



FOFI News



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

March 2016

FRIENDS OF FRENCH ISLAND NATIONAL PARK

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PROJECT DAYS

The ferry leaves Stony Point at 10.00 am. If you plan to come, please contact the Secretary well in advance so that transport on the island can be arranged.

Saturday March 19: Morning beach walk from Tankerton towards Fairhaven, with beach clean-up, survey of resident pairs of Pied Oystercatchers and Red-capped Plovers, hand removal of Sea Spurge, and preliminary observations of mangrove recovery. We will return to Tankerton by 1.00 pm for the Book Launch at the Eco Inn (see details below).

Saturday April 16: Activity to be advised.

FOFI AGM was held on 10 February. Office-bearers for 2016–2017: President: Chris Chandler; Secretary: Meredith Sherlock; Treasurer: Margaret Medley; Committee members: Geoff Lacey, Meg Macmillan, Bett Mitchell, Walter Mitchell.

Geoff Lacey is retiring from editing *FOFI News*, after working on it for many years. Follow-up is in process. Keep in touch through our website.



Murray Bouchier planting at Long Point

MURRAY BOURCHIER: February 1933–December 2015

I first met Murray in the mid 1990s on the Western Port wader surveys. He soon joined FOFI as well and

some years later became our very capable activities coordinator.

Murray's interest in nature, and birds in particular, began when he was a boy. In fact he told me that when he was about 14 he and a friend used to ride their bikes from Hughesdale, where he lived, to Sherbrooke Forest in the Dandenongs where they camped in the bush.

Murray and Wilma were married in 1960 and they built their own house at Park Orchards. This is adjacent to a patch of beautiful bushland. Murray became a key member of an action group that succeeded in having this land dedicated for conservation as the *100 Acres Reserve*. This was officially opened in 1980.

Murray's conservation interests were very broad. For example, in the early 1980s he took part in the successful blockade against the proposed Franklin River dam in Tasmania. Besides conservation he was politically astute, with a passion for justice and the plight of the oppressed.

On our many FOFI activities I learned that Murray was a very accurate bird observer, good at counting the flocks of waders and very good at recognising all the bird calls. He was also an excellent photographer, and his work includes a number of photos of birds on nests.



Spotted Pardalote

Murray Bouchier

I worked very closely with Murray after he joined FOFI and we usually travelled in his car from Ringwood, always stopping for a cup of coffee at Hastings. He was easy to work with, being adventurous, down to earth, and always ready to see the funny side of things. When setting up photo points, he once asserted that I had him hammering the stake into the ground while I did the easy work of taking the photos and notes. On another occasion, I was interviewing a local resident and taking notes while Murray was busy spotting a new bird for the island—the Weebill.

He was a renowned optimist. He was even convinced that one day we would find the Striated Fieldwren on French Island—in some patch of unexplored saltmarsh.

I went with Murray, and often other FOFI members, to a number of Friends Network and Field Naturalists conferences. We particularly enjoyed the field trips.

At the funeral service on 5th January at St Gerard's Church, Warrandyte, Phillip Bourchier noted that his father 'did not use technology a lot, always meaning to learn. The fact was, he was too busy living his life, in seeking the first hand experience and exciting others about it. He lived life to the full.'

Geoff Lacey



Murray with Art & Mick at lunch on Mt Wellington

ACTIVITIES REPORT

January 23: Western Port Wader Survey

We formed 3 groups for the survey, going to: Tortoise Head; West Coast & Rams Island; and Blue Gum Point.

Tortoise Head

We left home early, a cool overcast grey morning for a long haul from the Upper Yarra Valley to Stony Point to catch the 10 am to Tankerton, the first FOFI wader count for 2016. This already would be different. We were missing the cheerful warm voice of an indefatigable and outstanding FOFI member Murray Bourchier; to whom a few weeks before some of us had said our final goodbyes at St Gerard's Church in Warrandyte on January 5th.

A quick 'takeaway caffeine hit' at Crib Point—its roadside verge portable sign with CFA flashing message thanking residents for their communal efforts fighting local bushfires earlier in the week. For once nearly everybody seemed to be running late rushing to buy tickets. No one missed the ferry, packs stashed on the rear outside shelves we had a peaceful flat run into Tankerton.

Disembarking, the walk in small groups up the Tankerton wharf all engrossed in catch-up conversations. On reaching the dusty gravel tree-studded carpark the usual body count split with 'Either' the 'Parks Truck', driven by Peter (of the magnificently flowing long grey beard), 'Or Tortoise Head' led by Ken. Anna and I opted to follow Ken because we had never been, Emma making up our quartet. Meantime I had quietly stashed two bottles of wine and Anna's 11.30 pm home-baked plum tort cake in the boot of Chris's car for an afternoon tea in

Murray's honour. Agreeing all would return by 3.15pm we followed Ken onto the stony foreshore, sundry parked 4W-drives and boats quickly vanishing behind us.

Ken set a cracking pace, day pack on chest long snooper scope with its tripod strapped to his back. It said just one thing, serious, very serious, the only pauses to count and ID. We hit the chest high coastal scrub and its grasses. The arcane track only decipherable by our leader, jewel spiders, scrub wrens, a Swamp Harrier cruising overhead. He, Ken, had been here many times before, lost count, maybe 100+ give or take a few. Another FOFI veteran—1974 vintage.

A query. Ken looking back over his shoulder floppy hat shading his glasses, a glitter in his eye, his bristly white beard stiff in the wind, an NSA jut to his jaw, said: 'Collect 'em all!' I immediately warmed to the guy. Never quite got this bit of just counting the ones with wet feet. A bird is a bird is a bird, and in 21C you never know if it might cross your path again. Quiet Emma rapidly revealed herself as 'birdo par excellence'. Ken looked at her speculatively and never disputed her ID calls, a silent compliment. Modestly admitted she had been out for many years with her parents as a child and had always been in charge of the bird lists, only coming back deeply to birds in these last 3 years.

Anna and I learnt a lot, not to be anally conservative in counts, on the ground or on the wing, flock 'guesstimates', logical reasons of how and why. The art of stalking tidal roosts all bunched together as one low slow short fat caterpillar. At Tortoise Head a single curious seal, discussions about Whimbrels and Godwits amongst Curlews. Sooty Oystercatchers amongst Pied Oystercatchers, counting Red-necked Stints four times, once on the wing—just to be sure. I left the numbers to the others, never been good at that, my eyes are becoming crap; found myself lost watching the wheeling and flowing like water startled flocks in a summer cloud riven sky. Peaceful. Beautiful.



Swans

Geoff Lacey

Lunchtime. We were hungry, it had been good morning with some records broken. Walked up the hill through a small colony of Short-tailed Shearwaters, stepping carefully to avoid nest burrows, their juvenile inhabitants silent. Up on the grassy ridge abandoned burrows and down the other side to the shade of a large solitary scrubby tree with wide panoramic views of the island. We flopped, began eating and Ken set up his scope sweeping the sea and bay below silently counting. Finally joined us with a satisfied '410 Black Swans'. Told us a terrific story how once from this same spot with a friend they had seen a large Grass Owl below patrolling back and forth hunting prey. An extremely rare sighting.

Lunch over, we packed and began retracing the walk back to Tankerton carpark making it in by 3pm.

Shortly after plonking ourselves down amidst the trees at the wooden picnic table, Chris's car appeared in a cloud of dust. He safely delivered wine, tart, cheese and biscuits, which we unpacked and waited for the Parks truck to roll up and disgorge the rest of the FOFI crew. Seated around the table were Emma, Ken, Meredith, Chris, Meg, Geoff, Anna, myself, and Peter on the bank. Together we opened a bottle of red and one of white wine, ate plum tart and toasted the absence of a beloved friend, Murray, whose warmth, dedication, enthusiasm, knowledge, has enriched lives over many years, placing an indelible stamp on FOFI amongst many other things. We have lost a Venerable. The wine loosened our tongues in the warm sun and we nearly forgot the ferry.



Toast to Murray

Meredith Sherlock

Oh yes, the data: Swamp Harrier 2, Whistling Kite 1, Brown Falcon 1, Peregrine 2, Kestrel 1, White-browed Scrubwren 2, Brown Thornbill 4, White-fronted Chat 3, Magpie 3, Grey Currawong 2, Magpie Lark 1, Aussie Raven 20, Little Raven 7, Silvereye 10, Swallow 10, Pelican 6, Pied Cormorant 7, Little Pied Cormorant 16, White-faced Heron 9, White Ibis 2, Royal Spoonbill 6, Black Swan 424, Cape Barren Goose 2, Pied Oystercatcher 101, Sooty Oystercatcher 5, Masked Lapwing 2, Red-capped Plover 3, Ruddy Turnstone 8, Eastern Curlew 175, Whimbrel 5, Bar-tailed Godwit 3, Red-necked Stint 139, Silver Gull 88, Pacific Gull 2, Caspian Tern 3, Fairy Tern 3, and one young curious Fur Seal.

Robert Knottenbelt



Ruddy Turnstones

Wal Mitchell

West Coast and Rams Island

Geoff Lacey, Meg McMillan and I made up the second group of the day, cheerfully transported by ranger Peter Grenfell. We stopped first on the west coast, where Black Swans topped the list with a total of 65 birds seen. We counted a pleasing 50 Pied Oystercatchers and as high tide approached were much entertained by three determined individuals

jostling for position on a submerging rock that clearly had room for only two.

Eastern Curlews were also in good numbers and 30 flew off towards Tortoise Head. About 16 Chestnut Teal and 7 Grey Teal were resting on the shore, and 22 Masked Lapwings, 8 Pied Cormorants, 7 Little Pied Cormorants, 2 White-fronted Chats and just one small unidentified wader made up the morning's total.

We then enjoyed lunch looking over Rams Island and were able to walk out at low tide. Our list included 20 Red-necked Stints, 9 Red-capped Plovers including one chick, 5 Ruddy Turnstones, 8 Eastern Curlews and 1 Caspian Tern. Out on the bay there were 100 Black Swans and we counted 25 Australian Pelicans on Bird Rock.

On the drive back to the jetty Peter amused us with his story of the female koala, who for reasons known entirely to herself, had decided to walk out to the end of the jetty last week. She was strong and healthy and had proved quite a challenge to rescue!

Meredith Sherlock

Blue Gum Point

Chris Chandler went to this site. He had the unusual sighting of 19 White-throated Needletails (swifts) flying ahead of a storm cloud. They were zooming around at tree-top height. There were few other birds.

Where did all the waders go?

Given the small numbers of migratory waders on our counts, where did they all go on that day? Andrew Silcocks of BirdLife Australia has provided some answers.

1000 Red-necked Stints were recorded on the north-west corner of French Island, and even larger numbers at two sites on the eastern shores of the bay and at Long Reef in the northern part of the bay. The latter site also had 14 Pacific Golden Plovers. 190 Bar-tailed Godwits were counted at Observation Point on Phillip Island. However, numbers of Curlew Sandpipers were generally low.



FOFI at Heifer Swamp

Meredith Sherlock

February 20: Wetlands survey

Four FOFI members and two visitors surveyed the wetlands on the western part of the island. Last year's rainfall was only about two-thirds of the average and October was exceptionally dry. This has resulted in all of the wetlands on the island drying out, including Linley's, Bullock, Long Swamp and The Heifer. Only Clump Lagoon remains with a small amount of water in it (and probably Mountain Hole). Some dams still contain water, as does the important artificial wetland at Tony Rowe's on Coast Road. Here are the results of our visit.

Rowe's Wetland: Some water remains, but it is shrinking rapidly. Using this water were 26 Grey Teal,

3 Chestnut Teal, 4 Black Duck with a pair of Black-fronted Dotterel along the muddy edges. Also in the mud was a White-fronted Chat, behaving much like a wader. In the paddock nearby were eight Cape Barren Geese, with several dozen more in paddocks near Redbill Road.

Clump Lagoon: A shallow pool over about half of the main swamp area, which seemed ideal for herons, waders, etc. However the only waterbird there was a Black Duck. The Clump has had very few waterbirds on it since it filled up in 2010.

Heifer & Little Heifer Swamps: Both of these are now dry, with a deep hole in the centre of Heifer, which has dried up in the last few weeks. There are many interesting plants which appear around the edges of the drying wetlands, including attractive little Monkey Flowers. We found three species of Knotweed, including a 'new' one for the island: Creeping Knotweed (*Persicaria prostrata*). We also found at least two varieties of Willow Herbs. (Samples were taken for identification.) The bottom of the wetlands is covered with a luxuriant crop of weeds up to 0.5 m high.



Ibis nest remains

Chris Chandler

From about 1964 to 1989, these wetlands were important breeding sites for ibis, cormorants and Royal Spoonbills, with up to 2000 pairs nesting. Since the swamps filled in 2010, we have not had an opportunity to conduct a thorough check for ibis colonies, as the water levels have been too high.

With the swamps now completely dry, we were able to walk along the shorelines, looking for signs of ibis and cormorant nests. Some areas are hard to survey, with a dense jungle of Common Reeds up to 3m tall. However, we found nine flattened nesting platforms on stumps of sedge clumps in The Heifer, and we found two ibis nests in Melaleuca at Little Heifer. These nests appear to be from the Spring of 2014.

There are likely more nests which we did not find, but it is encouraging to know that some ibis have returned to breed on French Island. The only waterbirds which we saw on both swamps were three Purple Swamphens. Other birds were 3 Wedge-tailed Eagles, which soared over The Heifer, a lovely male Golden-headed Cisticola and a female Pink Robin.

A good day was had by all. Many thanks to Ranger Eileen from Seawinds for transporting us.

Chris Chandler



Golden-headed Cisticola

Andrew Browne

GROWING CONNECTIONS

A Western Port Biosphere Project

In 2013, the Western Port Biosphere Foundation established a project called Growing Connections to identify important wildlife corridors in the Biosphere. It has received funding of \$2.3 million from the Federal Government (over five years) for groups who can undertake works to improve and enhance habitat corridors which link important bushland remnants.

The southern third of French Island (old basalt soils) was considered the most important for remnant protection and linking corridors. Priority works for the first five years were identified as:

- weed control and replanting along the south coast,
- improvement to Tankerton Road and Centreway roadside vegetation (to create better habitat corridors between remnant bushland south of Tankerton Road and the National Park.)

The French Island LandCare Group was successful in applying for funding for four projects on the island in 2015. They are:

- planting 600 trees along Tankerton Road, from Clump Road corner. The trees were planted on the FOFI day in August last year.
- creating a 10m wide plantation in Bourke's property on the north side of this planted area along Tankerton Rd.
- control of weeds and planting at The Slipway. This is an extension to the area planted by FOFI and the LandCare Group in 2012. Tree planting will take place in autumn 2016.
- removal of pines, boxthorn, hawthorn and other weeds along the foreshore at The Anchorage.

Chris Chandler

Book Launch

FRENCH ISLAND: A VISITOR'S GUIDE

by Christine Dineen

Date **Saturday 19 March**. Time 1.00 pm

Venue: French Island Eco Inn. RSVP by 12 March to dineenc@optusnet.com.au or 0418 147687

This is a new edition of the *Visitor's Guide*, in full colour. It has many photographs of the island, information about services and facilities, a brief history of settlements and industries, flora and fauna, as well as a range of walks and rides.

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