the highest level in winter. Striated Fieldwrens were singing from various vantage points and Welcome Swallows were much in evidence.

Some 500 m from Murphys Hut we followed a track to the water's edge and set up spotting scopes to survey the birds. There we soon noted several Great-crested Grebes, among Hardheads, Grey Teal and a few Chestnut Teal. Whiskered Terns then made an appearance, whirling around the lake. Morning tea was taken here. We saw 69 species of birds today, including 30 waterbirds (see table).

We had lunch at the Murphys Hut 'chalet' – a picnic shelter and toilet facilities erected by Gunditjmara/Parks Victoria. The main shelter has included 2 large stone fireplaces at one end, near a huge Oak tree. A number of pines grow around the site and there are remnants of stone walls and a stock yard nearby. This must have been a very lonely place and difficult of access in the early days. At that time the lake would have provided plenty of fish and fowl, and water for home and livestock. In wet years it seems that the lake's water must have approached quite close to the hut.

After lunch Ken took us back along the track about 400 m to the fish trap area. The water was low enough for us to walk across the stony barriers and see the various places where baskets may have been placed to take the eels. Water was flowing briskly through the channels, but away from the main lake body, indicating that there was a sump near the edge where water flowed underground.



From the south side we observed Blue-wing Parrots, Red-kneed Dotterels, Black-fronted Dotterels and Latham's Snipe along the water's edge and among the stones. The parrots had a dull orange patch on the belly but were not Orange-bellied Parrots! (these would have been long gone to Tasmania and the birds we saw had very large area of blue in the wing and a breast feathers that were dull rather than bright green).



Nearby along the lake edge a flock of Sharp-tailed Sandpipers were roosting quietly on the rocks, though not for shelter as it was a warm, windless day. Had it not been for sharp-eyed observers we would have missed these birds.



We returned to where the sidetrack began, then left to cross the Condah Drain (~1 km distant). At the Condah Estate Rd we turned left and then left again at Vaughans Rd (~ 2 km further on). We drove along the Blue Gums track to the lake and then walked to the weir, 300 m to the east. The water was up to the boundary fence but had been above the level of the third wire from the top. There was some concern that the discharge pipe around the weir was set to allow a large amount of water to flow down the drain. Water was also discharging through the V of the weir. While an 'environmental flow' is needed, the water that flows underground should not be ignored in the calculation. If a metering station was set up downstream from Condah Mission it would be possible to calculate by difference the volume of that flow, since the flow through the weir is known.

We saw 3 Koalas in the Blue Gums, 2 in a dispute over the tree or the other Koala. Returning to Vaughans Rd, Yvonne had spied a patch of Blue Pincushion on the roadside (mostly on the graded edge of the road formation). This species is rather uncommon on basalt soils. We stopped briefly to inspect the flora and found many natives there but one area was degraded by a large dump of old hay bales. We also noted *Watsonia* flowering profusely at one point along the Condah Estate Rd – and of course along the Henty Highway north of Branxholme.

We returned to Hamilton via Condah and the Henty Highway (~ 46 km from Vaughans Rd), some of us arriving after 6 pm, after a very interesting and fruitful day.

HFNC Bird Surveys of Lake Condah, shore & forest fringe

No.	Species	Observation Date						
		04/12/08	02/08/09	09/08/09	14/10/10	27/07/11	10/11/11	12/11/11
	Waterbirds							
1	Australasian Darter						1*	7*
2	Australasian Grebe						~5*	3*
4	Australasian Shoveller				10*		~10*	
6	Australian Shelduck		*		*	*		
6	Australian White Ibis						2*	~10*
7	Australian Wood Duck					*	10s*	~20*
8	Black Swan		*	*	*	*	100s*	~1000*
9	Black-fronted Dotterel						1*	18*
10	Black-tailed Native Hen			*			~50*	~200*
11	Black-Winged Stilt				30*		~50*	~50*
12	Brolga			2*				
13	Cattle Egret						6*	
14	Chestnut Teal				*		10*	~20*
15	Eurasian Coot					*	1000s*	~3000*
16	Great Cormorant							1*
17	Great-crested Grebe						2*	6*
18	Great Egret						~12*	~25*
19	Grey Teal				100*	*	100s*	100s*
20	Hardhead				20*	*	100s*	100s*
21	Hoary-headed Grebe					*	100s*	100s*
22	Intermediate Egret						2*	2*
23	Latham's Snipe	4*						5*
24	Little Black Cormorant				10*		~30*	~20*
25	Little Pied Cormorant				10*		~50*	~50*
26	Masked Lapwing	*			6*		~10*	~20*
27	Musk Duck					2*		
28	Pacific Black Duck	*			30*		~20*	~20*
29	Pied Cormorant						2*	
30	Purple Swamphen					2*		2*
31	Red-kneed Dotterel						3*	20*
32	Sharp-tailed Sandpiper							~250*
33	Straw-necked Ibis	*					2*	~10*
34	Whiskered Tern				~100*			~50*
35	White-faced Heron	*			*	*	~10*	~10*
36	White-necked Heron						~10*	~10*
37	Yellow-billed Spoonbill			*		2*		1*
	Raptors							
1	Brown Falcon							1*
2	Nankeen Kestrel	*					1*	2*
3	Swamp Harrier							1*
4	Whistling Kite						2*	3*
	Other native species							
1	Australasian Pipit	*	2		*		2*	*
2	Australian Magpie	*			*		~20*	*
3	Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike		#					
4	Blue-winged Parrot	6*			4*			5*
5	Brown Songlark	*					2*	*

6	Common Bronzewing			#				2*
7	Crimson Rosella	*			#			#
8	Fan-tailed Cuckoo			#				#
9	Flame Robin			*				
10	Galah							#
11	Grey Currawong	#		#				#
12	Grey Fantail				#		#	#
13	Grey Shrike-thrush	#			#		#	#
14	Horsfield's Bronze-cuckoo			#	#			*
15	Laughing Kookaburra	#			#			*
16	Little Grassbird							*
17	Little Raven	*			*		*	*
18	Long-billed Corella							*
19	Magpie-lark							*
20	Mistletoebird		#					
21	Pallid Cuckoo							*
22	Red Wattlebird					#		#
23	Red-browed Finch		#		#			
24	Rufous Whistler				#			
25	Sacred Kingfisher							#
26	Spotted Pardalote							#
27	Striated Fieldwren	*				*	4*	*
28	Striated Pardalote	*						*
29	Stubble Quail	*					~10*	*
30	Sulphur-crested Cockatoo							*
31	Superb Fairy-wren	*			*		6*	*
32	Tree Martin							*
33	Welcome Swallow	*					1000s*	1000s*
34	White-browed Scrubwren	#						
35	White-eared Honeyeater	#						
36	White-fronted Chat	*					2*	*
37	White-winged Triller							#
38	Willie Wagtail				*		4*	*
39	Yellow-faced Honeyeater	#						#
40	Yellow-rumped Thornbill							#
	Introduced species							
1	Common Skylark	*			*		2*	*
2	Common Starling	*					*	*
3	European Goldfinch	*						*
	Total 84 species							

- * present, seen on or over the lake, shore line or grassland fringe (former expanse of lake bed)
present, seen in the forest fringe (incl. Blue Gum plantation)
10s (tens), 100s (hundreds), 1000s (thousands) – estimates
~ counts approximate: e.g. $\pm 10-20\%$ when ≤ 50 , $\pm 20-30\%$ when ≥ 100 or $\pm 30-50\%$ when ≥ 1000

Water levels

- 4/12/2008 ~Dry, except for a few puddles and water in the drain
2/08/2009 Water mainly in NW Cnr and near (and in) the drain
9/08/2009 Water mostly in NW Cnr and over about 30% of lake bed
14/10/2010 Water Mod. High, at the fence at weir, but ~1 m below highest mark in late winter when the water was 5-10 m outside the fence (and lapping the 2nd top wire).
27/07/2011 Water V High – up to 5 m through the fence near the weir and 2/3 up the posts
10/11/2011 Water Mod. High – at the fence near the weir & about 60 cm below this winter high mark
12/11/2011 Water Mod. High (as above) but receding