

HFNC Excursion to Drajurk State Forest – 17 March 2018

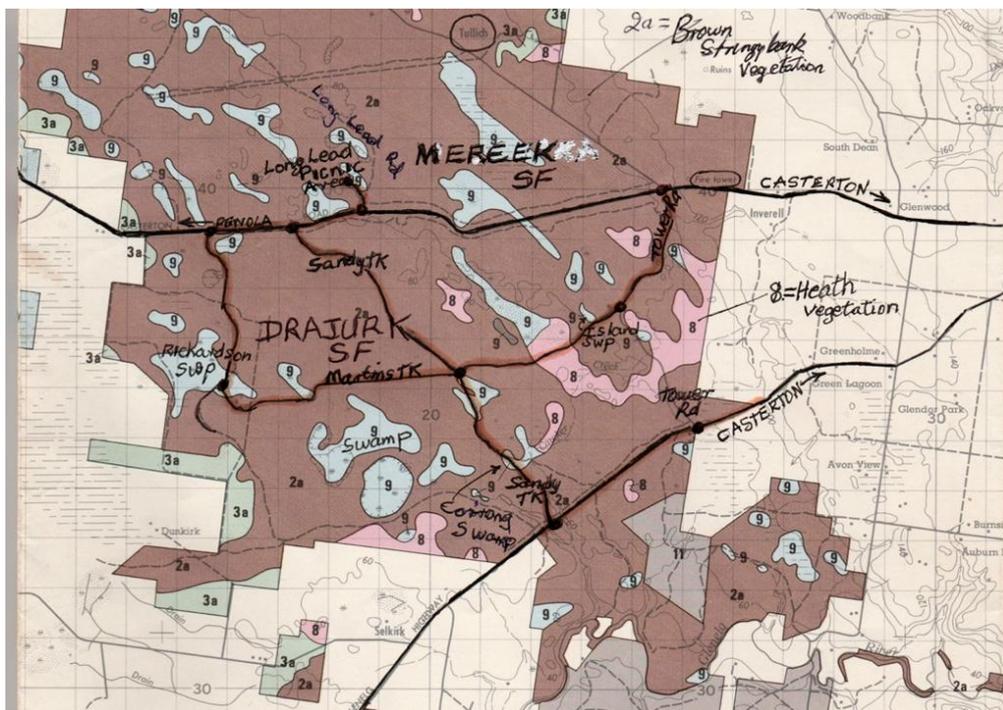
Rod Bird

Participants: Lyn & Dave Munro, Rod Bird, Hillary Turner, Peter Hocking & Kay Aldridge

Saturday was a warm day, with strong winds expected, and a total fire ban had been imposed over most of the State. The temperature reached 31°C by early afternoon in the Drajurk area and strong wind gusts arrived as we were about to return to Hamilton at 1.15 pm.

We approached the **Drajurk State Forest** from the Casterton-Mount Gambier Rd, entering by **Sandy Track**. This is a good gravelled road that runs north to the Casterton Penola Road. Most of the landscape in the forest is Brown Stringybark (*E. baxteri*) and associated understorey of Grass-trees (*Xanthorrhoea australis*, Silver Banksia (*Banksia marginata*) and the usual assembly of heath species. Sallow Wattle (*Acacia longifolia*) was seen sporadically along most of the drives. Sweet Acacia (*Acacia suaveolens*) was also seen at one place (Tower Hill).

Drajurk State Forest occupies part of the **North Kanawinka Sand Plain**. These are sheets and dunes of white, acid sand overlying clayey lagoon deposits of the former coastal plain. Sand overlies laterised tableland in the eastern part. Brown Stringybark is the major eucalypt but Swamp Gum (*E. ovata*), Shining Peppermint (*E. willisii*) and River Red Gum (*E. camaldulensis*) occur on the wetter areas. Yellow Gum (*E. leucoxylon*) and Pink Gum (*E. fasciculosa*) occur in northern areas, as at Dergholm SP.



Apart from the Silver Banksia, which mostly bore flowering spikes, there were few flowers to be seen. There had only been 24 mm of rain this year. At one stop were a few shrubs of Common Correa (*Correa reflexa*) with flowers and a white-flowering everlasting (*Chrysocephalum baxteri* or *obtusifolium*?).

Only at a couple of places did we see any Desert Banksia (*B. ornata*), but not in flower. It appears that the fire regime over many decades has been so severe here that it has all but exterminated the species. Unlike Silver Banksia, which can sprout after fire, Desert Banksia depends on seed for survival and if the fire frequency is such that it is burned before it flowers and produces seed then it will disappear.

From appearances, the Brown Stringybark also appears to have suffered from too frequent, or too hot, prescribed burns or fires started by other means. There are few large specimens, possibly because most have been removed by loggers. Also, there did not appear to be any bearing good crops of seed capsules. A consequence is that the Red-tailed Black-cockatoo will find it hard to make a living in such a forest because they are dependent on that source in this region (Bull-oak provides their other main food in the autumn period, but in the Wimmera).

We stopped on Sandy Track at **Coorong Swamp** (od. 1.7 km from Casterton-Mt Gambier Rd) – a narrow pool of water that extends quite a distance. Birds seen there included Australasian Grebe, Grey Fantail, White-throated Tree-creeper, Crimson Rosella and a Swamp Harrier.



Coorong Swamp on Sandy Tk

We travelled slowly up Sandy Track, crossed Martins Rd and reached Penola Rd (od. 8.6 km). We made a stop and looked for flowering plants but found only a few *Correa*. A few African Weed Orchid (*Disa bracteata*) were also found. This species is now widespread in Victoria and beyond control.



Sandy Tk at north end & Brown Stringybark



Correa reflexa on Sandy Tk



Eucalyptus baxteri woodland/heath



Banksia marginata along Sandy Tk

As it was nearly lunch-time we decided to go east about 2 km along the Casterton-Penola highway to the **Long Lead Rd** and **Picnic/Camp Ground**, about 300 m north of that road (od. 10.7 km). This site has picnic tables, a shelter, toilets and space to camp. This area is in the **Mereek State Forest** and is part of the Tullich Water Reserve.

Birds seen at **Long Lead Picnic Ground** were Eastern Spinebills and New Holland Honeyeaters in the flowering banksia and Grey Fantails and Brown Thornbills in the shrubbery.

A few shrubs of Callistemon species (possibly *Callistemon wimmerensis*) were seen near the shelter on the edge of the seasonally-wet adjacent flat but these may have been planted.

We retraced our way past the Sandy Track (od. 12.8 km) to **Richardson's Track** (od. 14.4 km). This was a minor un-gravelled track past **Richardson's Swamp** (od. 17.8 km) – an extensive area of wet heath with Scrub Sheoak (*Allocasuarina palludosa*), without water at this time of the year. This vegetation would be ideal habitat for Swamp Antechinus (*Antechinus minimus*) and Heath Mouse (*Pseudomys shortridgei*) - both species are uncommon and in Victoria are restricted to a few areas in the SW. Parts of this track to this point would be boggy in winter and best avoided.

A little further south and we took the left fork to **Martin's Track**. One could approach Richardson's Swamp from this direction in Spring.



Richardson's Swamp on Richardsons Tk



Island Swamp on Martins Tk

At od. 18.7 km we came to a T junction and took the left (east) fork, continuing on through the Stringybark forest, across one or two fire tracks to the crossing of **Sandy Track** (od. 23.1 km). We continued east past a small dam to the north (od. 23.8 km) and through heathland past **Cameron's Island Swamp** (od. 25.4 km). We arrived at the T junction with **Tower Track** (od. 26.8 km) and turned left, passing **Cleary's Dam** (od. 28.8 km) to the **Casterton-Penola Highway** (od. 29.9 km). This last section was through higher ground with taller Stringybark trees.

Flowering species seen:

- Silver Banksia (*Banksia marginata*)
- Common Correa (*Correa reflexa*)
- White Everlasting (*Chrysocephalum baxteri* or *obtusifolium*)

Birds seen:

- Australasian Grebe
- Brown Thornbill
- Crimson Rosella
- Eastern Spinebill
- Grey Currawong
- Grey Fantail
- Laughing Kookaburra
- New Holland Honeyeater
- Swamp Harrier
- White-throated Tree-creeper

While this was not a good time to look for wildflowers in this locality which is noted for its spring flower display, we were able to drive around all of the main tracks and familiarise ourselves with the terrain. It was a pleasant drive and has encouraged us to return in spring to see the wildflower display. One disturbing observation was the appearance of die-back of foliage in some Grass-trees near roads – it could just be symptoms of the dry summer but maybe a result of infection from *Phytophthora*.

The Drajurk State Forest and adjacent Mereek State Forest should have been gazetted as a National Park or State Park, on account of the species-rich natural vegetation and rare fauna (e.g. Red-tailed Black-cockatoo, Heath Mouse and Swamp Antechinus) that occupy the area. Since much of the area is suitable for pine plantations – and those plantations have occupied much of the former Brown Stringybark forest in the region – perhaps we are lucky to have any area of this woodland retained in a near-natural state.