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INTRODUCTION

This issue of the "Geelong Naturalist" is the first to be produced in combination with the "G.F.N.C. Monthly News".

It is of historical significance that the leading article is from the founder of our club, Trevor Pescott, and a long time contributor as well as one time editor. The co-author of this article is Ira Savage, a long time member and very active and widely travelled birdwatcher.

I wish the contributors and publishing committee success and satisfaction in supporting this historically important and valuable educational aspect of our club.

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President of the G.F.N.C.Inc.

Front cover design by Fay Wray.

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SONG THRUSH IN GEELONG

by Trevor Pescott and Ira Savage

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SUMMARY

From mid-1991 to early-1994, observations on the Song Thrush (Turdus philomelos) were collected from various sources. Collation of the data shows that the bird has its main Geelong population in the suburbs of Manifold Heights, Herne Hill, Newtown and Belmont.

Few sightings were reported in the autumn.

Nesting appears to take place in late spring and early summer.

INTRODUCTION

The Song Thrush is an uncommon bird of the suburban gardens of Melbourne and Geelong (Emison et al 1987). It has failed to colonise indigenous bushland in Australia, although it has done so successfully in New Zealand (Falla et al 1981). It is not considered to be a nuisance in suburban gardens - indeed its predation on snails is seen as a blessing, even though snails may have been deliberately brought to Melbourne in the first place as food for the bird (Pizzey 1988).

Song Thrushes are indigenous to the Northern Hemisphere, their range there extending from the British Isles east into Asia, and from Northern Scandinavia to the Pyrenees and Alps in the south. Some populations

migrate to Southern Europe, Northern Africa and Southern Asia in winter (Goss-Custard 1970), but there is no indication of seasonal movements in Australia (Blakers et al 1984).

Song Thrushes have been introduced successfully in Australia and New Zealand, but attempts to establish them in U.S.A., South Africa and possibly the Atlantic island of St Helena, have failed (Long 1981).

METHODS

One of the present authors (I.S.) knows the bird from his native England, and being a resident now of Herne Hill where Song Thrushes appeared to have a stronghold, and where their singing is a feature of winter mornings, he initiated a survey of the bird through the suburban newsletters of Geelong West, Newtown and Lara. (Savage 1991a,b,c.)

The other author (T.P.) took up the survey on a broader scale by requesting information in the Geelong Advertiser (Pescott 1991, 1992, 1993).

A request was also made at the G.F.N.C. Inc. meetings, and in the Club's Newsletter.

All sightings were collated on a Geelong suburban street map, other data checked, and reference material collected.

HISTORICAL

The first reference to the Song Thrush in Geelong was made by Brownhill (1955) who wrote that late in 1863, a Geelong chapter of the Acclimatisation Society of Victoria was established with Silas Harding, esq., as President. In his report of 1865, Harding advised that a request had been made to the Royal Botanic Garden's Dr Mueller "for some of the offspring of the English thrushes which have increased so rapidly in the Melbourne Gardens, and it is anticipated that young ones will be ready for distribution next spring".

Whether they were received is not recorded by Brownhill, but Song Thrushes appear to have been liberated in Geelong subsequent to that time. Some may have been released in the botanic gardens where Daniel Bunce was director, and it seems likely that others were set free on "Newtown hill" near The Heights. Brownhill notes that the area was "a favorite spot for releasing birds"

Thomas and Wheeler (1983) write that the Song Thrush was released in Ballarat in 1879, but it is now very rare in that area (Thomas 1992).

Balmford (1978) records the introduction of the species into Melbourne and Phillip, Sandstone and Churchill Islands before 1873, but makes no reference to Geelong.

Unfortunately, Belcher (1914) does not include any reference to introduced birds in his book on the birds of the Geelong district.

DISTRIBUTION

By plotting all of the observations made between 1991 and 1994, it is obvious that the main distribution of Song Thrush in Geelong is south of the Geelong-Ballararat Road, west of Pakington Street, north of Roslyn Road, and east of Scenic Road and the Moorabool River.

Even within this area, the gardens west of Shannon Avenue, south of Church Street, and east of the Barwon River, holds the major part of the population. Beyond this area, observations are restricted.

Perhaps the most unexpected result of the survey is the infrequency with which the species is seen in the Geelong Botanic Gardens. Morley (1983) in his study of the birds found there between 1974 and 1982 records only one bird, or possibly a pair, present for a week in early July 1980. Since then, he has seen single birds on only eight occasions, four of those between 2.1.87 and 2.2.87. Terry Searle (pers.com.) noted that between 1980 and

1985, he spent many lunch-times in the gardens without seeing the species.

Marjorie James reported one bird using the garden bird-bath at Pt Lonsdale on 26.5.91, and Denis Linley noted the species at Drysdale in September '89.

A series of reports by one observer of Song Thrushes in the Drysdale-Clifton Springs area in November '93 is puzzling, and may refer to juvenile Blackbirds.

Song Thrushes used to frequent the East Geelong area according to observations recorded by Jack Wheeler, and it seems likely that the species has declined there since his observations between 1956 and

1966. Chrysame Ferguson did record one bird in East Geelong on 4.2.93, and one was reported by Mrs Hobbs at Whittington late in December '92 (she is from Kent, England, and knew the bird from there).

Only one observation came from Grovedale, where Mrs Scealy found the birds nesting in January '93. She wrote that the thrushes have been there for several years.

In Highton, Song Thrushes have a patchy distribution. Valda Dedman reported one on 31.8.92 "the first for many years", while Ray Baverstock has seen them each year from 1980 to 1992, but in varying numbers.

Similarly in Belmont, Jack Cations has them nesting regularly, as does Bob Price, but they are more sporadic in other parts of the suburb. Most observations refer to the north-west side of Belmont.

There are no reports for the Norlane, Bell Post Hill and Corio suburbs, although on 7.9.92 Don Greaves made his first observation of the Song Thrush in the grounds of the Geelong Grammar School. In Lara, Vernon Cohen has had the species visiting his garden for the last three or four years, with up to three birds present.

POPULATION

Little research seems to have been carried out into the population levels of the Song Thrush in Australia, although in Britain in 1980 a farmland density of 0.15 birds/ha was recorded (Blakers et al 1984).

McEvey (1955) studied a small group of birds in the Melbourne suburb of Hawthorn, and wrote - "No definite conclusion was reached (in breeding populations) but I believe that three or four birds sang regularly from various song posts within say 300 to 400 yards radius of the nest site of the birds studied. The nearest regularly singing bird was some 80 to 100 yards distant".

In the current Geelong survey, we believe that the 240 ha area between Aberdeen Street, Shannon Avenue, Church Street and McCurdy Road may support between 12 and 20 pairs, giving a population density of 0.10 to 0.16 birds/ha.

Clearly, additional work is needed to give more precise figures.

AUTUMN ABSENCE

One of the most puzzling aspects to the study has been the paucity of sightings in the period from February to early May.

The only recorder to consistently see the Song Thrush throughout the year was Judy Rowe of Manifold Heights, with records spanning the six years from 1987-1992. Even here, in only two years were the birds seen in April, and three years in May, compared with six years in March.

Many observers made comments like "the first bird for this year" (Bob Price, Belmont 15.9.92), or "bird back after about six months" (Howard Milligan, Geelong West 30.9.93).

It may be that the birds are simply cryptic, remaining largely unseen until the need to sing brings the birds to prominence in May and June. Blakers et al (1984) notes that "The species seems to be sensitive to hot conditions, keeping to the shade during the Australian summer". Perhaps they move to the denser, damper gardens during this time, but we have no evidence to prove this possibility.

SONG

Many of the observations have been initiated by hearing the birds singing.

The voice of the Song Thrush is described by Pizzey (1980) as "clear spirited fragmented song, easily recognised by phrases repeated 2-4 times between pauses" and McEvey (1955) suggested that "the song was powerful, carrying, I should say, three hundred yards or more". Peters (1993) described the song as "a melodious series of simple phases frequently repeated, often punctuated with pauses of varying duration".

The species is a competent mimic with the calls of many other birds incorporated into its own. McEvey records Magpie-lark, White-plumed Honeyeater, Common Starling, and Common Mynah, while Peters notes the most frequently repeated mimicry is of the Magpie-lark and the alarm call of the White-plumed Honeyeater, but adds Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike, Noisy Miner, Galah, Willie Wagtail, Eastern Rosella, Rufous Whistler, White-browed Scrubwren, Superb Fairy-wren, Yellow-faced and New Holland Honeyeaters.

None of the observers in the current study reported any incidence of mimicry.

TIME OF SINGING

Singing usually begins in late May or early June, and may continue until mid-December. In his Highton garden, Ray Baverstock has noted Song Thrushes commencing singing as early as 20 May or as late as 29 July, and finishing as early as 15 September or as late as 3 December.

It is possible that the commencement of singing may correspond with the onset of wet weather, and the conclusion when the singing bird begins nesting.

McEvey (1956) suggests that in Melbourne, the Song Thrush has a sustained period of singing from May to August, and from October to November, while intermittent song is heard in June, September and December. While he makes no comment on the reason for the September decline in song, in an earlier paper (McEvey 1955) he related the cessation of song to commencement of nesting. If this is the case, can one assume that Song Thrushes have two broods annually? Some notes on nesting are included in a later paragraph.

Some observers have put the daytime onset of singing as up to an hour pre-dawn in June, with early morning the preferred singing period. Evening and mid to late morning are also frequently used, this confirming McEvey's comments on singing times.

NESTING

Most evidence of nesting has come from the observation of obviously juvenile birds or groups that appear to act as families. Most of these were made in late November, December and January, suggesting that the main breeding season extends from October to December.

Some detailed notes were received.

Jack Cations of Belmont noted a nest with 4 eggs on 2.12.93. This was the second brood for the year, the first having successfully fledged.

D.S. Fleming described how one pair in Herne Hill attempted nesting on three successive occasions in 1992, the first nest with 4 eggs deserted because it was too close to where people passed, the second after one egg was laid, the third with an unknown outcome.

Other nests with young were in Belmont on 15.12.92 (Bob Price), Highton 18.1.93 (Mrs Mitten), and Herne Hill 18.12.91 (Mrs Knight).

Nest failure was ascribed to various causes. Cats were blamed for some nest destruction and the loss of nestlings and fledglings. The invasion of the nest environment by Blackbirds was also noted on several occasions. Other nests were damaged by wind, and at least one by unintentional human interference.

FOOD

Snails were the main food item mentioned, with a number of reports of anvils being conspicuous where the birds cracked the shells. Several people commented that they left snails near these sites as food for the thrushes. No other artificial feeding was noted.

Other food taken by the Song Thrush were earthworms and fruit. In all cases, the birds were seen as ground-feeders.

COMPETITION, PREDATION

Blackbirds, Red Wattlebirds, Magpie-larks and New Holland Honeyeaters were all seen to display aggressive behaviour towards Song Thrushes, often when the latter were singing.

Blackbirds were noted as destructive to some nests.
Cats seem to be the main predator.

CONCLUSION, ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The survey has been an interesting combination of input from the general public and G.F.N.C. Inc. members.

We would suggest two further areas of study on the local Song Thrush population - that of density of breeding birds, and the apparent absence of birds in autumn.

We wish to thank all the observers who made observations on the birds and provided diary entries.

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BIODIVERSITY WORKSHOP GROUP

NOTE 1, December 1994.

by Les Barrow.

This is the first of what I hope will be a regular series of notes from the Biodiversity Workshop Group. The intention is to inform members of the type of things that we do in the group, and to encourage you to come along and join in.

After the initial disappointment, when only a small number of interested members turned up for the first meeting, we have now built up to be a small friendly discussion group which enjoys exploring the diverse world of natural history.

This first note is about two things; the first is the small froghopper that Frank brought to the October meeting, the second is to tell about the pleasure that I had in preparing the drawings of it.

The illustration with this note is only the second that I have tried to do, the first was an assignment for Macquarie University. I never liked assignments (who does?) but what shone from it was how much fun it was, and how it made me pay attention to what I was looking at. Advice from Fay Wray was that I should make sure that I drew what was there, and not what I thought should be there.

Frank's specimen caught my enthusiasm, it was a conical tube about 1 cm long and attached to a small Eucalyptus stem near a leaf. Breaking it

open revealed a small insect which looked like a tiny cicada; its wings were not fully developed and it was immersed in slime. Its mouth was a long tube probably used for sucking the plant sap, and its abdomen was sharply upturned and the underside of it was developed as two large plates

Dave declared it to be an instar of a froghopper. Sure enough, reference to the CSIRO "Insects of Australia" indicated that it was a member of the family Machaerotidae; along with two similar families they form the super-family Cercopidae in the Order Hemiptera (that Order contains the true "bugs" including the cicadas).

The Malchaerotidae build themselves their conical tube from their liquid excreta and live inside it, immersed in the liquid and feeding on the plant sap. The plates (operculum) on their abdomen are used as a door to seal the end of their tube (like the operculum of some molluscs).

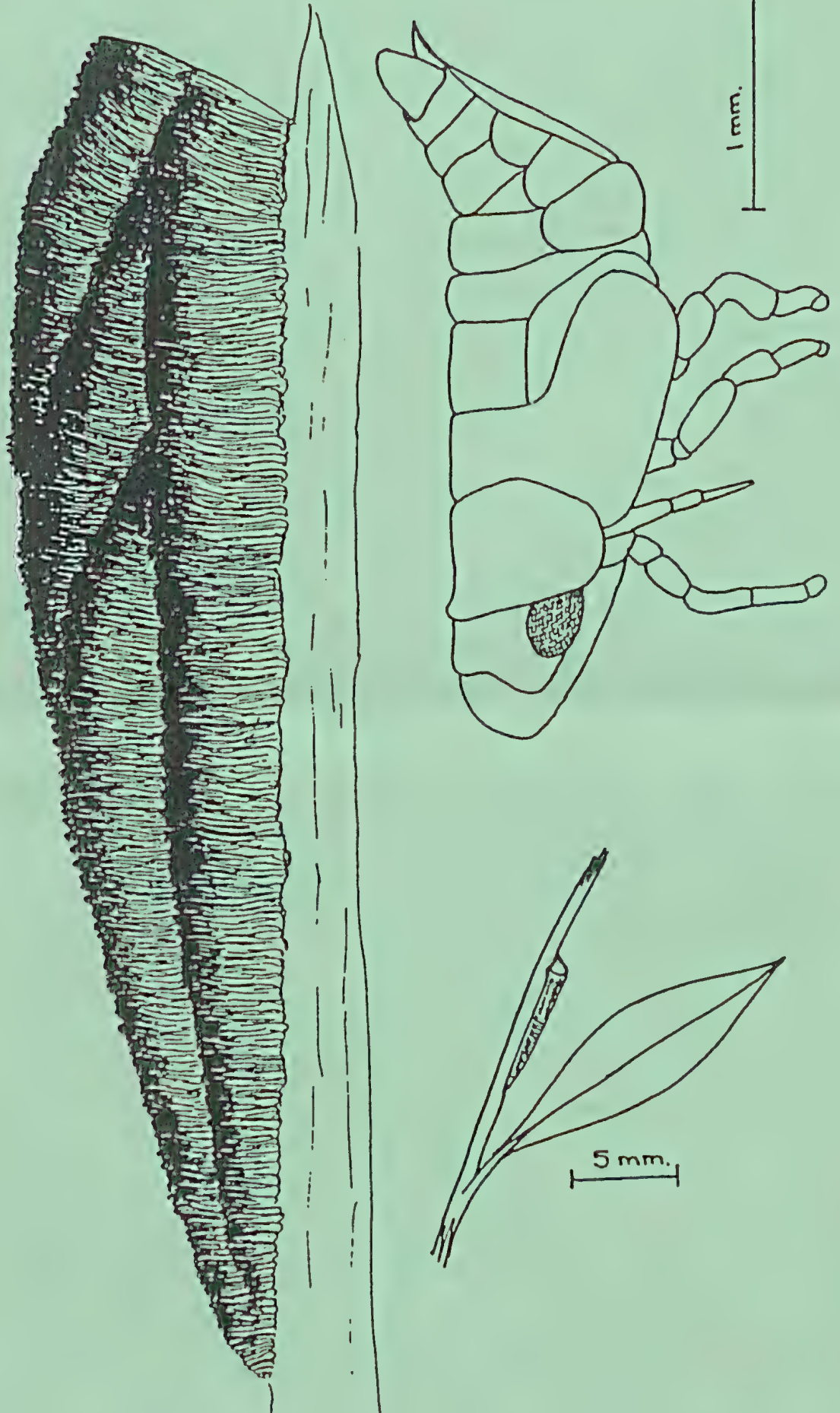
The adults look like leafhoppers, so I will now give a closer inspection to those creatures to check whether some are actually adult froghoppers. It will also be worth inspecting those frothy masses that we sometimes see on low bushes; frothy masses are produced by the spittle bugs which are close relatives of the Machaerotidae and which cover themselves with froth instead of making a solid tube.

One thing is certain, there is always something new to learn at the Biodiversity Workshop Group, in fact, the less you know (like me) the more fun it is.

Les Barrow, December 1994.

Froghopper instar and case. (See diagrams page 11).

The diagram shows an instar (larvae) of a froghopper (Machaerotidae) and the case in which it lives. The upturned abdomen carries plates on the underside and these are used to close off the entrance to the tube. The tube is fixed to a small branch and the froghopper lives inside feeding on the plant sap.



MAGPIE TALES

by Sylvia Spruit

Magpies may be common birds but they are always a source of interest and amusement. Each bird seems to have an individual personality. I expect many members enjoy having a magpie or two inhabit their garden.

The two magpies currently in possession of our garden arrived two years ago. At that time, one was an adult female and the other an immature bird. They perched on top of the side fence for several days, harassing the pair already in residence. Finally the original magpies stood side by side, goosestepped all the way along the path to the top of the garden, turned smartly and, still side by side, marched back again. The intruders were not at all impressed, so the first pair conceded defeat and flew off to live in a new territory, close by. They had been in the habit of sitting on the electric light wire in the street a block away from where they could watch the sliding glass door at the back of the house. The slightest movement on our part would send them zooming down in the hope of collecting a tidbit. We still see them perched up there but nothing will entice them to make a visit.

The victors quickly settled in. The juvenile is now a handsome male but a more greedy, aggressive bird I have yet to meet. Mum has to battle very hard to get anything. They are now rearing young and she has become much more determined. Would mother and son have mated? There is no evidence of any other male being in the vicinity.

The magpies carol and tap on the glass door, but if nothing is forthcoming the male parades up and down the kitchen window sill; he likes to keep an eye on the refrigerator. He cannot abide anything being left on the window ledge and quickly tosses the offending article onto the ground.

A stare from his beady eyes usually produces the desired response but if not he turns around, faces the wind chime hanging from the eaves and takes off. He makes a right angle turn, grabs a line in his beak and gives the wind chime a mighty shake, all in less time than it takes to tell. Quickly he returns to the door. This performance is repeated several times until either he gives up or we give in.

Another interesting magpie called on us one day. Half of the lower part of his beak was missing. We opened the sliding door and he walked right in. When he was outside again we gave him a few meat scraps. It was

interesting to see how he fed himself. He picked up the meat using the side of his beak and got it under his tongue. A quick toss of the head brought it to the top and then it was swallowed. After he flew away we did not see him for many months. Then one day he appeared on the roof of a building at the nearby shopping centre. He did not look well. Next day he lay dead in the gutter.

Until now we were not aware that magpies are like so many other birds which take the droppings from the nestlings and deposit them away from the nest area. We noticed an area of the back lawn becoming white with droppings. When we saw the female leave one there we realised they were coming from the nest. The nest is some distance away, in a tall gum tree, in a garden across the road.

An absence of many weeks while on holidays did not mean our magpies forgot us. A few days after our return they were back on the doorstep.

One fledgling was produced last year but it was quickly taken by a cat. We hope for better luck this year. With all the food taken back to the nest, from this source alone, at least it will have a good start in life and should be the most robust baby bird ever seen.

Sylvia Spruit
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THE FORESTS OF THE MOUNTAINS.

by Valerie Lloyd-Jones.

The beauty in the sub-alpine forests around Mt. Beauty (north east Victoria) is always present with the tall white Mountain Ash, Peppermints and the dark green Treeferns, but around September the orchids appear and other wildflowers begin their season with the main flowering in December/January.

It was five years ago early in September that I first discovered the Alpine greenhood (*Pterostylis alpina*) around the forest, usually at the base of a tree, in large numbers and the tiny, hooded Veined Helmet-orchid growing abundantly on a moist shady bank. The moment I looked into its mysterious dark depths I was hooked on orchids.

This year it was with dismay that I observed that there were very few of these orchids on the bank. There was no disturbance to the area and it is on a fire track where few, if any people wander. What could cause its disappearance?

The very next day I walked on another track at the little village of Bogong, halfway between Mt Beauty and Falls Creek. It was with great delight that I discovered my little, hooded orchid again growing abundantly in many places on a bank along the track and in full flower. We also discovered a grove of Sassafras trees in full bloom in a deep, wet gully with their beautiful conical shape and spicy perfume.

Above Mt. Beauty the woodland is open and some places have been completely cleared. In early January, these open places are covered in the Blue Sun-orchid and many other surprises may reward those who search the woodland.

I am still discovering the wealth of flora in this locality. The area is controlled by the SEC and has a network of fire tracks. A lot of tracks have locked gates so the region hopefully will remain as unspoiled and as beautiful as it is now.

A SHORT LIST OF WILDFLOWERS

<i>Comesperma volubile</i>	Love Creeper
<i>Corybas dilatatus</i>	Veined Helmet-orchid
<i>Glycine clandestina</i>	Twining Glycine
<i>Hibbertia linearis</i>	Showy Guinea-flower
<i>Lobelia gibbosa</i>	Tall Lobelia
<i>Pterostylis alpina</i>	Alpine Greenhood
<i>Stackhousia monogyna</i>	Creamy Stackhousia
<i>Stylidium graminifolium</i>	Grass Trigger-plant
<i>Tetratheca ciliata</i>	Pink Bells
<i>Thelymitra venosa</i>	Blue Sun-orchid
<i>Veronica gracilis</i>	Slender Speedwell
<i>Veronica derwentia</i>	Derwent Speedwell
<i>Viola hederacea</i>	Ivy-leaf Violet

Reference: Flowers & Plants of Victoria & Tasmania

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DO YOU HAVE AN ARTICLE TO CONTRIBUTE?

The magazine production team is keen to receive articles that can be published in future editions of this publication.

Articles should be based upon your observations of natural history . Observations of unusual behaviour by fauna, species lists, detailed observations of rare species or reports of long term study of a species or particular habitat are all suitable contributions to our magazine.

The length of articles may vary from a brief half page report to a major article up to ten pages long. Facilities for the inclusion of good quality high contrast black and white photographs are also available.

Experienced members are available to help out with the drafting of articles to allow you to produce well written material.

Please submit your articles to a member of the magazine production team and help us to record the natural history of our region for the future.

FRONT COVER DESIGN

The design and artwork on our front cover is the work of our own Fay Wray. Fay was given a very vague outline and she came up with exactly what was required.

Her design represents the three main groups within the club with the You Yangs in the background; a truly Geelong Naturalist.

Thank you Fay.

Responsibility for the accuracy of information and opinions expressed in this magazine rests with the author of the article. Please contact the author before making use of any information contained in the magazine..

Geelong Field Naturalists Club Inc.

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