

Wannon Falls Scenic Reserve and Wannon Flora Reserve management history

Rod Bird 2019

Wannon Flora Reserve

The Flora Reserve ('18-Acre Reserve') is on the north side of Glenelg Highway, opposite the "Boomerang Gate". The Hamilton Field Naturalists Club (HFNC) association with this reserve began in Sept. 1959 when members wrote to the Wannon & Nigretta Management Committee offering '*support and co-operation to develop the 18-acre reserve at the Wannon as a miniature National Park and Wildflower Reserve*'.

HFNC conducted 11 working bees in from 1963 to 1969, removing tons of rubbish, rabbit-proof fencing the reserve and removing thousands of small *A. paradoxa* that had flourished when the western area had been used as a tip. Removal of pines and other non-indigenous species, including *Freesia* and *Sparaxis*, continues sporadically. *A. paradoxa* is now also encroaching on the eastern section, displacing the heath species there.

HFNC made this reserve a focus of their early work, developing expertise in field survey, collection and identification of flora. Margaret Corrick, Lionel Elmore and Murray Gunn contributed largely to the development of the HFNC herbarium, with assistance from Cliff Beaglehole (Portland FNC). There are 173 native species listed for this reserve but some (e.g. Shrub Violet) have not been seen since the 1970s.

HFNC made representations to the Land Conservation Committee (LCC) in 1979 for reservation of the reserve and that body recommended in 1982 that it be a Flora Reserve. The control of this reserve reverted to the Department of Conservation, Forests & Lands in the late 1980s and to Parks Victoria (PV) in the 1990s, then to the Shire in 2004. Apart from some rabbit control, the SGSC has done nothing to manage it.

HFNC attempted to have PV conduct an autumn burn in the reserve in 1999 but this was patchy and the main impact was to burn down a couple of old Manna Gums. A contractor engaged for rabbit control work bulldozed a break around the inside boundary of the reserve, extensively damaging the heathland on the Nigretta Rd end where the break was diverted to a line some 30 m inside the reserve. Vegetation on that line has since largely regenerated. PV has removed fences originally installed by HFNC.

Wannon Falls Scenic Reserve

Wannon Falls Reserve was reserved in 1915, 1924 and 1933, with successive parcels of 10-20 acres added for Public Recreation. A State School plantation of 30 acres was added in 1929. HFNC made representations to the LCC in 1979 for reservation of the reserve and that body recommended in 1982 that it be a Scenic Reserve. The reserve includes frontage to the Wannon River, including both banks below the Falls. The southern (western) section has been compromised by continuous grazing there from settlement until about 1970 and the planting of exotic wattles and other trees there by local residents.

An open woodland of *E. viminalis* (Manna Gum), Drooping Sheoak and Silver Banksia once occupied much of the upper parts of the reserve, with River Red Gum and Blackwood along the river. A list of native flora is available – see Bird (2018) '*Indigenous Vascular Flora of the Wannon River Frontages – Wannon Falls Reserve to Red Rd Bridge*'. There are at least 218 species, including 83 not found in the 18-Acre Reserve.

In the 1970s and early 1980s, members of HFNC removed thousands of seedlings of Coastal Tea-tree (*Leptospermum laevigatum* planted by Grey St Primary School after a section of the pine plantation was harvested in the 1960s. The shrubs had seeded prolifically in the sandy soil and would have over-run the entire reserve. HFNC members served on Committees of Management and have independently worked to remove weeds and re-establish indigenous trees on the part of the original 30 acre section of pines that was harvested in 1992. The contractor created enormous ruts during harvest in a wet winter. HFNC contested the school's request to replant pines, pointing out the LCC recommendations precluded such a move.

In the 1980s the Lands Department, with Peter Milne as Crown Lands Management officer in charge, organized the removal of many of the Poplars from the gorge and provided visitor facilities and information in the falls viewing area. About that time a Highway Park camp area for overnight camping by travellers was formalized near the oval. The old pines near the falls parking area were cut out in 2000.

HFNC undertook to revegetate the area adjacent to Morgiana Rd and the Thomas Clark lookout, by planting native species endemic to the area (seed collected from the Scenic Reserve or the Flora Reserve). This planting of trees and shrubs was made over 5 years, 1994-99, with 1182 plants planted from seed collected:

- Sept. 1994 – 450 trees planted (Manna Gum, Blackwood & Drooping Sheoak)
- Sept. 1995 – 300 trees planted (Manna Gum, Black Wattle & Drooping Sheoak)
- Sept. 1996 – 40 shrubs planted (*Allocasuarina paludosa*) and Blue Gums cut down.
- Aug. 1998 – 192 trees planted (Manna Gum, Black Wattle, Blackwood & Drooping Sheoak)
- June 1990 – 200 trees planted (*Bursaria spinosa*) and weeding around trees planted in 1998.

In 1998 the Southern Grampians Shire Council (SGSC) proposal several tracks through the reserve and to build a swing bridge across the Wannon, below the falls. That did not happen, perhaps because it involved a very steep part of the reserve. Management was transferred in 2004 from DNRE to SGSC in 2004. A Management Plan was produced in 2005 but was apparently ignored or unknown to staff until about 2010.

HFNC was concerned at the impact of uncontrolled tourism, with *ad hoc* tracks and camping at non-designated areas rampant, degrading the native vegetation. We inspected the Wannon Reserve with Southern Grampians Shire on 6th October 2004, and followed up later, pointing out the destruction at Wannon and Nigretta, and asking for better signs and the blocking of off-road tracks. We also undertook to assist in control of some environmental weeds and that was welcomed. After more letters in 2005, 2006 and 2007, the Shire took action in late 2007 to block one track and provide better signage at the reserves.

Some Wannon locals had agitated for the SGSC to ‘tidy up’ the Reserve and in 2009 SGSC arranged for heavy machinery to demolish and burn dozens of dead trees and logs, scalping large areas of native flora. Much damage was done – and again in 2013 when an adjacent area below the campground was ‘treated’ – before the Dept. of Environment, Water, Heritage & Arts intervened through the Environment Protection & Biodiversity Conservation Act (EPBC). That was not sanctioned in the 2005 or 2010 Management Plans.

HFNC work on weed control began in October 2003, when it was clear that some weeds (especially *Sparaxis*) were likely to dominate the reserves unless action was forthcoming. John Cayley and Rod Bird made 8 visits to the reserve between 2003 and 2006 to spot-spray pest plants. Areas treated for *Oxalis purpurea*, *Sparaxis*, *Freesia* and/or Angled Onion included sites on and south of the oval, swimming hole, along the river on both sides above the Falls, near the Boomerang Gate, Morgiana Rd frontage & entrance nearer the bridge. Further work was required to mop up plants missed earlier, or those that germinated, with some plants noted in 2007 at the Boomerang Gate and along the Nigretta Rd. Infestations exist along the river, some on private frontage. The problem is on-going. Recently the SGSC has employed contractors to attend to some weed problems but *Freesia*, *Sparaxis* and *Oxalis purpurea* have yet to be exterminated.

Bridal Creeper is growing very vigorously along the river frontage downstream from the Falls. Biological control is required for that pest. The problem of “exotic” native wattles has yet to be tackled – the worst (Golden Rain Wattle – *A. prominens*) occurs west of the oval and their spread needs to be curtailed. A beginning was made by Green Corps in about 2009, when several hundred of the smaller trees were cut down. They produce an enormous amount of litter from pods and leaflets that suppresses the ground flora. *A. longifolia* and *A. pycnantha* are also problems, along with the other exotic wattles and Burgan (*Leptospermum phyllicoides*) planted in the reserve. Along with *A. paradoxa*, which has advanced in recent years, Burgan is a major threat to the indigenous flora of this important conservation reserve.

Agitation by some local residents since 2009 to ‘tidy up’ (remove logs and fallen branches and mow other areas) has been unrelenting. The fire bogy is always raised although there is no history of wildfire in the reserve, and no substantial threat from logs on the ground. There is, however, a potential problem of campfires causing a fire in the reserve, especially in the fire season. SGSC has refused to disallow campfires and has not stopped the extraction of timber from the reserve by campers, despite the management plans banning that practice. Fire is a likely danger and the first action should be to ban open camp fires in the reserve, at least in the period of most danger, from 01 Nov to 01 May each year. A gas bar-b-q is needed.

As a result of the damage done in 2009 at the Scenic Reserve, a new Works Plan was produced in May 2010 by consultant Tim D’Ombrain from Biodiversity Services. Some recommendations in that report, including prohibiting the use of open fires and the collection of wood, were not accepted by SGSC. Others, including blocking access into the bush, were approved but appear to have been ignored. Failure to stop such actions results in campers degrading areas of native flora and increasing the fire danger when they light camp fires and leave them unextinguished. It also allows people to dump garden refuse in the bushland, resulting in more weeds to compete with the native flora and an on-going problem of control.