

# HFNC Excursion to Cobboboonee National Park on 24 April 2022

Rod Bird

**Participants:** Diane Luhrs, Rod Bird, Glenys Cayley, Janeen Samuel, Ross Simpson, Fiona Robertson and new members Caroline MacDonald and Sarah Scott. Joanne Logan and Virginia Keiller, also new members, met us in the park.

We left Hamilton at 9.0 am and, about 7 km south of Heywood, took Coffeys Ln to access the park. At the T-junction we turned left on Jackys Swamp Rd and then, after about 1.5 km, right onto Cut Out Dam Rd. About 2 km along that road we stopped at the Surry Ridge picnic ground for morning tea.

First, a short history of the park and what is in it. The Cobboboonee NP (18,400 ha) and recreational Forest Park (8,600 ha) covers 27,000 ha of mainly Lowland Forest EVC (78%), Herb-rich Foothill Forest (10%), Heathy Woodlands & Heathlands (4%), Deep Freshwater Marsh (2%) and 11 minor EVCs (5%) on the Cobboboonee Basaltic Tableland – gently rolling forested hills of weathered basalt (2-3 mya). The soils are mostly gravelly sandy-loams. Messmate (*Eucalyptus obliqua*) dominates the fertile well-drained areas, Shining Peppermint (*E. willissii*) the exposed limestone slopes, Manna Gum (*E. viminalis*) the cinder cones, Swamp Gum (*E. ovata*) and Blackwood (*A. melanoxylon*) the wetter flats.

This forest was the region's major hardwood forestry area, managed by the Forestry section of DNRE. In the mid-1900s clear-felling replaced selective logging, greatly reducing the number of hollow-bearing trees. 'Ring-culling' in other coupes reduced the competition from 'useless trees'. After a long campaign the Portland FNC (with a little help from HFNC) succeeded in having a moratorium on the practice in 1999 but that was ineffective; the ring-culling stopped but the trees were cut down instead! Woodchipping was introduced to salvage timber from thinning operations. New logging coupes were made off Boiler Swamp Rd and habitat trees removed from the roadside. This culminated in a 10-year campaign led by Doug Phillips of PFNC, with Wilderness Society, VNPA, Environment Victoria, Gunditj Mirring and other groups, to have the area declared a National Park. That was largely accomplished in 2008, despite determined opposition from some users of the forest and the then leader of the Liberal Party, Dennis Napthine, who represented the Portland area and was hostile to the change in status. A major concession was made to the horse riders and trail bike clubs for access to the NP and Forest Park.

The mammals of significance in this park are Long-nosed Potoroo, Southern Brown Bandicoot (*Isodon obesulus*), Swamp Antechinus (*Antechinus minimus*), Heath Mouse (*Pseudomys shortridgeii*), Spot-tailed Quoll (*Dasyurus maculatus*), Yellow-bellied Glider (*Petaurus australis*) and Southern Bent-wing Bat (*Miniopterus schreibersii bassani*). Significant birds include Barking Owl, Masked Owl, Powerful Owl, Red-tailed Black-cockatoo. Significant flora includes Ornate Pink-fingers (*Caladenia ornata*), Gorae Leek-orchid (*Prasophyllum diversiflorum*), Dense Leek-orchid (*Prasophyllum spicatum*), Blotched Sun-orchid (*Thelymitra benthamiana*) and Swamp Diuris (*Diuris palustre*), Wrinkled Cassinia (*Cassinia rugata*), Swamp Everlasting (*Senecio psilocarpus*) and Prickly Raspwort (*Haloragis myriocarpa*).

Surry Ridge has a number of old Messmate (*E. obliqua*) remaining throughout the picnic ground. Some of the trees have been host to Powerful Owl and Yellow-bellied Gliders.

Hodgetts Trail – our first walk was from the picnic ground down to the Surry River, a small stream in a valley. There were few flowers, apart from yellow blossom of Messmate or Swamp Gum on the path.

Messmate gave away to Swamp Gum and Blackwood, with an occasional Shining Peppermint, as we neared the watercourse. Hodgett's Grove was a feature on this walk – this contained many old Blackwood and Swamp Gum, the valley floor covered with ferns and other plants.

A few fungi were seen with the white-coloured, spiky-topped *Amanita ananiceps* prominent.



Start of Hodgetts Walk from Surry Ridge



A Deathcap - *Amanita ananiceps*



Hodgetts Grove and Blackwoods



Blackwoods & ferns

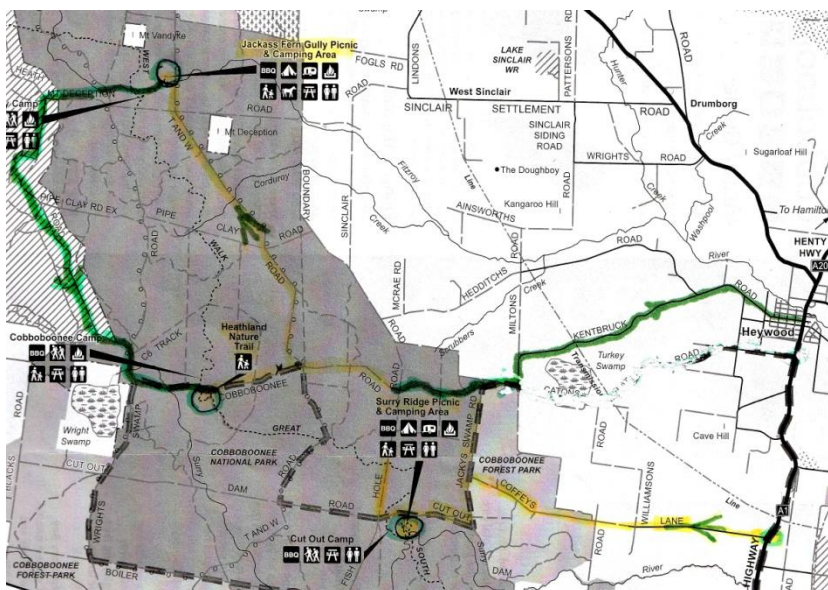


Swamp Gum on Hodgetts trail



Eastern Yellow Robin

The main shrub growing along this path was Prickly Currant Bush (*Coprosma quadrifida*), a shrub that has some moderately sharp spines on the stems and produces small red fruits. There were none present at this time.



We had lunch at the picnic ground, where Eastern Yellow Robins and Superb Fairy-wrens were very friendly, hoping for crumbs. A Bassian Thrush was also seen but it was wary.

Our next stop was Jackass Fern Gully. We travelled by Fish Holes Rd to Cobbooboonee Rd, then T & W Rd. We saw areas 'cool burned' in Feb. 2022 – trees scorched to 15 m high, and other signs of a hot fire.

We noted areas of relatively young trees but no old trees, a legacy of clear-felled coupes.

Another 80 years needs to pass before the trees develop hollows that many birds, mammals and reptiles need for survival. There are a few areas with some older trees but the forest now has mainly single-aged trees, a feature of modern forestry. Some large, older trees can be seen in the Jackass picnic ground.

At the **Jackass Nature Walk** we walked through the tree-ferns, Blackwoods and Hazel Pomaderris (*Pomaderris aspera*) in the gully. When visiting this spot with HFNC in June 1974 the tree-ferns were said to be Rough Tree-ferns (*Cyathea australis*). The species can be distinguished by the long, rough, brownish ‘hair’ at the base of the fronds, compared with the soft, fine, reddish hair for Soft Tree-ferns (see photo on p.6). We found the ferns to be Soft Tree-ferns (*Dicksonia antarctica*).

Other ferns there included Fish-bone Water-fern (*Blechnum nudum*) and what appeared to be Austral King-fern (*Todea Barbara*). We also saw Maidenhair Fern (*Adiantum aethiopicum*), Austral Bracken (*Pteridium esculentum*) and (I think) Tender Brake Fern (*Pteris tremula*). Several species of fungi were also on show, including Rainbow Fungus (*Trametes versicolor*), Beefsteak Fungus (*Fistulina hepatica*), an orange-gilled fungus (*Descolea* sp.) and a Caterpillar Cordyceps (*Cordyceps* sp.).



Soft Tree-fern (*Dicksonia antarctica*), Blackwoods & Hazel Pomaderris



Fish-bone Water-fern (*Blechnum nudum*)



Austral Bracken or Tender Brake Fern



Rainbow Fungus (*Trametes versicolor*) [DL]



Insect on Amanita fungus [DL]



A Deathcap fungus (*Amanita* sp.) [DL]



Vegetable Caterpillar Fungus (*Cordyceps* sp.) [DL]

We had planned to follow the suggested tour on p. 54 of our Hamilton Region Nature Guide and that had included a walk around the **Heathland Nature Trail**. That – and the walks at Surry Ridge and Jackass Fern Gully – would cover the 3 major vegetation types in the park. We drove west on the Mt Deception Rd to meet the Heath Rd, which lies near the eastern border of the Lower Glenelg National Park. Turning south we drove along Heath Rd through a wet heath wherein Silver Banksia (*Banksia marginata*) were flowering. This road would be a blaze of colour in Spring.

We lost our way on Heath Rd (details on the map being rather obscure), turning off before reaching Cobboboonee Rd. We stopped at one place where Scrambling Coral-fern (*Gleichenia microphylla*) covered the roadside banks.

Eventually we ended up on T & W Rd and drove south to Cobboboonee Rd, then turning west to the Heathland Nature Trail. This was rather difficult to spot, the sign being placed 30 m down the Great SW Walk track and partly obscured by swamp vegetation. However, after driving past the site we returned to investigate it, parking on the side of the road near the Great SW Walk sign.



Scrambling Coral-fern (*Gleichenia microphylla*)



Heathland Nature Trail & Red-fruit Saw-sedge [DL]

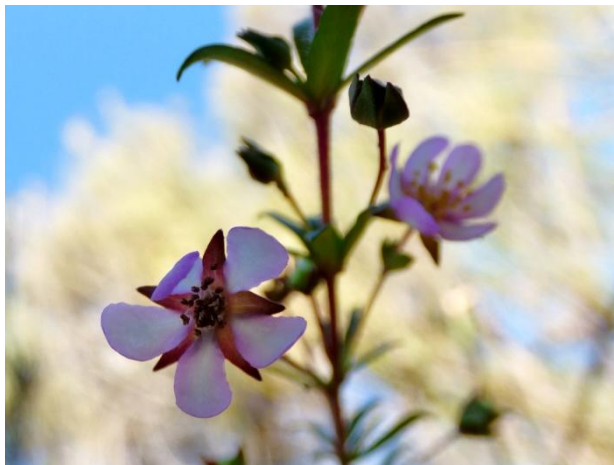
This 30-minute walk began in very wet heath dominated by Red-fruit Saw-sedge (*Gahnia sieberiana*) and Scented Paperbark (*Melaleuca squarrosa*). The track veered around to a sandy hillside dominated by Brown Stringybark (*E. baxteri*) and dry heathland plants, including some young Silver Banksia and one flowering plant of Bundled Guinea-flower (*Hibbertia fascicularis*) and of Common Heath (*Epacris impressa*). That brought us back onto the Great SW Walk, observing several flowering Wiry Bauera (*Bauera rubioides*) as we re-entered the wet heath section before arriving back at the road.



Brown Stringybark (*E. baxteri*) and dry heath



Bundled Guinea-flower (*Hibbertia fascicularis*)



Wiry Bauera (*Bauera rubioides*) [DL]



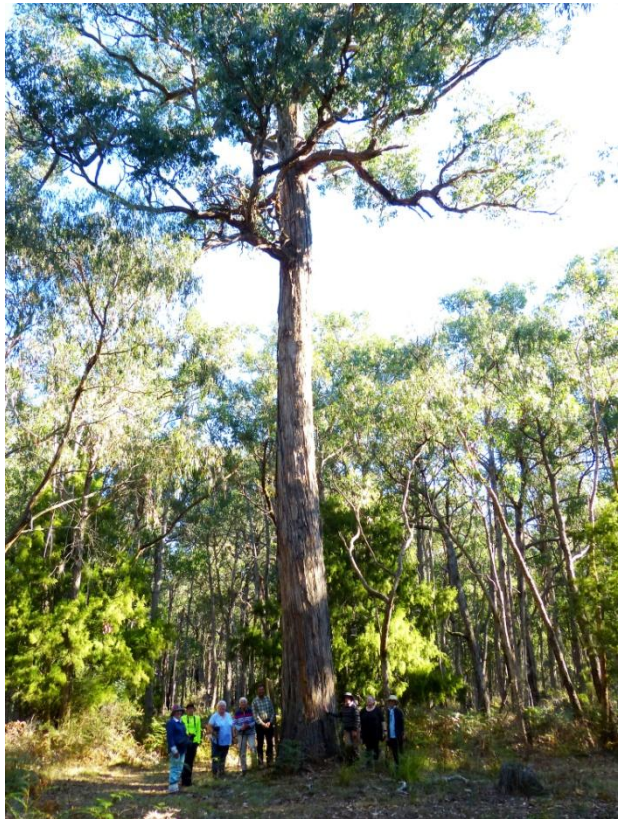
A friendly Leech [DL]

Returning east on Cobboboonee Rd we stopped at Stringy's Tree near the intersection with the T & W Rd. This is a superb Messmate preserved by H (Stringy) Aldridge, a forest overseer in the forest here from 1930-1968.



After a group photo at the tree, Ross and I measured the girth of the tree at 1.3 m from the ground so that I could compare that with the measurements given on the sign for 1973.

We found that the girth of this Messmate was 376 cm in April 2022, compared with 10 ft (305 cm) in 1973. The respective DBHs were 120 cm in 2022 v. 97 cm in 1973.



Stringy's Tree

The DBH growth in 28 years was 23 cm and the average annual growth was 8.2 mm. This seems low but River Red Gums (RRG) at Woohlpooer SF only managed 2.6 mm/yr from 1977-2002.

The sign suggests that the tree was 139 years old in 1973 and so the DBH annual growth estimate used must have been 7 mm/yr. However, if the current rate of 8.2 mm/yr prevailed in the earlier stages then the tree's age in 1973 would have been 118 (and not 139). In 2022 the tree's estimated age is 146 years. That estimate is subject to great uncertainty because we do not know what the growth conditions were like over 80% of the life of the tree. The estimated age is also much too low if juvenile Messmate behave like River Red Gum, growing at a much slower rate than larger trees. I found from looking at Roger Edward's data from Woohlpooer that RRG of 25-35 cm DBH grew at 1.9 mm/yr compared with 4.6 mm/yr for trees 55-75 cm DBH. That is likely to be the case for other eucalypts.

This was our last stop and we continued east along Cobboboonee Rd then left onto the sealed Kentbruck Rd and thence into Scott St at Heywood and the Henty Highway (adjacent to the hotel).

We were back in Hamilton at about 5 pm after a glorious sunny, windless day. Due to some vigilance, no-one supplied any blood to the leeches, which were not in great numbers.

Birds – our list for the day was limited – we had hoped to see Rufous Fantail, Rose Robin and Pink Robin, among many others, but the forest was very quiet. A pair of Crested Shrike-tits provided the highlight for me – the birds were heard calling (a confidential stutter 'knock-at-the-door' or 'chic-chica chic') and then seen in the trees near Hodgett's Grove.

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|-------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1. Bassian Thrush       | 6. Forest Raven         | 11. Spotted Pardalote          |
| 2. Brown Thornbill      | 7. Golden Whistler      | 12. Superb Fairy-wren          |
| 3. Crested Shrike-tit   | 8. Grey Currawong       | 13. White-browed Scrubwren     |
| 4. Crimson Rosella      | 9. Grey Fantail         | 14. White-throated Treecreeper |
| 5. Eastern Yellow Robin | 10. Laughing Kookaburra | 15. Yellow-faced Honeyeater    |



A fungal fruiting body past it's prime [DL]

Mammals – those near the front of the vehicle procession saw an Eastern Grey Kangaroo (*Macropus giganteus*), several Red-necked Wallaby (*Macropus rufogriseus*) and a Black Wallaby (*Wallabia bicolor*).

Fungi – these were not prolific, the conditions being rather dry. Some that we saw included the following:

- Rainbow Fungus (*Trametes versicolor*)
- Beefsteak Fungus (*Fistulina hepatica*)
- an orange-gilled fungus (*Descolea* sp.)
- Caterpillar Cordyceps (*Cordyceps* sp)



Orange-gilled Fungus (*Descolea* sp) [DL]



Soft Tree-fern (*Dicksonia antarctica*) base to fronds

Flora – there were very few plants in flower and they have been mentioned above, along with many others not in flower.