

Celebrating the caretakers of Ralph Illidge Sanctuary

Thanks to the incredible efforts of community, Ralph Illidge Sanctuary became a Trust for Nature reserve 50 years ago. This extraordinary reserve is a precious remnant of forest in south west Victoria and protects vital habitat for threatened species. Here, we celebrate how the reserve was created, and the volunteer Friends of Ralph Illidge Sanctuary who have cared for the reserve with such dedication for 25 years.

For a quarter of a century, dozens of dedicated volunteers have tended Trust for Nature's Ralph Illidge Sanctuary on Eastern Maar Country.

"It's one of the few remaining untouched bushlands," says Peter Battistello, former President of the Friends

of Ralph Illidge Sanctuary. "It used to be bush all the way from the Otways to Warrambool, but farmers cleared the land and everything changed. It would be a shame if it was gone."

Formed in 2000, and taking up the mantle of the earlier volunteers, the Friends are the caretakers of Ralph Illidge Sanctuary. Every month volunteers visit the reserve, contributing countless hours of weeding and maintenance.

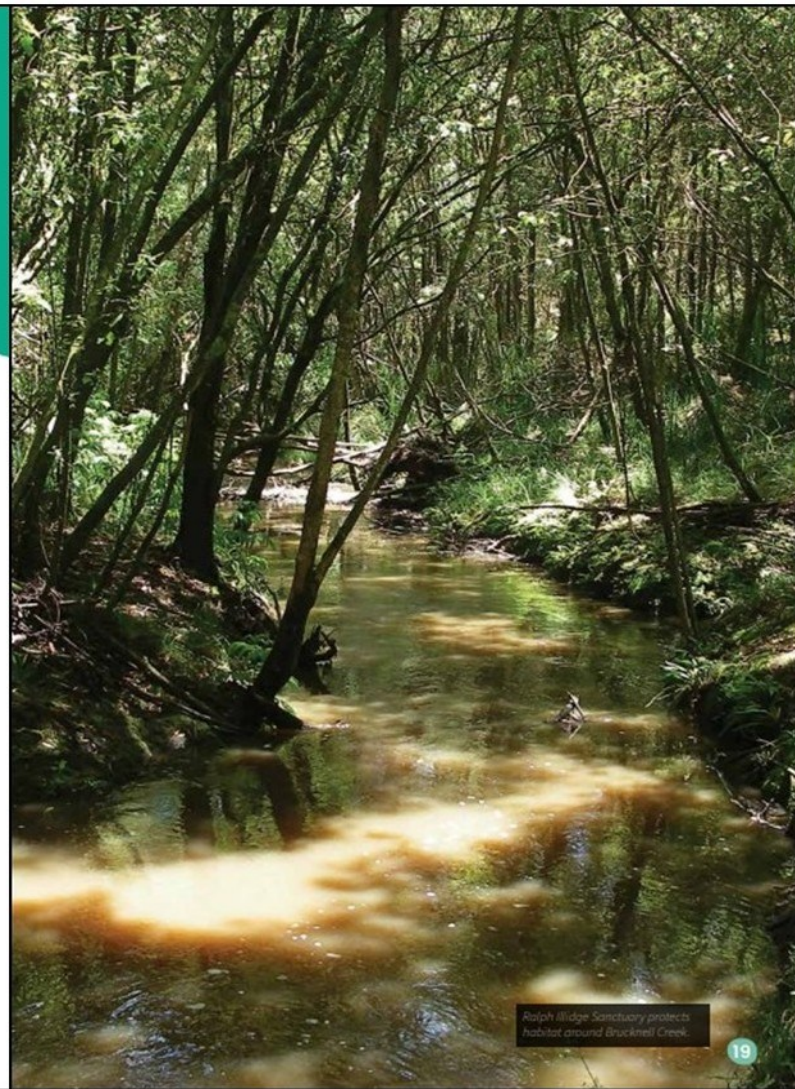
Peter was born in the area, and farmed dairy cattle on land opposite the sanctuary, and got involved in the committee when a member approached him.

"I was always looking at it and I've always loved the bush. I enjoy the whole ecosystem of it, not just one thing. You're always learning, you never stop learning," says Peter.

Today, the sanctuary protects nearly 100 ha of habitat, including threatened forests. Brucknell Creek flows through the reserve, before joining the Hopkins River and Bass Strait at Warrambool. Nearly 200 species of plants and animals have been recorded on the reserve, including threatened species such as Long-nosed Potoroos, Rufous Bristlebirds, Powerful Owls, and species of orchids.

Keeping on top of the weeds is an ongoing challenge – particularly Blackberries and Arum Lilies, which are creeping into the reserve from upstream.

The sanctuary provides important habitat for threatened Powerful Owls. Image: Perry Cha



Ralph Illidge Sanctuary protects habitat around Brucknell Creek.

"It's never-ending," Peter says. "But without constant weeding it will just go backwards."

The sanctuary regularly hosts visitors at the reserve's information centre, including school groups and field naturalists. In 2021, the Friends hosted an art show featuring some of the area's wonderful plants and animals.

This year, the sanctuary was visited by birders from far and wide when an unusual Black-faced Monarch showed up the reserve, well west of its usual range. The Friends have encouraged visitors to respect habitat and tread lightly.

"We like visitors," says Peter, "but big mobs of people can damage the environment, particularly if they go off trails."

With the dedication of the Friends of Ralph Illidge Sanctuary, the reserve will continue to provide important habitat for wildlife, and a place for people to connect with nature.

Some of the volunteers who care for Ralph Illidge Sanctuary. From left to right, Peter Battistello, John Krogh, Phil Baulch, Eamon Maher and Georgina Bedford. Image: Amy Marshall.



Lifetime of care

"I was walking home one evening when I heard a young owl, and I stopped to look for it," says Shirley Duffield. "Next thing I knew, an adult Powerful Owl swooped past me so close I could feel the wind."

Being swooped by Australia's largest owl has been for Shirley one of the wonders of caring for Ralph Illidge Sanctuary. That such a large and threatened predator calls the sanctuary home is testament to those who have protected it.

Born in Horsham, Shirley remembers going out to look for wildflowers with her mother and aunt while her father was away at war.

"In the springtime during the war we went out to look for Early Nancy's – I can still feel how lovely it was to find those. Going to the Grampians was amazing. Mum and Auntie knew where to look for orchids. It was part of what I took on as a child. To me nature is so interesting, I don't know the word for boredom." Shirley moved with her family when she was 17 to become dairy farmers in the Warrambool region. "When we came down here, it was all forested," Shirley recalls. "We had a little farm on the edge of the forest." In the 1950s and 60s, clearing intensified dramatically. As she surveyed plants for the local nature society, she witnessed firsthand the destruction. "I remember finding an orchid on a roadside, and went back to see it flower, but it had been ploughed up."

Aware of the urgent need to safeguard habitat, Shirley and others gathered together to see if they could purchase some of the remaining bush and protect it for the community.

"Sixty people turned up to a public meeting, convened by Ralph Illidge and chaired by the Mayor, and resulted in the formation of an action committee, who became the first managers of the property. It's amazing how many people cared about the bush," she says.

Ralph came to the fore, wishing for his property to be protected. Born in Western Australia, Ralph had a photography business in Warrambool. He was also a professional opera singer and had bought a property at Naringal East in 1958 which he called Bimbini, place of birds.

Although he had started to clear the property to run cattle, Ralph soon switched to focusing on nature conservation. Wishing for the property to become a national park, he turned his attention to Trust for



Shirley tackling weeds on Ralph Illidge Sanctuary. Image: Terry Goessling.

Nature. He died in April 1975, three months after giving the property to the organisation.

"It's just a priceless bit of bush that's preserved now. It's an oasis," Shirley says. "Ralph said to me the day before he died, 'I know you will see the right thing is done by the place'. Maybe that lodged somewhere in my head."

Shirley took the message to heart. In the 1980s, she became one of the first landholders to protect a property with a conservation covenant, just across the road from Ralph Illidge Sanctuary, where threatened Rufous Bristlebirds displayed near her gate. Based now in Warrambool, she continues to regularly visit the sanctuary to tackle weeds.

"Weeding can still be pleasurable because you're down there and you see things, you're so immersed," Shirley says. "It's just a lovely peaceful place. I'm always aware of how it goes back to the real original Australia. You can never be sure that you won't find something you didn't know was growing there before. It's a great place for birds, especially when I'm there just quietly weeding," Shirley says.