From the Editors

With this issue we draw an end to another volume of *The Victorian Naturalist* and the 135th completed year of publication. This is no mean feat, particularly since it has been achieved from the beginning entirely through voluntary efforts. We don’t mention this in order to gratuitously congratulate ourselves, but rather as an introduction to inviting readers to add to and enhance this contribution to the study of natural history.

We have observed in the past that this journal could not be produced successfully without the input we receive from people freely acting as referees, proofreaders and reviewers. This is still true but from time to time we need to add to our ranks of individuals who can be called upon to assist in these ways. If any of our readers would like to give up an occasional, small amount of time in order to aid a good cause, we would be pleased to add your name to our list, in any of these capacities.

We would be pleased, also, to hear from anybody with high resolution images that might be used as illustrations to accompany papers in the journal. As regular readers will know, the range of subjects covered in this publication is broad and occasionally it is hard to find appropriate pictures. Our aim is to have a pool of good quality images of the natural world on which we can draw, as the need arises. Of course, any images provided and used in this way will be properly ascribed and acknowledged.
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Thank you from the Editors

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Front cover: Colony of Nodding Greenhood Pterostylis nutans. See page 171. Photo: Peter B Adams.

Historical reports of Common (Bare-nosed) Wombats

Vombatus ursinus in the Warrnambool area, Victoria

The Common or Bare-nosed Wombat Vombatus ursinus was once widespread in south-eastern Australia, ranging from Mount Gambier and Murray Bridge in South Australia, through Victoria and New South Wales and into south-eastern Queensland (Troughton 1941). In Victoria it now occupies a range of habitats in hilly and mountainous regions (especially in East Gippsland, where it is common) and near the coast, but its distribution has declined. Thus, while it exists in Victoria in low numbers in the far south-west at Dergholm and Nelson (Menkhorst 1995), wombats are today almost completely absent in western Victoria. This contrasts with historical records indicating wombats were once found throughout the Volcanic Plains and the Otway Plains (Menkhorst 1995). Surprisingly, wombats are absent from the Otway Ranges and Menkhorst ascribes occasional sightings of them there to be the result of translocation by humans.

Common Wombats were declared vermin in Victoria in 1906 and a bounty was placed on their heads from 1925 to 1966. Seebeck (1984) noted thousands of bounty payments were made in the early years of the system, but bounties declined after the 1940s, presumably because of a reduction in numbers.

In this note, we describe some historical accounts of Common Wombats in Warrnambool and note how abundant they apparently once were in Warrnambool and its surrounding districts. The only local records in the Atlas of Living Australia for wombats are for skulls, skeletons and preserved specimens of unknown age.

Documented reports

An article on the ‘History of Warrnambool’ (Whitcombe 1929: 10) described Warrnambool in 1847 thus:

‘In 1847 there was nothing but a cattle run and a great forest of trees and undergrowth sheltering a population of hundreds of aboriginals; and in the early fifties Warrnambool was but a scattered collection of bush tracks, full of wombat holes, with timber everywhere and mobs of kangaroos and emus to vary the society of the blackfellow.

Certainly, our documented reports suggest shooting wombats was quite common in the early days of European settlement of Warrnambool. Thus, in describing Warrnambool in 1847, Osburne (1887: 277–278) wrote:

‘Warrnambool has always been celebrated for its fishing and shooting. In the olden time [sic] the beautiful scented groves of the myrtle (or box tree), stretching from the back of the hospital to the banks of the Merri, were filled with wallaby, kangaroo rats, brush kangaroo, native cats and wombats. The favourite haunt of the latter remarkable animal was between the mouth of the Hopkins and the east end of town. A great deal of the land there is sandy, with layers of limestone here and there, and afforded splendid cover for the wombat. Very large caverns caused by their burrows have been discovered in the course of excavations. The wombat is a very shy animal, is nocturnal, and as civilization has advanced, has almost disappeared from the suburbs. The author has seen some very large ones after they were slaughtered. He remembers hearing of one which weighed 3 cwt, and no doubt his old friend, Mr. E. Margetts, of the Savings Bank, who was and is a most enthusiastic sportsman, can bear him out in this assertion, for he was a great hunter of the wombat when they were so plentiful in Warrnambool.

An earlier newspaper report (Anon 1857: 2) referred to the aforementioned Mr E Margetts as a ‘veteran wombat hunter’. However, not all wombats were shot for sport (Anon 1917: 2): Mr Alexander McKenzie, of Monanding, had an unpleasant experience with a wombat. In his sheep dog kennels he heard a furious barking at night, and when making an entrance was attacked by a large wombat which showed fight and bit him on the leg. Mr McKenzie locked the door, and secured a gun, he despatched [sic] the wombat after firing three shots. It was found that the animal had killed a valuable sheep dog.

Samuel Hannaford worked as an accountant in the Warrnambool branch of the Bank of Australasia from 1854 to 1863. He published his famous ‘handbook’ (Hannaford 1860) that includes a ramble (pages 22–23) along Pertobe lagoon, the Merri River mouth and

‘... then ascending the track we clamber over the steep hill, passing by numerous deep holes, concealed almost by the thick bushes of the wild Raspberry, the Forget-me-not, and other of our indigenous plants; —they are the burrows of that uncouth creature, the Wombat, which is very numerous along the coast.'
The steep hill described is thought to be at Granny’s Grave. Hannaford went on to describe how a friend had reared young wombats, two of which were taken from the pouch of a mother wombat he had shot.

About the same time, James Bonwick, an Inspector of Schools and observant naturalist, described a field trip he took along the Hopkins River to Lake Gillear, then to Star Chamber (Starlight Cave) and the beach (Bonwick 1858: 65–66). He wrote:

The sand which lies on the limestone and under the soil, or which fills up hollows in the rocks, is a famous resort for the Wombats. These pig headed, pig bodied and pig sized marsupials are fat, chubby sort of creatures, keeping very bad hours, for they sport about at night, but affording a delicious supper for the Blacks, and not despicable to the palate of Whites. With their huge, blubbery carcass, it would hardly be believed that they are exceedingly nimble in action. I repeatedly watched them at moonlight feeding near their holes … The Blacks send a boy into a Wombat hole to cause it to squeak, by which those above discover its whereabouts and then dig down upon it. In making a cutting at Warrnambool, the skeleton of a Wombat was found in a hole with the head of a spear sticking between its ribs.

In 1885, an article entitled ‘Picturesque Victoria’ (The Vagabond 1885) described how the Aborigines were:

never very numerous, [but] the river provided them with plenty of fish, the bush with the kangaroo, the wallaby, the *kaola [sic]*, and the *perro*. Wombats, fattest of marsupials, burrowed into the cliffs along the coast, and the sea shore provided shellfish for a change of diet.

Residents in 1857 complained about wombat burrows that were undermining the local roads (Anon 1857: 2).

Certainly, 20 years after Hannaford and Bonwick took their rambles in Warrnambool, wombats were becoming quite uncommon. Thus, in 1884 a note (Anon) in one of the local newspapers read:

In the early days of the settlement along the western coast of Victoria wombats were very numerous, as evinced by the thousands of excavations (known as wombat-holes) round Warrnambool. The wombats are now seen very rarely in this district, but one was shot behind the hospital some weeks ago.

Urbanisation could also have reduced habitat for wombats in Warrnambool. In an 1894 article entitled ‘Cutting up the Farnham Estate’, Brunt (1894: 6) wrote about William Rutledge opening up land for sale east of Tower Hill and described what the country used to be like:

The forest was heavy… the surface covered with a dense scrub in which the tree ferns attained a great height. It was home to the wombat and wallaby.

Even if wombats were declining rapidly in the 1880s in Warrnambool, their burrows were causing hazards (Anon 1887: 7):

A man named William Morris was accidentally killed in the town common on Friday night last. At 5 o’clock he left Warrnambool the worse for drink, riding a draught horse with the intention of going home two miles distant. The horse was found without a rider, and on search being instituted the dead body of Morris was found on the common. Near it was a wombat hole, in which were marks of a horse stumbling.

Another newspaper report (Anon 1905: 8) of wombats concerned a property at Spring Creek, some 42 km due north of Warrnambool:

While Mr. John Gilmour, of Winslow, and his son, Thomas Gilmour, were engaged in digging out rabbits on Mr. J. Good’s property, ‘Injemira’, Spring Creek, on Saturday, they came across a wombat burrow, and after much hard work they captured a whole family of wombats. There were five full-grown animals, one of which the dogs killed, and another, a female with a young died. The young one did not long survive its mother. The other three, however, are alive, and Mr. Gilmour has offered them to the curator of the Zoological Gardens, Melbourne. Two of these wombats are about the size of well-grown bacons, and they should form an interesting addition to the collection of the Zoological Gardens.

‘The Naturalist’ (1915: 54) wrote a piece in the Melbourne newspaper *The Australasian* in 1915, in which he noted:

In the early days the wombat was very plentiful in the south-west of Victoria. Around Warrnambool and westward away to Port Fairy, Yambuck and Portland their burrows could be counted by the score. In the sixties [i.e. 1860s] they were very plentiful and hundreds were killed. The wombat is no good to eat … I have not heard of one being in the neighbourhood for many years and I fancy that the end must have come in the early eighties. Curiously enough the wombat seemed to have been content with the coast-line, and was rarely found at any great distance in land.

They seemed to survive around Portland much longer than in Warrnambool (BEC 1939: 3). Thus:

We could easily start a miniature zoo at Portland, for within a few miles we have kangaroo, emus, wombats, phalangers, large and small, besides a good collection of birds.

Contemporary long-term district residents also describe early recollections of wombats—either their own memories or those of others.
Shirley Duffield believes the last known wombat in Warrnambool lived in Merrivale (a Warrnambool suburb) until 1954, while there had been an earlier report of a main street post supporting a roof over the footpath collapsing through wombat activity. She also believes a wombat road-kill was found in Scotts Creek (some 65 km east of Warrnambool) in 1994.

Confusing nomenclature
The terms used by writers of articles in historical times can cause confusion. Common names for animals vary greatly, depending on location and the period when the article was written. Thus, an article in the *Portland Guardian and Normandy General Advertiser*, published in 1856, referred to ‘the valueless wombat opossum or native cat’ (Anon 1856: 3). So a wombat opossum was a quoll—but whether the Spotted-tail Quoll *Dasyurus maculatus* or Eastern Quoll *D. viverrinus* is unknown. The ‘perro’ mentioned earlier might be a potoroo, but we have no way of ascertaining the species of mammal to which the writer referred.

Another confusing term is ‘wombat hole’. Several old newspaper reports used this term for sites for deposition of sewage or bodies (Anon 1890, Anon 1874 respectively). It seems that the term ‘wombat hole’ could refer not only to wombat burrows, but also to straight shafts caused by gases escaping through lava. The author of an 1888 article entitled ‘A Trip to the Warrions’ (Anon 1888: 10) described what were locally called wombat holes as the shafts for escaping gases, and noted that while wombats may well have previously used these holes at the Warrion Hills, there were now huge numbers of rabbits using them. As well, a note described how an Aborigine had been found buried in a ‘wombat hole’ (Anon 1860: 2). The body could either have been in a lava shaft or in an actual wombat burrow.

Conclusion
Common or Bare-nosed Wombats were certainly once common in Warrnambool. Before European settlement they apparently provided a valuable food source for Aborigines but were shot in large numbers by settlers, either for sport or for the perceived damage they caused. Habitat loss to urbanisation and rabbit overgrazing would also have reduced their numbers.

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