

# FOFI News



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

January 2014

## PROJECT DAYS

We take the 10.15 am ferry from Stony Point. If you plan to come, **please contact Murray Bouchier** on 9876 1410 at least 7 days before the project day.

**Feb. 15** Western Port wader count

**Mar 8, April 12, May 10:** Activities to be advised after consultation with rangers.

## FOFI ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

will be held at 10 Orrong Ave, Frankston  
Wednesday 12 February at 7.00 pm. All welcome.

**This is a special 4-page issue of FOFI News, featuring an extended interview with Mick Douglas. It covers some of his work as head ranger on French Island between 1986 & 2013 and his reflections on this experience. The interview was conducted by Geoff Lacey and Meredith Sherlock last December, and edited by Meredith.**

## ACTIVITIES REPORTS

### January 11: Rams Island and swamps

Present: Murray Bouchier, Geoff Lacey, Bette & Walter Mitchell, Scott Coutts (Parks Victoria Ranger).

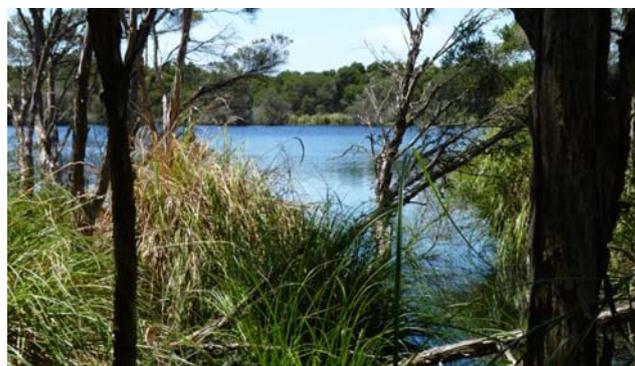
### Long Point & Rams Island

The first Friends outing for the year was held in superb weather after a cool morning. Aims for the day were to check Fairy Tern nesting at Rams Island and visit a suite of French Island wetlands. We had heard that the terns were nesting on Rams Island, so we looked forward to monitoring this breeding and adding to the dataset generated over many years.

Our drive to Long Point was notable for the large flocks of Little Ravens observed in the paddocks north of Tankerton Road. Martin estimated about 300 birds in two separate flocks. Bette also observed a number of Dusky Woodswallows towards the eastern end of Tankerton Road.

## FRIENDS OF FRENCH ISLAND NP

**President:** Frances Garner. **Secretary:** Meredith Sherlock (3/11 Raymond Ave, Frankston 3199: ph. 9770 5229). **Editor:** Geoff Lacey



Clump Lagoon

Geoff Lacey

At Long Point we recorded a number of birds: numerous Golden-headed Cisticolas (in the grassy areas), Brown Thornbills, Grey Fantails, Silvereyes and a Rufous Whistler in the planted areas immediately south of the fence. Skylarks were heard overhead. We especially enjoyed observing the skills of a male Nankeen Kestrel as it foraged over the grassy paddocks before intermittently dropping out of sight. It was soon joined by a second Kestrel. A Swamp Harrier flew over too. The usual Australian Magpies were in the paddocks nearby.

Approaching the rocky causeway to Rams island quickly generated anxiety in the nesting Fairy Terns as a flock of adult birds came out and hovered like swallows over our heads, all the time emitting a characteristic squeaky scolding call. A total of 35 were counted.

## MEMBERSHIP RENEWAL DUE JANUARY 2014

Name

Address

Phone No.

E-mail

Membership per person or household: \$10 (note increase this year)

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

After checking for avian predators, Geoff and Martin agreed to quickly access the nest site to count nest numbers and eggs/young if possible. We detected 5 Fairy Tern nests with one egg each and a single nest with two eggs. Breeding may be at an early stage with more nests to come.

Other birds seen here were 2 Caspian Tern, 4 Eastern Curlew, 2 Ruddy Turnstone, 60 Red-necked Stint, 3 Pied and 1 Sooty Oystercatcher. A single Pied Cormorant was seen flying east. Scott mentioned to us that he had observed three Caspian Tern chicks at this site three weeks earlier. The apparent absence of any young at this time suggested they had departed the island. Before departing the rocky causeway Scott showed us fresh feral cat prints as well as human and dog prints along the high tide mark. This was a reminder of the disturbance factors acting on the site.

### Swamps and West Coast

Scott drove us to **The Shag**, which was reasonably full of water. There were 4 Black Swans in the water and 4 White-faced Herons nearby. A Little Grassbird was heard. Bush birds included the Grey Fantail, Little Wattlebird, Silvereye and Eastern Yellow Robin. A Swamp Harrier flew over. The shade of a shrub made a good lunch shelter from the now warm and sunny conditions. A Hyacinth Orchid was in flower nearby.

Our next site was **Clump Lagoon** which was so full that the wetland edge could not be easily accessed. We still managed to record about 80 Grey

Teal, 4 Black Swans and some Silvereyes. Two Pobblebonk Frogs were calling to each other. It was lovely to see a few Flag Irises out and to see the very healthy vegetation following a burn of the area in 2013.

Our penultimate site for the day was **Fairhaven** where there were a number of cyclists camping. New Holland Honeyeaters were active in the Tea-tree. We observed an extremely low tide, with the muddy banks fully exposed out in the western channel of Western Port. A few each of Pied Oystercatcher, Silver Gull, Chestnut Teal and Masked Lapwing were seen in the distance and many Black Swans far to the south.

The final wetland site for the day was **Linley's Swamp** on Coast Road. This was looking in fine condition after the recent rains. Species we recorded were: 4 Black Swan, 2 Straw-necked Ibis, 3 White Ibis, 12 Eastern Swamphen, Chestnut and Grey Teal (45 in total), 3 Hoary-headed Grebe, 1 Pied Cormorant and a 1 Greenshank. The final sighting of the day, at Tankerton Jetty, was a single juvenile White-bellied Sea-Eagle flying across from the direction of Stony Point

As usual the Friends group relied on the support and assistance of ranger Scott Coutts to transport the group on the day. Another enjoyable day with the highlight being the continued success of Fairy Tern breeding at what is believed to be the main reliable site in Victoria.

*Martin O'Brien*

## Mick Douglas (Head Ranger, 1986–2013)



Mick Douglas with Des Quinn

Bette & Wal Mitchell

*Mick Douglas retired from Parks Victoria in the middle of last year, ending an association with French Island almost as long as FOFI's. His knowledge of the island and rapport with our group will be greatly missed. We thank Mick for agreeing to this interview for FOFI News, wish him all the very best with his future projects, and hope we will still see him on the island from time to time, perhaps at his favourite places – Spit Point, the northern saltmarsh, and some of the smaller swamps.*

**First impressions of French Island.** I did like it. It was vast, it had the feeling of a real wilderness. And it was such a challenge. Not many people get the opportunity when they're 28 to manage 12,000 hectares of land. I felt a kinship. And I love to see

how ecologies work, how they're stitched together, so in some ways it was a dream job.

No management had really been applied to the Park up until that stage, apart from koala catches – they started in 1983. In 1986 we were catching for four weeks – an enormous amount of koalas. That was the thing struck me: the damage to the Manna Gum and the Swamp Gum, it was just incredible. And it was impossible to stop, because for the first few years there were so many koalas, even though we took off hundreds – from memory, at least 400 or 500, I remember one year 800. The budgets were poor, we had to climb every tree and use long bamboo poles. The koalas were taken to suitable habitat throughout Victoria, but this created other problems. Some were released at Cerberus and in 1988–1989 we worked with Fisheries and Wildlife and removed over 1100 koalas from the area after Graeme Pizzey informed them of the issue.

**Living on the island.** After six months in the job I decided to move over to the island and live at the depot. (*Mick shows a photo of the Parks Office surrounds from 1986 looking east and there are no trees.*) This made the job easier, as there was a lot to do and a lot of people to get to know, but it was also more intense because it was very difficult to have a life away from work. If I took a day off I was still on

the island! And going away for the weekend was difficult because I had to get back for the 4 o'clock ferry. So after three and a half years, in 1991, I moved back to the mainland. The Parks people didn't like me doing that, and in fact refused to pay my ferry fare. So I had to work on the ferries one day a week to earn enough money to pay my fare to get to work! This went on for twelve or eighteen months until Parks agreed to pay half.



Turnstones

Mick Douglas

**Early management.** The State Park at that time was managed by the Department of Conservation, Forests and Lands. Our budget was about \$32,000, \$4000 of which was for fire protection. All the budget did really was keep things ticking over. It wasn't a development budget or a budget that meant we could go out and start managing the land. And the wages were terrible! Stewie Scott was fantastic support. He had been working for Fisheries and Wildlife for four or five years before I got there and was full-time. He had that French Island fire knowledge and passed it on to me so that it could be written down. Most importantly, he knew how to burn – the right temperatures, wind strengths, humidity, seasons, how fire burns and the results. The islanders had been burning for their own fire protection for a long time before that, but by the mid '80s they were mostly helping Percy Pulham (*Mick's predecessor*). Six months after I got there Alan Pullen arrived as a second ranger, which made a huge difference. He was there for about nine years.

The biggest challenges, apart from getting a handle on fire, were the weeds and the pest animals. Rabbits were a major problem, not only in the Park but also on freehold land owned by BHP and Australian Land Holdings (Hooker Rex). This land was leased to the locals, but they didn't manage it. Stewie and I worked on rabbits for about three years – ripping, fumigating, trapping, myxomatosis.

Removal of Cluster Pines (*Pinus pinaster*) started in 1988 after CFL got a Bicentennial Federal Grant. The strategy was to burn with a very hot fire, knock down the wildlings, let the seedlings grow and then burn again after seven years. There were 3000 hectares divided into nine blocks. We started with \$20,000 a year, but they kept chipping it off, so there was never enough money. There is still one block that has never been burnt, and the other blocks are only 60 per cent completed. The drought also made the burning difficult. Still, there has been some permanent progress, and I shudder to think of the

monoculture that would be there now if we hadn't started when we did.

Duck hunting was another issue. One of the secrets of the island was that duck shooting went on all year, not just in autumn during duck season. In the early days this probably wasn't a real problem, but I was concerned about the pelicans breeding at the Duck Splash and roosting at Redbill Creek. There's no doubt I was a harbinger of change. Under the Parks Act it was illegal even to be carrying a weapon, but it was a delicate operation because I wanted the co-operation of the islanders. I discussed it with Parks and they found an obscure provision in the Act which allowed individuals to apply for a permit based on a "history of use". There were only about 30 individuals, not all of them locals, and if Joe Bloggs turned up wanting to shoot ducks they'd send him in the wrong direction. The barge wouldn't even bring a vehicle over if they knew there were shooters on it. So though it was sort of illegal, it wasn't too bad. There was great camaraderie at the duck camps, and the guys adhered to their own rules. But things change. They'd been given six to seven years grace, and gradually areas were reduced down to one or two swamps and then it stopped. Locals then went on to create their own wetlands to provide for hunting.

**French Island National Park.** The National Park was proclaimed in 1997. Then the budget started to improve, and really improved when Parks Victoria took over, with \$160,000 plus fire money. That's when Clive and Fay Gordes came in as contractors to work on the weeds. They've done a fantastic job on flat weeds and grasses like Briza, and wild *Watsonia* and *Aloe Vera* have been eradicated.

We couldn't get any more staff – there was me, Alan, Stewie and Terry Easy. But it was great that I was able to have a lot of input into the Management Plan (*French Island National Park Management Plan*, October 1998).

**Rams Island.** When I first visited Rams Island there was a broken-down old fence on the causeway, but cattle could still get out there. The Coastal Protection Fence went in around 1998 and I was keen to get FOFI to plant trees there straight away to create a viewing platform so that we could see what was happening on the island without disturbing the birds. (*FOFI planted Drooping Sheoaks and Coast Boobialla on the coastal slopes outside the fence in June 1999.*) I had to negotiate with the landowners to run the fence through their land, and they were terrific about it.

**The drought years (1997–2009).** I used to cry. All the wetland birds disappeared, I didn't see a Purple Swamphen for a decade. The bush birds also suffered, and species like the White-naped Honey-eater that we didn't normally see came into the birdbath at the depot. The trees and heath started to die, which made the fires worse. A terrible lot of Messmates died at Keith's Curly Corner and right through Blue Gums and at Mt Wellington. But it never

ceases to amaze me what fantastic recovery capacity this country has. All the swamps have now refilled and are looking great, even a half-full Duscher's. Interestingly, one thing that hasn't come back is the mosquitoes. They dropped off during the drought and haven't returned, I don't know why. Perhaps it's the inundation of the salt marsh, because the sea level has risen a few centimetres.

**Dieback, Cup Moths, Christmas Beetles.** I know it's there, but I haven't seen any deaths due to Cinnamon Fungus. When I got to the island in 1986 there were plans for a wash-down facility at Corinella, but there never will be. It's too hard. The good news is that the fungus doesn't affect Manna Gum or Swamp Gum, but the bad news is that Messmates – and that's the forest – are highly susceptible. The fungus travels quickly along drainage lines and road edges, but much slower uphill. Not every plant is susceptible, so the bush will recover over time. The same with the Cup Moths. Any trees that are weak will be taken out but the other 99 per cent will recover.

In the early 1990s, Christmas Beetles got into a beautiful run of Manna Gums off Redbill Road that went north for about a kilometre and a half. The beetle has to have cleared land to breed and lay its eggs, so we ploughed up the private land next to the fence line one year, but the beetles still came back and we lost the trees. They also took out a couple of beautiful Manna Gums on the Coast Road near the old airstrip. But these threats come and go. I'm more concerned about climate change, the tidal surges, and the sea level rise which will devastate the whole estuary of Western Port.



Mick & FOFI members

Andrew Hollis

**FOFI.** I view FOFI now as a major asset for the Park. It is one of the few organisations that has a complete history of managing the Park, and the knowledge has been passed on. That's why I scanned all the old newsletters onto disc, because they're a wonderful resource. I have to admit I didn't take advantage of the group in the early years, and then I began to realise I had an incredible asset with these people coming over to the island month in, month out, and I started joining in. From then on it was one of the better parts of the job, catching up with lovely people once a month and making a difference.

From the late 1980s, Occupational Health and Safety became more of an issue. FOFI continued weeding at Tortoise Head and Ram's Island, pulling

pine seedlings, beach cleaning, etc. but it worked well for me that the group began to concentrate more of its activities on monitoring. (*For the record, in thirty years there has never been a reportable incident on a FOFI activity!*) It was also great that Parks Victoria started paying the group's ferry fares, to give something back.



Waders

Mick Douglas

**The Park today.** Parks Victoria's budget is now \$120,000–\$130,000 most years, which is a reasonable budget, though I always wished it was non-targeted money so that the person actually managing the Park could decide what projects to spend it on. For example, at the moment there is a big problem with blackberry on the island and I would have preferred to have the money to concentrate on blackberries for three years. Of course, you can always use more funding, you can always do more. Certainly the place needs more staff. All the work that's been done over the past thirty years will go backwards if they don't keep on top of it. That's the nature of land management – it's an ongoing process. The most important task is to keep on top of the weeds. Pest plants are the major threat to any bushland and there will always be new weeds.

RAMSAR made a difference, the Western Port Biosphere project made a difference. French Island is one of the few parks where the budget has been maintained even though visitor numbers are low. So there must be a recognition that the values of the Park matter for their own sake. Today the Park is a properly managed area of land, and its sensitive saltmarshes, breeding areas and swamps are protected. It's a fantastic place for insects, especially Causeway Road extension and the bush at Blue Gums – wasps, flies, butterflies, moths, bugs. The Fiery Copper is a relative of the Eltham Copper Butterfly. No one's ever even looked at that stuff. There has been an increased growth on the south coast, and beautifully verdant beds of seagrass off Blue Gums where there used to just be mud. I'm sure the place will be fine. As Melbourne heads towards six million people, one the island's greatest assets is just being there.

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