



Conservation

DON SAUNDERS AND JENNY LAU

Eastern Great Egret. Photo: R. Mackenzie

MILLEWA FOREST REPRIEVE

In the last edition of *The Bird Observer* we reported that while the NSW Government had agreed to the creation of the Millewa National Park, half of the Millewa State Forest would remain available for logging until July 2015. The ink was hardly dry on that edition when, on 19 May 2010, the NSW Government announced that there would be no interim logging and that the entire Millewa State Forest would become a National Park on 1 July 2010. The NSW Premier, Kristina Kennelly, also announced an increase in the total support package from \$80 to \$97 million for affected timber industry workers, regional communities and to set up and manage the new parks. BOCA applauds the decision and looks forward to a new era of management in this internationally significant wetland.

VEAC DISCUSSION PAPER RELEASED

On 28 June 2010, the Victorian Environment Assessment Council (VEAC) released its Remnant Native Vegetation Investigation discussion paper. The discussion paper provides a detailed analysis of the condition and landscape context (connectivity) of remnant native vegetation on public and private land in Victoria's 28 bioregions. It is the first time such an analysis has been undertaken in Australia. The results will be extremely valuable for those planning landscape-scale conservation projects, such as biolinks, and it provides a model for other Australian states and territories. The paper also discusses a range of ecological issues and processes relating to habitat fragmentation and climate change.

On the day of the paper's release, BOCA joined with other environment groups in issuing a press release condemning the Victorian Government's plan to abolish VEAC and absorb its functions into a new Natural Resource & Catchment Council – an amalgamation of the Victorian Catchment Management Council, the Victorian Coastal Council and VEAC. At risk is VEAC's capacity to undertake independent investigations into a wide range of land use issues in close consultation with the Victorian community.

VEAC is inviting submissions on the discussion paper until 30 August 2010. Those wanting a copy can access it at www.veac.vic.gov.au or by contacting VEAC at:

Level 6, 8 Nicholson Street, East Melbourne, VIC 3002
Ph: 03 9637 9902.

PLAGUE LOCUST CONTROL AND BIRDS

Last year's good spring rains over south-western Queensland and north-western NSW created ideal conditions for the Australian Plague Locust *Chortoicetes terminifera*, with swarms of these insects moving south and west in autumn 2010. The Australian Plague Locust Commission (APLC) predicts that there will be a further outbreak of locusts this coming spring, with heavy infestations along the south-western slopes of NSW, south-western Qld and north-western NSW, the Riverina (NSW and Victoria) and areas west of the Flinders Ranges in South Australia. This means that large areas of land will be subject to some form of locust control involving the use of pesticides, principally fipronil and fenitrothion.

In response to enquiries from BOCA members about the potential impacts of locust control on birdlife, BOCA joined with Birds Australia and Trust for Nature (Victoria) in requesting a briefing from the APLC and the Victorian Department of Primary Industries on the extent, methods and potential ecological impacts of the locust control program.

The control program will specifically target areas with extensive hopper bands (high densities of wingless, immature locusts). Where these occur on agricultural land and some public land, it is likely that they will be treated with fipronil and fenitrothion. However, large areas of public land will be exempt from treatment with fipronil and fenitrothion. For example: areas of high biodiversity value, such as national parks; areas with significant concentrations of non-threatened fauna, such as flocks of feeding birds following locusts, or local breeding aggregations of birds (1.5 km buffer); waterways (1.5 km buffer); and within 3 km of a Ramsar wetland or a nesting waterbird colony. Where necessary, conservation reserves will be treated with *Metarhizium* (Green Guard), a fungal control agent with no

known toxicity to birds or humans. Areas with greater than 10 per cent tree cover, such as woodlands and forests, will not be treated.

While the control program will be widespread, it does not aim to completely eradicate locusts. In targeting areas with dense concentrations of locusts, it is unlikely to reduce locust numbers substantially enough to cause starvation amongst birds – the locust plague should still provide a feast for our birdlife. Pesticide use is not expected to cause direct bird mortalities, but long term, sub-lethal effects of pesticide use on birds, such as impacts on reproduction and metabolism, are largely unknown.

For those members living in areas affected by locusts, BOCA would be interested in receiving information about bird mortalities or other impacts that may be related to the control program. Also, if members know of significant bird breeding sites or notice significant hopper bands within locust control areas that may be unknown to State authorities, please report these to BOCA, the APLC (1800 635 962) or the Victorian Department of Primary Industries (1300 135 559).

INSKIP POINT, QUEENSLAND

One of Australia’s iconic birding sites is being threatened by urban development. Inskip Point is best known to birders as a “highly-probable” location to see the elusive Black-breasted Button-quail and is part of the Cooloola and Fraser Coast Important Bird Area.

The Rainbow Shores Development Stage 2 proposes urban development on 200 hectares of coastal dunes (see map). The Department of Environment and Resource Management (DERM) refused the application based on conflicts with various provisions of the State Coastal Management Plan, including it being core habitat for Black-breasted Button-quail and Beach Stone-curllew.

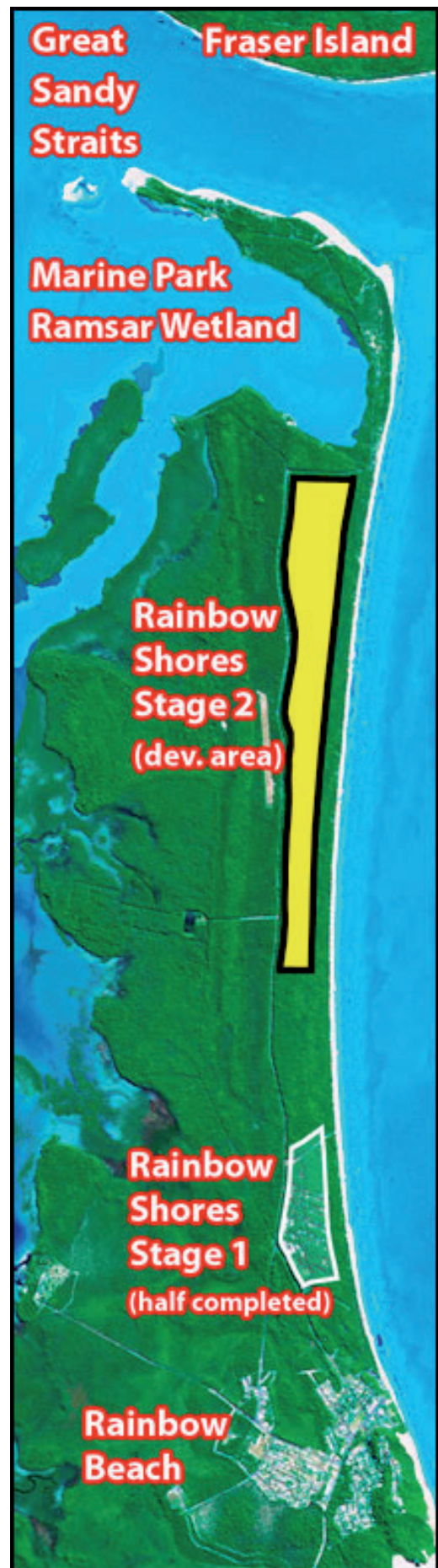
The developer has appealed this decision and the matter is now before the courts. The State has a very strong case to support its refusal, however nothing in court is certain. *The court’s decision on this in November will be final.*

To help DERM uphold this crucial refusal, community groups and individuals have joined the case as Co-respondents, calling expert witnesses to help ensure that the court fully considers the real facts that apply to the locality and its true needs.

The community court action will cost money. A tax deductible fund has been set up under the auspices of the Sunshine Coast Environment Council (SCEC). Donation forms and general information flyers can be downloaded from the website or requested via the email address and phone number provided below.

The Black-breasted Button-quail is listed as Vulnerable under the EPBC Act, Vulnerable in Queensland and Critically Endangered in NSW.

Email: info@saveinskip.org.au Web: www.saveinskip.org.au
Ph: 0466 814 710.



SMUGGLERS TREE DOWN

The famous Smugglers Tree at Iron Range, Cape York, has fallen. *The Brisbane Courier Mail*, 19 February 2010, reported its demise with extensive quotes from John Young.

Possibly 300 years old and at least 60m high, the tree was a landmark for countless nature lovers after naturalist Harry Barnard found the first recorded Eclectus Parrot's nest before World War 1.

A few years later, someone hammered a ladder of steel spikes up the tree's smooth trunk to the lowest nesting hole.

That ladder's use by egg collectors and thieves taking rare parrot chicks for illegal markets earned the tree its Smugglers Tree tag.

Queensland wildlife cinematographer and bird guide, John Young, photographed rare Eclectus Parrots in the tree last November, but when he returned to lead a bird-watching week this month, the tree lay rotting in the tropical jungle, 850km north of Cairns.

"For bird watchers, that tree was an absolute icon", he said.

"It was what the Iron Ranges is all about. At dusk, it was such a spectacle. It was a living block of flats.

"In its heyday, there would be between 250 and 350 pairs of Metallic Starlings nesting in it. There nearly always were three nests of Eclectus Parrots in the hollows, with the top nest nearly 45m up.

"In a rotten branch, Marshall's Fig-Parrots had one nest and a pair of Red-cheeked Parrots had drilled a nest cavity in a rotting branch near the top.

"For years a pair of Grey Goshawks nested on one particular branch and for two years in a row, a Rufous Owl nested in a hollow.

"Within 100m of that tree, everything was a sanctuary, but outside that zone, the predators could take what they liked.

"When a Goshawk flew in or out, you'd see 600 Metallic Starlings drop like they were shot.

"They'd plummet down and fly low out onto the forest and it would be dead silent for 15 minutes before they started coming back.

"Cyclone Monica (in 2006) badly damaged the Smugglers Tree and surrounded it with debris. It... died within 18 months."

THREATENED SPECIES – NSW

The NSW Scientific Committee, established by the Threatened Species Conservation Act 1995, has made Final Determinations to list the Striated Fieldwren (*Calamanthus fuliginosus*) as

an Endangered Species (previously listed as Vulnerable) and to list the White-fronted Chat (*Epthianura albifrons*) as a Vulnerable Species.

The Committee has also made Preliminary Determinations to list the Australasian Bittern as an Endangered Species and to upgrade the listing of Regent Honeyeater from Endangered to Critically Endangered.

RALPHS BAY, TASMANIA

The Bird Observer, August 2004 and February 2010, reported concerns about a major development proposal at Ralphs Bay, Lauderdale, 20km south-east of Hobart. The Tasmanian Planning Commission had recommended against the 470 lot canal development, but the final decision rested with the Tasmanian Premier.

The good news for migratory and resident shorebirds is that the Premier has accepted the recommendations of the Planning Commission, so the development will not proceed. Birds Tasmania will now push for the Ralphs Bay area to be added to the existing Pitt Water Orielton Lagoon Ramsar site.

CAPERTEE NATIONAL PARK, NSW

A 2800 hectare national park has been created in Capertee Valley, an area famous for its birdlife. The property known as "Port Macquarie" was purchased for \$4 million by the NSW Government, with the Australian Government providing \$2.7 million of that amount through its Caring for our Country initiative.

The property includes 15km of the Capertee River and is a breeding and feeding site for the Regent Honeyeater. Other threatened species there include Diamond Firetail, Hooded Robin, Turquoise Parrot and Barking Owl. It also protects more than 350 hectares of White Box-Yellow Box-Blakely's Red Gum Grassy Woodland and Derived Native Grassland which is listed as Critically Endangered under the Commonwealth EPBC Act.

LAKE TORRENS, SA, EARNS ITS IBA STATUS

The national IBA Committee discussed at some length whether a site such as Lake Torrens, which only fills occasionally, should be recognised as an Important Bird Area. Fortunately, the Committee agreed that it should be listed and the Lake has now justified that decision.

It appears that some 150,000-200,000 Banded Stilts moved from the lower Coorong in April to breed on islands in Lake Torrens, which flooded for the first time in two decades. How did the birds know that the conditions were suitable on Lake Torrens?

There is an excellent article by Ken Gosbell *et al* about this event on the Australian Wader Study Group website <http://www.awsg.org.au/news.php>.