



# Conservation

DON SAUNDERS AND JENNY LAU

Eastern Great Egret. Photo: R. Mackenzie

## VEAC REMNANT NATIVE VEGETATION INVESTIGATION

BOCA has made a submission to the Victorian Environment Assessment Council (VEAC) commenting on its Remnant Native Vegetation Investigation (RNVI) discussion paper. The discussion paper identified roadsides, river frontages, wetlands and small public land reserves as areas of public land containing remnant native vegetation that is significant in both total area and conservation value, with the capacity to contribute to improved ecological connectivity. At present, there are no clear, statewide management strategies for these 'bits and pieces' of public land. Yet, in some Victorian bioregions, native vegetation on roadsides may constitute up to 30 per cent of the remaining native vegetation and provide the only opportunities for ecological linkages. BOCA believes that the final RNVI report must outline new initiatives, and provide recommendations, to improve the protection, management and restoration of remnant native vegetation in these areas.

The discussion paper also emphasised the importance of remnant native vegetation on private land and that private land conservation will play a vital role in protecting and restoring degraded ecosystems. VEAC has clearly identified that in most bioregions, the condition of native vegetation on private land has lower site condition values than that on public land. While any new initiatives proposed by VEAC will necessarily focus on public land, these will have the potential to guide private land conservation.

BOCA believes the final RNVI report has the potential to provide government and the community with coordinated, science-based strategies and new initiatives to protect, enhance and restore Victoria's remnant native vegetation. It must emphasise the need for programs that produce clear guidance on how to prioritise conservation actions at multiple scales, including actions specifically aimed at achieving improved ecological connectivity.

## VEAC REPRIEVE

In the last edition of *The Bird Observer*, we reported that the Victorian Government was planning to abolish VEAC and absorb its functions into the new Natural Resource & Catchment Council. BOCA is pleased to report that the Victorian Government has reversed this decision with Victorian Minister for Environment and Climate Change, Gavin Jennings announcing that VEAC will be retained in its present form as *'the best way for the council to retain its autonomy and independence and provide the best possible environmental advice to government'*. BOCA agrees and applauds this decision.

## PRECAUTIONARY PRINCIPLE APPLIED TO MORTLAKE WIND FARM

In the December 2008 issue of *The Bird Observer*, we outlined a number of threats affecting Brolgas in south-western Victoria. A potential new threat to the species is the construction and operation of wind farms. Potential impacts include direct mortality due to collisions with turbines and powerlines, disturbance and displacement of birds from nesting and flocking sites and interruptions to migratory movements of birds between breeding and flocking sites. Just how much of a threat wind farms are to Brolgas is unknown because we know little about how Brolgas move through the landscape and their capacity to avoid moving turbines. For this reason, BOCA has made a number of submissions on wind farms proposed for 'Brolga country' in south-western Victoria, calling for the precautionary principle to be applied. This means that where there are threats of serious or irreversible damage to the Brolga population, lack of full scientific certainty about the extent of that threat should not be used as a reason for allowing the project to go ahead unhindered. Put more simply, we should err on the side of caution.

In the case of a wind farm proposed for the Mortlake area (south-western Victoria), BOCA's concerns have been heard. In August 2010, the Victorian Planning Minister, Justin Madden, approved the partial development of the Mortlake Wind Farm. The proposal consists of two distinct clusters of turbines – the Mortlake south site, which has been given approval, and the Mortlake east site, which will not proceed until potential impact of the project on the Victorian Brolga population has been further assessed. The planning panel report also calls for further examination of the significance of the site for Latham's Snipe. BOCA agrees with this decision; we did not object to the proposal for the Mortlake south site, but the Mortlake east site contains a number of wetlands, a creek with associated swamps and is adjacent to a large wetland on private land that is being managed for conservation. The area contains a number of known and potential Brolga breeding sites and is close to two Brolga flocking sites. Furthermore, areas around the wetlands and creek are known to support Latham's Snipe.

The planning panel report criticised the proponent for the inadequacy of its avifauna surveys and for its failure to consult local landholders on their knowledge of local birdlife; criticisms that echo the submissions of BOCA, Trust for Nature and a number of local birders. BOCA thanks local birders for voicing their concerns about the potential impacts of the project on our birdlife. In particular, BOCA thanks members of Sou'West Vic BOCA (Peter, Rhonda and Shelley Barrand and Chris Connelly) for supporting our submissions by undertaking bird surveys of wetlands adjacent to the Mortlake east site.

## FIRE AND BIODIVERSITY DECLINE

'Fire regimes that cause biodiversity decline' has been nominated as a key threatening process under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act). In assessing this nomination, the Threatened Species Scientific Committee of the Federal Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities (DSEWPC) will consider *'the ecological effects of the current frequency, intensity, location, scale and timing of fires and how contemporary fire regimes may be affecting biodiversity throughout the Australian landscape'*. Altered or inappropriate fire regimes are already recognised as a key threatening process in NSW, Vic and NT.

BOCA will be making a submission to support this nomination. More information can be found at [www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/](http://www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/) or by contacting the Species Listing Section of DSEWPC on 02 6274 2238. Submissions will close on 23 November 2010.

## PROTECTING PENGUINS

- BOCA supported Sou'West Vic Branch members in objecting to a proposal to conduct private-operator tours of the Little Penguin colony on the beach at London Bridge in **Port Campbell National Park, Victoria**. The small beach also supports breeding Hooded Plover and has been closed to the public since 1979 after vandalism caused a decline in Little Penguin numbers.

The beach is at the base of high vertical cliffs and fencing has effectively excluded foxes, dogs and cats from attacking the Little Penguins and Hooded Plovers.

Following an independent assessment, Parks Victoria has rejected the proposal for tours and the beach will remain closed to protect wildlife.



Top: Monitoring the health of Little Penguins. Bottom: Monitoring breeding of Little Penguins. Photos courtesy of Phillip Island Nature Park, Vic

- On **Phillip Island, Victoria** there has been an on-going program to buy back land on the Summerland Peninsula to protect the Little Penguin colony. This program has taken 25 years to complete, requiring tens of millions of dollars to buy back the 50 hectares of prime coastal land, most of which was divided into residential-size blocks, many with existing holiday homes.

The Summerland Peninsula is home to the world-famous Phillip Island Penguin Parade which is estimated to contribute approximately \$96 m a year to the Victorian economy.

Phillip Island originally supported 10 Little Penguin breeding sites, nine of these have been lost over the last 100 years. Since the buy-back program began, the numbers breeding on Summerland Peninsula have increased significantly to the current estimate of 28,000.

Work will now begin to remove remaining infrastructure and rehabilitate recently purchased land.

Successive Victorian Governments must be congratulated for persevering with planning and funding of this program which, when proposed in the early 1980s, raised a storm of protest.

- Not so fortunate are the Little Penguins of **Granite Island, South Australia**, which have been monitored since 1991, with an annual census since 2001, except for 2004.

The newsletter of Nature Foundation SA, Spring 2010, reports on the results of this monitoring:

“The 2010 Penguin Census was held over two days with a total of 80 volunteers helping out. Unfortunately, this year’s census revealed that the Little Penguin numbers on Granite Island have continued to decline, with numbers dropping to an all time low of only 146 penguins, compared to 1,548 in 2001. It is disappointing to see the decline, but not unexpected.

“The big question is why? Where are the penguins going? We know they are not relocating to other areas and that they are dying. We know that the decline is likely to be linked to the increase in the population of New Zealand Fur Seals (*Arctocephalus forsteri*) but there is no hard evidence to prove them responsible. Other possible factors may include reduced food sources for the penguins, tourist impact, feral animals and global warming.

“The problem is, we don’t know and at the moment very little is being done to find out the causes. If we knew the causes, we could then develop a strategy to protect the penguins.

“West Island, only five kilometers away, had a thriving colony only five years ago – it now has few or possibly no penguins remaining. We are facing a very real possibility that the days of penguins on Granite Island will soon be gone. There is every likelihood that this will be in the next few years.

Penguins tend not to recolonise, so when they are gone, they may never come back.

“As well as the huge environmental loss, the loss to tourism will also be felt heavily. Over 35,000 people a year visit Granite Island to view penguins and take penguin tours each year. Many of these people eat in and/or sleep over in Victor Harbor. This would create a significant economic loss to the town.”

## AUSTRALIAN PAINTED SNIPE SURVEYS

The heavy rains throughout the Murray Darling Basin, the Channel Country and into the interior this winter could provide a bumper breeding season for the Australian Painted Snipe (APS), as it has already been for other opportunistic waders such as Banded and Black-winged Stilts. The rain events will however, allow the birds to remain dispersed. For this reason, the Australian Painted Snipe Recovery project encourages wetland birders from across the nation (especially in the under-represented north) to be vigilant as APS have been found in all types of habitat from vast lagoons to storm water drains.

Australia-wide simultaneous surveying for APS will occur on the weekend of 15 January 2011 in an attempt to improve estimates of the population, now thought to stand at less than 1,500 individuals. An earlier Australia-wide survey was conducted on 16 October 2010. Incidental surveys outside these dates (including those where no APS are seen) are also much appreciated in an attempt to unravel the many ecological questions still surrounding this enigmatic bird.

For more information on the APS and tips on how and where to survey for them, visit <http://www.birdsaustralia.com.au/our-projects/australian-painted-snipe.html> or contact Chris Purnell at [c.purnell@birdsaustralia.com.au](mailto:c.purnell@birdsaustralia.com.au) or Threatened Bird Network coordinator Janelle Thomas at [j.thomas@birdsaustralia.com.au](mailto:j.thomas@birdsaustralia.com.au). Online survey forms and a link to hard copy forms are available on the website – and remember that negative surveys are just as important as positive sightings so please send in ALL survey forms.



Bottom: Australian Painted Snipe. Photo: Geoff Jones