

HFNC Excursion to Fern Cave in the Lower Glenelg National Park and to Cobboboonee State Forest on 16 May 1997

Rod Bird

Ten members attended this excursion to find and explore Fern Cave. This was a site once investigated by Cliff Beauglehole, who sifted metres of soil to find sub-fossil bones of various fauna.

An earlier visit had failed to find the cave but the Western Victorian Conservation Committee, led by Cliff Beauglehole, located it on 12 Jan. 1997. Rod was present, along with Hilda, Hillary Turner and Andrew Pritchard, and he was able to guide HFNC members in May.

This limestone sink hole is accessed off Kentbruk Rd, about 2 km from the junction with Winnap Rd. At about 80 m N from a bend and seepage hollow there was an old track leading E to a gravel pit about 500 m from the road. We walked E past the pit along the old track, past a log across the track and a sharp bend S that turns N again until a big old cut log is seen on the left and a big Stringybark (60-80 cm DBH and a fork at 15 m) on the right of the track. Continue directly E for 150 m to the shell of a big tree then walk 100 m due S to the Fern Cave. The distance from the cave to the gravel pit is about 1500 m.

When the WVCC visited we were unable to enter the sinkhole – a ladder was required. We saw a Copperhead snake resting on the fern and a patch of moss illuminated by a spot of light within the N side. This time Ken Grimes had a steel caving ladder and 8 people ventured down into the sinkhole, being very careful not to disturb any ferns or other vegetation.

Reto & Yvone mapped the cave while others looked for bones (finding several wallaby skulls) and bats. We saw 11 bats in 4 clusters on the walls/ceiling. The bats had tiny, rounded ears and snub heads and appeared to be Chocolate Wattled Bats (*Chalinolobus morio*) but could possibly have included other species, such as Bentwing Bats (one would need to examine ear, tragus, digits and measure forearm length to be certain).

The 'cave' is about 4 m wide at the top and 20 m wide at the base, with about 5 m depth to the rock fall centre of the sink hole.

Walking out, Rod missed the track and emerged on Kentbruk Rd some distance north of the vehicles. As reported in the HFNC Minute Book, '*We had such confidence in Rod that we followed him....and followed him.... and followed him!*' However, everyone had the benefit of a 'round walk'!

After a late lunch we met with Portland FNC to look at forestry practices in the Cobboboonee State Forest. We began at the Mt Deception Rd/T & W Rd intersection, looking first to the N at the clear-falling operations behind a cosmetic roadside fringe of trees. The forest there was bulldozed to clear all trees except a few fairly large trees per ha – the standard clear-fall practice on coupes of perhaps 30 ha. Then, looking S, everything was bulldozed and burned, with deep ruts from heavy machinery operating in wet conditions.

Driving down T & W Rd we saw several Yellow-bellied Glider feed trees (*Eucalyptus obliqua*). We passed the Surry Ridge Picnic Ground entrance and stopped at Fish Holes Rd to look at the 'treated area'. There, big, old trees with hollows had been frilled and poisoned. This was apparently not officially sanctioned but an act of environmental sabotage by a forest worker.

It was obvious that there was little concern for conservation of fauna in this forest – the clear-falling forest practice here and tree poisoning, is resulting in the disappearance of the big, old trees and the legacy will be no refuge hollows for a hundred years in most of the forest. When/if it becomes a National Park the forest will be almost entirely juvenile with no standing old trees.

There are a few patches of old trees but these are mainly at the picnic places and subject to culling when they are deemed to be dangerous. Any roadside trees that are initially retained as screening buffers are

subject later to culling on account of real or imagined safety concerns from fire or storm.

Stringy's Tree is perhaps the largest in the forest, saved from logging. Luckily it had a protector in 'Stringy' Aldridge, a forest overseer from Heywood in the 1960s-1980s.



Eucalyptus obliqua (Stringy's Tree) in the Cobboboonee SF in 1996

Photo provided by Rod Bird.