The weather’s not always this lovely, but volunteering does offer moments like this, a gathering of volunteers and parks staff at Cope Hut in the Bogong High Plains a few years back.

IT’S SERIOUSLY GOOD FUN

In the Australian Alps national parks, volunteers make a huge contribution every year through an impressive array of activities. They clear fire trails, maintain walking tracks, map & remove weeds, build & repair huts, help with feral animal programs, conduct surveys, take pictures, work in visitor centres, act as interpreters, help with search and rescues, participate in citizen science, fight fires, plant trees, run events and tell stories. No matter how hard, dirty or challenging the task, there are volunteers willing to take it on.

There’s no doubt that volunteers do a lot of valuable work in our Australian Alps national parks. They give their time, energy and passion and the benefits extend well beyond the park boundary. Volunteering strengthens relationships between park management and the community. As a volunteer you have the chance to learn, to understand and to become our voice. This matters as much to us as the work itself. In times of budget pressure and fake science, National Parks need their well-informed champions, their ambassadors and their defenders. In return for all this giving, volunteers live a happier, healthier life and get more sleep. What a great deal!
In putting this newsletter together, we wanted to share what goes on and how much of a difference it makes. One thing became obvious early on: that there are far too many people, groups and stories to include them all here. Nevertheless we’ve attempted to provide a broad sketch of the variety of volunteering opportunities offered in the alps. And we’ll also say the obvious – a big thank you to all the volunteers who have made and continue to make such a mighty contribution to the Australian Alps national parks over so many years. They make all the difference. – John McRae, Program Manager, Australian Alps national parks Cooperative Management Program

When I think about volunteers I think of the integral part they play in helping us manage Kosciuszko National Park. Take Hawkweed for example, where you need literally boots on the ground to monitor its presence. We couldn’t deal with it without volunteers, flying those with on-ground Hawkweed experience by helicopter into remote sites. (We believe that humans along with wind are vectors for its dispersal, so we’re looking at remote camping areas as well as sites that have been identified through wind plume modelling.) Another way in which volunteers help us to offer park visitors a fantastic winter experience is via the public shelter at Perisher which is maintained by the cross country ski community. They also work closely with us to make calls about the grooming of the trails on a daily basis through the season. And then there are the projects that volunteers are able to make happen, such as clearing post-fire regrowth from a lesser used track, like the one which rises 41800 metres up the west side of Mt Kosciuszko along Hannels Spur. Or the volunteers who look for evidence of quolls – they leave latrine cairns on rocky ledges. The list of volunteering contributions is a long one. – Anthony Evans, Area Manager Alpine-Queanbeyan Area, NSW National Parks & Wildlife Service

Thirty years ago there were wonderful community groups, but there weren’t as many volunteers as we have today. As parks managers, I don’t think we could do what we do without the support of today’s volunteers and community groups. I recently had the opportunity to observe one of our volunteer interpreters here at Namadgi interpreting the landscape for a group of visitors, I was privileged to witness the personal passion and love for this landscape they bring to their roles. It’s inspiring to know that the collectively our parks are in good hands as we work side by side with our volunteers. – Brett McNamara, Area Manager, Namadgi National Park

As park managers, there will always be things we’d like to do that our resources won’t cover which is why it’s great that there are people passionate about the parks who are willing to get involved in what’s meaningful for them. With a lot more people on the ground, it allows us to expand our activities for the betterment of the park. For example, I was involved a few years ago in establishing the first deer control program in a national park. We deliberately designed a program with volunteers in mind and from the first meetings with the members of the Australian Deer and Sporting Shooters associations I remember being impressed by their knowledge of deer, their professional approach and commitment to the program. The first operation was held in May at high elevation in wild, testing conditions and the volunteers were all wearing smiles. And they’ve kept coming back, which is great because they’ve shown they have the skills to contribute to making a difference for the environment. – Daniel Brown, Manager Regional Planning, Eastern Victoria, Parks Victoria

why they do it...

John Muir, the environmentalist philosopher whose activism helped form many of the earliest and iconic North American national parks, said: “Climb the mountains and get their good tidings. Nature's peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees. The winds will blow their own freshness into you, and the storms their energy, while cares will drop off like
autumn leaves.” This is partly why people volunteer in our own Australian Alps, but there are other reasons…

**Cynthia Burton** declares herself as being, “…absolutely passionate about the Australian Alps! I fell in love with this unique and beautiful part of the world from the first time I ever laid eyes on it. I bushwalk here often: both in Kosciusko National Park (KNP) and Namadgi National Park. Eventually I came to learn of the many threats to the rare, fragile plants and animals that are only found in this place. So when the opportunity came up to help out with exotic weed survey and control in KNP, through a partnership of NPWS with Greening Australia and the Canberra Bushwalking Club, I grabbed it. Early on, NPWS discovered that a particularly bad exotic weed - mouse ear hawkweed – had found its way onto the Main Range, and there was only a limited window of opportunity to control its spread. Every summer I participate in MEHW surveys, walking around the Main Range looking for any new infestations (and we have found some). It is a lot of fun to work with the rangers and enjoy the alpine scenery, while giving something back to a place that has given a lot to me.”

**Geoff Puleston** loves being part of a team of trained, accredited volunteers who help connect people with parks. “To me, the most enjoyable and fulfilling part of our role is interacting with visitors face-to-face when they come to Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve and Namadgi National Park. Our title is Volunteer Interpreter – we interpret nature in a way that can help enhance visitors’ knowledge and enjoyment of our natural surroundings, our fauna, flora and our history. We work in conjunction with Parks and Conservation staff to promote the best possible experience for people visiting the area, in a way that is in keeping with the needs and preferences of the visitor. Volunteer Interpreters encounter many other aspects of the ACT’s natural environment in our ongoing training and involvement. Opportunities, such as assisting the wildlife team on their rounds, helping develop visitor programs, and generally working alongside a fantastic group of Parks staff, are what make the job even more enjoyable.”

**Simon Buckpitt** began volunteering with several different Alps volunteer groups when he came to the ACT region in 1999: the Kosciuszko Huts Association (KHA); Gudgenby Bush Regeneration Group (GBRG); National Parks Association of the ACT (NPA ACT); and the Victorian High Country Huts Association (VHCHA). “I volunteer for many reasons. Although outdoors a lot when younger I’m now stuck in an office all day. Physical fieldwork is a pleasant and healthy change. I am (was) a bushwalker, touring cyclist, canoeist and want
to give back to that which has given me pleasure. I love rural and regional Australia. The planet is a system that gives us our oxygen, water, and food. It also protects us from radiation (cities and towns don’t do these things). We need to nurture it or it might just stop doing these things. I believe in the conservation of natural and cultural heritage and the maintenance of the ecological diversity of the planet. Conservation in all its forms needs community commitment and support otherwise governments will ignore it. It’s a change of social scene - I get to meet and work with other people whose motivations are genuine and altruistic. It motivates me to learn new things and I remain continually impressed with the diverse range of skills and knowledge people have.”

Allen Skilton is President of the Victorian High Country Hut Association. “I joined the association back in 2007 as the Huts Maintenance Officer for Area 11 Dartmouth. I have volunteered in the past with other organisations, I think it’s in the blood, I come from a family of volunteers. The VHCHA has the unique roll to help maintain huts, bring individuals from many backgrounds, many I now call friends based on the camaraderie forged while working on these buildings. Volunteering has given me access to learn some less used skills, but I can pass on skills I have been given. Rangers are the key to all of this, their enthusiasm for the same goal, their willingness to get the job done and work with
personalities that are as driven to conserve small remnants of a time past, this in its self makes all this worthwhile. My role in the VHCHA allows me to ensure others have the same opportunities, to give, learn and build friendships that will last a life-time. I own and run a small Mechanical Drafting company, started out as a Boilermaker Fabricator, milked cows, and helped raise our family. Based in Northeast of Victoria we have access to the best (I believe) parts of the mountains.”

Darcy Blair began volunteering when retired, “...and will keep doing it as long as my legs hold out. It’s great fun and I’ve met loads of interesting people. As a vollie, I sometimes get to go behind the locked gates with the rangers which feels a bit special. When you are working in a team, it’s amazing how much you can get done. Big jobs become small jobs and there’s a real sense of achievement to sit back with a cuppa and admire your day’s work. You generally get fed & watered when you volunteer for a project. Given my parlous pension, free food is a bonus! There doesn’t seem to be many rangers in the parks, and I think they really benefit from having keen helpers. I only wish I’d become a volunteer when I was a bit younger and fitter. Ah well, better late than never.”

the joy of weed-spotting

a case study by - hawkweed eradication volunteers Paul, Marion, Jean and Gwenda

It's early summer and we’re spending a week helping the seasonal NPWS crew starting the annual hunt for a weed that threatens bushland and agricultural land across a wide swathe of South East Australia. At the moment, it's only found in some parts of the Snowy Mountains and a few sites in Tasmania and Victoria.

Hawkweeds are perennial Eurasian herbs that have become weeds in many parts of the world, damaging conservation lands and costing agriculture billions. Hawkweeds are tricky beasts. It’s hard to pick them from the look-alikes growing amongst the grasses and sedges on the high ridges of the Snowy Mountains. A good natured and dedicated crew of hawkweed experts are pushing through grassy hummocks and Snow Gums still regenerating after fires that swept through the high country over 10 years ago. Alongside them are us volunteers, mainly new to the job, heads down scanning the ground to and fro in carefully planned and recorded systematic lines.
The hills are covered in wild flowers – bossia, epacris, buttercups – as we criss-cross the site, searching out the hairy leaves of the Hawkweed. Usually it's down to close observation, persistence and careful checking. Sometimes it's sheer luck. Sit down to lunch, glance to one side and there's a plant.

It's hard work. The weather changes quickly up here and everyone has a bag full of layers ready to go. Warm jackets, waterproof trousers, beanies and gloves. Whatever it takes to stay warm and dry. We spend the day finding the plants, marking the sites and carefully recording the position for the contractors who will come in to deal with what we've found. It's a lot of fun. Jokes, music, wild tales. People from all over, giving their time and energy to tracking down a weed that has the potential to do so much harm.

The seeds can survive for several years, so it's work that has been going on for some time and each site is checked repeatedly for at least seven years until it's certain that all the plants (and seeds) are gone. It has been a great way to get out to wild places, to do something to help and spend time with like-minded people working to make a difference

Hawkweed volunteers help surveillance teams search high and low in Kosciusko National Park.

### 4WD power

**a case study by Greg Rose, from Four Wheel Drive Victoria and the Land Rover Owners Club of Gippsland**

The Land Rover Owners Club of Gippsland specialises in working remotely with Parks Victoria in the Southern Alps, and we were asked if we could replicate the sort of asset building we had undertaken over two years at Talbotville. As the club had already completed some general cleanup work at Horseyards we were happy to oblige. With a range of building skills, plenty of driving experience in the high country, members qualified in first aid, willingness to work safely under Parks instructions and enjoyment of working remotely, we are a good fit with the Parks Victoria Foothills and Southern Alps Team. Our volunteers are all entered on to the relatively new ParkConnect online volunteer registration system.

After many on-site inspections and consideration of some of the unique flora of the area, it was decided that stage one would be the construction of four concrete fire rings and four picnic table and seat sets adjacent to the fire pits. Over the 20th, 21st and 22nd of November, under the leadership of Ranger Wayne Foon, fourteen volunteers and two
additional Parks Victoria staff, set to work. Club members not only completed the main asset building tasks but also repaired and cleaned the toilet, conducted a plant survey, cut large areas of long grass, inspected the Moroka Gorge walking track, cut saplings away from roadside signage and generally cleaned up the area. The worst task has to be giving the table and seat timbers a final coat of protective oil once they are assembled and cemented into place, potentially very messy.

The logistics of these operations are quite complex, with everything needed including a large cement mixer, hand and power tools, bags of cement, sand and gravel, generators, several large steel rings that are the form work for the fire pits and the table and seat timbers, having to be transported from Heyfield. We have a comprehensive checklist so that nothing is left sitting in the storage sheds in Heyfield. Sand and gravel were placed onsite before the working days. It was a long slow drive with heavily laden trailers. We have our catering organised so that everyone self-caters except for the evening meals. For those meals the club and Parks Victoria take it in turns to see who can provide the best banquet. These are not activities to join if you are trying to lose weight.

We managed to get all our tasks completed leaving enough time for a drive to the summit of Mt Kent. In recent years the track has been quite rutted and overgrown. Dozer work as part control measures for the fires in the area late last summer has made the trip easier. The views from the rocky 1561 metre summit are spectacular. There is an impressive stone cairn marking the summit. Numerous species of wild flowers were in full bloom adding to the colour to the area. The helipad at the top of Mt Kent allows plenty of parking and manoeuvring space for vehicles.

While we were working at Horseyard Flat a number of tourists and campers called in and were amazed and impressed that Four Wheel Drive Victoria affiliated clubs do so much volunteer work across the whole state and have such a close working relationship with the land managers. Volunteer work is very important to Parks Victoria. Sarah Noonan, Ranger Team Leader at Heyfield, commented that without the volunteer input the work probably would not have been undertaken. Although the club supplies the labour, none of this work would happen without significant commitment from Parks Victoria; staff time, allocation of money for materials and a passion to improve the Park. There will be a stage two with more improvements in the future. The second stage will include additional fire rings and table sets and some contractor machinery work rehabilitating the deeply rutted informal tracks.
Let’s hope that the small number of people, who thoughtlessly damage our Parks, respect the new assets and appreciate the great opportunities we have in Victoria to enjoy the outdoors and free camping areas in the alps.

a ranger’s view-point

case study by Parks Victoria Ranger Team Leader Gary Bellesini

I’ve worked with volunteers for many years and their contribution to Parks Victoria is much appreciated. Their legacy is tangible and substantial; far more than volunteer hours reported on a spreadsheet can convey. As a long time ranger with Parks Victoria I’ve dealt with some of the bigger well known volunteer groups such as the Friends of Wonangatta valley and Friends of the Great South West. As a team, we’ve undertaken some fairly large projects including: a footbridge over the Conglomerate creek in the Wonangatta valley; walking track benching and surface stabilisation; and steps to the beach near Portland.

Apart from getting stuck into jobs we had some fun along the way and most importantly we were all very conscious of going about our tasks in a safe manner and openly discussing safety issues associated with works at hand.

Several years ago, I transferred into a ranger team leader position at Bendoc. I have been very fortunate to forge some good working relationships with several volunteer groups, namely four-wheel drive Victoria, the Victorian bushwalkers association and the friends of Errinundra. Parks Victoria’s complement of staff here at Bendoc is two - myself and senior ranger David Butterworth. With approximately 250,000 hectares to manage spread over three national parks (parts of Alpine, Snowy and Errinundra National Parks). The contribution of volunteers to getting some on ground works done is crucial.

There is a lot of planning that goes into our annual weekend with both Four-Wheel Drive Victoria and the Victorian Bushwalkers Association. We have large sections of the mentioned national parks subject to seasonal road closures over the winter/spring months and I know that without the annual track clearing weekend with the four-wheel drive association just prior to gate opening weekend that a lot of tracks would have trees over them that two rangers would not be able to get to and clear for many weeks.
We also have quite a few walking tracks spread over the three national parks that we manage and again without the annual walking track weekend with the Victorian Bushwalkers Association we would struggle to maintain our walking tracks to any reasonable standard. The Friends of Errinundra also play a vital part with maintaining walking tracks. We have around three working bees with them a year and have recently had some other activities like getting together on a Sunday afternoon for a presentation from a key note speaker about flora and fauna in the Errinundra National Park. The friends have also expressed an interest with getting involved in some greater glider monitoring as Errinundra is one of the gliders favoured habitats in Gippsland.

The facts & figures

One thing is certain, the amount of freely given, unpaid support to the parks agencies across the Alps is significant. Across the 2016/2017 financial year, the ACT recorded 8861 volunteer hours in their alpine parks. Major contributors were Kosciuszko Huts Association, Friends of Tidbinbilla, Gudgenby Bush Regenerators and Conservation Volunteers Australia. In that same year, Parks Victoria reported 221,794 volunteer hours across the state worth an estimated $7.7 million with 15,454 of these hours in the three alpine regions. Their big contributors included Bushwalking Victoria, 4WD Victoria and participants in the Volunteer Track Ranger Program. And while equivalent information isn’t currently available to describe volunteer activity across the border in NSW, anecdotal evidence shows it is impressive. How fortunate for everyone – volunteers and parks staff – that this movement is strong and well established.
to get involved…

Whether you’re thinking of signing up with a park agency, joining a club or contributing to a citizen science project, there are so many volunteering options available that we may not even have them all listed here.

CITIZEN SCIENCE: With the advent of smartphones and apps, citizen science has become one of the most exciting new ways to volunteer. It’s also a terrific opportunity to get kids outside doing science. Taking photos, making sound recordings, geo-locating and writing field notes: it’s all science and it all adds to the body of knowledge. In recent years, citizen scientists have re-discovered lost species, identified invasive weed incursions and discovered entirely new species. Here are some citizen science websites to get you started.

https://www.citizenscience.org.au/
https://www.ala.org.au/
https://www.frogid.net.au/
https://www.inaturalist.org/projects/the-great-cicada-blitz
http://cattracker.org/
http://canberra.naturemapr.org/

AGENCY VOLUNTEERING: Signing up directly with the parks agencies is one of the best ways to access a wide range of goings on:


AND MORE: There are many organisations with specific interests to add to the mix – here are just a few beginning with your local bushwalking club…

Greening Australia: https://www.greeningaustralia.org.au/
The Victorian High Country Hits Association: https://hutsvictoria.org.au/
Kosciuszko Huts Association: https://www.khuts.org
Victorian 4WD Club: http://vfwdc.com/

STOP PRESS: May 21-27 is National Volunteer Week. This is a week-long celebration to acknowledge the generous contribution made by our nation’s volunteers. The theme this year is ‘Give a little, Change a lot’. For more information visit Volunteering Australia’s website: https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org.
For more information about the Alps, including information about the Parks, other publications and news, visit the Australian Alps web page, https://theaustralianalps.wordpress.com/. Thank you to those who have made the time to be interviewed, and to the photographers for their images. Without this support, News from the Alps would not be possible.