



Crossing a trestle bridge on the Rubicon Dam walk tour with RFPG, a 10 kilometre return walk. Photo Ann Jelinek.

Rubicon's scenic, historical, and cultural heritage

By Ann Jelinek

RUBICON FOREST Protection Group Inc. (RFPG) promotes the significant biodiversity, scenic, historical, and cultural heritage values of our magnificent mountain forests as well as the exceptional tourism, education, and recreation opportunities in these areas and their associated economic benefits.

A key concern of the Group is the long-term sustainable management of these special forests.

Current large-scale logging operations in the montane ash forests (mountain ash, alpine ash, and shining gum) of the Central Highlands, including Rubicon State Forest, combined with the devastation caused by the 2009 Black Saturday bushfire, are rapidly compromising a sustainable future for these majestic forest environments.

Loss of habitats of varying ages, loss of habitat connectivity, and changes to plant-and-animal interrelationships within the forest including invasive weeds like blackberries, are critical considerations for maintaining forest biodiversity.

Equally, the health and wellbeing of local communities are dependent on the essential environmental services provided by the integrity of biodiverse forests, such as clean air and water, carbon storage, and a place for recreation.

RFPG has recently organised several popular tours of Rubicon State Forest to help our local community value its unique natural, historical, and cultural features – the group believes that tourism, recreation, and a healthy environment are integral to

a sustainable future for the Murrindindi community.

Plants and animals of the mountain forests

A diversity of plants and animals occur in the complex structure of mature montane ash forests.

At night, the forests come alive with tiny feathertail gliders, eastern pygmy possums, various bats, and small mammals like bush rats, marsupial *Antechinus*, and long-nosed bandicoots scurrying through the leaf litter.

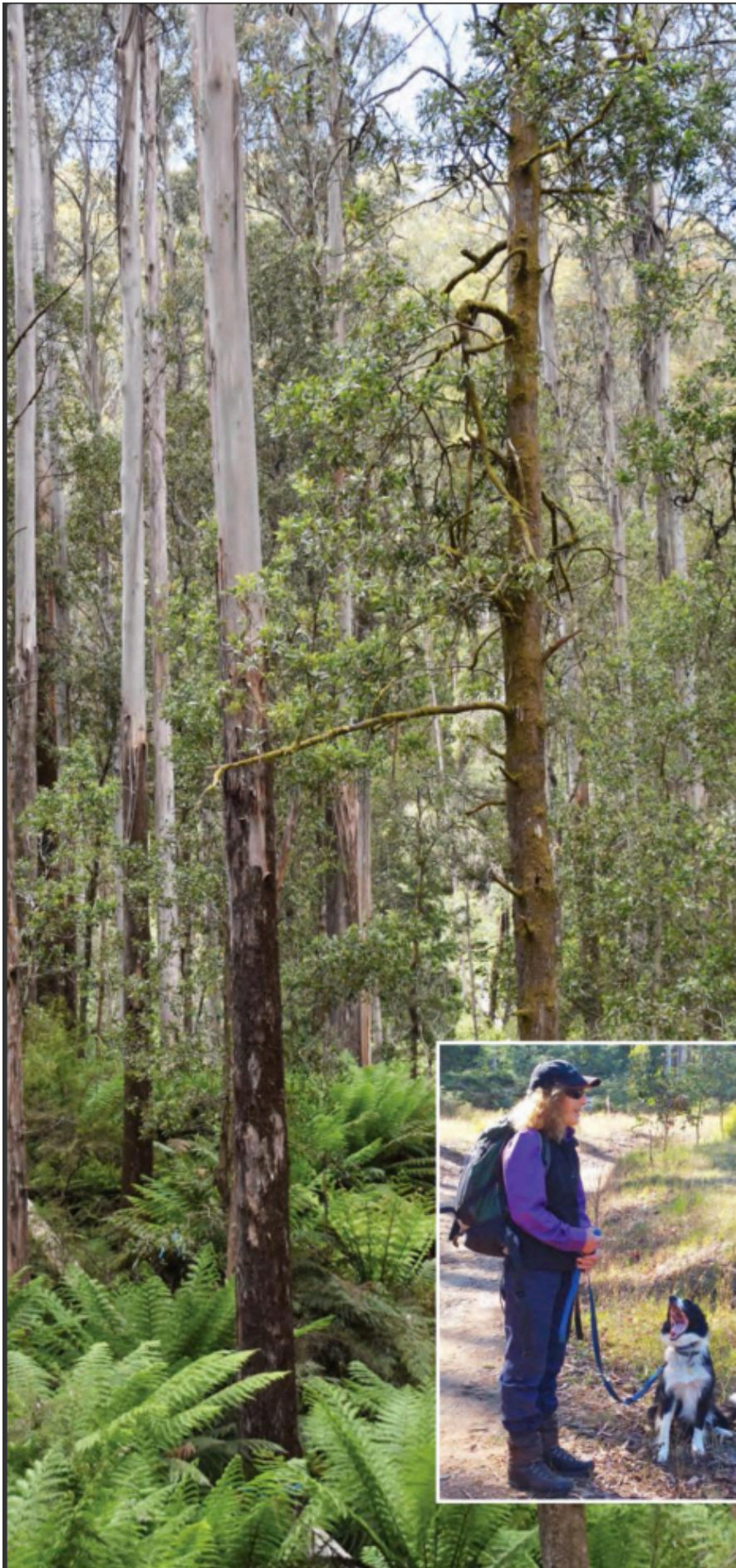
There are also noisy mountain brushtail possums (known as bobucks), sleek black-and-white greater gliders feeding high up in the tallest trees, the powerful owl with its distinctive call, and even lyrebirds roosting in vegetation above ground. Haunting calls of the yellow-bellied glider and sooty owl add to the mystery of these

forests and their delicately balanced ecology.

During the day, many small birds repeatedly call as they flit through the bushes and tall tree canopies in search of insects and nectar, while the unmistakable chuckles of kookaburras and whip-cracks of whip birds are often heard at dawn and dusk.

Mountain ash, *Eucalyptus regnans*, is the world's tallest flowering plant and grows quickly, although it takes well over 100 years to reach maturity. Mature montane ash forests store huge amounts of carbon and are particularly important for protecting water quality and quantity in our catchments.

The variety of understory plants in the montane forests includes many that have edible fruits, flowers, and underground tubers, with some also having valuable medicinal uses. ➤



Moss-covered Antarctic beech temperate rainforest communities alongside waterways like the Royston River provide a cool, dark environment for ferns, mosses, and fungi. Antarctic or southern beech, *Nothofagus cunninghamii* is an important species in the origins, evolution, and distribution of plants in the Southern Hemisphere.

The mature montane ash forests – with hollow-bearing trees and dead stags, a diversity of understory plants, ferns, mosses, and fungi – provide essential habitat for the critically endangered Leadbeater's possum, *Gymnobelideus leadbeateri*, vulnerable greater glider, *Petauroides volans*, and sooty owl, *Tyto tenebricosa*. Waterways in the area also provide refuge for threatened fauna like the barred galaxias, *Galaxias fuscus*.

Leadbeater's possum has a very restricted distribution, being largely confined to the montane ash forests of the Central Highlands. Habitat loss and fragmentation, including loss of forests of different ages and hollow-bearing trees, primarily caused by current logging operations and recent bushfires, threaten its long-term survival.

Rubicon Valley Historic Area

The Rubicon Valley Historic Area is now recognised on the Victorian Heritage Register and includes features such as the recently reconstructed '15000 siphon' trestle bridge on part of the original tramline, an undulating 10km return walk along the tramline to Rubicon dam, open aqueduct, huge pipeline with the odd leak, various sawmill structures, and Royston power station. These structures reflect the fascinating history associated with Victoria's first hydro-electricity generation scheme dating back to 1929.

For more information on Rubicon Forest Protection Group visit www.rubiconforest.org

Left: montane ash forest. Photo Ann Jelinek. Inset: ecologist Ann Jelinek giving a talk about the forest. Photo courtesy Bev Dick.