



# Wombat Forestcare Newsletter

**Early Autumn has arrived** and we look forward to a wonderful display of fungi. Silver banksias are starting to flower and will provide nectar for birds and small mammals. Don't forget to also look out for autumn flowering orchids. Read about a sighting of a juvenile Nankeen Night Heron. Enjoy this issue.

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## The Slow Route to Fungal Wisdom

**Words and image by Alison Pouliot**

The world is speeding up and shrinking, or so we are told.

The artificial sense of speed and urgency imposed by the media rushes us on from being in the moment. However, not all folk want to live life on fast forward, in haste, hurried on by reminders and deadlines. The Wombat Forest, of course, still ticks along at a "sensible" pace and what better way to tune to the real rhythms and tempo of life than to spend time there.

Most things in life are best understood and appreciated when granted proper time. Understanding the Wombat requires the time and freedom to ponder, pause and marvel, to study closely, to be amazed. Emotional responses to discoveries further enrich the experience and aid memory. In time, facts becomes knowledge, understanding and perhaps even wisdom.

In recent years, local folk have renewed interest in foraging for wild foods including mushrooms. Like plants and animals, fungi take time to get to know. For those interested in foraging for edible mushrooms, it is vital to be able to distinguish them from similar looking toxic species. The best way to do so is to develop the skills to make a definitive identification of the species and then

consult an expert or field guide to confirm edibility or toxicity. Unfortunately, there is no ten-point checklist of characteristics that differentiate edible from toxic species.

Rather, each species needs to be intimately known through slow accumulative learning.

One seldom works up a sweat foraging for fungi. It is not about speed, but slow movement and close observation. Time and patience. "Slow mushrooming" over an extended period allows time for detailed examination; to fine-tune the senses and the ability to detect subtle features; to recognise the extent of morphological variability within a species; to become familiar with the associations between species; and to increase awareness of the seasonal and other more subtle changes within the forest that accompany their fruiting.

Sometimes I receive requests for 'a quick run-down' of edible species. I wish I could oblige.

However, pruning facts doesn't

help, especially when poor decisions based on superficial knowledge could be fatal. Accelerated approaches can only ever offer an abbreviated account, a truncated version of a kingdom of staggering profusion. Fungi, like people, cannot be known and understood straight away. They can be illusive and unpredictable. It can be years, even decades in between seeing *continued next page ...*



Fungi take time to get to know but the rewards are worth the effort. Photography © Alison Pouliot

some species. Although the ephemeral fruitbodies of most fungi are short-lived, the slow route to fungal wisdom provides a space for critical reflection, allowing them to resonate more slowly in both minds and hearts, evoking not only a more profound understanding, but a more rewarding experience.

Mycologist Tom May refers to the need for foragers to do an “apprenticeship”, by which he means that fungi should be learned slowly and comprehensively. Interest in foraging is growing faster than the available resources such as field guides that assist foragers to identify species. Currently in Australia, most guides only indicate edibility in the very rare exception. When information about edibility is known, it is usually for introduced rather than native species. This is, in part, why foragers often seek introduced edible fungi that grow in association with European trees, as more is known about their edibility and toxicity, and this is often indicated in European field

guides. For those interested in identifying edible fungi, it's best to concentrate on learning fewer species thoroughly, rather than many species scantily. Tom, along with chef George Biron and I are working toward an Australian field guide that indicates edibility for a selection of more readily recognisable species, but we're also taking a slow approach to ensure its rigour and reliability.

“Treading softly” has become a catchcry of the last couple of decades in the context of minimising our potential impacts on the earth. “Moving slowly” is the perfect counterpart. Time stands still in the middle of the Wombat, which is fortunate because it takes time to get to know. Slow wandering through the Wombat allows time to make connections and associations and be reminded of its great pleasures in our own slow time. In an accelerating world, ‘fungus foraging therapy’ might just be a new tonic for slowing down. ■

NB: Note that collecting fungi on public land, including the Wombat Forest, is illegal without a written permit.

## Nankeen Night Heron

By Trevor Speirs



This juvenile Nankeen (Rufous) Night Heron *Nycticorax caledonicus* was photographed recently at the Werribee River picnic area, south of Spargo Creek. Mainly nocturnal, and roosting during the day in tree foliage, this bird was seen standing in the shallows of the river on a rainy Sunday around noon.

The hunched neck is the typical pose, but when alarmed the neck becomes extended, giving the juvenile Night Heron a somewhat similar appearance to that of the much rarer Australasian Bittern. Adult Nankeens look quite different to their young; cinnamon-rufous and white with a black head and bill.

The Nankeen Night Heron is on the FFG Act Advisory list as near threatened, and while there have been previous sightings in nearby towns and the Hepburn Regional Park, until now there are no records on the Victorian Biodiversity Atlas of the bird being seen within the Wombat Forest. ■

Juvenile Nankeen Night Heron *Nycticorax caledonicus*. Photography © Gayle Osborne