



Day 5 (Site 2): Friday 6<sup>th</sup> October 2023  
**Mount Vandyke Restoration Reserve**

Just over two years ago, Nature Glenelg Trust announced the purchase of Mt Vandyke as our 8<sup>th</sup> Reserve.

This update accompanies our visit as part of the *NGT Grand Tour of Ecological Restoration*, and provides an opportunity to recap our progress and highlight the next steps in this novel ecological restoration project.

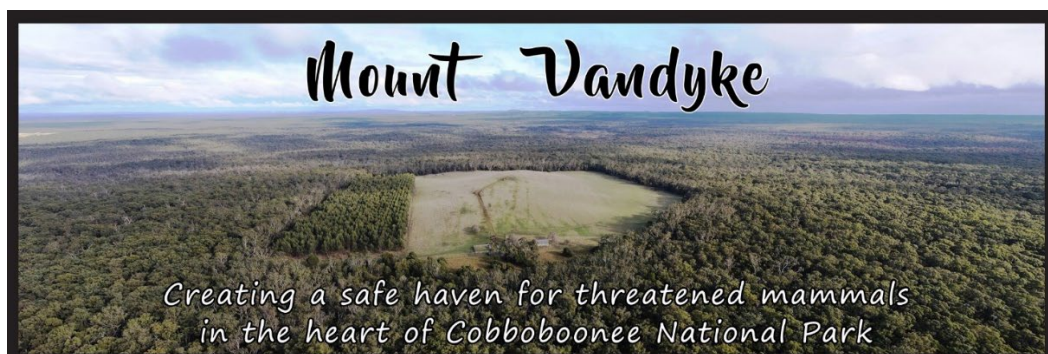
We acknowledge the Gunditjmara people, the First Nations custodians of the land that includes the Mount Vandyke Restoration Reserve (traditionally known as Banbangil), and pay our respects to elders past, present and emerging.

We are fortunate that a sole newspaper article from 1870 (right) preserves a fragment of the deep time connection of the Gunditjmara people to this land, with the recording of traditional oral history; accumulated knowledge passed down over millennia. At present, this is the only reference we have discovered to the traditional name Banbangil.

**SINGULAR LEGEND.**

(FROM A CORRESPONDENT.)

The aborigines have a legend which may have had some foundation in reality. They aver that "long ago" a great water (tidal wave) came to Leywhollot (Portland), but as the beach there was too low to restrain it, it rolled on through the Nine-mile forest, devastating the country, and destroying all animal life. It, however, did not reach the summit of Yayah (Mount Eccersly), where some aborigines were then encamped; and they alone of a numerous tribe were left to tell the dismal tale. The legend states that prior to the advent of the wave Wombriknik (Scott's Waterhole) was a great lake; and Wangot (Oak Bank) the haunt of great birds, probably the dinornis. At that time Yallok (Crawford River) was a great arm of the sea; and Banbangil (Mount Vandyke) rose from the plain in one night, and Pyrtpartee (Mount Mistake) leapt up a day or two after. Palawarra (Heywood) was a great swamp, and Benwerrin (Mount Richmond) was on fire. There were great wild beasts in the country then, and at Namburnburn (Ettrick) there were some that the blackfellows dared not encounter. The first blackfellows, the legend asserts, came from where the sun sets, across an isthmus, which the tidal wave destroyed; and when Mount Gambier begins to burn, and the earth to shake, the tidal wave will come again.



## 1. The land purchase – second time lucky

Nature Glenelg Trust first investigated the purchase of Mt Vandyke when it was placed on the market in autumn 2012, only a few months after NGT was launched. At that time our options for purchase or securing finance were limited, and the property was sold to another buyer. Then in late 2019, we were surprised to see the property placed back on the open market for sale and by this time NGT was in a better position to act more quickly.



*Mount Vandyke in 2012, after blue-gum harvest*

The property was secured with a loan, settlement occurred in July 2020 and in May 2021, we kicked off a public fundraising campaign at that time with a \$268,192 loan balance. Over a period of 6 months, donations had reduced the balance of the loan to approximately \$130,000. It was at this time that we took a call from Judy Glick, who had been quietly following the progress of the fundraiser and decided to make a major gift in honour of her late parents, Dora and Felix Hiller, wonderful people who shared their passion for nature with their family throughout their lives. Her incredibly generous gesture was matched by the Purryburry Trust, and suddenly in mid-December 2021, the land purchase loan was paid off! This goal was achieved thanks to contributions from a wide range of more than 150 different people and organisations.

## 2. Testing a new concept in a unique location

Mt Vandyke is a small in-lying parcel of private farmland situated on a volcanic peak in the middle of the Cobboboonee National Park.

Traditionally known as Banbangil, this peak has been known on maps since European colonisation as Mount Vandyke, and by old time locals as the “Good Hill” – presumably for its reliable rainfall and rich volcanic soil that originally sustained open native grassland and sedgeland, likely maintained by traditional burning by Gunditjmara people. Fragments of this original vegetation still occur in places around the base of the hill, including near the entry gate, providing a guide for restoration.

This 85 acre parcel of land presents a unique opportunity for NGT to embark on a very exciting and different type of restoration project, where grassland restoration and threatened small mammals are the focus and using the strategic location of the site to our advantage. The site is surrounded by 50,000 hectares of continuous native vegetation that has been continuously baited for foxes since 2005, making it an ideal location to experiment with locally threatened or extinct species of small mammals.



Most small mammal recovery projects on the mainland have generally either sought to build large, feral predator-free enclosures to re-establish extinct species, or alternatively aimed to suppress introduced predators over large unfenced landscapes to protect or recover threatened species that are still persisting (e.g. Glenelg Ark, Southern Ark in Gippsland, Western Shield in WA).

The NGT project at Mt Vandyke is looking to experimentally blend and test these concepts together, by reducing the scale (and hence cost) of the introduced predator-free enclosure, but using it as a staging point by embedding it within a wider landscape where introduced predator control is already occurring.

Our initial focal species for this project are:

- the threatened (but still locally occurring) **Southern Brown Bandicoot** and **Long-nosed Potoroo**. For these species, NGT has partnered with DELWP and will use the Mt Vandyke safe haven as a staging point for releases of animals into the wider forest, allowing for the introduction of increased genetic diversity and fitness to sustain and enhance local wild populations to prevent further declines.
- the now extinct (but long-ago, once abundant) **Eastern Quoll**. For this species, NGT is partnering with the Dunkeld Pastoral Company and Shepherd's Hut Sanctuary, who also own safe havens in the region and are founding members with NGT in the SW Victorian Eastern Quoll Hub. The Hub has the goal of using Mt Vandyke as a location for returning eastern quolls into the wider landscape surrounding our reserve that is subject to the Glenelg Ark fox-baiting program.



### 3. Fence design and construction

In September 2021, NGT held a fence design workshop with representatives from our immediate 'neighbours' at Mt Vandyke. This included staff from Parks Victoria, who manage Cobboboonee National Park, and DELWP, who deliver the Glenelg Ark fox baiting program across this reserve and adjacent public land.

After weighing everything up, we settled on a fence design as follows:

- 2 m high fence, with mesh size of 40 mm
- apron on both sides along the ground, also with mesh size of 40 mm
- umbrella over the top with 50 mm mesh (overhanging floppy top on both sides)
- manual sliding gate
- fence capable of future electrification, but not initially fitted



After our fencing materials order was placed in late 2021, the fence construction process formally commenced in January 2022 and initially involved preparation of a property perimeter track, to both provide sound access for future fence inspection / repairs (given how wet the site gets in winter), as well a solid foundation upon which to build the new fence.

**RIGHT: Track construction completed in early 2022.**



After also trimming back overhanging limbs, to minimise the future risk of the new fence being breached by falling trees, construction of the fence itself commenced in March and was completed by the end of April 2022.

**RIGHT: The completed sliding gate.**



## 4. Grassland / sedgeland restoration

With the all-important job of fence construction complete, we're now focussed on taking the necessary steps towards recovering the former diversity and structure of the original native vegetation inside the fence at Mt Vandyke, in readiness for future use of the site by small mammals.

As the site was grazed for most of the past 150 years, prior to 15 years as blue-gum plantation, and then re-cleared, tilled and sown to pasture over the past decade, the restoration task is complex. Mt Vandyke is also very wet.

Annual mean rainfall is around 850 mm and in May this year it received over 120 mm for the month! With any form of revegetation, timing is everything, and the triple La Niña years have been a very difficult climatic phase for terrestrial restoration work.

Recent soil investigations, coupled with our growing knowledge of conditions at the site, have improved our revegetation plan and the next phase of restoration works will take place at the top of the hill. Grassland restoration is extremely challenging, even at the best of times. Apart from the variations in the weather and a changing climate, seed availability is extremely restricted. Only 2 % of the original grassland vegetation of the Victorian Volcanic Plain (between Melbourne and Mount Gambier) remains.

Over 65 kg of native seed has been purchased for direct seeding and 10,000 Kangaroo Grass cells ordered for over-planting. This will establish a 2-hectare area of native grassland cover from which we can harvest seed for on-going direct seeding down the slopes of the hill. A detailed contour map has been produced that has enabled the development of a staged works plan with the vision of a grassland hill surrounded by damp grassland/sedge land at its base, before grading into an ecotone of fringing woodlands. Eventually, when digging mammals like the Southern Brown Bandicoot and Long-nosed Potoroo return, we are also hoping and expecting to see a positive long-term influence on both the soil characteristics and grassland flora of the site. This is because symbiotic relationships between native flora, fauna and physical processes will soon be reinitiated by the presence of these keystone mammals in the ecosystem.

For more information about the project, or to donate to Nature Glenelg Trust, please visit the NGT website: [www.natureglenelg.org.au](http://www.natureglenelg.org.au), call 08 8797 8596, or email [info@natureglenelg.org.au](mailto:info@natureglenelg.org.au).



*Difference in habitat condition inside and outside the fence at Mt Vandyke*



***Nature Glenelg Trust is grateful for the support of the following partners at Mt Vandyke:***



Environment,  
Land, Water  
and Planning

