

STEP NEWSLETTER MARCH 2025



View from the Kurrajongs looking towards the Parade of Peas, Photo Andy Russell

From the President

Hello all, and welcome to a new year in the Southern Tablelands Ecosystems Park!

The hard work continues down in Forest 20 and working bees are back in full swing after a slowdown in numbers over the festive season. Our STEPPers often showed up on even the hottest Thursdays, although we sensibly ceased our manual labours after morning tea when the mercury topped 30 degrees Celsius. We were also mindful of the combined summer hazards of heat, sunburn and snakes! Fortunately, several deluges occurred over summer and the gardens are looking surprisingly well for late February.

There has been a lot of wind, and we have had “emu parades” to pick up and stack fallen branches and sticks so that the mowing team from the Arboretum can access the native grass near the Eucalypt rows. Some of the smooth barked gums like Scribbly Gum *E.rossii*, Brittle Gum *E.mannifera* and Blakely’s Red Gum *E.blakelyi* have been shedding their bark (a process known as decortication) which has the combined benefits of creating a natural mulch and colourful, ornamental tree trunks. The dead branches which are still attached to trees are left in situ to provide perches and habitat for birds and insects.



Unfortunately, several Snow Gums *E.pauciflora* have not fared so well and have had to be removed. New trees were planted nearby a year or two ago, so hopefully these will survive. It could be that the sodden drenching rains of 2020-2022 followed by the two extremely hot summers put too much stress on these cool climate trees.

The Wattle Walk, now into the sixth year after planting, has grown into a shady and educational space to wander through. Of particular note are the similarities of foliage, contrasted with variations in flowering times, among the pinnate-leaved Acacias such as Deane's Wattle *Acacia deanei*, Paramatta Wattle *A. paramattensis*, Early Black Wattle *A. decurrens*, and Late Black Wattle *A. mearnsii*. These can be very difficult to tell apart when not in flower, unless one has a hand lens and a keen eye. However, this year the Deane's wattle is flowering (I think for the first time) in February whereas the other three species flowered in either spring or early summer. This is useful information we can share with visitors when we do our Wattle Walks in late Winter. There will also be a Eucalyptus walk coming up at STEP on 10th May-10am- for Canberra Tree Week .

As always, I send thanks to both our volunteers and also the team at National Arboretum Canberra for keeping Forest 20 looking so tidy and productive.



Photos and Text Jane Cottee

STEP President

News from Forest 20

The ups and downs of looking after Forest 20 continue to present challenges and opportunities for STEppers. Some of these are repeating, such as dry and wet periods, a need to refurbish plantings of shorter living species, and the need to keep longer living species under control!

Recent opportunities include discussions with Arboretum staff about installing a new water supply with multiple points to access water at a more reliable pressure. This will eventually mean that the two green storage tanks are removed, and Forest 20 will be linked into the Arboretum's main supply system. This will be a very welcome upgrade and opportunity to revitalise the Bush Tucker Garden and other locations.

We have also been working closely with Arboretum staff on a new sign for the Wattle Walk, and some new signs designed to assist visitors to find us as they enter the carpark or use the Arboretum's walking paths. We have also been working with the Friends of the Arboretum and NAC staff to locate and fund a picnic setting. A



site for this has been identified near to our main entrance and paths but also in view of the lower carpark. We hope that this will be visible, readily accessible and give visitors good views into Forest 20.

Significant works by our keen STEPpers include: extending the 'pea parade' into a new bed with a retaining wall of rocks, supplied by the Arboretum; extensive refurbishment of the ephemeral wetland that has become a bit too overgrown with tussock grasses and rushes that obscure visual access; and some significant pruning of shrubs that were part of our early plantings and needed rejuvenation.

We are soon to receive some specimens of our national floral emblem (*Acacia pycnantha*) from the Wattle Day Association. Thank you to them and for their

continued support for STEP and our annual Wattle Day walks in September. These will be planted as part of our usual autumn plantings – hoping we will get some rains soon.

As always, we are very grateful to the band of regular STEPpers who keep our working bees going through thick and thin, wet and dry, cold and hot. We are regularly enjoying the company of 20-25 STEPpers at morning tea, often with some of the Arboretum's horticultural team. Bringing volunteers together with Arboretum staff is an important demonstration of our partnership.

Lastly, Max Bourke tells me that ten years ago he placed Forest 20 onto Google maps and this week it reached a total of 10,000 hits! Another link with the world wide web is via Instagram which Lainie Shorthouse looks after and has 161 followers, some of whom are regular walkers around Forest 20!

Photo David or Lainie, text David Shorthouse

Traveller's Tale from South America

On the eastern side of Buenos Aires, fringing part of the mighty Rio de la Plata is a wonderful nature park. The



Reserva Ecologica is very close to the bustling city area and is a tribute to planners who have excised this to protect the fragile lakes and marshes along margins of the river. The park has an extensive system of boardwalks and trails and is a haven for many bird species. One species of Jacana, smaller than

Jacanas I have seen in Australia (to my inexpert observation), roam with ease across stretches of water covered

with weed and lilies. Such care for the environment in a bustling city is very heartening. Judy Smith, Photos taken by Andy Smith, local Argentinian guide.



From the brochure

Welcome to the Ecological Reserve Costanera Sur

Nestled just metres away from Puerto Madero and a few blocks from the bustling centre of Buenos Aires, the Reserve offers a unique opportunity to immerse yourself in nature without leaving the city. This guide is your comprehensive companion to exploring one of the most important urban reserves in Latin America.



With over 350 hectares of forests, grasslands, lagoons, and wetlands, the Reserve is home to more than 2,000 species of plants, animals, fungi, insects, and other organisms. Whether you're an avid bird watcher, a nature enthusiast, or simply looking for a peaceful escape, you'll find something to marvel at here.

Discover the best natural viewpoints of the Río de la Plata, wander through diverse ecosystems, and learn about the incredible efforts of conservation and regeneration that make this place a thriving sanctuary. From the vibrant ceibos (*Erythrina crista-galli* also known as Cockspur Coral tree) to the elusive coipos (herbivorous semi aquatic rodent *Myocastor coypus*), every visit promises new sights and experiences.



This guide will provide you with all the information you need to plan your visit, including tips for responsible exploration, detailed descriptions of various trails and circuits, and insights into the rich biodiversity that awaits you. So, lace up your walking shoes, grab your binoculars, and get ready to connect with nature in the heart of Buenos Aires.

Enjoy your journey through the Ecological Reserve Costanera Sur!



Cygnus melancoryphus Black-necked swan. The largest waterfowl native to be found in South America, which can be seen at this reserve. Picture Animalia.bio

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The STEP Newsletter is produced quarterly in March, June, September, and December. Contributions are welcomed. This newsletter has been edited by Andy Russell. This is the last newsletter that I will be editing. My long association with STEP is coming to an end due to moving away from Canberra.

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Traveller's Tales from Southeast Asia

The Bourkes recently spent 3 weeks in Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand and as always plants, gardens and horticulture were central to the travel. Saw some wonderful old and new gardens and revisited stalwarts like the Singapore BG and Gardens by the Bay. The latter has now matured spectacularly as only well cared for tropical gardens can. Most 'management' seems to involve extensive lopping. A first visit though to the Kuala Lumpur Botanical Gardens which are very large and have a wonderful 30+ha 'wild section'. But the formal gardens also have an extremely good, unmanned, visitors centre with excellent materials on both tropical rainforests and climate change.

The Cameron Highlands were a very sad story of overexploitation of highland ranges (up to 5,500 feet). Now they are sadly smashed by huge areas of protected horticulture and in their own awful way are fascinating. These frighteningly steep hillsides have huge areas, hundreds of hectares in some cases of poly-tunnels jammed into them providing major cropping businesses for much of SE Asia.

But just north of the Cameron Highlands in Kelantan State, also feeling the impact of this exploitation, we saw our major botanical interest when we were taken by an orang asli guide (the orang asli are the original inhabitants of the peninsula and are now down to a very few villages in this region) to see one the rarest and most interesting parasitic plants in the world, the Stinking Corpse Lily *Rafflesia arnoldii*, named of course after Sir Stamford Raffles and one of his almost contemporary botanists Arnold. This beautiful parasitic plant traps night flying insects with its pungent odour and is at serious risk of forest clearing. Despite the hot and hard scramble in very steep terrain it was worth it.

Text and photo Max Bourke



A generous donation

Thanks to Dr Suzette Searle for the donation of 10 *Acacia pycnantha* Golden Wattles to plant at Forest 20. Suzette is president of the Wattle Day Association and will be promoting our Wattle Walks at STEP this year, which will take place on Sunday 31st August. There will also be a display in the arboretum (NAC) Village Centre on the same day.

Photo and text Jane Cottee



Some recent photos from Forest 20



Junonia villida Meadow Argus
Often seen at Forest 20

Photos Andy Russell



Amegilla cingulata Blue-banded Bee
Seen on *pelargonium australe* lately.



Crypishora ocularia Red-lined Looper Moth
landed on Andy's shirt at morning tea recently.



Pterygophorus cinctus Bottlebrush Sawfly
caused defoliation of our Melaleuca species.



Vanessa kershawii Painted Lady
feeding on *Podolepis jaceoides* Showy Copper-wire Daisy



Apis mellifera European Honeybee
on Showy Copper-wire Daisy

Photos Andy Russell except the top right one that I cannot recall who took it or where it was from.



All in a Thursday mornings work 31 January 2025. Nothing unusual about this. Photo Andy Russell



Chondropyga dorsalis Cowboy Beetle



Asura lydia A Tiger Moth

Photos above unknown contributors (sorry I cannot remember who took them)