



We hope you enjoy our spring issue. Is the Wombat Forest a beautiful creation for all forms of life, a provider of ecosystem services or a fire risk? Read Alison's article about the use of language. John continues his series of articles on what's what in the pea world. Catch up with Trevor's latest bird article. Happy reading.

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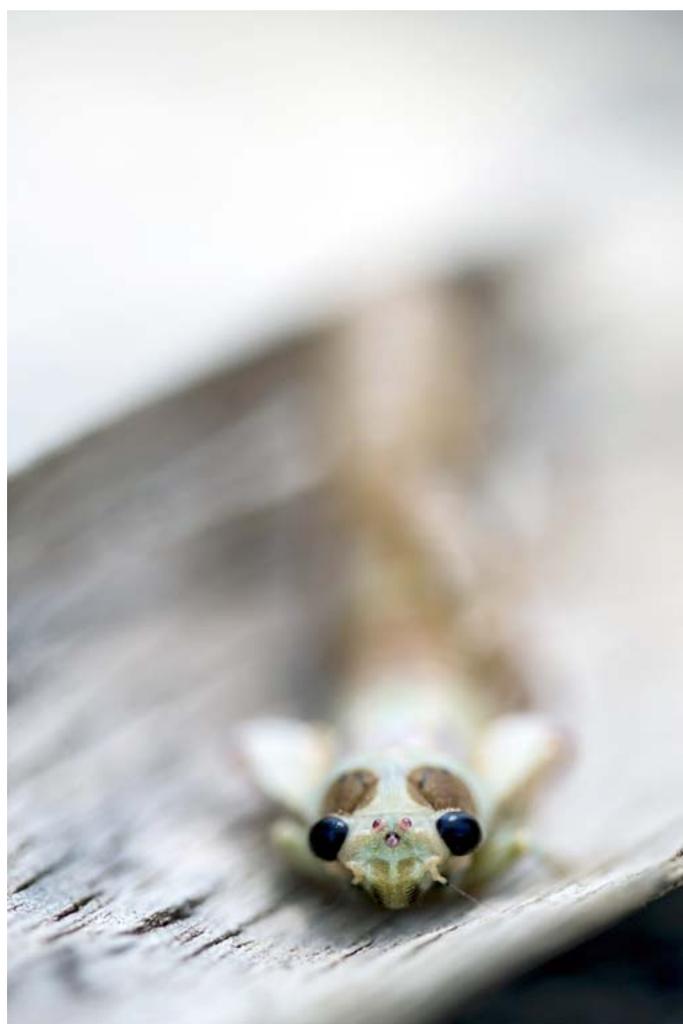
The Wombat Forest and the War on Nature

Words and image by Alison Pouliot

Remember Summer? Ah for those carefree days when the heady scents of the Wombat's eucalypts made one dizzy. Dragonflies buzzed lazily along the Loddon and the air was shrill with cicadas. Well, I'm sorry to jolt you from any kind of sentimental reverie, but it's time to get real. Summer is gone. Over. Finished. It no longer exists. The *guvament* stole it, perverted it and renamed it. It is now officially the *fire season*. We're no longer allowed to look forward to summer, but rather, we're supposed to feel menaced by a sense of dread at the possibility of another *angry summer*, aka, *fire season*.

Australia's naturally highly variable climate makes it difficult to isolate the effects of global warming but there is no question that Australia is getting hotter and drier. Droughts increase in intensity and extent. Extreme heat and catastrophic fires are no longer the exception. High-intensity blazes have exceeded all Australian records with fire temperatures reaching 1000°C. Fires generate their own weather systems with winds over 200 km per hour. There's lots of big numbers. Heatwaves are the *new norm* and there's a heightened level of vigilance around their life-threatening dangers. Anyone who has experienced wildfire first hand viscerally understands its power and terrifying ferocity. No-one mucks around with the *fire threat* but rather we obediently *plan and prepare* to be *fire ready*. Fires are commonly described as *unprecedented* and *catastrophic*. We have *firestorms*. They are real.

Back in those balmy summer days, we also used to have weather. Remember that? And fire for that matter. Rain and floods. While I was dangling my toes in the river, they got stolen too. This time, they all got turned into *events* – *fire events*, *weather events*, *rain events*, *storm events*, *flood events* . . . Presumably the *event* bit allows us to anticipate the arrival



The delights of summer, like this cicada (*Cyclochila australasiae*) emerging from the leaf litter, have to contend with the threat of the next controlled burn.

of a defined *happening* so that we can *strategise*, *action* and *debrief* accordingly. Weather no longer just *is*. It no longer just happens and we accept it and get on. These terms have been revamped and repackaged into *tangible targets* so that we can better manage and control them, or rather, kid ourselves that we can.

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Am I playing with fire? Is the local fire chief going to denounce my every word and accuse me of irresponsible or subversive writing, perhaps even *fake news*? If so, then she will have missed my point entirely. This is not to negate the realities of our changing climate or the increased severity of fire. It is not to downplay the gravitas of environmental issues and our urgent need to respond. Rather, it is about recognising that something else is going on here. I'm referring to language. I'm referring to the intentional and manipulative use of euphemisms to influence human thought through a government-sponsored fear campaign. It is actually not so different from the doublespeak forced into the mouths of soldiers to demonise *the enemy*, disguise gore as glory and mask the horrific realities of war.

Except now, the enemy, is summer.

The *fire season* is one of those insidious bits of jargon surreptitiously implanted into our brains and before we know it, the same words are spewing forth from our mouths, as that thing called *summer* fades into the distant past. It is unscrupulous spin to which we have become disturbingly immune. So why am I getting all hot under the collar about the use of a few old words? Because doublespeak affects the way we think about nature, about the Wombat. Because, in the eyes of the *authorities*, fuelling the *fire season* is our forest of *fuel*.

Not only has summer become the enemy, but so has the forest.

My aim is simply to expose how language can be manipulated to set us up against nature. Doublespeak removes us from nature. It fosters the fantasy that we are somehow separate from it; as if we have no connection, no dependency, no need to assign it any concern. Recasting summer as the *fire season* sets it up as a deadly enemy against which we must collectively, even heroically, fight. Fight, paradoxically, the very thing that sustains us. Fuelling the fervour is the hackneyed narrative of the Aussie battler, braving the perils of our dangerous land, waging a war against nature. Over time, the *fire season* becomes normalised. Repeated often enough, it triggers the desired response of public acceptance of a command-and-control management approach, rather than fostering the innovative and imaginative thinking that is so desperately needed. Gradually we become more reluctant to accept the variable and extreme nature of our land and less willing to work with it, opting instead to join the noble battle against it.

Such bunkum abounds in government propaganda. In a previous article I've written about the doublespeak of *ecosystem services*. This empty neologism is similarly moot. The Wombat is not there to *serve* us. It is not subordinate. It just *is*. The idea of nature's servitude harks back to some

biblical delusion that *Homo sapiens* occupy the apex while all God's creatures willingly consign themselves to our exploitation. It's another example of government spin that we're forced to swallow if we want to consider ourselves grown up citizens dutifully participating in the monetising of nature. We're told that if we don't adopt its language, then the forest won't be *accounted for* in their bona fide models and indices. But didn't the forest exist long before the economic overlay that demanded its enumeration? Something doesn't seem to quite add up here.

Ecosystem services is an idealised economic stock-flow model that conveniently overlooks the complexities and functions of real ecosystems. Ecosystems are dynamic environments in constant interaction, change and exchange, not a singular process or product deliverable as a *service*. Moreover, this reductionist view of nature determines *services* based on the value to only one species. In an economic system entrenched in profits and *jobsandgrowth*, conservationists' ethical and philosophical arguments based on intrinsic values are mocked as being passé, unrealistic, even selfish. *Ecosystem services* is convenient and definable, resonating for those important people in society deemed the *decision makers*. But where does *caring* fit into those indices? What number do we assign to care? Nature is not a set of numbers and our dynamic forest is not reducible to simplified costs and benefits. A forest that is cared for might just require less management or enumeration.

Rest assured that as you dream of summer, our politicians will be *making commitments* and developing *strategic delivery channels* for our *natural capital*, to minimise the chance of nature *impacting* on us (insert jargon of choice). But don't despair. The people have the power here. Management rhetoric only gains clout if we comply. We can resist. We can wrestle summer back from the *fire season* and reject the scare campaigns that instrumentalise nature and language and rob us of the freedom of thought and expression. I'm not suggesting being foolhardy or negligent or taking unconsidered risk. This is not to be artless or irresponsible, but on the contrary. I'm just asking how we became so deeply locked in a language of crisis, where nature became the enemy enumerated by its human *victims*, where *events* are described by their potential for destruction. Sounds awfully hope-less to me.

Today's children no longer have summer. That was something from the *olden days*. Instead, they have the *fire season*. The succession of controlled burns in the Wombat means that blackened trunks are the norm. How could they know any different in a forest of *sliding baselines*?

Let's retrieve our language for what we cherish and give them back the forest and the summer. ■