Mammal Survey Group of Victoria
NEWSLETTER

July 2006

Next Meeting Tuesday August 8th
This meeting will be our AGM. Please come! To be held at Arthur and Jess Howard's House, at 8 pm, 6 Alphington St, Fairfield. Bring a small plate if convenient.

Working Bee Sunday July 23rd
This will be a general equipment/nest box construction working bee at the Oldens from 10:30 am 34 Argyle St Bentleigh. Let the Oldens know if you are going on jolden@bigpond.net.au or phone 9 579- 3756.

Last Camp:
June 11-13: Wychitella
We checked the 50 nestboxes installed last November in the Flora and Fauna reserve and adjacent Australian Bush Heritage properties. Disappointingly this only revealed 1 brushtail possum with a back young. Signs of occupation, probably sugar glider, were apparent in another 5 boxes which were all close to each other. The rest had little or no vegetation placed in them. This contrasts with our nest boxes at Heathcote where all boxes had signs of occupation within a few months. About a quarter of the boxes had chewed entrances, probably due to galahs, and we repaired a number of these using steel plates. Again this has not occurred to the same extent at Heathcote.


Is anyone home?


Tawny Frogmouth – at Bunyip camp in May (photo Chris Wilson)

Next Camp - August 12-13: Clydesdale
We will be revisiting a private property (owned by Ian Higgins) with a Trust For Nature Covenant to put up nest boxes including some targeting Pygmy Possums/Feathertail Gliders. We will also be inspecting a few existing nest boxes guided by neighbours (Liz and Trevor Ingham) from an adjoining Trust for Nature Property. Apparently these are well patronized by sugar gliders. Tuans are yet to be seen in them although these have been detected by hair tube on the property.

We will meet at the Ingham's house at 2 pm Saturday. You can set up camp either before or after this. See attached maps. Note that if it is wet the site we used last time could be swampy and we may have to choose a different but nearby campsite to the north or east.

Future camps
July 23rd Working Bee, August 12-13 - Clydesdale, September 9-10 - possibly Heathcote (Mt Ida/Crosbie), October 7-8 (probably -

Mulungdung, November 4-7 –
Redbank Nature Conservation
Reserve

Howard's Way:

DIET CHANGE

The Australian gliding possums had their origins some 5 to 10 million years ago, at a time when a progressively dry climate was changing the once wide spread rainforests, to a more open eucalypt bush land. Possums had to adapt to an environment when the tree canopy was no longer closed, to move from one tree to another they had either to cross on the ground, running the gauntlet of predators or develop an alternative technique. As the tree spacing gradually became greater, a group of possums developed the ability to leap out and parachute over the intervening space. So to improve their aerodynamics, they developed skin extensions down each side of the body between the ankle and the elbow or wrist. These improvements enabled the gliders to cover a considerable distance from one tree to another, using their bushy and soft furred tail to steer a course.

One of the species is the Yellow-bellied Gliders (*Petaurus australis*). They are most attractive animals, with their long bushy tails making up nearly two thirds of their length. They have a rich brown to grey fluffy body fur on their backs, with a permanent black stripe extending from the head to the base of the tail; the body is a lighter colour, varying from a creamy white to a deep yellow, and with a large fold of fury skin, that extends from the body to the ankles and wrists of their limbs. This enables them to travel airborne for up to 100m in a single jump. They are fairly difficult to spotlight, as they are rarely seen, but easily heard. Their call begins with a rapid ascending/descending scream, ending in a gurgling rattle as it decreases in volume. Their calling maintains contact between individuals during nightly feeding excursions. - "Banjo" Paterson poem (The Animals Noah Forgot) summed up these nightly excursions.

From a forest comes a call,
Wild and clear and sweet and strange,
Many tongued and murmuring
Like the river in the range.

Their diet consists of invertebrates such as insects and spiders, which they find between the loose bark often high in the canopy. On a still night, Yellow-bellies can be heard moving among the tree branches as they hunt for food. Nectar and pollen, and manna and honeydew, which are exuded from sap-sucking insects, are almost as important as the sap that oozes from the V shaped notches in the smooth bark gums. About this time of the year around May to July, the Yellow-bellied Glider population in the Victorian forests change their diet. So if you find a feed tree this time of the year, hoping to see them glide in to feed, forget it. Because for the past few months they have been feasting on the sap exuding from the incisions they made in the various eucalypts. In the selection of a feed tree they move through the forest biting into the bark of a likely tree. When one is found that bleeds sap freely in generous quantities, the gliders set to work biting deep into the bark to make V grooves, (similar to the workers tapping a rubber tree). The sap is sweet and sugary that flows and becomes a major source of food for about 4 months each year, this eventually scars the tree from near the ground level to the upper reaches. Not only do the Yellow-bellies feast from this bleeding sap, there are other animals that take advantage of this sweet sap, Sugar and Feather-tailed gliders, Tuan, also Geckos. In the daytime several species of honey-eater, especially New Holland, and numerous insects also enjoy the sugary sap.

Yellow-bellied Gliders are not in large numbers anywhere, because their biology prevents them from living in close contact. Home territory of each is around 30 hectares of old growth mixed forest; this makes conservation of the species much more difficult than it is with the smaller glider species. The forest needs to be managed properly so that gliders can move freely through the forest. There needs be at least a 300m wide corridor between blocks of forest to fulfill the needs of both Yellow-bellies and Greater Gliders; for both these species there is a threat of "islandisation". The various family groups or discrete populations, could become isolated from adjoining groups and be confined to islands of habitat in the forest. They are slow in reproduction, with each mature female producing only one young at a time. It stays in the mother's pouch for three months, then for nearly two months more it remains in the tree nursery. The young lives with its parents for 18 months before becoming independent of them.

ARTHUR HOWARD.