



FOFI News



The newsletter of the Friends of French Island National Park Inc.

December 2015

FRIENDS OF FRENCH ISLAND NATIONAL PARK

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PROJECT DAYS

January 23: Western Port wader survey.

The ferry leaves Stony Point at 10.00 am. If you plan to come, please contact Murray Bouchier on 9876 1410. For further events & updates, check our website or contact Murray.

FOFI ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

Wednesday 10 February 2016 at 12.00 p.m.

At the home of Margaret Medley, 11 Neville St, Mooroolbark (a short walk from the station).

All welcome. Please bring a plate to share.



South of Pt Leschenault

Geoff Lacey

ACTIVITIES REPORTS

September 19: 'Vine forests' and breeding Sea-Eagles

FOFI members: Murray Bouchier, Meredith Sherlock, Geoff Lacey, Martin O'Brien and ranger Scott Coutts.

Visitors: Richard Boon, Peter Black.

Saturday 19 September was FOFI's annual monitoring of White-bellied Sea-Eagles breeding on French Island and, after failing to locate one of the nests in 2014, a bit more homework was done prior to the day (with Peter Black's mapping skills) which included examining aerial photography and utilising GPS devices on the day.

A cold Melbourne start led to a foggy Western Port as the ferry departed Stony Point, with the usual Little Pied and Pied Cormorants on a channel light plus two Australasian Gannets floating on the water, an unusual observation for the group. The sun had commenced to shine upon arrival at Tankerton Jetty

where a few Pacific Gulls and Pied Oystercatchers stood in the shallows nearby.

Site one is in the SW of the island and it wasn't long before the group observed a large female Sea-Eagle sitting on her guard roost high in its nest tree. The day's objective was to confirm Scott's observation earlier in the week of breeding behaviour of these birds.

Soon after, the male of this pair appeared from behind the distant tree canopy and flew out over the channel to keep an eye on our activities. The birds circled briefly but were most reticent to leave the area before the female returned to her roost, giving us good distant views again of these magnificent birds. Interestingly, a pair of Swamp Harriers and a single Australian Kestrel appeared around the guard roost tree at one stage without any obvious reaction from the Sea-Eagles.

Useful new information collected at the site was a guard roost and some discarded food items. Confident that this was an active pair we left the area for the second south coast nest site and headed along Tankerton Road where most dams we passed had a pair (or more) of Cape Barren Geese (but no dependent young like the previous trip).



Lichen on rock

Wal Mitchell

The Barge Landing made for a nice lunch location before our next nest search. For company we had Brown Thornbills up close, Crescent Honeyeaters, Golden Whistler, Fairy Martins, Grey Fantail and frequent calling of a Bassian Thrush. High in the sky a large flock of Straw-necked Ibis flew in a skein across from Corinella and Silver Gulls with the odd Crested Tern flew over the channel.

Shortly after we had sat down near the small jetty we realised another female Sea-Eagle was sitting nearby on her guard roost in clear view of our lunch site. A number of photos were taken of this bird

(which had a noticeable crop bulge) before we packed up and headed to the next nest locality.

As we traversed the coast, little gullies appeared where trees were festooned with yellow-white Clematis and Wonga Vine in full flower, giving the vegetation a rainforest-like appearance. To the observer it certainly seemed that these areas could be described as a 'vine dominated' forest or woodland. At one gully we heard the bright song of a Scarlet Robin and close by the 'chop-chop' call of an Eastern Yellow Robin.



Clematis

Geoff Lacey

Not far from the second nest site we observed a Sea-Eagle fly inland whereupon we headed through the forest to locate the second nest. Unfortunately we discovered this old nest was in fact not in use with no evidence of droppings, food debris or fresh nest material around the nest tree.

Much discussion followed after we left the site and it was agreed that a return visit was warranted to this area to locate the current nest. As we returned to the Barge Landing we had a fleeting glimpse of a single Sea-Eagle flying inland, further suggesting to us that the new nest was not far away.

Feeling pleased with our work for the day we returned to Tankerton and saw Black Swans and more geese in roadside paddocks. Thanks to Scott for transporting our group across the island and especially his valuable Sea-Eagles observations which made our monitoring day far more successful.

Martin O'Brien



Sea-Eagle and Raven

Wal Mitchell

October 17: Sea-Eagles revisited

Our activity for October was a return to the White-bellied Sea-Eagle nesting site. This site was visited last month and it appeared that the usual nest site had been abandoned. Our objective was to try to locate the birds and to determine whether they had established a new nest.

Despite eight pairs of eyes and some very high tech equipment we were unsuccessful in locating a new nest. A single bird was seen regularly flying up from the forest cover and Scott, Martin, Richard and Peter braved the thick woodland to search the area but the nest site eluded them.

An impressive aerial bombardment by a Raven was interesting to watch as the Sea-Eagle and the Raven sparred in mid air.

We were beginning to think that the lone female had possibly lost her mate but towards the end of the afternoon we were relieved to see the smaller male perched on a dead eucalypt.

During lunch we enjoyed close views of Tree Martins collecting mud for nest building. So intent were they on the task in hand that they seemed unaware of us and some good photos were obtained.

The question of the nest site was unresolved but we were rewarded with sightings of many bush birds. The list comprised Yellow Robin, Mistletoebird, Grey Shrike-thrush, Silvereeye, White-browed Scrubwren, Striated Pardalote, Grey Fantail, Crescent Honey-eater, New Holland Honeyeater, Wedge-tailed Eagle, Kookaburra, Golden Whistler, Grey Currawong, Shining Bronze-Cuckoo, Fan-tailed Cuckoo, Brown Thornbill.

Our final stop was to the store to replenish Meredith who had been without coffee and lunch throughout the day! Many thanks to Scott Coutts for providing transport and assistance.

Bett Mitchell



Shore platform

Wal Mitchell

November 28: A gentle day on the island—counting waders and terns

The final Western Port wader count of 2015 saw five FOFI members and one visitor (Geoff Lacey, Martin O'Brien, Dianne Emslie, Ken Harris, Chris Chandler, Snezena) check various wader roost sites on the island.

Rams Island and the west coast were overall very quiet this time with only relatively small numbers of waders recorded (Red-necked Stints, Red-capped Plovers and some Greenshanks). We were lucky, however, to record both Fairy and Caspian Terns briefly at Rams Island, while a single Pied Oystercatcher nest with two eggs was also observed there.

Although the tides weren't in our favour, the conditions were otherwise perfect for recording birds with still, sunny weather (especially on the west coast of the island). Parks Victoria ranger Sam Pollard (from the Peninsula) was our driver for the day and assisted in detecting birds at our sites. This transport also enabled us to visit Mini Inlet up the west coast, which is a site we often have trouble getting to during the wader counts.

Lunch on the beach at Mini Inlet was a treat, with Chestnut Teal, Pied Oystercatchers and Swans keeping us company. And we were rewarded with distant views of Greenshanks. The peacefulness at this site meant few words were spoken between us.

Further down the coast at Fairhaven the somewhat sweet but mournful call of an Olive Whistler emanated from the tea-tree thickets.

In the south-west of the island at Tortoise Head the variety and numbers of birds were much greater. Birds counted included 150 Eastern Curlew, 1 Whimbrel, 6 Red-capped Plovers, 4 Caspian Terns (one pair nesting), 10 Fairy Terns (several nesting), fresh evidence of Shearwaters, and many Pied Oystercatchers.

Martin O'Brien



Mick Douglas & FOFI members (2013)

Andrew Hollis

Spring Bird Records

Highlights this Spring include rare French Island breeding records for two falcon species.

Australian Hobby: A pair were seen attacking a raven on a farm near Mt Wellington on 3 October. Two days later, a Hobby was seen entering an old raven's nest high in a pine tree nearby. The young could be heard making begging noises from the nest. Adults were seen coming and going to the nest several times through October, with the loud begging calls of the young heard each time.

Peregrine Falcon: On 28 September we saw a male Peregrine calling loudly whilst perched on a dead tree on the edge of a south coast cliff. The bird flew short distances, calling all the time. On 16 October, the female was perched in the same tree, also calling loudly and not leaving the area. She flew up to and perched in a tall dead tree in the forest, next to an even taller tree which had a stick nest high in the branches. This appeared to be an old raven's nest. She did not leave the area. During two more visits in November, both birds were still at this site.

Blue-winged Parrot: Blue-winged Parrots are rarely seen in summer in Western Port. So it was interesting to see a bird fly out from the forest edge at *Blue Gums* on 16 October. A pair was seen feeding in grassland at Long Point on 11 November. On 25 November, one flew out of the exact same patch of forest at *Blue Gums*. Later in the day, a pair was disturbed feeding in paddocks 400 m north.

Olive-backed Oriole: several calling at Overpass Road forest on 10 October.

Varied Sitella: a feeding party near Mt Wellington on 10 November. This is the third group I have seen on the island in 2015.

Satin Flycatcher: Two territorial pairs have been calling from the same forest on the corner of Mt Wellington and McLeod Roads since October. The territories are about 100 m apart. *Chris Chandler*

MICK DOUGLAS: May 1953–September 2015

On 10th October family and friends came together to commemorate the life of Mick Douglas, who had been ranger on French Island from 1986 to 2013. He had an intimate knowledge of the island and great rapport with our group. The January 2014 issue of *FOFI News* contains our interview with Mick at the time of his retirement.

I first met Mick on French Island around 1995 when helping to organise FOFI activities. It was obvious that he had a great love of his work as a ranger and that he enjoyed engaging with people. Working with him was always a delight.

Mick was very gifted as an environmental manager. He always seemed to notice new things in the French Island environment—before other people were aware of them. As an example, around 1995 he noticed that a striking change was taking place in some of the island forests and woodlands. The dense heathy understorey had begun to die away and 'fall over', leaving a more open understorey dominated by grasses, sedges or bracken.

This phenomenon led me to realise that French Island was experiencing a remarkable ecological development that needed to be investigated. The character of the forests was changing. I was soon to start writing up part of the ecological history of the island and Mick's observation was a key insight that guided my work.

Along with Mick's keen insight into detail, he had a sense, perhaps we could say a poetic sense, of the wholeness of the environment—how everything held together. And he had a sense of adventure, generally finding real excitement in the work we were doing on any given day.

Mick once told us that when he first came to work on French Island in 1986, he planned to stay five years. But he soon had second thoughts. He said: 'French Island is vast. It had the feeling of a real wilderness. And it was such a challenge. I felt a kinship. And I love to see how ecologies work, how they're stitched together.'



Pied Oystercatchers

Mick Douglas

Of Mick's many projects on the island I will single out two. The first was focused on the very important bird site, Rams Island. For a long time this site was protected just by a broken-down fence, and cattle could still get out there. So Mick organised the new Coastal Protection Fence all along the coast near Long Point, with the cooperation of the adjacent landowners. This was completed around 1998.

Then he organised FOFI to do a big planting of Drooping Sheoak and Coast Boobialla on the coastal slopes outside the fence in 1999. We followed up with further plantings, together with Landcare, in subsequent years. And the trees are now thriving.

Another great project was the West Coast Walking Track. Mick made sure that this would be a really interesting track, from which walkers could enjoy beautiful and varied scenery while keeping well clear of the sensitive shorebird flocks on the beach.

FOFI members and Mick really enjoyed working together. He said it was good to have us coming over each month and making a difference. Before he retired, Mick scanned all our old newsletters onto a disk, so that they could be a resource for the future. Mick was a great photographer too and his pictures have often featured in *FOFI News*.

We enjoyed Mick's competence and dedication, his warm friendship and his delightful and rather wicked sense of humour. Working with Mick was a wonderful and creative experience. And along with Mick we were all drawn more deeply into the adventure of observing and restoring the ecology of French Island—while experiencing its beauty and wonder.

Geoff Lacey



Frances Garner planting with other FOFI members Geoff Lacey

FRANCES GARNER: Feb. 1932–Nov. 2015

On Friday 27 November, family and friends gathered to farewell Frances Garner, who died aged 83.

Frances was a founding member of FOFI, attending the inaugural meeting on Saturday 18 February 1984. No one can quite remember now what (or who) brought her to the island, but for the next thirty years her love of French Island and her loyalty to the Friends group were unwavering.

In the early days the committee was rather an *ad hoc* affair, with Frances listed as Secretary, Activities Coordinator, Acting Editor and Vice-President at various times. She officially took over compilation of *FOFI News* in November 1994, helped by her sister Loris, and continued until March 2008 when the role was formally handed over to Geoff Lacey, who had been assisting with layout since 2004. Frances was FOFI's President from 1999 to 2015, and most of our Annual General Meetings were held in her pleasant courtyard garden in Frankston (with her daughter Megan always providing a wonderful supper).

Frances Garner was one of the funniest people I knew. She wrote much of *FOFI News* in the mid 1990s and her pieces were always witty, self-deprecating and humorously observant of human

nature. Even though she complained of an 'inability to recognize any bird smaller than a pelican', she could in fact write up our activities very well, and even in her nonsense one can glean the fierce intellect that enabled her to produce an outstanding PhD in History at Monash University in the 1960s.

Frances managed to combine a sometimes alarming lack of interest in her own welfare with a strong stubborn streak. These two traits combined in perhaps her most memorable moment on the island in November 1994 when, against all advice, she announced she was taking a shortcut by leaping across Brella Creek. Instead, she dropped vertically into the muddy morass. No one could have described the event better than Frances herself:

Light relief was provided by intrepid and/or mad Activities' Coordinator taking a plunge into the murky depths of Brella Creek, but the rest of the party soldiered on and were kind enough to put up with her presence on the return trip.

Although Frances did not own a car, she managed to get to the island almost every month for many years, sometimes bringing her young grandchildren. She adored her family and her dogs; she loved the beach, the sun, sailing and cricket. She was a wonderful friend to me. Frances had a very soft voice, but this belied her strong views on fairness, compassion and social justice. It came as no surprise to learn that she had been a member of the Communist Party in the 1950s.

Frances was also exceptionally brave during her long illness, displaying a tenacity to live that was sometimes heartbreaking to witness. Her family plans to scatter her ashes on French Island, and I am sure we will hear her spirit singing in the saltmarsh and forest.

Meredith Sherlock



Yellow Robin (Frances' favourite bird) Murray Bouchier



MEMBERSHIP RENEWAL DUE JANUARY 2016

Name

Address

Phone No.

E-mail

Membership per person or household: \$10

Please return to Mrs Margaret Medley, Hon. Treasurer, 11 Neville St, Mooroolbark 3138