

WARRINGAL CONSERVATION SOCIETY'S WORK AT BANYULE FLATS

(Talk for Heidelberg Historical Society, Oct. 2011)

Warringal Conservation Society was formed in September 1970, and it has just celebrated its 40th Anniversary. One reason it has managed to survive is that the Heidelberg area has so many natural areas worth conserving. We do our best to act on behalf of all Heidelberg, and now for Banyule's, parks and reserves, but Banyule Flats was what stimulated the Society's formation.

In 1970 Heidelberg City Council bought the farmland which became Banyule Flats Reserve, with the intention of turning it into sportsfields and a basketball stadium. At the time it was used for grazing cattle. There was a large billabong with old Red Gums surviving on the banks, some remnants of riverside bush, and swamp and marshland. Banyule Creek had long been diverted into a fairly straight drain.

In response to this threat of major alteration, local residents gathered together to form the Society. Under the Founder President Doug Western, and the second President Keith Holywell, they lobbied HCC to preserve some of the land for nature conservation – successfully. Chris Bailey was another valued founder member; so were some Councillors such as Vern Henderson. Only two ovals were constructed, and a Native Garden planned for the Banyule Rd. frontage. Cattle remained because the land was leased back to the vendor, Mr Alan Baxter, who bred Red Poll herd bulls. Eventually some tracks and stiles were built for walkers, but one had to look out for the stock. The Eastern property was a dairy farm, with Friesians, until 1980.

The Conservation Society carried out surveys of plants and birds – several founding members belonged to the Bird Observers Club including Howard Jarman (died 1981) and Reg Johnson (died this year). It is still one of Melbourne's best bird places, with at least 100 species possible – though not all at once. Our main focus was the Billabong whose surroundings were heavily grazed; it was splendid for waterbirds, but the only cover for little birds such as Fairy-wrens and Red-browed Finches was the tangle of blackberries and hawthorns on the banks. Plantings were carried out from 1974. One WCS suggestion, carried out by Council, was to build the buffer bank between the Ovals and the Swamp, which now carries the Main Yarra Trail. Despite unpromising soil (clay and broken footpath) the trees and shrubs planted in December 1980 have grown very well. A W.C.S. Maintenance Bee was necessary in Jan 1981 for watering and mulching the young plants. Since then plantings have taken place in winter and spring.

Our first publication appeared in 1977 the *Register of Environmental Assets of the City of Heidelberg* (now out of print). This was used as a basis for Council's later Heritage Study. In 1981, we produced *The Birds of Heidelberg and the Yarra Valley*. This was a major effort, and thanks to our Treasurer Jack Wright, a financial success.

The Board of Works bought the eastern farm for the Metropolitan Yarra Park in 1980, and promptly started fencing the Billabong and river margins from stock (they replaced the Friesians with a few Angus steers to keep the grass down at first). It was not open to the public for some years.

Cattle caused damage in the Banyule Swamp in spring 1984, when they broke a fence and ate out a reed-bed. It was distressing to see migrant Reed Warblers searching for the tall reeds where they hoped to nest – they have never re-established themselves. Following this, HCC staff checked the lease terms and found boundaries had never been legally defined. Wetland fencing was improved, but the Billabong was not fenced till 1989.

This enabled a major project to be carried out by the Society. There were already rumours of

plans for a new Highway or Freeway through the Yarra Valley, and our President Vic Marks pointed out that we should put our money where our mouth was if we expected to be taken seriously. We carried out a Megaplanting on the banks of the Billabong, with the aid of other conservation societies such as Men of the Trees. The Council was very helpful, spraying to kill grass and weeds, and providing \$2500 for indigenous local plants. 100 volunteers planted 4500 plants in nine large mixed clumps. We couldn't afford individual tree-guards, but each clump was protected with wire fence against the rabbits. In later years WCS weeded the clumps, and more infill clumps filled the gaps. The growth was quite spectacular and it is now hard to see the billabong without going in the young trees. Water quality improved, and birds moved in in large numbers, including the Common Bronzewing, wiped out by shooters in most farm areas.

The Main Yarra Trail opened in 1991 – passing around the Swamp on an old farm road and the buffer bank. It is very popular with walkers and cyclists. WCS made more plantings in the Swamp margins. And in 1991, we published a guide to Banyule's parks and reserves - “*Beautiful Banyule*”, written by Carol Toomey (now James). Both our books are still available.

From 1998 to 2009, the big drought had major effects. The Billabong dried out completely in 1994. Its bottom was colonized by grass and shrubs – with no grazing animals present, it became densely overgrown. Most of the waterbirds would have flown away, but BCC raised the water-level of the Swamp by blocking a drain in March 1999. A thunder-storm filled it and it was immediately colonized by a pair of Black Swans, which nested every winter, plus ducks and Coots and Dusky Moorhens. It was a real oasis, and a fine foreground to the view of Banyule House. Water-plants grew splendidly, providing food for frogs and birds. Native mammals also colonized the area in the drought – Eastern Grey Kangaroos, Swamp Wallabies, Wombats, Echidnas, and occasionally Koalas are seen (but they are terribly vulnerable to dogs). Possums are very numerous – many are illegally released here- and a healthy Powerful Owl population keeps them down. I hope they also take the Rabbits, which with Foxes are far too numerous. Many unusual birds visited the area during the drought.

In late summer 2009, the Banyule Swamp dried out almost completely and was reduced to mud and dead Water-Ribbon clumps. This made it easy to observe Latham's Snipe, (a summer migrant from Japan) and other waders as they fed in the open, but all our other waterbirds had gone. Fortunately, with the major storms which followed the Black Saturday bushfires, the Swamp was refilled. The Swans returned and produced three broods in two years. The summer of 2010 was unusually wet and we were visited by Scarlet Honeyeaters - normally summer visitors to East Gippsland. This year (2011) the Swans and most waterbirds are absent, because the Swamp is now too deep for the waterplants they feed on. But the Billabong is full and sheltered, and full of birds. Like all our natural areas in the City, the park has benefited greatly from Banyule's specialist team of Bush Crew Management workers.

Warringal Conservation Society celebrated its recent anniversary by planting 40 trees near the Yarra, close to the Old Shire Offices where we hold our meetings. We hold meetings on the first Thursday, every month but January, and of course visitors are welcome. We publish a bi-monthly Newsletter. Our present major concern is of course the prospect of the North-east Freeway Link between the Ring Road at Greensborough and the Eastern Freeway at Bulleen. Claims are made that this will be in a tunnel, but from an engineering point of view, I doubt this - it's on the floodplain after all, and this February we saw the park areas flooded. A viaduct is much more likely.. WCS has supported the development of a new strong and enthusiastic anti-Freeway body, the Friends of Banyule <www.friendsofbanyule.org.au>. We shared a stall at the last Banyule Festival, where a large aerial photo of the potential freeway route created great interest. May I suggest that all readers check the Friends of Banyule website to keep up to date with this threat. The Freeway Link has the potential to destroy so much that we value in the Yarra Valley - the

remnants of the Heidelberg School's views, and so many of our parks - Banyule Flats, Warringal Parklands, Heide, Yarra Flats, Bolin Bolin Billabong and the Bulleen Parklands. As Melbourne's population increases, and nature is put under greater pressure, we cannot possibly afford to lose our valuable parkland and nature reserves in the Yarra Valley.

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