

Wombat Forestcare Newsletter

Welcome to our spring issue, wattles are flowering and butterflies emerging.

Greenhood orchids have started to appear. It is great time to explore the Wombat Forest. A fabulous range of beautiful orchids can be seen in the drier forests of the Upper Loddon Flora Reserve and the Hepburn Regional Park. **Gayle Osborne** (editor) and **Angela Halpin** (design)

Small Things Considered

by **Alison Pouliot**

Wandering through the Wombat a couple of months back, I spied a most unfamiliar fungus. Unable to resist the human obsession for naming things, I took it home for further investigation. Resting it on the table, I attended a couple of other matters, before returning to my fungus. To my surprise and delight, a spineless procession was wriggling, hopping, squirming and scurrying its way across the laminex in exile from its fungal sanctuary.

I dashed to get my magnifier. In all there were about a dozen different species. Among the more familiar were springtails, mites, millipedes, beetles, slugs, some unidentifiable maggots and a seemingly bewildered spider. In my haste to meet each member of the parade before scooping them up along with their fungal shelter for further relocation, I completely forgot to pay attention to the fungus. Never mind. Sometimes, not knowing names can be just as satisfying.

Ecologist E.O Wilson famously reminded us that it's the little guys that run the world. Indeed it's the invertebrates, fungi and micro-organisms that drive most of the Wombat's functions and processes. Functions and processes? Let's take fungi.

They build architecture in soils. Influence hydrology. Sequester carbon. Recycle organic matter. Form relationships with most plants and innumerable animals. Drive biogeochemical cycles. Engineer atmospheric and geospheric chemistry. They're not just lying around on the forest floor, but are seriously busy. Or how about ants. Often dubbed ecosystem engineers, ants constantly regulate, modify, maintain as well as create habitats within the Wombat. Ever met a lazy ant?



Above: The eyelash like fibrils of this lichen fruitbody (*Usnea* sp.) loom forth under 10 x magnification. Photography © Alison Pouliot

Yet for all their industriousness, our conservation efforts tend to focus on the bigger stuff, generally the so-called charismatic megafauna; often colourful birds and 'attractive' mammals. It seems that size does matter after all. These are the organisms, for myriad reasons, we have assigned greater value. Our emotions and empathic reactions typically extend to other organisms relative to their resemblance to ourselves. Hence we tend to identify less with slime moulds, stinkhorns or sucking lice. Well, most of us anyway.

The invention of the microscope in the seventeenth century radically changed the way we understood the world. Previously unseen micro-worlds of life were revealed. Many still remain

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undescribed today. But a \$15 magnifier (or lupe, or as they were originally called, 'flea glass') can also take us to amazing new places.

Some of my most enjoyable moments in the Wombat have been shared with others as we've ventured into its microcosms; witnessing the delight of life magnified times ten. I recently passed my magnifier to a friend and pointed to a fruiting lichen on an overhanging blackwood branch. I observed as her head and the magnifier moved in and out trying to find focus. Then a great whoop of amazement signalled she'd indeed found it, and also brought others in our group running to share in the discovery. But as I watched her, bent almost

double, nose jammed into the wet trunk, I saw her knuckles whiten as her grip tightened on the magnifier, the exclamations of discovery continuing. The others patiently waited for a turn, but I could see that under no circumstances was she going to surrender the magnifier and access to her micro-wonderworld until she was absolutely ready!

It took more than seven decades on the planet before my friend discovered the wonders of the Wombat's microcosms. While she's certainly making up for lost time, given the incredible diversity of life to discover in the Wombat, I fear there will not be time to sleep again before she shuffles off this mortal coil. Hence, it's much

more sensible to start young, so as not to rush these things. There's not much you can buy a child for fifteen bucks these days. Barely half a running shoe. A T-shirt made in China perhaps? A \$15 dollar investment in a tool that will last a lifetime must be one of the best presents you can buy a young curious mind. Fifteen bucks to open up worlds of wonder and discovery.

So much of the beauty and wonder of the Wombat is in the detail. In the cracks and crevices and also in its nuances and subtleties. Closer observation of the less seen corners can reveal unimaginable treasures and the promise of a lifetime of endless discovery. ■



Above: A white smudge on a log? With just 10 x magnification the delicate intricacies of the slime mould, *Ceratiomyxa fruticulosa* are revealed. Photography © Alison Pouliot

Mosses of dry forests in south eastern Australia

by Cassia Read and Bernard Slattery

We often remark on the beauty of mosses but know so little about them. The Wombat has many species in common with the drier forests and this guide is a great starting point for students and absolute beginners.

The guide contains an introduction explaining the life cycle of mosses and their importance in the ecosystem.

This book can be ordered from the Friends of the Box Ironbark Forest website.

<http://www.fobif.org.au>

